

# Command and Control in Stressful Conditions

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*'The justice court of Heaven, after long delay,  
At last has pitied me, the tired castle, and  
Poor citizenry. Stirred by people's prayers and  
Their Laments, it has relieved the frightened city.'*  
J. van den Vondel, 1637<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

### 1.1 GENERAL

The subject of *the human in command*, especially under difficult circumstances, is an appealing theme. Certainly for someone like myself who, as Commander of Dutchbat 2/UNPROFOR, serving in Srebrenica in the former Yugoslavia from 19 July 1994 to 18 January 1995, has experienced this responsibility first-hand. I have written this contribution on the basis of my subjective experience.<sup>2</sup> My own command and control experiences take centre stage, although I have tried to look at these aspects against the background of the overall picture.<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that the subject contains a great many subjective elements which makes writing somewhat easier, as it is not necessary to opt for an approach with an academic foundation containing a great deal of annotations. Of course the danger of a subjective approach is that one's own experience and perception could lead to matters being taken out of context and that individuals and organisations could come to be viewed in the wrong light. This could also lead to a "lament", which, as far as I am concerned, is certainly not my intention. You will no doubt be familiar with the way that time changes many things. Events gain perspective and nuance, the sharp edges are softened and, perhaps more importantly: the pleasant experiences with one's unit become more pleasant, and the memory of bad things fades.

I would like to make two comments at this point: the deployment of my battalion to Srebrenica<sup>4</sup> will always remain inextricably linked with unthinkable human suffering in extremely poor conditions; furthermore, I shall always have a deep respect for the men and women who served with the various Dutchbat battalions under exceptionally difficult circumstances.

In the following pages I will briefly describe the general situation in

the area of operations. Then I will go on to discuss the "difficult circumstances" in Srebrenica. My aim is to sketch the circumstances under which operations had to be carried out and my perception of them. After all, it is the circumstances that determine the way in which a mission is carried out. I will also deal with a number of operational issues in addition to other aspects of the operation and personal experiences. Finally, I will discuss the question of how these circumstances were dealt with in relation to command and control.

### 1.2 GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE OPERATIONAL SITUATION

The mission for the battalion was in general terms to support the delivery of aid by UNHCR and other organisations and to create favourable circumstances for the evacuation of wounded people, care of the population, living circumstances and the halting of hostilities. The departing point of this mission was that the enclave would be respected by all parties and that no weapons would be available to the Bosnians within the enclave.

The enclave could be characterised as mountainous, with high-est peaks up to 1500 meter. Only one major hardened route, running from north to south, was available in the eastern part of the enclave. The size of the enclave was approximately 15 km north to south and 15 km east to west. The majority of the population lived in the city of Srebrenica and the village of Potocari, both in the very eastern part of the enclave.

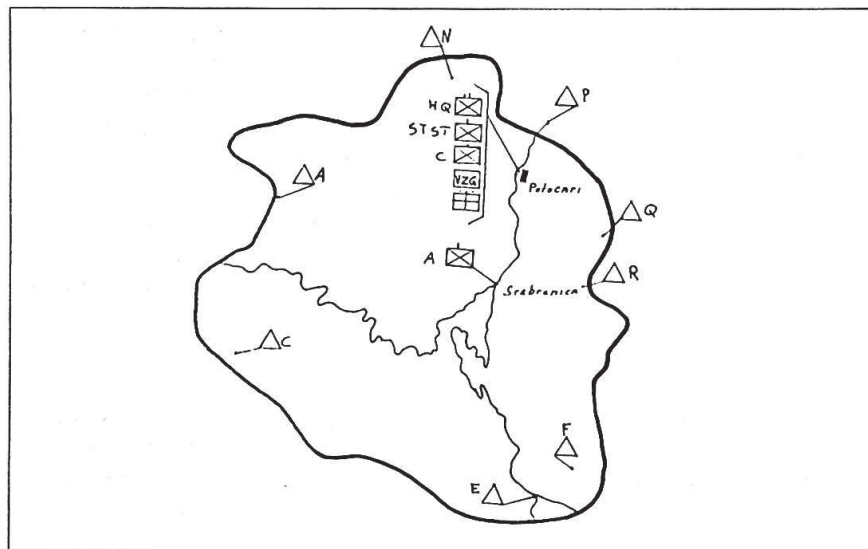


Figure 1: The Srebrenica Enclave (From: Dutchbat on Tour, Delft, Debut, 1995, p.26.)

From a military point of view the battalion had to take into consideration that the Bosnian Serbs controlled the area outside the enclave with perhaps three brigades. They had a wide variety of means available. Most important was that they could reach every part of the enclave with artillery fire. Within the enclave the so-called 8 Operational Group was available to the Bosnians. Approximately 3 - 4,000 young men formed this group. They were mainly armed with light weapons, but also some mortars and heavy machine guns were available.

To execute the mission the battalion consisted of a headquarters company with a.o. two security platoons and engineers, three rifle companies (with armoured vehicles), a direct logistical company, an engineer company, a medical company and an indirect support unit. Of these units, one rifle company was stationed in the area of Sapna and the indirect support unit was stationed in Tuzla. In total the battalion counted approximately 1200 women and men. Approximately 600 were stationed in the enclave.

