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Exploits of VJ's 37th Motorized Brigade

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[Unattributed Article: "Brave Men of Drenica, Heroes of Defense"]

[FBIS Translated Text] The 37th Motorized Brigade from Raska was one of elite units of our army even before the aggression. Its participation in fights in Kosmet [Kosovo and Metohija] brought it the Medal of National Hero. The story of its wartime journey, told in a soldier's style, mentions many battle places, combat conditions, and events and does not carry in it a smell of gunpowder, but a message not to be forgotten.

On 16 June, at 3 AM [0100 GMT], the last unit of the heroic 37th Motorized Brigade returned to the barracks in Raska from the territory of Kosovo and Metohija. Just as they remember the exact hour of their return, the past three months which reflect the wartime journey of the brigade, are indelibly imprinted in the memory of the fighters. Every day was like a long and difficult year, and every night like an uncertain and unforeseeable decade.

It is not easy to get through the closed door of these fresh and painful memories. A wall built from a desire to forget poses itself as a defense and does not allow the words to come through. Why, who wants words, they wonder. Homeland? They paid their debt to the homeland in blood, by surviving honorably and heroically at the place where all evils of this world were threatening. History? The history, which again records the wounds to Serbian people, inflicting them because of repeated mistakes and unlearned lessons of survival in the whirlwind of the Balkan. The youth of today that carried the burden of war on its own back, and the youth of the future that will heal the pains of existence? It is for them that these words of remembrance must be said. They will know how to appreciate them, keep them for years and save them from being forgotten. Their youth grew old in a short time; worries crept into their carefree life. And their tears, tears of heroes who survived the hell of Drenica especially, even though they cannot bring to life their killed buddies, can hurt, and hurt for years.

That is why the story which follows, about the wartime journey of the brigade, told in a soldier's style mentions many battle places, combat conditions and events, and does not carry in it a smell of gunpowder but a message not to be forgotten.

In Combat Reconnaissance: 50 Percent Officers

If we had the power to listen and read thoughts, the fast and tempered Ibar could hum to us about the past events at the territory of Kosovo and Metohija in which 37th Motorized Brigade was an active participant. This river probably knows already all secrets of soldiers and officers from this garrison. All of those who came for leave whispered stories about bravery, sacrifice, about Kosmet's cruel reality to their girlfriends in the twilight on its banks. But our powers are small, completely human, and we can only hear words and see faces of people we talked to -- Majors Danilo Simonovic, and Goran Petrovic, and Capt. First Class Slobodan Radenkovic. Danilo, vivacious, of short height, with lively blue eyes, and probably the same nature, brown hair; Slobodan, quiet, with a sad look and melancholic voice, and the tall and temperamental Goran, who, they say right away, was the master for a good mood in the unit.

These three officers and fellow fighters talked about the wartime journey of their brigade. They divided it into two phases of the unit's deployment on the territory of Kosmet: the period from 7 March to 2 April, and the period from 2 April to 16 June. Major Simonovic says that when it was known that the brigade was going to be deployed to provide security for one part of Kosmet territory, a combat group from part of active and reserve components was formed as a

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framework of 37th Brigade. It was comprised of 50 percent of active officers, while active soldiers were the ones from March and June Class. They did not want to take the December Class, because in their opinion, they were still young. The ratio of officers and soldiers was 1 to 5 because it was necessary to save the lives of these young men.

I went to Kosovo on 7 March with this first part of the unit, says Maj. Simonovic, and the rest of the forces arrived in the following days. The fact that the commander of the brigade now exceptionally promoted to the rank of colonel [pukovnik], Ljubisa Dikovic, soon joined us speaks to the importance of this small unit of ours. Apart from that, the commander of 1st Battalion of the Brigade, Capt. First Class Dragan Mitrovic, and the commander of 2nd Battalion, Capt. First Class Dejan Randjelovic, were the commander and the deputy commander of the combat group.

This combat unit was deployed in the areas Kosovska Mitrovica -- Glogovac -- Pec -- Istok. It had enviable successes from Mitrovica, Cicavica, and Drenivca. They especially remember the territory of Drenica -- Glogovac, Srbica, infamous Donji and Gornji Prekazi, Lausa, Likovac and Vocnjak.

