



# KRENAR KOMONI: FROM BLOODY WAR TO SUCCESSFUL STARTUP

by Alan S. Brown

**KRENAR KOMONI THOUGHT HE COULD MAKE IT AS A PRO SOCCER PLAYER. INSTEAD, HE ESCAPED A WAR TO LEAD A SUCCESSFUL STARTUP.**

When Krenar Komoni, CEO of Tive, Inc., was growing up in Pristina, Kosovo, he loved playing goalie in soccer. He played on hard dirt and sometimes concrete, but never hesitated to throw himself to the ground to stop a ball. It was his passion.

Yet, what he loved most about the position was the way it let him lead his teammates. “I could see the whole game,” he said. “It was like conducting a symphony. I told my defensemen where to go, motivated them, and screamed at them.”

He never played on grass until he joined the local Pristina club. He was short for a goalie, but the club’s trainer thought his skills and passion could make Komoni a pro. Komoni thought so too.

It was heady music in a post-Cold War nation with limited opportunities.

Yet by the time he turned 14, he had decided to leave soccer. “I thought, if I’m injured, I’d have no future,” he said. “If I can use my brain, I think I can do more things in my life.”

That combination of passion and dispassionate analysis defines Komoni. It shaped his career and ultimately led him to found Tive, a company that makes sensor systems for truckers carrying perishable and environmentally sensitive products. But to get there, Komoni first had to survive a bloody war in Kosovo.

### UNDER SIEGE

Komoni was born in Pristina, the Albanian-speaking capital of Kosovo, in 1983, six years before the Berlin Wall fell. His father was a mechanical engineer, his mother a journalist who wrote poetry.

A natural in math, Komoni was onto computers by the time he was 12. PCs were rare in Yugoslavia, but his father had an IBM 386 PC and taught him DOS. Komoni learned C programming while laid up two weeks with a fractured knee.

He also taught himself animation. “I downloaded a 15-second *Toy Story* trailer over a modem,” Komoni said. “It took forever, and it was small and pixelated, but I must have watched that video close to one thousand times. I thought, ‘There’s got to be a way to learn to do this.’ So I started learning 3D Studio Max, an animation program, when I was 12.”

At 16, he got a job doing animation for a local television station. “There was an ad in a newspaper, and I got an interview,” Komoni said. “I came in and I was a kid and the guy interviewing me was much older. He sat me down and had me draw a cube and a sphere, and move them around. Then I showed him a few things that I had already done, and he was just shocked.”

He could not believe it. He worked from May to September and part-time on weekends during school. He earned more than his parents.

The income helped. The old Yugoslavia was fracturing into a jumble of ethnic states. Kosovo was part of Serbia, which wanted the Albanians out. In 1998, the



TOP: Krenar's high school in Kosovo.  
BOTTOM: Krenar (far right) with family in Istanbul in 1997.

Serb government began firing Albanians. Komoni's parents lost their jobs, though his mother brought in hard currency by running English classes for children at home. At night, Komoni dreamed of drinking a Coca-Cola or having a whole tomato to himself.

In March 1999, the Serb army advanced and the fighting in Pristina heated up. Komoni would put his school bag next to the window so its books would stop stray bullets. One day, as tanks rolled through the city a mile away, he and a friend sheltered under a first-floor balcony until the shooting stopped.

Because she was a journalist, Komoni's mother could see where events were heading. She left with Komoni, his brother, aunt, and grandmother on a bus to Turkey, bribing border guards

along the way. In Turkey, she took a job as a reporter. Komoni's father stayed behind.

"As a reporter, she went to one of the massacre scenes, but she never shared the details," Komoni recalled. "She tried to protect us."

Life went on. "You could just sit and worry, or you could go out and do something," Komoni said. "For me, I thought I might as well learn as much as I could."

## COMING TO AMERICA

Komoni eventually returned to Kosovo, but wanted the best university education he could get. He found a family in Tulsa, OK, who would host him while he spent his senior year at their local high school. Elated, he flew to Albania, which was handling U.S. visas for Kosovo exiles. But the rules had changed. He needed an appointment. When he told the host family that he would be delayed, they decided not to host him.