Within the enclave the mission was fulfilled by operating a number of observation posts, situated along the border of the enclave and by patrolling, mainly along the border of the enclave. Next to that within the enclave two compounds were available. One in Srebrenica with one rifle company and one in Potocari with the remainder of the battalion.

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## 2. Factors Affecting the Operation<sup>5</sup>

I would first of all like to focus the reader's attention on my battalion's mission. Prior to deployment there was a great deal of discussion on the subject of this mission, and there was a large diversity of opinion. Some deemed that the mission was not feasible, others spoke of a difficult but feasible mission. In the preparations for the deployment it was difficult to explain the diversity of opinion to my soldiers. Clarity is of the utmost importance. After all, my personnel were about to embark upon a mission of uncertainty. I felt that such public discussions regarding the feasibility of a mission are incompatible with this need for clarity. I will not discuss the ultimate feasibility of the mission in any further detail; the events of June and July 1995 speak for themselves.<sup>6</sup>

I shall now turn to the chain of command. In a formal sense, the commander of HQ North-East<sup>7</sup> was my operational commander. However, he never set foot in the enclave because the Serbs prevented it and the influence of this headquarters on developments in my area of operations was limited. This resulted in the battalion being forced to "do business" with a higher level of headquarters than anticipated. This mainly involved all activities related to convoys



and leave arrangements. There were also contacts with the Netherlands, which ran "officially" through the agency of a Dutch detachment commander in Zagreb. Furthermore, I was often in contact with what is known as the "Situation Centre" of the Royal Netherlands Army in The Hague. Many problems were discussed via this line of contact. As far as I was concerned, this was a welcome sounding board. Thus the chain of command seemed ambiguous to me. In some cases we had to do business with headquarters X and in others with Y.

12 Prior to deployment the available armament and equipment of the battalion were also a frequent topic of discussion. For me as commander, the armament and equipment were a *fait accompli*. Just as with the public discussions on the mission, it was extremely annoying to me that many people in the Netherlands had an opinion on these matters, while it was the members of my battalion who actually had to do the work. In this context, we must not forget that ammunition belongs with weapons. I had learned from our predecessors that the situation regarding the availability of ammunition was by no means rose-coloured - a mere 16% of what was regarded as the minimum level of supply was available because of the Serb control of supplies to the enclave.

In theatre, the battalion's freedom of movement was extremely restricted. Because of the mountainous features of the terrain, movements of vehicles were relatively easy to detect by all parties. Thus it would have been possible to take action against movements of the battalion using simple assets such as mines. Furthermore, all compounds<sup>8</sup> and observation posts<sup>9</sup> were situated in locations that were easily observed by all parties,<sup>10</sup> and were therefore also vulnerable to fire.

In addition, never more than 75% of the personnel were present in order to carry out the assigned task. This was caused by the leave arrangements.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, leave is a very important factor when a battalion is operating under great pressure, which increases as circumstances degenerate.

A factor that was to have a profound effect on all facets of the operations was the total isolation of the battalion, in all respects. Not only was this to influence the implementation of the task, but also the level of supply, and of course the psychological state of the personnel. Furthermore, it was clear to me that the battalion could not be supported by troops from higher levels of command because this would be at the very least an extremely arduous operation, due to many factors such as road infrastructure and the terrain. In fact,



the battalion could not count on much support, given the circumstances. I hardly need mention the fact that this isolation played an extremely significant part in all of my considerations.

Another factor was that both parties to the conflict frequently restricted the battalion's freedom of movement. This sometimes took the form of a refusal to grant permission for certain activities to be carried out, or a simple refusal to allow the use of roads or to grant access to areas. This had a negative influence on the way the battalion carried out its task, and thus also on the implementation of the mission.

It is also important to point out that the enclave was surrounded by a great many minefields; the location of some of these was known, but most were not.

Another important operational factor was that the enclave was surrounded by a number of Bosnian-Serb brigades, the strength of which was unknown. These units had various types of light and heavy weapons at their disposal. At the very least they had the firepower to cover all Dutchbat positions and locations effectively. Units of the Bosnian government army were also present in the enclave, numbering between 3,000 and 4,000 personnel, usually with light arms. In short, both parties constituted a military factor that I had to take into account in an operational sense.

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I must also say that, owing to its size alone, the population of the enclave (approximately 35,000 souls) was a factor that we had to take into account. It had been demonstrated in the past that human blockades can be extremely effective in making military operations impossible, or at least severely restricting them, certainly when conducting a "blue"<sup>12</sup> mission.

From an operational point of view circumstances were complex. It was clear that the battalion was walking a tightrope. There were plenty of possibilities for losing our footing, and the risk of damage was high, particularly in view of the high level of political and media interest in the mission.

### **3. Interaction with Other Agencies**

As a commander - certainly in a situation in which one is in fact totally cut off from the outside world - one realises that there are many interests that have to be taken into account; interests which otherwise - in exercises or operations in the framework of a general defence task - would not be given such close attention. As a result, these interests, which I now refer to as "other circumstances", al-

ways played a part in my considerations. There were often conflicting interests, but above all I had to decide for myself how to deal with them, as there was little or no support from the outside. I therefore think it is important that I discuss these interests here. The subjects have been chosen in random order.