There were many actions, they are all remembered, but four were of special importance. The first was ingress in the depth of the occupied territory, and the other three are the so-called sweeps of the territory and the fight against Albanian terrorists. They had the first task at the mere beginning, in March, when one reconnaissance unit and one unit of military police were put inside the region of Prica toward Cacavica. Senior Sgt. [stariji vodnik] Milovan Vidic led the reconnaissance unit, and Senior Sgt. Ivan Toskic led the military police unit. Under cover of the night, they were placed deep into the occupied territory, in the twin [adjacent] houses to Albanian houses, which made possible placement in and taking of the objectives Zmic and Maruga in the territory of Kosovska Mitrovica and Srbica. After that they came down to Drenica.

"That was a heroic action," adds Danilo visibly excited by the memory, "and a Christening by fire."

The second task was the sweep of the territory in the towns of Gornja and Donja Prekaza over the mountain of Cicevica, toward the village of Staro Poljance. The third task was on the territory of Krasimirovac, Cirez, Likosan -- these are villages on the way to Dobrosevac and Glogovac -- and the fourth one was between Metohijska Klina and Pec.

In one action in the region of the village of Banja toward Josanica, Sgt. [vodnik] Toskic, commander of the police unit, was wounded. It was considered a success to survive in territory of Drenica for a month without losses. During that time, the brigade had only one wounded commissioned officer and two soldiers.

It is hard to describe each of those events. They had to be lived through. In peacetime we did not have actions involving breaking into villages and sweeping [operations], because the military police did that, and now we did that while in movement. However, the morale was unbelievable, we breathed with one soul. You should have seen this youth, how brave they are. If I had said "to the moon," we would have surely gotten to the moon. I take this opportunity to emphasize the words of our supervising officers, Generals Pavkovic and Lazarevic, that a monument should be erected to our active soldiers. They probably took us officers as role models. In this combat group of the Brigade, from the commander of the Brigade down to soldiers, everyone was in the same position in the forward area. There was no rear. The commander of the Brigade came with us four or five times on reconnaissance.

The terrain on which the fights took place was wooded and impassable, and the enemy waited behind every bush. They had special difficulties with the red soil in which a tank would wallow as soon as it got off the road. On one occasion, a tank was stuck for four days, and on another a vehicle was stuck in the territory of the village of Taradza. Senior Sgt. Pero Hristo spent three days with his three soldiers before they were able to get out. This brave and responsible action of his was conducted in the area where they were easy targets.

The weather was not on their side either. It was either snowing or raining, and it was difficult to get provisions delivered, so they used horses to deliver food to positions. The aggression of NATO forces against the FRY [Federal Republic of Yugoslavia] found the combat group in the larger area of Gornja Klina. The command was in Srbica. On 2 April this forward unit of 37th Brigade received support from the reservists so the unit could operate fully staffed.

In the Infamous Drenica Region

Capt. First Class Slobodan Radenkovic continues with the second part of the story of the unit's wartime journey. Upon the proclamation of the state of war, the Brigade received an order to conduct mobilization. It was conducted under most unfavorable conditions, [more than] it was anticipated in planning documents. Despite problems, it was conducted with the percentage of 105 percent [as published]. After a short training period of a few days, between 2 and 3 April, the Brigade was brought to Kosovo and Metohija to an area of 3440 square kilometers, in a marching formation and deployed in conducting combat actions on the territory of Drenica.

This is where our interviewee paused, took a deep breath, and continued as if fighting for air with every word.

This is the worst evil that has existed in this area since the end of the last century. This is where the first attacks on our soldiers during the withdrawal through Albania in the First World War took place. This is where Balists [members of Albanian political organization Bali Kombetar] were destroyed only after the Second World War. In Drenica and Srbica, Albanian demonstrations started also in 1981. The police only recently entered the surrounding villages that were strongholds of Albanian terrorists. Drenica was a synonym for a snake hole of separatists. After the Second World War, Srbica was a Serbian city with 90 percent Serbs, while the census from 1991 recorded only 94 Serbs out of 70,000 inhabitants. There were no Serbs in Glogovac.