Fortunately, one of his friends worked for Jonathan Hoffman, an American doing humanitarian work in Kosovo who now heads Direct Aid International. Hoffman put an ad in his hometown newspaper in Northfield, VT, and Komoni soon had a sponsor.

He returned to Albania for his visa. When he walked in the house, the television was showing a jet crashing into the second World Trade Center tower. "I could not believe my eyes," he said. "I thought it was a movie, but then the reality hit."

Finally, on November 2, at 17, he flew to America and enrolled in Northfield High School. He also began taking some classes at nearby Norwich University, a military academy. It eventually offered him a scholarship. He had originally planned to major in astrophysics, but switched to computer engineering when his advisor promised a better scholarship and more career opportunities. He also majored in math and minored in computer science.

In his junior year, he interned at Bit-Wave Semiconductor, a startup developing programmable transceivers for base stations and cellphones. "I fell in love with radio frequency engineering because it was abstract and yet you could build things," Komoni said. "It



# THE PROFILE

**NAME:** Krenar Komoni

**CURRENT POSITION:** CEO, Tive, Inc. 2015-present.

**BIRTHPLACE:** Pristina, Kosovo, 1983.

**HIGHEST DEGREE:** Master of Science, Electrical Engineering, Tufts University, 2008. Ph.D., begun in 2011, all but dissertation complete.

### MAJOR CAREER HIGHLIGHTS:

Koha Vision—KTV, Technical Engineer/Special Effects designer, 2008. BitWave Semiconductor, Design Engineer, 2008-10; VP Engineering, eco SolidStateDrive Corp., 2010-11; Eta Devices, RF/Systems Engineer, 2011-12; Managing Partner, PhoenixRF Technologies, 2012-15; CEO/Founder, Tive, Inc., 2015-present.

**HONORS:** Tau Beta Pi R.C. Matthews Outstanding Chapter Award, Norwich University, 2004-05.

**GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT:** Having two amazing kids.

**FAMILY:** Elisa, wife, 2010.

He has two children: Fiona and Darsen.

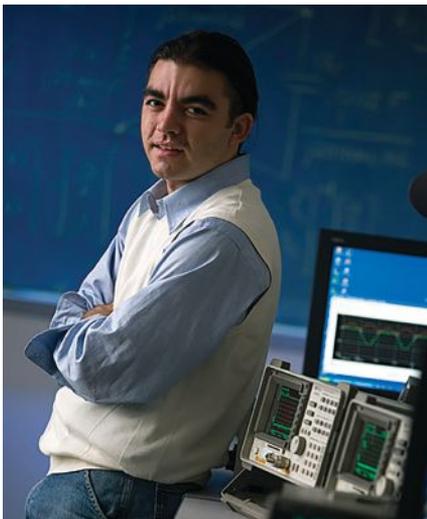
**LEADER MOST ADMIRED:** Soichiro Honda, the founder of Honda Motor Co. He had to face extremely difficult challenges, including an earthquake that destroyed his popular motorcycles and then automobiles, but he never gave up.

**HOBBIES:** Playing video games, especially soccer games, and spending time with his children.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie and *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill.

**PERSONAL MOTTO:** Adapt and overcome. I learned this at Norwich University.

**IF YOU COULD DO ONE THING OVER:** I listened to old men and women who had regrets. I do not want to wish there was anything I wished I could do over.



was magic how the bits were flowing.” At the urging of one of his coworkers, he stayed in school and earned a master’s in electrical engineering at Tufts University. After graduation, he joined BitWave, where he surprisingly found himself developing some serious technology management chops.

## CAREER

BitWave was designing a programmable chip, but Komoni soon realized that no one could tell him when it would be finished. So, he approached chief technology officer Geoff Dawe, a fellow Norwich alumnus, and proposed a spreadsheet with timelines for the project’s many strands.

“The design engineers were much older than me, and I didn’t think I had the power to do this,” Komoni said. “And Dawe said to me, ‘Nobody gives you power. You just go and take it.’ It was a nice way of saying, ‘Do it, but we’re not paying you more.’”

Komoni started talking with the other engineers. He was surprised to find that they liked sharing their progress and were honest about where things stood. The roadmap he put together was off by only two or three weeks over the six-month time span.

More importantly, though, it changed how Komoni viewed himself. “I realized that I had the potential to lead really smart people who were experts in their technologies,” he said.

