
Jakov (Jim) Botica

A PROUD AUSTRALIAN – HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE WAR EFFORT IN CROATIA – YUGOSLAVIA DURING THE CONFLICT THAT WAS WORLD WAR II

I, Jakov (Jim) Botica was born in 1923 on a small, coastal village called Racisce, on the beautiful island of Korkula, Dalmatia, in the heart of the Adriatic Sea. My parents were Peter Botica and Maria (maiden name Yurisich) who were also born in Racisce. This is a small part of my personal journey.

In 1941, Mussolini's Army occupied the southern part of Yugoslavia while the north was covered by Nazi Germany. King Peter, the leader of the nation at the time fled to Egypt with his family and associates leaving Yugoslavia without a government and people in despair. This cast a shadow over the nation as food shortages and occupying oppressive forces made life hell for the remaining people.

Some leaders of the formative Communist Party retreated to surrounding mountains and formed anti-fascist, Partisan Guerrilla Units, which were prepared to fight the enemy that had invaded our homeland.

The occupying Italian Forces enforced martial law with freedom of movement restricted between 6am and 6pm. Many women were raped and murdered in cold blood during these terrible days. The occupiers killed all the cats and dogs, who's silenced barks allowed the occupying Italians to quietly perform their horrid operations and do to the people as they pleased.

The brutality and cruelty were unforgettable. All the surrounding mountains were torched in a horrific mass inferno that was all encompassing in an attempt to flush out pockets of resistance scattered throughout the ranges. My heart simply ached with pain as I witnessed my homeland in flames.

The proud Yugoslavs did not take to occupation well and the resistance of its people cost many lives. For every Italian killed 10 villagers were killed. The Italian forces pursued the underground Partisans with great intent. Any person suspected of being in league with the Partisan Rebels were tracked down and murdered. This included wives, sons, daughters, brothers and sisters. Entire families were eradicated upon these sorts of suspicions. Fear, distrust and despair spread throughout the land that was once peaceful. Suspicion put neighbour against neighbour as survival became paramount.

In 1943, Mussolini's army was dispersed by the British/American forces, which became allied with the Yugoslav Partisans. With all the confusion it was hard to know who was in command. During this time the first whispers of the name Tito began to be heard. In the wake of the leaving Italian Forces, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia began to gain more momentum.

Then at the age of 20, I volunteered for the Partisans, along with many others from Racisce and surrounding villages. We armed ourselves with rifles left

behind by the Italians, as we did not have any of our own. Our uniforms were the clothes on our backs. I was given a post in the hills. Our greatest asset in our artillery was a massive canon (Briska Haubica) that required 10 mules to drag it from place to place. Due to its size, the Germans had fired upon us from across the Peninsula and from the air.

On December 22 1943, the battle hardened German Army landed on the Island of Korcula in large numbers. Outnumbered and out skilled, our inexperienced Partisans were destroyed. This was a great tragedy in which many civilians were slaughtered. The Germans lobbed hand grenades without mercy into homes regardless of age or gender of the occupants.

I recall on instance when German soldiers threw a grenade into a group of old people, huddled together in fear. Eight were killed. The offending soldiers then proceeded to throw the eight mangled, dead bodies into the sea. The morning after, the bodies had washed back to shore – yet no one was permitted to collect them for burial, they were simply left to rot in the sea.

In the early morning hours, under the veil of darkness, many villagers left their homes to seek refuge in other neighbouring villages. Through strong winds and heavy rain they would walk, often barefooted and barely clothed, over sharp rocks, through thick bush and hazardous terrain. Throughout the unrelenting torment of the German occupation, there was the constant battle to hold back the tears when baring witness to the despair of children, women and my fellow countrymen. The coldness, torture and crimes against humanity are things I will never forget.

I was part of a small and clandestine group of freedom fighters, bound by our patriotism and love of our homeland. There were only 10 of us in total. We were ordered to leave our post and dismantle our main piece of artillery, our canon. We were to take several parts from the canon so that it would lose its immediate functionality while keeping it in our arsenal for future operations.

After travelling through the night through heavy rain and bitter cold 5 men from our group made it to a neighbouring village. Upon leaving the next morning, we were spotted by 4 German Messer Schmitt fighter planes and were fired upon. Our pack mules were killed and our small group was scattered.

After managing to re-group, we finally arrived at another neighbouring village called Blato. Here, I was overjoyed to see my mother, brother and younger sisters all alive and well. My father and older brother had already immigrated to Australia in 1936 and 1937 respectfully.

Some villagers were able to leave the island by boat to other neighbouring islands such as Hvar or Vis. From here some villagers managed to escape to refugee camps in Egypt, which were being supervised by the British Army. Many however, were not so fortunate.