Finding themselves in such surroundings, the members of the unit from Raska did not spend a single day from the Brigade's deployment until its withdrawal from Kosovo without combat action. The Brigade performed several tasks simultaneously: fighting separatist forces, organizing defense, combat control of the territory, and protection from artillery fire.

The actions to break Albanian separatist forces were numerous. Our interviewee mentions several: the first one on the line of the village of Krusevac -- Devicka Suma -- Novo Poljance -- Trstenik -- Rezala -- Gornje Obrinje; the second one on the line Kosmac -- Mukusnica -- Taradza -- Galica -- and the infamous Lausa. For about thirty days, part of the forces were deployed on the blockade of north and northwestern slopes of Cicavica, breaking and destroying of terrorists in the region of Kamenica, Vrbovacko Brdo, Dosevacko Brdo, the region of Vasiljevo, Gornje Prekaze, Del, Kodra Priboj, Ovcarevo, Kosmac, Gornje and Donje Obrinje, Dobrostan, Likovac, and participated with part of the Brigade's forces on the mountain of Drenica.

Exceptionally difficult tasks were placed before the Brigade, continues Slobodan, so each action was carefully planned. Besides the commander, the deputy commander, Lt. Col. [potpukovnik] Borivoje Orovic, had a big and important role. The fact that no one left the unit and that negative influences which were the result of aggressor's psychological and propaganda warfare were not even felt in the Brigade speak about the good work and the responsibility of the commanding officers. "It would happen when we talked to the command in Pristina, that Gen. Lazarevic would answer instead of the operator on duty. He wanted to hear live information, and we would be glad to hear his paternal voice."

Our interviewees say that throughout the combat actions they had certain problems that made action more difficult. The following can be placed under the same hat: a big zone of responsibility, the nonfunctioning of civilian authorities, institutions and organizations, (with the help of the Brigade, civilian government in Srbica and Glogovac was established) the large-scale presence of civilian and a non-military population in the Brigade's zone of responsibility, and also there were two big towns -- Srbica and Glogovac -- that had to be kept under control because they were the terrorists' support in

this zone. Albanians placed a huge number of anti-tank mines. A connection between Albanian terrorists and NATO was also proven, and it consisted of classic guiding of airplanes by means of modern communication devices -- satellite telephone and other methods.

Even though more than 600 missiles were dropped by the air force on the Brigade's zone of responsibility, the effects were unnoticeable: one tank was destroyed, one combat vehicle, four classic air defense weapons, and two motor vehicles. In order to show great losses, the aggressors hit the same targets more times. They attacked with various missiles -- from cluster bombs to A-10 aircraft that killed the commander of reconnaissance company [ceta], Capt. First Class Ivica Stankovic. He was posthumously decorated by the president of the country.

Danilo tells us how he will remember 4 May when they dropped cluster bombs on their positions. He was also wounded then. Everyone thought that there was nothing left of the command of the Battalion. The commander of tank company, Capt. Dragan Blanusa, was the first one to arrive heroically to give help. He did that, disregarding the flying planes and the possibility of a new attack. In that attack, two volunteers and one soldier on active duty died, four were seriously wounded, and two had light wounds.

The attacks by enemy planes and frequent and deceitful attacks by separatists did not prevent the members of the brigade from carrying out their task. During the combat action, they eliminated between 1,000 and 1,200 members of Albanian separatist forces, wounded several hundred of them, and arrested over 300. About 1,000 men, capable of performing military service, were handed over to the MUP [Interior Ministry]. Investigation proved that more than 600 of them actively participated in the so-called OVK [Kosovo Liberation Army -- UCK in Albanian]. Large quantities of weapons, ammunition, equipment, mortars, anti-tank mines, medical and other material and documents about formations and organization of the OVK in the area of Drenica, which was the headquarters of their operational zone, were confiscated and destroyed.

Due to the courageous actions of the unit from Raska, which was also known as an elite unit in the Army before the war (in 1997 it was named the best in its category), the Brigade became a national hero.

