

# Bataille de Medak – The Medak Pocket Operation

## Initial Actions on the Battlefield – Commando Raids of Both Belligerent Sides

Prior to the Medak Pocket Operation, the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defence intelligence services reported that "...there was a military build-up and grouping of military forces in the arena... According to intelligence and surveillance of the Ministry of Interior and Croatian Army reports: the area (Medak) was controlled by approximately 250 enemy soldiers. Of these, 100 were mobilized troops coming from the area of Gračac and Lapac, and mercenaries from Romania (two busloads of them changed shifts on Mondays). These were deployed along the highest peaks and the most strategically important points. They were shelling Gospić on a daily basis."<sup>154</sup>

The attack on Croatian special police stationed on the Velebit Mountains:<sup>155</sup> on September 4th 1993 two policemen were killed and three were wounded.

September 6th – the 9th mobile brigade commenced an attack on Urije near Novi Lički Osik – the diversion done to divert attention from the real attack target;

## Medak Pocket Operation – Chronology

### Preparatory Stage<sup>156</sup>

On September 7th 1993 the 9th mobile brigade's commander Colonel Mirko Norac gave a warning attack order and on the same day analyzed the future operation together with his HQ's unit commanders.

September 8th – preparations and reconnaissance missions were done and units were given their assignments; the brigade commander, Colonel Mirko Norac, met that evening with commanders of battalions and individual companies to give them the updated warning order. Commanders reported on their preparations and the final details of the operation were updated. On the same day and on the basis of intelligence reports, district command post Gospić ordered immediate maximum battle readiness.

Under the cover of darkness during the night of September 8th - 9th night, forces were brought to the area from which they would start their advance and take their battle positions (200 – 300 meters away from the enemy line).

Before midnight on September 8th- tanks and armoured carriers with "labudica" carry-alls were brought to their starting position; the anti-tank armoured vehicles were positioned and infantry units secured passes through minefields.

September 9th 1993 at 04:00 hours – the sector's district command post HQ in Bila received reports that units were ready to start the attack. The data differs about the exact time the actual order to attack was given:

- At 05:38 hours, according to the Ministry of Defence liaison office stationed with the UN/EU in Gospić the Serb artillery attack commenced, to which Croatian forces strongly responded;
- At 05:56 hours, according to minutes of the Serb Army main staff HQ, on September 15th 1993 some combatants of the 103rd Lika brigade pulled through the "Ustaša encirclement";
- At 05:58 hours, a hand-written report was signed by Serb Colonel Šuput and sent to the 9th mobile brigade HQ, 18,50 and 70 PBR<sup>157</sup>;
- At 06:00 hours, according to the Ministry of Defence and ICTY indictment of General Bobetko;
- At 06:00 hours with no artillery preparation as reported on September 8th 1993, from the Divoselo, Čitluk and Počitelj area;

- At 06:05 hours, according to General Bobetko's book "Sve Moje Bitke" and to Canadian sources.

Various sources data varies regarding the duration of the action:

- Four (4) hours – cites General Janko Bobetko;
- Five (5) hours – cites "Globus HQ";
- Two (2) days – cites the ICTY indictment;
- Four (4) days – cite Canadian sources;
- Seven (7) days – cite Serb sources (General Sekulić).



Picture 15: Croatian plan of the military-police operation in the area later known as "The Medak Pocket Operation"

## The Action's Development

THE FIRST ATTACK'S STAGE:

September 9th 1993.

