

= Battle of Kusunje =

The Battle of Kusunje was a two @-@ day clash fought in the village of Kusunje near the town of Pakrac on 8 ? 9 September 1991 , during the Croatian War of Independence . The battle was initiated when a platoon of the Croatian National Guard (Croatian : Zbor narodne garde ? ZNG) was ambushed by Croatian Serb forces while conducting a reconnaissance patrol . The ZNG deployed reinforcements to extract the ambushed platoon , but failed to reach them . The surviving members of the platoon held out until they ran out of ammunition and surrendered only to be killed by their captors and buried in a mass grave .

The fate of the reconnaissance platoon was not known to Croatian authorities for months , adding fuel to an already volatile atmosphere in the city of Bjelovar , where the ambushed unit was originally based . This tension erupted a week later with the blockade and capture of the Yugoslav People 's Army (Serbian : Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija ? JNA) barracks in Bjelovar .

During a commemoration service held two years later , a landmine exploded killing three and wounding others . The Croatian authorities declared the incident to be a terrorist attack , and it contributed to Croatian government 's decision to launch Operation Medak Pocket the next day .

= = Background = =

In 1990 , ethnic tensions between Serbs and Croats worsened after the electoral defeat of the government of the Socialist Republic of Croatia by the Croatian Democratic Union (Croatian : Hrvatska demokratska zajednica ? HDZ) . The Yugoslav People 's Army (Serbian : Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija ? JNA) confiscated Croatia 's Territorial Defence (Croatian : Teritorijalna obrana ? TO) weapons to minimize resistance . On 17 August , the tensions escalated into an open revolt of the Croatian Serbs , centred on the predominantly Serb @-@ populated areas of the Dalmatian hinterland around Knin (approximately 60 kilometres (37 miles) north @-@ east of Split) , parts of the Lika , Kordun , Banovina and eastern Croatia . In January 1991 , Serbia , supported by Montenegro and Serbia 's provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo , unsuccessfully tried to obtain the Yugoslav Presidency 's approval for a JNA operation to disarm Croatian security forces . The request was denied and a bloodless skirmish between Serb insurgents and Croatian special police in March prompted the JNA itself to ask the Federal Presidency to give it wartime authority and declare a state of emergency . Even though the request was backed by Serbia and its allies , the JNA request was refused on 15 March . Serbian President Slobodan Milo?evi? , preferring a campaign to expand Serbia rather than to preserve Yugoslavia with Croatia as a federal unit , publicly threatened to replace the JNA with a Serbian army and declared that he no longer recognized the authority of the federal Presidency . The threat caused the JNA to abandon plans to preserve Yugoslavia in favour of expansion of Serbia as the JNA came under Milo?evi? 's control . By the end of March , the conflict had escalated with the first fatalities . In early April , leaders of the Serb revolt in Croatia declared their intention to amalgamate the areas under their control with Serbia . These were viewed by the Government of Croatia as breakaway regions .

At the beginning of 1991 , Croatia had no regular army . To bolster its defence , Croatia doubled its police numbers to about 20 @,@ 000 . The most effective part of the Croatian police force was 3 @,@ 000 @-@ strong special police comprising twelve battalions organised along military lines . There were also 9 @,@ 000 ? 10 @,@ 000 regionally organised reserve police in 16 battalions and 10 companies , but they lacked weapons . In response to the deteriorating situation , the Croatian government established the Croatian National Guard (Croatian : Zbor narodne garde ? ZNG) in May by expanding the special police battalions into four all @-@ professional guards brigades . Under Ministry of Defence control and commanded by retired JNA General Martin ?pegelj , the four guards brigades comprised approximately 8 @,@ 000 troops . The reserve police , also expanded to 40 @,@ 000 , was attached to the ZNG and reorganised into 19 brigades and 14 independent battalions . The guards brigades were the only units of the ZNG that were fully equipped with small arms ; throughout the ZNG there was a lack of heavier weapons and there was poor command and control structure above the brigade level . The shortage of heavy weapons was so severe that the

ZNG resorted to using World War II weapons taken from museums and film studios . At the time , the Croatian weapon stockpile consisted of 30 @, @ 000 small arms purchased abroad and 15 @, @ 000 previously owned by the police . To replace the personnel lost to the guards brigades , a new 10 @, @ 000 @-@ strong special police was established .

