

Medieval legend returns to marshal Serbian rebel forces

DAILY TELEGRAPH 19/7/91

IN THE Balkans, where fact is often stranger than fiction, Captain Dragan is becoming a living legend.

From his base in a 15th century Venetian fort in Knin, 200 miles south of Zagreb, he has turned the Serbs of Krajina, the race's self-proclaimed southern enclave in Croatia, into a formidable fighting force.

This new army includes 250 women, dubbed the Amazons, and it has orders to wipe out all the Croat police in Krajina.

Croats call him a terrorist. Serbs see him as medieval warrior hero returned to help them in their hour of need. But Captain Dragan is vague about his past. "I don't want

to reveal anything which could put my family at risk," he says.

He has been described as English, Australian, Canadian and even as a member of the IRA. In fact he is a Serb, born in Belgrade 36 years ago, who left Yugoslavia when he was three.

Two and a half months ago, Captain Dragan returned to Yugoslavia for the first time. He speaks perfect English with an Australian accent but will not say where he has lived in between.

"I came here by accident. I am a Serb. I looked at the situation and thought I could do something to help. I have calmed things down and got things under control. My training system is based on the

British system. It is the only one that works."

Ever since Franjo Tudjman became President of Croatia in April last year, Serbs in Krajina have been in revolt.

They fear that the resurgence of Croat nationalism could lead to a repetition of the massacres of the Second World War in which 600,000 Serbs died.

Lazur Macura, an English teacher turned Krajina's Minister of Information, said: "In 1941 we were caught by surprise. Every family here has relatives who were killed. Now we are taking every measure to make sure that does not

By Christopher Bennett in Knin

happen again." On April 2 the government of Krajina announced it was joined to Serbia. On July 1 it embarked on Operation Wasp. Mr Macura said: "Operation Wasp is our plan to wipe out all Croat police who remain in Krajina."

Captain Dragan masterminds the operation. On July 6 his forces attacked Croat police in the village of Ljubovo. "In 40 minutes we killed 32, wounded 26 badly and 105 lightly. We had no casualties."

Another 43 Croat policemen are now prisoners in Knin old hospital.

Short, tanned and wiry with cropped white hair, Captain Dragan denies he is a mercenary. "I

am no soldier of fortune, no gun for hire. I have always worked for governments. Now I work for the government of Krajina."

Krajina needs to raise £500,000 a month to maintain its army — a tall order for one of Yugoslavia's poorest regions. Much of its funding comes from Serbs living abroad. Captain Dragan has also devoted his personal fortune to the cause.

"My aim is to make the Serb population safe. Knin is now safe. Today I am leaving for another trouble spot to organise the people there."

In Knin, a city of 16,000 people, his proteges are ready to look after themselves. Borka, 20, and Sneza, 25, the first women to become ser-

geants are prepared to fight. Borka explained: "We grew up together, we have always done everything together and now we will fight together. We no longer have time for boys. But we will have boy-friends again when the war is over."

They are grateful to Dragan for everything he has taught them. They wear the same uniforms as their male colleagues and sleep with pistols under their pillow.

Three hundred and fifty thousand people live in Krajina, 300,000 of them Serbs. Mr Macura claims that in the event of full-scale war they can put 50,000 fighters in the field. They will not tolerate any form of independent Croatia.