- The artillery forces commenced firing on their designated targets; the barrage lasted for five minutes. The enemy has soon returned artillery fire that wounded six members of the Homeguard battalion, deployed on the Rizvanuša-Lički Novi line. The artillery attack was diverted to the city of Gospić. The Croatian artillery initially hit the Serb Krajina Army 2nd battalion of the 9th mobile brigade HQ, and the Serb communication centre in Medak, which caused great havoc in the command chain and communication with the rest of the Serb units;
- The T-12 unit situated on the artillery position in Lički Novi had deployed earlier, because it had been spotted crossing Serb lines, and was consequently subjected to fire from the Serb Kamenjuša position. That target was immediately destroyed;
- According to confiscated documents, parts of the Serb 9th mobile brigade were deployed immediately after the Croatian artillery fire started in Počitelj and Čitluk. They left their positions and abandoned armour and ammunition in Počitelj, which was later taken by Croatian forces.
- Up to 08:30 hours the 1/9th and 2/9th guard mobile brigade<sup>158</sup> took the closer designated target with no troops killed and three wounded soldiers; one tank was destroyed;
- The 3/9th guard mobile brigade forces encountered slightly stronger resistance on the Kamenjuša position, which slowed their pace. The Gospić homeguard battalion combat readiness had not been satisfactory, which enabled the Serb enemy forces to regroup. The brigade was slightly shaken because of the first casualties;
- The 3/9th guard mobile brigade in advancing to its immediate designated target had two soldiers killed, five wounded, one tank damaged and two ambulances destroyed;
- The reconnaissance company, manned partly by foreign nationals volunteers ("foreign mercenaries?!") advanced to the Rogići station, had been detected and temporarily stopped. But the 3/9th guard mobile brigade fulfilled its immediate task and the reconnaissance company advanced with only one soldier wounded;
- The Croatian special police forces had to sneak behind heavily mined enemy lines – causing several soldiers to be wounded<sup>159</sup>. These difficulties slowed down the tempo of the attack. The linking up with the 9th guard mobile brigade had also not been done at the designated time; and the encirclement of the enemy forces was not quick and effective enough which enabled the enemy's stronger resistance to the 9th guard mobile brigade.<sup>160</sup> This caused one part of the enemy forces

to break through the encirclement into the forested slopes of the Velebit Mountains.<sup>161</sup> This is important data because it denies the accepted preconception that all three villages' inhabitants were missing (killed or that their bodies had been hidden). Such a claim is still repeated by some Serbian and Canadian authors.<sup>162</sup> The conclusion is clear: one part of the population (children and the elderly) had already been evacuated before the military action started, others had left the theatre of operations escaping to the south, while some had passed through the Velebit Mountains and had reached Gračac<sup>163</sup> - like the Lapac light brigade soldiers.

Some were taken prisoners, and some were escorted by Croatian Government forces to their relatives living in Zagreb, Rijeka or Pula. The accounts of the members of the Serb 103rd Lapac brigade<sup>164</sup> prove that Serb resistance was strong and that the Croatian Army "had targeted house by house with tank cannons; after which they started a cleansing operation using armour and infantry."

General Norac's forces (the 9th guard mobile brigade) reached their start position. Its dismounted infantry backed by two tank platoons reinforced with artillery carried out the attack, spearheading Or(a)nice<sup>165</sup>-Lički Čitluk. After taking the Or(a)nice-Čitluk road and Rajčevići hamlet, they reached the Cindrino Brdo-Rogića most line and linked up with forces of the Ministry of the Interior, which have been deployed on the Medak-Lički Čitluk<sup>166</sup> line.

Author Ozren Žunec in his book does a short synopsis of the Medak Pocket operation: "...it was a relatively small scale operation correcting the Gospić frontline... during the short attack some homesteads south of Gospić were taken and Croatian forces took better positions on the Velebit Mountains".<sup>167</sup> "Serb lines quickly crumbled and they retreated together with the civilian population. During the swift operation Serbs had been fighting a withdrawal, trying to hold onto each house, which had been a paramilitary operation post. Therefore it was possible that some women, members of military logistics, had been in the military combat zone and had been killed, either in crossfire or from hand grenades.<sup>168</sup> "...During the night three women, serving as terrorist guides who tried to escape through the Medak Pocket's difficult terrain, had been shot at close range, according to Croatia's deputy Prime Minister Dr. Kostović.<sup>169</sup> Ljilja Jelača and two Četniks encountered Croatian forces, activated a hand grenade and killed all three of them."<sup>170</sup> In his book: "Velikorspska najezda i obrana Hrvatske"<sup>171</sup> Božidar Javorović writes about the Medak Pocket Operation as a preparatory move to stop the attacks on the city of Gospić and its

surrounding area, which had lasted for 738 days. "Politically, psychologically and as far as security was concerned, the situation had become more difficult. The Četnik authorities did not want to start serious negotiation. It was necessary to drag them away and to show the rebel Serbs that Croatia would not endlessly put up with their insurgency and the occupation of parts of the county. The Croatian 9th guard brigade acted like a hammer while the special mountain police forces from the south, had the role of an anvil. The Serb forces were surprised by this attack and were neither in number, nor in armour, nor organization, matched to the forces of the Croatian army. In this action there was a lot of destruction and death. This was due primarily because the Četniks defended themselves from inside houses. Almost every house was a firing point. Therefore, killed with the soldiers were civilians who stayed with them.<sup>172</sup>"

#### THE ATTACK'S SECOND STAGE:

As the Croatian offensive advanced, the resistance of the Serb forces to the 3/9th guard mobile brigade at Strunići grew stronger. Parts of the 9th guard mobile brigade tried to secure their flanks, advanced and kept the theatre under control. Up to 12:00 hours parts of the 1/9th and 2/9th guard mobile brigade had taken their next designated position and linked up with the Croatian special police units that had destroying the retreating enemy. 3/9th managed to break the enemy's resistance and capture Strunići.

