

Seventy Five Years since the Battle on Neretva

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The collapsed bridge in the Neretva River is a symbol of Jablanica and a witness to the history of that area. The bridge was built at the height of 42 meters and was 82 meters long. It was demolished for the needs of one of the best Yugoslav films of all times, "The Battle of Neretva" by Veljko Bulajić, which was nominated for the prestigious film academy award Oscar in 1969.

The scene when the bridge was collapsed was filmed on December 18, 1968. At 12:50 am that day, 400 tons of metal collapsed into the Neretva River. Not a single frame of that demolition was included in the film because the demolition raised dust that made it impossible to film, thus the demolition was filmed later, on models in a Czech laboratory. Twenty cannons, 16 tanks and trucks, and 5 tons of other materials, together with 12.000 explosive packages with 10 tons of explosive, were thrown into the canyon of the Neretva River. One role in the film was played by the famous Orson Welles. Poster for the film was designed by one of the most renowned artists, Pablo Picasso, who requested a crate of the best Yugoslav wine for it. The film was made according to the so-called battle for the wounded, which is also known as one of the most humane battles in the former Yugoslavia and whose military strategy has been long analysed in military academies. At the same time, it is one of the most important battles in the Second World War at the territory of the South-eastern Europe. Battle for the wounded on the Neretva River was a battle for salvation of over 4.000 wounded men, led and won by Partisan units against the joined German, Italian, Ustasha and Chetnik forces in February and March of 1943. The Germans wanted to destroy the central command of the Partisans, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, and the main Partisan hospital. The Axis forces gathered nine divisions – six German, three Italian, several Ustasha and Homeguard units and several Chetnik units. It is estimated that over 150.000 soldiers of the Axis forces attacked the significantly outnumbered Partisan detachments, the wounded men included. Even though the enemy forces were superior in number, they did not succeed in their intention, given that the Partisans managed to break the encirclement and inflict heavy losses on the opponents. Demolition of the bridge on Neretva was a sly strategy ordered by Josip Broz Tito and used by the Partisans to deceive the enemy and save their members. The breakthrough across the Neretva is a unique event in the history of warfare, because strong encirclement was broken with internal force of the gathered army, tormented from fighting and without any help from the outside. The original deception worked on the experienced opponent. This battle entered all military textbooks of the world thanks to the humane aspect, the perseverance, and Tito's strategic thinking. The bridge can now be accessed from the beautiful Jablanica park in front of the Museum of the Battle for the Wounded. Visitors can enjoy by the emerald green Neretva and, with the silence of the river, try to imagine the pictures of history and think about how the famous actor Orson Welles stood there a long time ago. People say that Welles was so afraid of looking into the abyss of Jablanica that he requested a helicopter to take him down from the Risovac plateau, but he was rejected. Welles will be remembered for the saying: "Until my last breath, I want Tito's head!" Sarajevo Times 6.5.2018.

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