= = Prelude = =

Following the first skirmish in Pakrac in March , a predominantly Serb @-@ populated area east of the town , straddling the Pakrac ? Bu?je ? Po?ega road , remained generally beyond the control of Croatian authorities . In early July , the insurrection spread to the entire area between the towns of Pakrac and Po?ega and north to the northern slopes of Papuk and Bilogora . This development threatened to interdict the Croatian use of the Vara?din ? Osijek road , as it was within range of Croatian Serb artillery near Slatina . After the Serb rebels declared the Serbian Autonomous Oblast of Western Slavonia (SAO Western Slavonia) and expanded the territory under their control to include the town of Oku?ani , the most significant transport route between Zagreb and Slavonia ? the Zagreb ? Belgrade motorway between Novska and Nova Gradi?ka ? was severed . SAO Western Slavonia comprised no major settlements . In order to address this deficiency , Croatian Serb forces launched an offensive early on 19 August . The objectives of the offensive were to capture the towns of Grubi?no Polje , Daruvar , Pakrac and Lipik , and consolidate the territory of SAO Western Slavonia . The offensive failed after the arrival of Croatian reinforcements from Zagreb and Bjelovar , but the line of control remained in close proximity to the four towns .

= = Timeline = =

On 2 September , the ZNG deployed A Company , 1st Battalion , 105th Infantry Brigade to Pakrac in order to reinforce police defences in the area . Violence in western Slavonia flared up once more on 3 ? 4 September , when Croatian Serb forces attacked the villages of ?etekovac , ?ojlug and Balinci south of Slatina , killing two policemen and 21 civilians .

On 8 September , A Company 's reconnaissance platoon was tasked with using a gun truck and scouting the area around the village of Kusunje . The platoon encountered no resistance before it reached the village , where it was ambushed by Croatian Serb troops . The platoon 's gun truck was disabled and the ZNG troops abandoned it and took shelter in a nearby house .

When it learned of the ambush , the ZNG deployed a force to extract the reconnaissance platoon . The relief force consisted of the rest of A Company , supported by the " Omega " special police unit , reserve police , and ZNG reinforcements from Virovitica . The reinforcements were unable to reach the embattled reconnaissance platoon , which was running low on ammunition . The stalemate continued until the morning of 9 September , when Croatian Serb forces used explosives to demolish a portion of the house in which the reconnaissance platoon had sought cover . Eleven members of the reconnaissance platoon had been killed during the fighting , and the remaining seven had run out of ammunition . They surrendered to the Croatian Serb forces which had surrounded the house , and were then killed by their captors .

= = Aftermath = =

As the force which was sent to reinforce and extract the reconnaissance platoon took further casualties , the total Croatian losses in the fighting and its immediate aftermath amounted to 20 killed . The fate of the reconnaissance platoon was not immediately known to Croatian authorities or relatives of the troops for months , adding fuel to an already volatile atmosphere in the city of Bjelovar , where the 105th Brigade was originally based . This tension erupted a week later , with the blockade and capture of the JNA barracks in Bjelovar . The JNA denied it had any knowledge on the fate of the Croatian soldiers . Details of their deaths became known in December 1991 . Croatian forces recaptured Kusunje on 30 December in Operation Papuk @-@ 91 , and their bodies were exhumed in January 1992 . Along with the soldiers , the bodies of 23 civilians were also

exhumed from a mass grave in the village of Rakov Potok . The soldiers were re @-@ interred in Bjelovar on 5 February 1992 . According to JNA intelligence reports , during the period from the exhumation to the re @-@ interment , 32 Serb @-@ owned houses in Bjelovar were demolished in retribution for the killings .

The area was demilitarised following the arrival of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) to implement the Vance plan and ceasefire to stabilise the areas affected by the fighting until a political settlement was reached . The area adjacent to the Pakrac ? Po?ega road , especially around Kusonje , remained unsafe . There were numerous attacks along the road , resulting in deaths and injuries . These included an attack on a Croatian police patrol on 5 August 1993 , which left four policemen dead and another four wounded . In September 1993 , Croatian authorities placed a commemorative plaque at the site of the 1991 ambush and planned a wreath laying ceremony to mark the second anniversary of the event . At 10 : 20 on 8 September , while the ceremony was in progress , a landmine exploded at the site killing three and injuring eleven . The wounded included one Argentinian member of UNPROFOR . Those killed were members of the ZNG 105th Brigade . The incident , described by the Croatian authorities as an act of terrorism , came on the heels of a series of artillery bombardments and sabotages that resulted in the Croatian government losing its patience with the situation . This contributed to the launching of Operation Medak Pocket the following day .

Croatian authorities prosecuted four people in connection with the 1991 killing of the prisoners of war , and convicted and sentenced them to 15 to 20 years in prison . Another person was tried and convicted in connection with the 1993 bombing , and sentenced to 20 years in prison . In 1998 , the Chapel of Nativity of Mary was built in Kusonje at the initiative of the parents of the soldiers who were killed there , and a commemorative plaque containing the names of the 23 killed was placed at the chapel . The events of 1991 and 1993 are commemorated annually in Kusonje , with civilian and military representatives attending . In 2014 , a feature film titled Number 55 , based on the 1991 events in Kusonje , was released . The title of the film refers to the number of the house where the ZNG troops took shelter on 8 ? 9 September 1991 .