#### THE ACTION'S CONCLUSION:

At 13:05 hours the Sector HQ received reports about the mission being accomplished; the Begluk-Drljići-Pjevčeva Draga line was established, the engineer units of the brigade started to build bunkers. The remnant Serb units, who tried a breakthrough from the encirclement were still being engaged in smaller firefights. The enemy re-deployed its forces in order to counter-attack and to free those left in the encirclement. The Serb counterattack was repelled with artillery fire and the attained line was defended. The Croatian Army and police forces were ordered to hold their positions. "They regrouped in order to continue the attack to the Lički Čitluk-Počitelj line, where they had to maintain, (prevent – authour's note) the enemy forces advancement from the Divoselo encirclement, in order to reach Pavići-Njegovani-Zaselak towards Memedovo brdo-Dolovi-Begluk. And after taking the tactically adequate positions, they had to fortify the defence lines. The 9th guard mobile brigade had to execute a lightning pincer advance, no matter what decisive action the enemy undertook in the semi-encirclement. An

armoured battalion had reached the Lika River and cut off the enemy forces that decided to leave their position and retreat to *Debela Glava*, where a Croatian police ambush was already waiting for them.<sup>173</sup> The Serbs were swiftly defeated. They withdrew together with civilians. The planned action ended the same day. Occasional fighting continued for a couple of days, ending in front of Medak, a small town 20 kilometres south of Gospić. In Medak general panic started, soldiers left their positions and fellow Serb troops shot some deserters.<sup>174</sup>

September 10th 1993.

The enemy Serb forces brought reinforcements<sup>175</sup> and consolidated the Sitnik-Njegovani-Memedovo brdo line, trying to regroup for the counterattack in order to retake Lički Čitluk and Divoselo.<sup>176</sup> The whole frontline in Croatia, from Dalmatia to Karlovac had reignited. Serbs started shelling a large number of Croatian cities. ("Real threat strategy") – there were dozens of dead in Karlovac, ground-to-ground missiles were fired on a Zagreb suburb. A couple of days after the operation finished, Serbs handed over a list of some thirty or so targets that would be attacked if the Croats did not retreat or if they continued to attack the "RSK".<sup>177</sup> The weather conditions were worsening. It was raining and it grew cold. On the Velebit Mountain slopes, Croatian special forces were fighting exhaustion and night attacks. While on guard, two Captains, J. G. and S. P. were ambushed and killed. Croatian forces took cover under limestone shelters and scraps. They were constantly under a rocket barrage fired by Serb multiple rocket launchers positioned in Medak. A larger group of Serb soldiers, policemen and civilians were still encircled in the Divoselo area. The data about their numbers differ. One-hundred and fifty-seven according to one Croatian intelligence source. The other mentions about 100. While a third intelligence report mentions as many as 300. During the night of September 10th and 11th and during the day of September 11th about 90 soldiers and villagers safely pulled out of the Divoselo encirclement. According to Serb sources, up to September 12th 79 soldiers and 26 civilians pulled out of the encirclement. "On September 12th 1993, up to 12:00 hours from the encirclement in the village of Divoselo, 49 members of the 103rd Lapac light brigade from Donji Lapac that held their positions pulled out, and the 40 remaining are unaccounted for."<sup>178</sup>

September 11th 1993.

Surrounded enemy Serb forces backed up by their cannons and tried in smaller groups to charge through the Vukasi-Vitasi-

Bobići line, but were repelled. At 05:00 hours the Serbian Krajina Army used the artillery preparation and attacked the new front in order to enable those encircled to pull out. The counterattack was repelled and a larger number of Serb soldiers and civilians were discovered west of the village of Drljići (the Croatian Ministry of Interior special police zone of operations). The group was destroyed in the morning hours: 12 Serb soldiers were killed, two soldiers and two civilians were taken prisoner. In the afternoon, around 15:00 hours, one Jastreb J-21 dropped two bombs on the Ornica area. At 17:00 hours, the same plane took a reconnaissance mission over the same area. Serb sources reported the counterattack and reaching the Vuksani-Njegovani line. But that only marked the approach to the line Croatian forces have taken on September 9th. That day on the Velebit Mountains, during a Serb artillery attack, eight Croatian policemen were wounded. In the vicinity of Gospić, three civilians were wounded. In response to this, the Croatian Army's artillery attacked Korenica and Udbina.