Once the first Dutch battalion had been committed, and the more the general situation worsened, the more limited the possibilities for communicating with the Netherlands became. In other words, the image that developed in the Netherlands regarding the situation in Srebrenica as far as I could see was not entirely at one with the situation experienced within the enclave. This effect was exacerbated by attempts of Bosnian organisations to purposely disseminate incorrect information<sup>13</sup> concerning the situation in the enclave. As a result, it was my experience that the UN and other parties did not always have the correct information to base decisions on. One consequence of this could have been that the actual situation was perhaps not properly assessed by the aforementioned authorities. For me as commander, this meant that I had to be "careful" regarding my communication concerning the situation, in order to prevent our "home front" from becoming more concerned than necessary. Because of the restricted freedom of movement and difficult communications,<sup>14</sup> officials in the chain of command could only be partly aware of the circumstances in which the battalion had to conduct its activities. Consequently, higher levels sometimes took decisions which the battalion could not possibly implement. At times I was compelled to protest against such decisions. In short, it required a disproportional effort to convince others that the situation in the enclave was a very special one.

Another aspect that had a strong influence on decision-making was the fact that the parties with which the battalion was involved regarded Dutchbat as an entity. In other words, it was of no relevance to the parties whether a certain group did or did not do anything in a certain area. The battalion as a whole was deemed responsible for all activities undertaken by individual members of the battalion. This meant that activities in a certain area that were not accepted by the conflicting parties could lead to reprisals in an entirely different location. Consequently, it was necessary to make the actions of individuals, groups and platoons as uniform as possible. Naturally, this meant that individual initiative suffered as did individual interpretations of assigned tasks. It will be obvious that this was a very sensitive issue for leaders who, in a peacetime situation, are accustomed to taking their own initiative and sometimes exercising a little more freedom when carrying out tasks than is desirable in a deployment situation.



"Doing business" with both parties added a special dimension to the implementation of the mission. In the Netherlands we are accustomed to being issued a mission and to rely upon our initiative and interpretation of that mission. In the enclave, this was out of the question. Everything was centrally directed.<sup>15</sup> Our discussion partners had no authority whatsoever. In fact, the battalion was consequently unable to make arrangements with the local authorities to improve the situation within the enclave. This was not a particularly encouraging situation for those who had contact with the parties. As a result, initiatives taken by the battalion, requiring co-operation from the parties, often failed to get off the ground. It actually boiled down to the fact that "negotiations" with the parties constituted an extremely long and drawn-out process.

Within the enclave, the battalion maintained contact with the civil authorities.<sup>16</sup> There was a certain form of administration in which the Bosnian military leadership had absolute authority. This administration dealt with "the interests" of the enclave's population. It was noticeable in this respect that these administrators were materially better off than much of the population. Also noticeable was the inability - or perhaps reluctance - of the administrators to evenly distribute the little that was available in the enclave among all the inhabitants. I often had the feeling that they would approve of anything, as long as Dutchbat provided the resources and they themselves did not need to make any effort.

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Another phenomenon facing the battalion were the so-called Non Governmental Organisations. Members of *Médecins Sans Frontières* were working in the enclave, and sometimes representatives of the International Red Cross. Furthermore, representatives of the UNHCR, UNMOs and UNCIVPOL were also active within the enclave. Co-operation with these organisations was pleasant, and in many cases our co-operation improved the assistance being delivered to the local population. Because of the geographic isolation of the enclave, these organisations were also largely dependent on support from the battalion, particularly with regard to fuel supply and security. This meant that the battalion - at least in a moral sense - was to a significant extent responsible for the well-being of these people. In this context, we must not forget the fact that around one hundred members of the local population worked for the battalion. Clearly, this also added to the task of the battalion.

The final aspect that was of particular importance was the apparent powerlessness of the United Nations to improve the fate of the population of the enclave. On various occasions it appeared that neither promises nor threats made any difference whatsoever to the situation of the population or the battalion. It was my feeling that

the credibility of Dutchbat - as a representative of the United Nations - was implicitly undermined by this situation, as was the confidence in the implementation of Dutchbat's mission.

#### 4. Psychological Factors in the Operation

I have already mentioned the total isolation of the battalion. It is important to mention in this respect that the isolation was immediately clear upon entering the enclave, which was encircled by high mountains, dotted with Serb observation posts. This meant that personnel were extra conscious of being actually surrounded and of the threat posed by the Serbs. This led to a feeling of being in the biggest open-air prison in the world, with all the associations that entailed.

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One aspect that left a particularly deep impression on everyone who served in the enclave was the life of the population in the enclave itself; a life in unimaginably harsh conditions. There were far too many people in too small an area. There was not enough shelter, not enough food, no electricity, no sewer system, no waste disposal system worth mentioning. No shops, no restaurants .... a situation we could scarcely have imagined beforehand. Furthermore, the population itself was weighed down by the constant uncertainty about its very existence, the threat from the Serbs, the apparent powerlessness of their own government to do anything for them, the apparent powerlessness of the United Nations, and merely a faint hope of better times. It goes without saying that the suffering of the population did not go unnoticed, especially since the battalion had neither the material resources nor the opportunity to relieve their torment.