The German Army eventually allowed the villagers to return to their home, though many did not. My family and I decided to return to Racisce. We trekked through thick bush for almost 5 hours until we made it back to our home. When we finally arrived we found our home totally ransacked. Our meagre possessions were

destroyed, widows smashed and anything considered of value or useful (of which there was very little) had been stolen by the German Army. Everything was ruined in my home as was our neighbours' houses.

In January of 1944, the occupying German Army gathered all of the residents of our village into a narrow street as if we were sheep, so that no one could escape. We were all terrified, as no one really knew what the intentions of the German occupiers were to be. They picked out about 25 young males, including myself and took the group as prisoners to the main village on the island, Korcula – 15km without any warm clothes or shoes, (if any were on the feet on the young men at all.) Men that did have shoes were hand made and held together by the barest of threads.

Upon arriving in Korcula, we were granted a tiny piece of black bread. That night we were transferred to Orebic, which is located on a peninsular, 2 nautical miles away from Korcula.

At Orebic, we were forced to sleep with horses and other animals. It was dirty and the smell unbearable as there were no toilet facilities. Even with these terrible conditions, sleep was a luxury, which was hard to come by due to the constant state of worry that I felt for the rest of my family and friends.

The following morning we were again forced to walk to our next destination, Janjina, which was located in the middle of the peninsula approximately 25km from Orebic. With only a small piece of bread to sustain us, we walked through thick bush and mud, forbidden to speak to each other. Exhausted and hungry we marched further until we reached Ston. One of my tattered shoes finally gave way and I was forced to walk through the bitter cold, thick bush and mud with one bare foot, while clutching on to my other shoe in the hope that I may be able to repair it in some way.

On route to Ston, we passed through another small village. Our hearts broke and souls wept when we saw the horrific sight of two decaying comrades hanging from telephone posts. The German Army had left them there as a reminder to all for what was in store for anyone that chose to defy the occupying Third Reich. Judging by the smell and amount of decay that had set in, the bodies were hanging there for at least 2 weeks.

We marched on. After walking another 30 kilometres, we were all given a slight reprieve from our long, exhausting journey when we arrived in Metkovich. Here, the strongest and youngest men were selected to build bunkers for the impending D-Day Allied invasions. I managed to feign an injury in the hope that I would not be selected. Thankfully my ruse was successful and I was then ushered upon a train destined for Caplinu.

Caplinu was a supply yard to the German Forces. That night I slept on a hard, cold floor in the company of other prisoners. If anyone needed to use a toilet, groups of six men were only permitted at any one time in the company of armed soldiers.

For several months I remained imprisoned here and was forced to work as a labourer for the German Army loading and unloading the trains as they arrived

and departed. After some time I began to hear stories between my fellow imprisoned comrades of a way to escape to Dubrovnik on an Ustashi controlled train.

The Ustashi were a radical and very extreme fascist movement that joined the German Army on mass. This racial fascist group developed most prominently in Croatia. The Ustashi were responsible for some of the worst atrocities known in the modern history of Europe. The Ustashi extremist nature and terroristic violence was joined in a sadistic union with religious fanaticism.

The result was unspeakable cruelty and torture to many innocent people. The Croatian Ustashi became a party under the leadership of Ante Pavelic (1889 – 1959). The Germans gave power to this party while the Chetniks, who were also aligned with the Nazi's were given power in Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina. The German strategy was quite simple. Divide and conquer! Croatia became part of the German war machine and concentration camps were established. Thousands were killed, mainly Jews and gypsies.

While many people joined the Nazi Terror as Ustasha or Chetniks, there was also the equivalent surge of anti-fascist support in the form of the Partisans. The Partisans were initially an anti-fascist movement from many regions of Yugoslavia, their leader was a Croat Communist named Tito. They formed the People's Army known as the Partisan Army. They were anti-fascist regardless of ethnicity and invited all who were willing to fight against the Nazi's to join. Tito was actively working towards the liberation of Yugoslavia from the grip of fascism and German control.

On a very cold morning at approximately 1am, the Germans gathered us into a line with much force and haste. Panic set in as rumours began to circulate that we were all to be executed. "If they are to take us to be killed," whispered one of my comrades beside me, "let this be the time to escape as we are dead anyway." However, we found out later that the rumours were false. There was a train that had just arrived which needed to be loaded quickly: it was bound for Dubrovnik, which was under Ustashi control.

In a rare moment of lapsed security, I managed to stow-away on the departing train to Dubrovnik that was controlled by the Ustashi. I had to stay completely hidden, as I had no identification papers, the absence of which was certain to land me in grave danger at the hands of some of history's most sadistic killers.

I was completely gripped with fear as I silently hid. My fears became realised when an Ustashi Inspector discovered me and demanded to see my papers. As I could not verify my identity I was dragged into a separate section and locked up – but not before receiving a severe beating at the hands of my new captors. Shaking with fear as much as from cold and hunger, I feared that this would certainly be the end of my life. Tears flowed as I thought of my family.

