

20 years after the events, you will find below the firsthand report of the assault led by french troops against the VRS forces (Serbs) in 1995.

Many of you maybe weren't even born at that time, during the Yugoslavian civil war of 1991 - 2001... many others will have never heard of this battle. But in no case are we allowed to forget.

Until now, it had never been published in english.

Under fire

Written by Bruno Héluin in May 1995.

May, 27th 1995, 08:45 am.

I am lieutenant Héluin, leading the first squad of the 3rd RIMa *forbans* (1) and i'm walking across the streets bordering the jew cemetary of Sarajevo, towards the bridge of Verbanja. About an hour ago, i have been assigned a very simple mission : retake the french outpost along the bridge, that the Tchetrniks (2) overtook during the night.

My plan is to attack simultaneously the three small bunkers with a group of three pairs of soldiers (3) for each of these targets. Each pair has a precise arriving point.

I left my adjunct behind with the armoured VAB (4), the snipers with a Mac Millan shotgun and the antitank shooters. His task is to provide support fire from the heights.

When i gave him that order, he looked at me, desperate : "Lieutenant, you can't do that !".

Captain Lecointre is with us to manage the squads' environment, especially the support fire of the RICM (5).

Guided by a bosnian soldier we arrive in sight of the outpost.

I regroup the squad and realize we've left in the VAB the two doors we

were supposed to use to pass over the barb-wires, poor kit by lack of an appropriate material.

Nevermind. I look at my marsouins(6). They're calm and silent. Just like them, i feel strangely serene. It's true that since i woke up, three hours ago, i've not had a minute to think about the danger.

I have an absolute trust in my chief and in my men.

On my call, we run downhill bayonet at gunpoint in the trench about fifty meters from the first target, supported by a bosnian cover fire. We're wearing complete ballistic protections, those designed specifically for idle guards. Some of my men are in full dress uniform. They didn't knew, a few hours ago, that today's



The Vrbanja bridge over the Miljacka river, in Sarajevo. There happened the assault of 27th May, 1995.

In 1999 it was renamed the *Most Suada i Olge* after Suada Dilberović and Olga Sučić, the first victims of the war to be killed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On April 5, 1992, 100,000 people turned out for a peace rally in Sarajevo. Serb snipers opened fire on the crowd from the Holiday Inn hotel, killing six people and wounding several more. Suada and Olga were in the first rows, protesting on the bridge, and were the first to be killed.

high point would'nt be the expected military parade but an assault.

First, i throw in Le Couric and his group towards the farthest target, the western guard post. I see them running, then stopping in front of the barb-wires surrounding the post. They're unable to pass over and the bullets begin to fly from the Prisunic building overhanging them. A 90mm shell strikes it followed by 7,62 and 20mm bursts coming from our RCM squads. We're now into a bubble of explosions, fireshots, bangings, whistlings and impacts.

Powerless in front of the barb-wires, a marsouin is dazed looking at his perforated thigh. Another has two fingers cut off. A bullet is stopped by his neck protection. They'll stay on site, without any morphine because it's been forbidden in the emergency medical kits by fear of addiction.

Two other guys are literally emptied of their energy because of the violence surrounding them, they're like ragdolls. The group is out of action.

My plan has been put to the test and it has lasted two minutes thirty seconds. I have to react immediately. Instead of catching the three targets simultaneously, we'll clean them up one after the other beginning with the eastern guard post. We're all going to pass the barb-wires in front of us, 90 degrees from those that stopped the first group but beyond a no man's land of fifty meters in the Serbs' line of fire.

I rush towards the Miljaca river followed by the second group, while the other marsouins return fire against the ennemy snipers in the nearest building.

On my left side, Dannat, the paramedic, falls down with a perforated lung. He raises up and walks to the rear, crossing the looks of the others walking to the frontline, hypnotized by the blood flowing on his arm.

On my right, Djaouti falls down. I am now facing the barb-wires and despite the twelve kilos of my bulletproof vest, my weaponry and my useless PP39 radio, i manage to pass over the wires followed by my men. We find ourselves in the middle of antitank hedgehogs and turn left towards the target.

Bullet rounds begin to fall on us like in Gravelotte (7).

My brain is like the focal of a huge camera. At the moment, i am in panoramic mode. I turn around and see my minimi shooters firing on all doors and windows of the Prisunic building. One of them, Coat, runs to a wounded guy and takes his ammo. The guy carries a FAMAS gun (8), which ammo doesn't fit into the minimi : he has to unload each round and reload each again in his own magazine. Suddenly his head has a strange movement and he falls on his side.

I continue my way toward the earth barricade that protects the target's entryway. I feel the need to open fire but my gun refuses to work. I think i should stop to check it, but i have no time.

At no moment do i think i may have forgotten to arm the weapon.

To my side, Dupuch stops : "i'm wounded". He checks himself for a second "No, it's all good !" and resumes his run. Indeed, he's really been shot at, but the bullet has pierced his gourd and got stuck in his flashlight.

We stockpile ourselves on the barricade in front of the entryway.

A few seconds ago i was working in panoramic mode, now nothing exists except the barb-wires through which i throw the grenade that Dupuch gave me.

Explosion.

I run bayonet forward, firmly decided to skewer the first Serb that will cross the corridor. The men are glued at my side, two by two. We're hardly ten fighters, one-third of the initial number. The squads quickly refitted in one assault element, lead by me with buddies progressively added during the action and a second element designed to protect our backs and "clean up".