The fact that the circumstances also claimed casualties greatly affected the battalion. In a short time (in August, approximately a month after taking over the area responsibility), we lost two excellent NCOs as a result of mine accidents. Later, another three members of the battalion were wounded and repatriated to the Netherlands. After the initial shock, everyone realised that the situation was serious, and they had to be constantly alert. They also realised that when on patrol on the enclave boundaries, they were visible to all parties and thus constituted a possible target. This exerted great pressure on the entire battalion, and certainly on the leaders, who felt responsible for the well-being of their personnel.

Because of the isolation of the battalion and the constant obstruction of the smooth implementation of the leave arrangements, these arrangements became a constant source of concern for those



tasked with their implementation, and of course also for the personnel wanting to go on leave. Nor must we forget the countless relatives and friends who worried every time a convoy of personnel on leave was delayed.

## **5. Experiences and Lessons Learned**

During a period spent in an area of deployment, there are various circumstances from which we can learn. Certainly when one is left entirely to one's own devices, one must give due consideration to the local circumstances which, after all, determine the best way of operating, and thus of carrying out the mission. Moreover, for the battalion, the taking into account of the circumstances was a matter of "survival"; almost literally as far as I was concerned. I have chosen to confine myself to mentioning the most important experiences that influenced my decision-making, and thus the actions of the battalion. I shall deal with these experiences below.

### **5.1 HANDLING RISKS**

Approximately one month after the battalion had assumed responsibility for the area within the enclave, a minefield was cleared and Bosnian Serb positions within the enclave were removed. As a consequence we were faced with a number of mine incidents. Within a short time, two outstanding NCOs were injured and had to be repatriated, a YPR armoured vehicle drove over a mine and was a write-off, although fortunately the crew were not injured, and finally a Mercedes Benz drove over an anti-personnel mine. I am firmly convinced that there was a direct connection between these "incidents" and the demining and clearing actions of the battalion. In addition, during that period the Serbs put the contacts<sup>17</sup> with the battalion on a back burner, and the convoys that were so sorely needed by the battalion were systematically held up. All of this had a tremendous impact on the battalion. Not only did it become clear that things were serious, but the situation also forced an evaluation of the operational procedures and the so-called "skills and drills". This led, amongst other things, to adaptations of the YPR, changes in the methods of vehicle patrol and changes to the minimum number of soldiers taking part in a foot patrol. Furthermore, the composition of a patrol was adapted as a result of these incidents. The evaluations and investigations that followed the incidents resulted in an assault engineer and a medical orderly joining every (foot) patrol. In view of the lack in these categories of personnel, their workload was heavier than that of the other personnel. I also clearly laid the responsibility for the patrols at the door of the commanders in the line. In my view that would contribute to their control of the operations. Previously, a duty officer was able to give

permission (and thus in fact was responsible) for certain patrols to take place; for me this was no longer acceptable, even though it would increase the burden of the commanders in the line.

For me as commander, a number of things became clear: both parties to the conflict could arbitrarily strike the battalion wherever they wanted; for supplies, and therefore for the fulfilment of its mission, the battalion was fully dependent on the approval of the Serbs for logistical and leave convoys, and promises of support from the UN would not quickly result in an improvement of the situation in which the battalion found itself. As for the battalion's own personnel, this situation reinforced my opinion that unnecessary risks were to be avoided: they served no purpose. From August onwards the battalion had to tread more carefully on the fine line between fulfilling the mission and the interests of all parties.

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Prior to departure for the area of deployment, all battalion personnel had been informed of a vast number of regulations regarding what was and what was not acceptable regarding the movement to the area of deployment. This was necessary as a result of regulations and arrangements made by the UN and the Serbs for the so-called rotations. There were very specific regulations regarding what was permitted and what was not. Despite various discussions on this subject and the issuing of stringent directives many soldiers chose to disregard these directives. The result of their actions,<sup>18</sup> in these specific circumstances, put the entire group at risk. Thus a rotation was at stake and a convoy of more than 200 people was briefly held up as a result, with no-one to come to their aid. Even as a commander I was powerless to change the situation of the convoy.

I found this situation totally unacceptable and from then onwards I was exceedingly critical of personnel disregarding directives. The interests of the battalion and the implementation of its mission, as a collective objective, were of far greater importance to me.

One thing of great importance in this respect was the constant development of scenarios ("what ifs", which assumed even worse circumstances than those in which we found ourselves at that particular moment). A great deal of time was spent on discussions aimed at convincing people of the gravity of the situation and trying to have the battalion carry out its task using extremely modest resources. All of these circumstances led me to believe, at the end of November 1994, that by mid-December the battalion would no longer be able to fulfil its task if no supplies were forthcoming. It appeared to me that in the Netherlands, the situation was judged differently. This made it difficult for me - as a commander - to com-



municate an accurate portrait of the situation.