September 12th 1993.

The Serb side stabilized its lines, brought reinforcements, engineers dug trenches, and from time to time they tried to move their defences. Croatian forces repelled several attempted offensives. There were no large-scale engagements in "clearing" the liberated area. The remnant enemy groups were neutralized. Brigadier Ademi commanded, (according to the orders of General Bobetko and approved by President Tuđman), that during the next 48 hours the artillery fire on major cities should cease, even if the enemy would engage in that way.

September 13th 1993.

A verbal ceasefire agreement was reached. In Gospić, one person was killed and eleven were wounded. The Serbs used artillery and fired on positions of the Croatian 9th mobile brigade. The Serb offensive on Brda was repelled, but three Croatian soldiers were wounded. The Croatian Army used 120mm mortars to target the Serb 82mm mortar platoon and Croatian tanks targeted enemy positions in Ljubojevići and Sitnik. The Serb airplane "Jastreb," that flew over and attacked Croatian army positions, was fired upon with anti-aircraft guns and an S-2M rocket.

September 14th 1993.

The UNSC appealed for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of Croatian forces. Three persons were wounded in Gospić. The



members of the Croatian 9th mobile brigade answered Serb provocations with infantry arms. Police special forces repelled two attacks on the Drljići village.

September 15th 1993.

A ceasefire agreement and pre-September 9th lines withdrawal agreement was signed. The Serb signatory was Major-General Mile Novaković, and the Croatian signatory was Major-General Petar Stipetić. The agreement stated the ceasefire should commence at 12:00 hours on September 15th 1993, when control was to be taken over by UNPROFOR. The withdrawal time was 24 hours. The Croatian side asked for another 24-hour extension and a final withdrawal was agreed upon for 18:00 hours on September 17th 1993.

September 15th/16th 1993.

During the action a confrontation between Croatian soldiers and the Canadian UNPROFOR contingent occurred, killing some soldiers, (the details of the events are embargoed).<sup>179</sup>

September 16th 1993.

At 22:00 hours, the second in command at Gospić HQ (Brigadier Ademi – author's note), held a meeting with UNPROFOR in the district command post at Gospić, after an agreement between the Croatian army HQ and UNPROFOR was reached. At 22:40 Ademi commanded a complete ceasefire and ordered the Croatian Army and police force withdrawal. This caused discontent within the ranks of the Croatian Army. According to one Croatian army report, *"The order to withdraw had a negative impact on soldiers so many of them reacted in an impermissible way."* Nonetheless, the order was carried out up to the evening of September 17th 1993. Then members of the Canadian (and French – author's remark) UNPROFOR battalion entered the wider area of Divoselo.<sup>180</sup>

During the Action's imminent aftermath, bodies were uncovered. Without any investigation they were deemed to be victims of Croatian war crimes. Strong reaction, pressure and threats came from the international community.<sup>181</sup> Great Britain and France threatened air strikes from the aircraft carriers "Invincible" and "Foch," situated somewhere in Adriatic waters close to the Croatian coast.<sup>29</sup> Croatian Army reports listed a few minor incidents due to the arrogant behaviour of UNPROFOR forces and a breach in the previously arranged agreement. On one such occa-

sion, mentioned by Canadian sources, the Croatian side used a tank to underline that Canadians breached the agreement. The Canadians later used that incident to enforce their thesis about engaging the Croatian Army, although a firing engagement never happened. Canadian troops condemned Croatian resistance to their arrogant behaviour; their display of their "supreme rights" in a sovereign country. To Canadian troops it seemed natural to forcibly enter the area in which they could have entered only after a complete sensitive military agreement was accepted. On another occasion, UN APC's had forcibly passed through a Croatian police checkpoint. One APC hit a mine and three Canadians were slightly wounded, transferred to the Gospić hospital, where they received medical treatment, and later returned to their unit. Because of the undefined demarcation line, the tension built up and incidents continued to happen between Croatian soldiers and police on the one side and Canadians on the other.