One move and Dupuch runs into the eastern guard post, while Llorente throws a grenade in the toilets' corridor. Humblot and Jego follow up, i send them on the roof to support us from above.

We resume toward the second target : a container we used to live in before the Serbs took possession of the area. Delcourt comes forward in the corridor when a burst forces him to back off. I get a grenade from captain Lecointre and throws it beyond the curtain that separates the container in two.

When i surge into what had been our dining room, i see a wall of fire raising and sliding above me on the ceiling. I shout : "the gas cylinder !"

Dupuch and Delcourt back off hastily. Half a second later i hear a terrible blast and i see very clearly a small object rushing at me in a background of flames.

I feel like i'm in a slow motion movie. My left eye is violently hurt and i'm pulled backwards while a spit of blood is thrown the other way. The men look at me and hesitate.

I mumble what i think are clear orders to have them moving forward. I have some more time left to tell the captain i don't feel very good, then i collapse on the floor.

I get conscious again a moment later, awakened by the impacts of bullets in the earth bags i'm sitting on. I'm covered by blood. I raise up, leave the building towards the Miljaca river. An explosion sends me back inside. I am like a little mouse in a labyrinth, banging on the walls.

My brain is working intermittently. I see a marsouin aiming at the last building kept by the Serbs.

"What you doing there ?"

"This is where i was supposed to be, at the end."

In the complete chaos of battle, this man held to the orders i gave him before the assault.

Then i understand the captain is leading the fight since i collapsed. He is determined to eliminate the Serbs in the remaining room and save the French hostages. With the bunch of guys remaining, he shoots down two Tchetrniks.

One of them smiles and says "French, good fighters !" but the others manage to escape with the last prisoner. On the radio, i call Cheick and orders to send a sniper and an antitank shooter. I want to put them in front of the building.

I walk in the devastated outpost. In the living area, there are three Serb prisoners and a corpse, also Serb, lying in the middle.

Lance-corporal Jego comes at me. I notice his gourd and one of his magazine are perforated. He took a burst in the belly and the bullets were stopped by his kit. His voice is broken : "Humblot is still on the roof. He's wounded and don't answer my calls."

I put myself in support fire, facing the building that overlooks us, while Mandart and captain Labuze go and get Humblot to safety. They're lying him near the ladder right when the doctor arrives. He checks the pulse and looks at me. "Sorry. Finished for him."

The fight is over. I hear that Amaru has been shot by a sniper while he was firing at the buildings from the unprotected turret of his VAB. Seventeen other marsouins are wounded, three of them critically. We killed four Serbs in the outpost and four more are our prisoners. I don't know the ennemy casualties in the surrounding buildings.

Erring in the corridors, waiting to be relieved, i come across a lance-corporal who tells me to go see a doctor.

I walk towards the medical VAB, riddled with impacts, that stopped right before the entryway and i become outraged : "It's not a lance-copropal who's gonna give me orders !" and walk back where i came from. The guy sees me and insists "Lieutenant, you must see a doc !"

I answer "Oh, okay" and leave again.

Outside, the ground is covered by pieces of kit ripped from the wounded to give them emergency care.

There are many magazines, most of them half-full.

Many guys used the moments of calm to throw away their magazines and replenish with new, full ones. We have used 4.000 rounds in less than ten minutes on the surface of one hectare (about 2,47 acres).

By 10:30am, the platoon of lieutenant Provendier comes to take over the guard from us.

A few minutes earlier, they didn't even knew an assault had been led. Guys are mute and open great eyes when they see me. I think : "none of them salutes. What's that mess !"

I bring Provendier inside to brief him. I get a table, a pen and begin to draw. I don't even notice the Serb corpse at my feet. My blood is dripping on the paper and it's when i wipe it with my sleeve that i understand the situation might not be so normal.

My orders given i get with the survivors in a VAB heading to our base, in the Skanderja ice-rink (9). We're haggards.

Once in Skanderja, we get medical attention then at around 01:00pm i leave with the wounded guys to the military hospital. As soon i lay in my bed, i collapse, exhausted."

--- NOTES :

- (1) : 3rd Marine Infantry Regiment (french army). *Forbans* is the nickname of its soldiers, meaning Pirates. About 30 of them were involved in the direct assault.
- (2) : irregular soldier, either Serb, Bosnian or else.
- (3) : a pair of soldiers is called *binôme* : the association of two fighters complementary to one another. During this assault, one knew the inside settings of the target, not the other one.
- (4) : the VAB is an amphibious four-wheeled armoured personnel carrier seating 10 + 2, mounted with an open turret and 7,62 machine gun in its combat version. Also exists as a medical vanguard vehicle, without mounted armament.
- (5) : Marine Armoured Cavalry Regiment. About 70 of them were involved in the support fire.
- (6) : *Marsouin* is the usual nickname for soldiers serving in the french marine infantry. Meaning Porpoise.
- (7) : The small village of Gravelotte, well known for a famously violent battle between France and Germany on 18 august 1870.
- (8) : the service assault rifle of all french soldiers.
- (9) : at the time of the Yugoslavian war, the french army headquarters were located in the compound of Sarajevo ice rink.

Check also the video below for an account of the events by those who lead the action (english subtitles) :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAPox1A3F6U>

[English translation by Yannick Primel. May 2015.]