During the deployment of the battalion, countless incidents occurred. Fortunately, most of them turned out well. In a number of cases, the battalion conducted operations aimed at stopping undesirable activities by the parties to the conflict or the civilian population. In doing so, the battalion acted with restraint, partly as a result of the mine incidents mentioned earlier. However, there arose an occasion when restraint was no longer possible. The immediate cause for my decision to take action was the fact that the battalion's hospital, which was clearly recognisable, had come under direct fire on three occasions. The decisive factor was our own morale and my faith in our own ability. By taking a conscious - albeit limited - risk, we were able to improve our sense of self-respect, which had a positive effect on the implementation of our task. An important lesson for me in this respect was that it was sometimes necessary to take risks because it enabled the battalion to function better as a whole.

## 5.2 SHORTAGES

I have already discussed the isolation of the battalion. At the end of August the battalion introduced the fist rationing of fuel and, to a more limited extent, fresh food supplies. During the course of the deployment, an increasing number of shortages manifested themselves in all areas, which was an impediment to the implementation of the battalion's task. For instance, it became impossible to carry out patrols using vehicles, posts could not be visited on a regular basis and the overview of the enclave thus became limited. As commander, I was faced with the question of: how can I travel around in my Mercedes while I am severely restricting everyone else? As a result of my deliberations, I used the Mercedes as sparingly as possible, the drawback being that I had to drastically limit the number of visits to posts....

Owing in particular to the shortage of fuel and spare parts, the battalion was in fact unable to continue using the fleet of vehicles. Moreover, because of the approaching winter, the battalion was forced to take whatever measures possible to survive the winter. The battalion therefore constructed a great number of heaters.

In this context, the so-called "mini-mini-minimise" programmes will be remembered by many for years to come. In these programmes, the S4 of the battalion gave detailed instructions as to where wood could be burned and for how long, which units were tasked with chopping wood, and the priorities for distributing it. The programmes also gave very detailed instructions for the use of lighting, the use of water, showering (a hot shower once a week only, notably

in November 1994), laundry (cold water only), and of course heating. Because of these circumstances a greater effort was needed to motivate and stimulate the personnel. Consequently, I increasingly focused attention on the personnel and logistic aspects of the deployment. In fact, the operational aspect became more and more subordinate to finding ways of surviving the winter. In other words, circumstances compelled me to conduct a "survival strategy", in which keeping personnel fit became a matter of growing concern.

### 5.3 COMMUNICATION

20 I indicated earlier that only a limited number of officials in the chain of command were aware of the precise situation in the enclave. I also indicated that the perception of the situation in the enclave differed from reality. This made communication regarding the situation extremely difficult. I felt that there was often a case of being at cross-purposes as far as communication was concerned, particularly because the messages coming from my battalion in the enclave were not always hopeful. For me, this meant that the possibilities I had for explaining the situation were severely limited by the false conceptions that existed at other levels. This also meant that - when communicating with the press and the people at home - I had to exercise extreme restraint when describing the situation. A special lesson I have learned from this is that the local commander (also within the battalion) has the best knowledge of the situation, and that it sometimes takes a great deal of personal courage to trust him to make the right decision. If guidelines for an operation are required, then knowledge of the local situation, coupled with good and open communication, is of the utmost importance.

In this context, it would perhaps be useful to briefly discuss the influence exerted on very high levels by decisions taken at very low levels. In general, we are accustomed to acting in a particular way, in which commanders have a relatively high degree of freedom within their area of responsibility. In this respect the influence of decisions taken at a lower command level can never be so great that the higher level would have to adapt its course of action, or, more seriously, that a decision taken by a lower level would draw attention from political authorities. As I have already mentioned, within the enclave Dutchbat was seen by all parties as an entity. Actions by individuals were regarded as the responsibility of the battalion as a whole, which meant that decisions at low levels had to be taken into account within the battalion. With the passage of time, and the increasing complexity of the circumstances in the former Yugoslavia, the involvement of political and senior military authorities became greater. The impact of decisions taken at lower levels on higher levels therefore grew at the same rate. Obviously, this li-



mitted the possibilities of the local commander to exercise freedom in his decision-making. Consequently, there was an increase in the number of limiting (external) factors that had to be taken into account in the decision-making process, while communication was becoming if anything more difficult. In my opinion it was therefore necessary to issue stringent guidelines with regard to the action of the various elements of the battalion, and to restrict the freedom of the sub-commanders.

#### 5.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

During the stay in the enclave, the battalion was fully dependent on the Serbs with regard both to supplies and the implementation of the leave arrangements. After all, it was the Serbs who approved the applications for the logistical and leave convoys. In all cases, the majority of movements were across Serb territory: they had planned the routes to be taken, so the battalion was in fact only able to use very poor roads along the river Drina. In November, the battalion had to face two hostage situations. A supply convoy involving about twenty people was "stopped" en route, and at the same time a convoy of approximately eighty personnel on leave was "stopped" in the vicinity of Zvornik. It soon transpired that these situations were linked to the events at Ubdina where the airfield was being bombarded at that time.