A short time later the Inspector returned with a young lady. I was huddled in a corner weeping for my life, racked with fear, cold and desperate. As the Inspector moved towards me, preparing to deliver another beating, the young lady interjected. "Can't you see that he is merely a poor frightened civilian?" The

young lady managed to convince the Inspector that I was just that and when the train arrived at Gruz, I was informed to jump from the train with a warning to stay off the main roads and streets as I would most certainly be re-captured. Convinced, the Inspector also told me to wait for him in Gruz. I was extremely suspicious of his motives, however as I had very few options I decided I would have to trust a man that I considered to be a traitor.

The Inspector returned, but rather than appearing with a capturing force, to my surprise he returned with assistance. The Inspector took me to a house after which he quickly departed. An elderly man appeared and instructed me to sleep under his veranda until early morning. That night I managed to get a little sleep. The next morning the elderly man gave me instructions on how to reach Dubrovnik and there, to my great delight found several of my friends from my home village of Racisce safe and well.

Four days later, my friends and I, posing as road workers for the German Army armed only with shovels and picks, passed through the German security check point and were out of Dubrovnik. We managed to make contact with a man who then led us to the small Partisan headquarters. We were all eager to join the real core of the Partisans and the "Peoples Army" they represented. From here we walked to Herzegovina, which was approximately 40km. It was my first day as part of the real Partisan Army.

We came across a small group of Partisans that were not well equipped. In the early hours of the morning the Partisan commando gave me his orders, an English landmine and a quick send off into action with the rest of his unit. The unit waited at the top of a road for a convoy of German supply trucks. Seven appeared on the road on this night. We successfully destroyed all seven army supply trucks.

I managed to land my grenade right into the drivers' seat of one of the trucks, completely blowing it up. During the raid I also acquired a German machine gun, which I then used as part of the ambush against the enemy. It was extremely heavy and I required a second man to carry the bullets for this prize gun. This man friend was killed in a later battle.

During another ambush, we sought protection and refuge in typical guerrilla style behind many surrounding boulders. We were so very close to the German soldiers that we had to dodge hand grenades being lobbed at us. As part of our ambush we were able to place several hats on sticks as decoys to draw fire and open the German soldiers to our counter attacks with their own machine gun before drawing back into the darkness.

Once the explosions and shooting died down we had killed several drivers and accompanying German soldiers and managed to re-equip our bare unit with some much needed supplies. Our head commando/Unit leader was injured in the fight. He was shot in the face with a bullet passing through his chin. In the chaos of the raid I did not notice that I was hit in the chest by a piece of shrapnel until I noticed the blood on my shirt was my own.

The next morning a very heavy fog set in. Here we seized the opportunity to put down a large number of landmines in a busy roadside we knew was used by at least 40, 000 German soldiers. We knew that the Germans would be pulling back through this strip of road on route to Austria and we were determined to do everything we could to stop them or at least slow them down.

Just before the end of the war, Winston Churchill acknowledged Tito as leader of the Partisan Army and sent his nephew to confirm his leadership. Tito later fulfilled his dream of freeing Yugoslavia from fascism and united all the states as one country. Tito became leader of the Communist Party and President of Yugoslavia and was recognised worldwide.

As the war was coming to an end, I was very excited to discover that our unit was to be sent to protect part of Korcula. By now I had not seen my family for nearly two years. I was overjoyed by the prospect of re-uniting with my mother, family and friends. We had not heard from my father for 5 years during the war while he was in Australia. Three months after the end of the war, we received word that he had died in a logging accident in Mundaring, Western Australia. After all I had endured I was shattered with the news of his death.

I left the Army on December 12 1946 to return to my home village Racisce. Upon my return and re-unification with my family I went to work re-building our terribly damaged home and village, restoring our shattered lives and endeavoured to put the horrific incidents and suffering of war behind us. Together as a village we put our lives back together and slowly things began to improve.

I am very lucky and happy to have survived. It is very difficult to write of all the terrible things that occurred during that time, I shall save that for another story. During those dark days I walked from Herzegovina to Montenegro, through hills, valleys and mountains, through bays and shorelines from Ilirske, Bistrice, Istra, all along the Dalmatian coastline – and most of it barefoot over sharp, jagged rocks, with very little food to eat. This great conflict caused much heartache and division for the Yugoslav people from which many have never recovered. The war was over but the division of the nation had begun.

Though there was much suffering I have been blessed with many wonderful things in life. I migrated to Australia to join my brother in 1955 and am now a proud Australian citizen, father and grandfather. I survived and have prospered and for that I am eternally grateful.

LEST WE FORGET.