

COURTSIDE: Sarajevo Trial

Western journalist describes how Serbs invited him to fire artillery gun trained on Sarajevo.

By and large, war reporters from Western newspapers, agencies and TV channels shared the fate of Sarajevo's civilian population while the city was under siege. They too were potential targets of the artillery gunners and snipers who had the city and its inhabitants in their sights.

Unlike Sarajevans, however, war reporters could sometimes cross over to the other side, and take a look at Sarajevo from the positions of the forces besieging the city. Looking through the viewfinders of artillery and snipers of the Army of Republika Srpska, VRS, some Western guests were even invited to fire a bullet or a shell on the city.

Last week, two war reporters who covered the besieged city testified at the trial of General Stanislav Galic, the former commander of the Sarajevo-Romanija corps of the VRS, accused of crimes against humanity and violations of the laws and customs of war.

Both Aernout Van Linden, a Dutch reporter for Sky News, and Morten Val, a Norwegian photographer for the Associated Press, occasionally visited the artillery positions on the hills around the city and interviewed VRS soldiers and commanders there.

Van Linden told the judges how, during one of many visits to Pale, General Ratko Mladic took him to a nearby artillery position and gesturing towards the besieged city, declared, "Sarajevo is in the palm of my hand. I am a bugbear for Sarajevo!". Van Linden gave a detailed description of the atmosphere of terror, desperation and hopelessness in which the people of Sarajevo lived, exposed as they were to continual and systematic artillery and sniper fire.

He described how in 1993, at a VRS artillery position on Mount Trebevic, he was invited to pull the rope on a 105 mm howitzer whose barrel was trained on the centre of Sarajevo. He said he turned down the offer, explaining that he was "not a participant in the conflict". At Grbavica, Van Linden had an opportunity to view the M-84 machineguns, better known as "sowers of death", on the other end of whose viewfinders he said he had found himself several times. After two years of driving around Sarajevo, the AP armoured vehicle looked like "Swiss cheese", said Van Linden.

Western journalists also visited the positions of the city's defenders, said the Sky journalist, stressing that their guides on those visits were "Bosnians, not Bosniaks (Muslims)", because Sarajevo was "defended by Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats together".

The reporters testified that VRS snipers tended to act according to a set pattern. After wounding a victim, they would then wait for rescuers to gather around, before then opening fire again, wounding a large number of people. Sometimes, Van Linden said, "real massacres" were carried out using that method.

The prosecution case against General Galic continues and is expected to conclude in March.

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