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The hostage situations brought us face-to-face with the facts once again: in this case the Serbs were able to take arbitrary measures and the United Nations were powerless to change the situation. These were extremely humiliating situations, and I had a sense of complete impotence. The sense of relief was great when, after approximately ten days, this nightmare came to an end - the soldiers and their families were reunited and for the first time in ages a small quantity of diesel and some food were supplied. It had now become perfectly clear to me that the battalion - if push came to shove - was on its own, and that support (apart from lip service) could sometimes be very scarce.

Duties within the enclave were often monotonous - patrolling day in, day out (on foot), guard duty at the compound and manning the observation posts. Furthermore, these activities were often carried out in physically demanding conditions, with nutrition that was none too good and the constant threat of activities by the parties to the conflict. This meant that the lower levels within the battalion were also exposed to severe pressure, while there were scarcely any possibilities for recreation. Owing to the physical burden and the constant psychological pressure, it became necessary to constantly monitor personnel. The counsellors present within the battalion played an important role in this respect.

In one case - after lengthy consultations and intensive discussions - I decided to refurbish a platoon. I had noticed that the platoon was no longer carrying out its mission properly, as more than fifty per cent of the unit was no longer fully deployable. This was caused by physical problems such as the consequences of being in extremely heavy terrain when carrying out patrols, and by the constant psychological pressure. We devised a plan for the refurbishment with one of the counsellors and the company commander was responsible for its implementation. I shall never forget that it is extremely difficult to take the decision, on the basis of subjective observations, to allow a unit to recuperate. The unit regards such a decision as a punishment, even though everyone knows that the situation cannot continue. Only afterwards was it apparent that many supported the decision. For myself, I have drawn the conclusion that one sometimes needs the courage to take decisions that will not have broad support, but which in your opinion are both perfectly legitimate and necessary for the implementation of the mission and - not to be forgotten - the well-being of a large group of young people.

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The more time that passed, the worse the circumstances for the battalion grew. I refer here in particular to the constant psychological pressure and pressure of work on the personnel, in combination with poor hygiene conditions and a permanent shortage of fresh food, milk and suchlike, which was a constant cause for concern. Poor communication with relatives also complicated the situation for the soldiers in the enclave. Mail depended on Serb approval to let convoys pass and the possibilities to communicate by telephone were limited. So, there were few moments to "let off some steam".

Furthermore, the battalion - especially personnel working from the Potocari compound - were facing serious environmental pollution. Good food and living conditions are an important precondition for well-functioning personnel. Unfortunately, we could do little to change these conditions. By adapting the activities and patrol schedules, we did everything possible to accommodate the diminished resistance of the personnel. Furthermore, we took all possible measures to seal off badly-polluted areas in the compound to personnel. In addition, many members of the battalion were given medical examinations and advice. Fortunately, the personnel subjected to these conditions - as far as I am aware - have suffered no ill effects as a result.

In the course of time it also became clear that the battalion and its commanders would be constantly confronted with situations that they had never seen or experienced before. A number of these have already been discussed. For instance, acting as "guard" to approxi-



mately 35,000 people forced to live in poor conditions. Another element is the inconceivable complexity of having to manoeuvre between the conflicting interests of the parties, the population and the national and international organisations. The most important factor is perhaps that in the course of time one comes to experience the sheer despair of men, women and children who have absolutely nowhere to go. This is a unique experience, particularly when compared to one's own situation and family at home in the Netherlands.....

As a commander you are given a lot of responsibilities and the possibility to commit the resources you have. In a military organisation, this, of course, means the use of force. This use of force could imply that you put the lives of your soldiers and many other people at stake if you don't take the right decisions. Connected to the use of force is the power you have to change situations for your soldiers and in my case for the population of the enclave. By using your legitimate power, you can meet situations in which you also decide about the lives of many people. For instance, I had to balance the needs of the population and certain people who were in immediate need against my own, with shortages of all essential stocks. It was balancing on a very thin line between the interests of my unit, the interests of the population and my own moral standards and values.

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There is another important experience that I must mention, namely that of the position of the commander. However much he wants to be at one with his unit, and wants to "belong", in many cases this is impossible. He has an official position in commanding his unit. He therefore, if you like, constitutes the "figurehead" of the unit and is also the representative of his unit. He is thus also personally responsible for all decisions taken. Experience has taught me that - despite having an outstanding staff to support and advise me where possible - I was ultimately always faced with having to consider matters personally, with the staff "wanting nothing to do with it". This boils down to the fact that as a commander, you alone have to take the decisions, there is no one to hide behind. If things go well, you are lucky, and you allow your staff and the unit to reap the benefits; however, if things go badly, then I think you should take responsibility yourself. What I shall never forget is the fact that as a commander, there is a special kind of loneliness. This feeling was reinforced by the exceptional situation in Srebrenica, where we were totally powerless, and support - in whatever form - could not be expected.

## 6. Strategies for Coping

The ability to cope with the circumstances described above - total isolation, all manner of shortages and little understanding from higher levels - is not something that happens all of a sudden, in my opinion. As with so many things, certain habits form over time within a unit and there is a tacit understanding among its members of the situation in which they find themselves. Dealing with circumstances is often also a personal matter: one person is better able to cope with certain circumstances than another.