In Raska,, in the "Ibarski Rudari" Barracks, at a place dear to them, where the enemy also left a shameful trace of destruction and devastation, they will try to forget the nightmares, lives full of risk, and to suppress all bad memories by removing the traces of war from their lives.

[Box, p 12]

#### Decorated and Rewarded

The following were decorated with the Medal for Bravery: extraordinarily promoted Lt. Col. Zoran Bojkovic, extraordinarily promoted Capt. First Class Branislav Mihajlovic, Capt. First Class Ivica Stankovic (posthumously), Second Lt. [potporucnik] Nenad Popovic, Sgt. First Class Mirko Zivkovic, Sgt. Milovan Vidic, Junior Sgt. [mladji vodnik] Ivan Niciforovic, and soldiers Veroljub Mijatovic, Milinko Pondic, and Milan Bogdanovic.

The following were posthumously decorated with the Medal for Contribution to the Defense and Security: Lt. Col. [potpukovnik] Brane Stefanovic, Captains First Class Boro Adzemovic, **Dragan Mitrovic**, and Radovan Stoiljkovic, Capt. Dragan Jasnic, Lt. [porucnik] Zoran Gavrilovic, Second Lieutenants [potporucnik] Djordje Dunic and Milan Jovanovic, and Warrant Officer [zastavnik prve klase] Vojislav Mitic.

Besides these, 19 officers, four noncommissioned officers, and 143 soldiers were decorated with the Medal for the Contribution to Defense and Security. Seventeen officers, 53 noncommissioned officers, and 62 soldiers were extraordinarily promoted.

[Box, p 12]

#### After the Road Blockade in the Raska Area: Payment of Wartime Per Diems Has Begun

Various news has reached Belgrade about the blockade of roads in the Raska area because of overdue payments of wartime per diems. The newspapers emphasized this

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or that side of that phenomenon, depending on what suited someone, but the real story about what was happening can only be heard if one goes to the scene. We found out the following from Lt. Col. [potpukovnik] Radomir Milovic, the assistant commander of the Uzice Corps for Information and Morale:

"During the afternoon of 2 July, some demobilized military conscripts gathered in Raska in civilian clothes, without weapons. There were about 100 of them in the area of the bus station and the Kraljevo-Raska-Mitrovica road. The reason for the gathering was the unpaid per diems for their involvement in the area of Kosovo and Metohija.

"On the same day, but in the morning, they blocked that road with one tractor-trailer and two trailers. One dump truck full of sand and several cars blocked traffic on the bridge that connects Kraljevo, Raska, and Novi Pazar along with three or four vehicles in the area of the city. Long columns of motor vehicles coming from Mitrovica, Novi Pazar, and Kraljevo were created because of that.

"They were not threatening military facilities, and they did not hinder passage and the regular supply of our forward facilities, nor were they aggressive. No one from our command addressed them, but we monitored what was happening. Conscripts who had been in the brigade, and who were not exemplary in the quality of their performance of their duties, were identified. That situation also lasted until Saturday, and on Sunday they were addressed by the director of Telekom, and he promised that the per diems would be paid to them by Thursday, 8 July. He called upon the demonstrators to disperse, which they did.

"On Saturday, the arrival of demobilized reservists from Kraljevo was also announced. The fact is that our unit is also partly manned by military conscripts from that city. Both groups were in Kosovo and Metohija, and fought there and remained there until the withdrawal. No one from the 37th Brigade returned earlier, or left his unit. Saturday was critical, because that is a market day in Raska, but everything ended OK," Lt. Col. Milovic said.

What was promised to the demobilized military conscripts was done. The money arrived as agreed, and on Wednesday, 7 July, payment began within the perimeter of the barracks in Raska. Soldiers and active-duty officers who, in contrast to their former colleagues, had only received pay for April observed that action from the side.

[Box, p 13]

#### Albanian Roulette

Believe it or not, it happened that one soldier from the military police unit during the sweep operation was approached from behind by an Albanian terrorist who shot twice at his head. But his pistol did not fire. After the second shot, the soldier managed to get away and fired a round into his opponent. Then, he took his [enemy's] pistol, to see how he managed to avoid death, and fired the third shot. There was no mistake this time. This one would have killed him for sure.