

## = Battle of Vrbanja Bridge =

The Battle of Vrbanja Bridge was an armed confrontation which occurred on 27 May 1995 between United Nations ( UN ) peacekeepers from the French Army and elements of the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska ( VRS ) . It occurred after the VRS seized French @-@ manned United Nations Protection Force ( UNPROFOR ) observation posts on both ends of the Vrbanja Bridge crossing of the Miljacka river in Sarajevo , Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Bosnian War . Upon seizing the bridge , the VRS took the French peacekeepers hostage . A platoon of 30 French peacekeepers subsequently re @-@ captured the bridge with the support of 70 French infantrymen and direct fire from armoured vehicles , in an action which saw the first French Army bayonet charge since the Korean War . During the French assault , elements of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina ( ARBiH ) opened fire on the VRS @-@ held observation posts , accidentally wounding one French hostage .

Two French soldiers were killed during the battle , 10 were wounded , and one died of wounds later that day . VRS casualties were four killed , three wounded and four captured . Following the battle , VRS forces were observed to be less likely to engage French UN peacekeepers deployed in the city .

## = = Background = =

During the Siege of Sarajevo , Vrbanja Bridge was located in no @-@ man 's @-@ land ; it was surrounded by tall buildings , which made it a target of sniper @-@ fire from the beginning of the Bosnian War . On 5 April 1992 , six protestors were shot on the bridge by Serb snipers ; two women , Suada Dilberovi? and Olga Su?i? , died as a result of the sniper @-@ fire and are considered by Croats and Bosniaks to be the first victims of the siege .

In March 1995 , while NATO was planning a new strategy to support peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina , a ceasefire brokered by former US President Jimmy Carter between the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina ( Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine ; ARBiH ) and the Army of Republika Srpska ( Vojska Republike Srpske ; VRS ) forces expired and fighting resumed . As the struggle gradually widened , the ARBiH launched a large @-@ scale offensive in the area of Sarajevo . In response to this attack , the VRS seized heavy weapons from a UN @-@ guarded depot , and began shelling targets around Sarajevo , prompting the UN commander in Bosnia , Lieutenant General Rupert Smith , to request NATO air strikes against the VRS . NATO responded on 25 and 26 May 1995 by bombing a VRS ammunition dump in the Bosnian Serb capital , Pale . The mission was carried out by USAF F @-@ 16s and Spanish Air Force EF @-@ 18A Hornets armed with laser @-@ guided bombs . In response , the VRS seized 377 UNPROFOR hostages and used them as human shields for a variety of potential targets in Bosnia and Herzegovina , forcing NATO to end the air strikes .

Facing a second hostage crisis , General Smith and other top UN commanders began to shift strategy . The UN began to redeploy its forces to more defensible locations , so that they would be harder to attack and so that it would be more difficult to take UN personnel hostage . General Michael Rose , on the other hand , established the UN Rapid Reaction Force , a heavily armed land unit with more aggressive rules of engagement , designed to take offensive action if necessary to prevent hostage @-@ taking and enforce peace agreements .

## = = Battle = =

## = = = VRS attack = = =

On 27 May 1995 at 4 : 30 am , VRS soldiers posing as French troops captured the UN observation posts on both ends of the bridge without firing a shot . They wore French uniforms , flak jackets , helmets , and personal weapons and drove a French armoured personnel carrier ( APC ) ? all stolen

from UN troops detained outside the city . The Serbs disarmed the 12 peacekeepers on the bridge at gunpoint . Ten were taken to an unknown destination while two remained on the site as human shields . According to Colonel Erik Sandahl , commander of the 4th French Battalion ( FREBAT4 ) which was at that time provided by the 3rd Marine Infantry Regiment , " when the Serbs took our soldiers under their control by threat , by dirty tricks , they began to act as terrorists , you cannot support this . You must react . The moment comes when you have to stop it . Full stop . And we did . "

= = = French reaction = = =

The first evidence that something was wrong at Vrbanja Bridge was radio silence from the French post . About 05 : 20 on 27 May , platoon commander Captain Francois Lecointre had lost radio contact with the posts , and drove to the bridge to find out what was happening ; he was met by a Serb sentry in French uniform who attempted to take him prisoner . Lecointre quickly turned around and drove to Skenderija stadium , the headquarters of FREBAT4 .

The French responded by sending a platoon of 30 FREBAT4 troops from the 3rd Marine Infantry Regiment to re @-@ capture the northern end of the bridge , backed by another 70 French infantry , six ERC 90 Sagaie armoured cars and several VAB APCs . The assault force was led by Lecointre , who approached the northern edge of the bridge following the usual route of the UN convoys . The French marines overran a sangar held by the VRS , at the cost of the life of one Frenchman , Private Jacki Humblot . The action marked the first French bayonet charge since the Korean War . The assault was supported by 90 @-@ millimetre ( 3 @. @ 5 in ) direct fire from the armoured cars , and heavy machine @-@ gun fire . The Serbs responded with mortar bombs and fire from anti @-@ aircraft weapons . Five French were wounded in the clash , while four VRS soldiers were killed and four were taken prisoner .

ARBiH snipers joined the fight , accidentally shooting and wounding one French hostage . At the conclusion of the 32 @-@ minute long firefight , the VRS remained in control of the southern end of the bridge , while the French occupied the northern end . The VRS then asked for a truce to recover their dead and wounded , under the threat of killing the French hostages . The wounded French soldier was immediately released and evacuated to a UN hospital . The VRS eventually gave up and abandoned the southern end of the bridge . The last French soldier held as hostage , a corporal , managed to escape . The second French soldier to die in the battle , Private Marcel Amaru , was killed by a sniper while supporting the assault from Sarajevo 's Jewish cemetery . One of the wounded French soldiers died of wounds later that day . The VRS soldiers captured in the action were treated as prisoners of war and detained at an UNPROFOR facility .

= = Aftermath = =

According to the top French officers involved in the operation , the action on Vrbanja Bridge showed the VRS that UNPROFOR 's attitude had changed . Following the battle , VRS forces were observed to be less likely to engage French UN peacekeepers deployed in the city . Lieutenant Colonel Erik Roussel , an officer from FREBAT4 who had participated in the operation , stated later that " since the incident , the Serbs are strangely quiet towards us . " A memorial to the French soldiers killed in action was unveiled on 5 April 1996 , along with a plaque commemorating Dilberovi? and Su?i? . That day , the bridge was renamed in memory of the two women .