### 6.1 THE BATTALION

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As far as I am concerned, in our situation it was important to create as much certainty as possible in the daily running of things. In this respect, we held meetings at a fixed time every day, with the main objective of informing each other, and also to keep social contacts going. In my battalion, all sub-commanders, staff officers and NCOs gathered to watch the news broadcast on RTL 4<sup>19</sup> at 08.00 hrs. This source of news was often the only way the unit had of gaining information about the situation outside the enclave. After the news, we held the "major" staff meeting. Following the meeting, I always spoke to the company commanders separately - on the one hand to give them the opportunity to exchange thoughts among themselves, and on the other hand to discuss more confidential matters. The daily cycle ended with a staff meeting of the section heads at 20.00 hrs. This enabled me to prepare the meeting for the following day, and there was also a possibility for feedback regarding the past day. I stuck rigidly to this schedule. The reason for my doing so was because I thought it was necessary to give the staff and other personnel a means of letting off steam, and also to avoid giving the impression that we were resigned to our circumstances, and that the staff was "doing nothing". The daily routine for the units themselves also fitted within this framework. Every day of the week they had the same regime of a fixed rhythm of reveille followed by daily duties. The only deviation from this regime was on Sundays. As far as I was concerned this was necessary for, on the one hand, giving the personnel a rest, and, on the other hand, to give everyone the feeling that another week had passed. In other words, to prevent them from losing their sense of time. I have already indicated that I regarded it as extremely important that personnel should be able to take leave. Leave and variation are, in my view, excellent ways of making the circumstances in which one must work as bearable as possible.

In addition to these contacts within the battalion, myself and other officials regularly held meetings with all parties and relief organisa-



tions within the enclave. This enabled us to explain our own situation, and proved absolutely vital once the battalion became hard pushed to carry out its assigned task. Furthermore, as a unit, we were better informed of the situation around us thanks to these meetings. This contributed to the decision-making process and to understanding the needs of the population as well as possible.

It is perhaps useful to point out that the battalion devised various ways to continue to be able to carry out their mission. Once I had restricted movements by vehicle, owing to a fuel shortage, a number of alternatives were thought up so as to enable patrols to still be carried out. For instance, we switched to the setting up of patrol bases from where a platoon was to carry out its orders for several days. Another idea was what became known as "enclave-hopping": by having patrols move from one observation post to another on foot all the time, we were able to drastically reduce the requirement for fuel for the vehicles. In this respect, many personnel also became inventive regarding energy supply, water consumption and the creation of all manner of installations to generate heat.

Obviously, the essence here is that personnel must be given a useful task and something to hold onto: once this no longer proves possible, a unit's morale is ultimately eroded.

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Another important element is the task for which one is ultimately deployed. It is crucial that the personnel continue to see the sense of the mission, and that there are tangible results. This was of course also in the interest of the population in the enclave. I always insisted that support be provided to all projects, whether they concerned water supply or the setting up of a rubbish dump, anything visible counted. We were certainly able to do a great deal of useful work for the local population with regard to medical support: from births to deaths. This support was welcome and was gratefully accepted. Even though the battalion had problems with its own supplies, I still believed that it was better to share them with the local population. There was also a practical reason for this: if the population thought that the battalion had a generous level of supplies, and they themselves had nothing, it was highly conceivable that the agonised population would eventually simply avail themselves of the battalion's supplies. I therefore informed the authorities in the enclave on many an occasion that we, too, did not have a great deal: the empty storage areas of the battalion also spoke volumes.

Another element concerning dealing with stress was of course the training and instruction that the personnel had been given leading up to the deployment. During this training, attention had been paid to functioning in difficult circumstances and the impact this

would have on personnel. Furthermore, the battalion employed what is known as the "buddy system", geared to two people being responsible for one another and keeping a constant eye out for each other. In addition, the commanders and the various counselors were tasked with personnel care. As far as I am concerned, this entire system functioned effectively in the circumstances in which the battalion was to carry out its tasks.

Finally, I cannot omit to mention the fact that, in my opinion, each individual has his or her own mechanisms for dealing with extraordinary circumstances. It is significant in this respect that some people fulfil a certain function in which they are responsible for a group of people. This situation creates a particular obligation, but also makes the period spent in stressful conditions even harder. It is also a fact that commanders are *always* commanders. They cannot simply say 'it's too difficult', or 'I'm too tired, I'll just drop out for a while'. A commander's responsibility is there twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and in my case it lasted for almost seven months. All that this entails cannot be described in such a short article: only those with a similar experience will know exactly what I mean.

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#### 6.2 THE COMMANDER

I shall now briefly describe how I dealt with the circumstances above, both as a person and as a commander. The distinction between "person" and "commander" is a conscious one: as far as I am concerned, the "person" can take everything he sees or feels to heart. The "commander", on the other hand, has a particular responsibility for the implementation of his mission and for all the personnel entrusted to him. As a person, you might choose certain options on the basis of emotional considerations; as a commander, you must at least always try to arrive at choices based on rational considerations. The more that greater differences occur between the "person" and the "commander", the harder it becomes to function properly. In an ideal situation, the two elements can be virtually one. I can assure you that in Srebrenica the situation was not really ideal: this was, as far as I was concerned, a considerable burden during my stay in the enclave.

Before we went to the area of deployment, I had agreed with two officers that I could telephone them whenever I wanted to, and discuss anything with them in confidence. I believed that I needed such a sounding board. I, too, had to vent my opinions, and say what was on my mind now and then, however negative, without harming the battalion or myself. I often made use of this opportunity, and it certainly contributed to my being able to hold things



together. Furthermore, I had also made a number of good arrangements with two officers from my battalion staff. I asked them to watch over me, and to warn me if it looked as though I would go off the rails, so to speak. I also gave them the freedom to tell me to my face what was wrong, if I were to make decisions that were totally inappropriate or if I started behaving oddly. As far as I am concerned, these people were a very special support: I shall never forget them, and shall always remain indebted to them.

I shall now turn to the fixed rhythm of meetings and suchlike mentioned above. For me as a commander, this resulted in order and regularity. Furthermore, it compelled me to continue to prepare matters and to think about the various problems that came my way. I was greatly in favour of the fixed rhythm, as it also gave me something to hold onto. Moreover, it gave me a structured possibility to keep on meeting with a representative group of people from the battalion and other organisations, and to bounce my own ideas and feelings off them. I must also point out that the visits to the units and posts often contributed to my motivation. It was an extremely pleasant experience to discuss day-to-day affairs with the soldiers and it gave me the opportunity to explain my policy, which often proved necessary. Furthermore, the visits were often a source of inspiration for new ideas.

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As for the human aspect - by which I mean the population of the enclave - I never grew accustomed to the circumstances such as they were. The conditions were disgraceful, and I could do precious little to alleviate the situation, even though I as a commander and we as a battalion were highly motivated to be of help. In my opinion, such a situation is psychologically distressing. In this sense, Srebrenica constitutes a black page in my personal history.

## 7. Conclusion

If I take another look at things, it strikes me that we ask a great deal of our commanders as a person and as a leader and of the personnel entrusted to them. It is the "entrusted" personnel who make it necessary for the commanders to make careful choices and preparations for their difficult task. The organisation must not, therefore, hesitate to prevent individuals from taking up command functions if these individuals are not deemed suitable as commanders. Not only could this save lives, but it will also enhance the confidence our personnel can have in our organisation.

Col. Peer Everts' article in this year's NL ARMS will also be published in McCann, C. and R. Pigeau (eds.), *The Human in Command*, Plenum Press, 1999 and is reproduced here with their permission.

## Notes

1. These four lines form the beginning of the elegy 'Gysbrecht van Aemstel'. This elegy describes the siege of the city of Amsterdam by the city of Haarlem in 1304. Amsterdam was destroyed.
2. I wish to thank Carol McCann, Ross Pigeau, Ad Vogelaar and Donna Winslow for their useful and stimulating comments on this paper.
3. My experience laid down in this paper mainly concerns the units of the Battalion inside the enclave of Srebrenica. Other units served in the areas of Sapna and Lukavac.
4. In this paper Srebrenica is also referred to as "the enclave". An enclave is a certain area which is geographically separated from its fatherland.
5. I have chosen the term "factors". I shall leave it up to you to determine whether these factors were "harsh" or "difficult".
- 28 6. On the 11 July 1995 Bosnian Serb troops occupied the enclave of Srebrenica. This eventually prematurely ended the mission of the third Dutch battalion.
7. HQ North East was located in Tuzla. It was responsible for the operations in the northern part of central Bosnia and the enclave of Srebrenica. It was subordinate to the HQ in Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovina Command).
8. Compounds are the locations in which the battalion and the companies stayed. They were fenced off from their surroundings.
9. An observation post is a location designed to be visible for all parties and from which location the area could be observed. Normally 6 - 10 soldiers would man the post.
10. In this paper the parties are the Bosnian Serbs (outside the enclave) and the Bosnians (inside the enclave).
11. During the execution of a mission personnel have the right and the need to get rest. Depending on the duration of a mission, the soldiers might get up to 21 days of leave during six months of duty.
12. "Blue" missions are missions executed within the framework of the UN. "Green" missions were referred to as missions in the framework of war operations.
13. On one occasion we learned through military channels that people inside the enclave were supposedly starving and that many were dead, just laying in the streets of the enclave. This was simply not true. Later it became clear that Bosnian organisations had given this "news" to the authorities in the Netherlands.
14. Difficult communication is in this respect to be seen as the impossibility to talk



face-to-face to higher commanders and staff officers, and, of course, the impossibility for commanders in the chain of command and staff officers to visit the enclave.

15. As far as I could see the Bosnian Serbs would receive guidance from their superiors in Pale and the Bosnians would receive guidance from Sarajevo.
16. The enclave had a president and the city of Srebrenica and some other villages had a mayor.
17. The Bosnian Serbs had some officers who acted as liaison officers for the battalion and with whom the battalion and the companies had contact irregularly.
18. For the rotations the UN and the Bosnian Serbs came to agreement about what was allowed for the soldiers to take with them. In this case it was forbidden to take items such as cameras, video cameras and big radios.
19. RTL 4 was a television station that could be received in the enclave and that provided news concerning the Netherlands.