“It’s a really challenging thing to do. I’ve seen vice-presidents of engineering fail at that left and right. But I realized



I might have the gift to manage engineers because I could empathize with what they were going through.”

It was a good start, but BitWave changed. It had a new CEO who was less transparent. Komoni could see the writing on the wall and left after two years, a few months before the business closed.

Shortly after Komoni was accepted into the Ph.D. program at Tufts, MIT engineer **Joel L. Dawson, Ph.D.** (MA B ’96), who had consulted with BitWave, recruited him to be the first employee of Eta Devices. Eta planned to create the world’s most efficient base station. Komoni said yes only after he and Dawson convinced his advisor at Tufts to let him do a part-time Ph.D.

After a couple of years, Dawe, BitWave’s former CTO, asked Komoni to start a consulting firm with him. In December 2012, they formed PhoenixRF Technologies. Its communications projects ranged from satellite chipsets to RF transmitters for digestible pill-sized cameras.

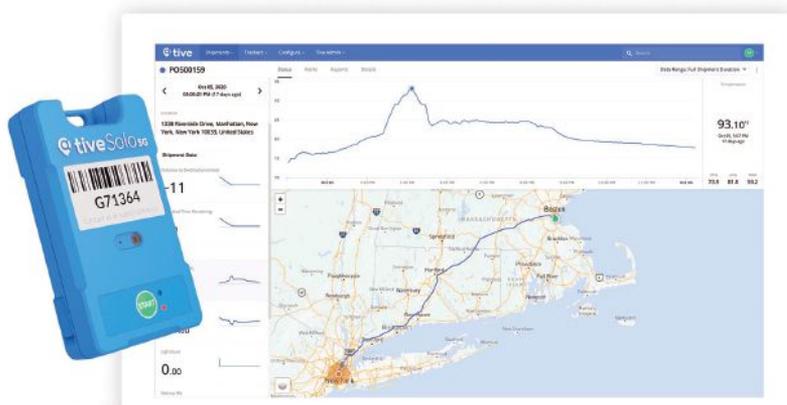
LEFT: Young Krenar at Norwich University. ABOVE: Krenar, center with tie, at graduation with his electrical engineering class at Norwich.

PhoenixRF was a big success. Komoni was now married to Elisa, a woman he had met at an Albanian Independence Day party. He seemed ready to settle down. Then, he learned something surprising about his father-in-law’s business.

## TIVE

Elisa’s father owned a small trucking company. When Komoni visited her parents’ home, her father was often on the phone late into the night trying to locate his drivers. If they did not answer, he was flying blind. So, Komoni volunteered to put some GPS trackers on his trucks.

The result was more kludge than elegant. But once he attached it to a truck’s CB radio, his father-in-law—and some of his friends—could see where their fleets were any time, 24/7.



Single-use multi-sensor tracker provides real-time visibility into the location, temperature, humidity, shock, and light of goods in transit.



Krenar (center) at the 2005 TBP Convention in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he accepted the Outstanding Chapter Award. (Left to Right) Dennis J. Tyner, Ph.D., Matt W. Ohland, Ph.D. (FL A '96), and Carol E. Stephens, Ph.D. (TN E '91).

One of those friends told Komoni about the sensors used to track fish and other perishables. They recorded a shipment's temperature, but they stored the data on a chip that could be read only after the goods arrived. Still, it could show if, say, a shipment of berries had frozen and could no longer be sold and whether the trucker or seller were to blame.

That got Komoni thinking. If he could add a temperature sensor to his GPS tracker, it could warn the trucker if there was a problem right away. He could add a humidity sensor, an accelerometer to detect forces that caused breakage, and even a light sensor (because a light and temperature spike would show that someone had opened the refrigerator truck door).

To do this, he needed low-powered sensors that retained their charge for a week or more. Fortunately, the emerging internet of things—the use of wide-area, low-power networks to monitor and communicate a product's condition and location—had created exactly what he needed.

Alone, wiring those trucks, Komoni realized this was a bigger opportunity than he had originally thought. Visualizing the business and how it could grow gave him the courage to leave PhoenixRF and devote himself full-time to Tive.

Still, he needed money to fund R&D. Komoni had no experience with venture capitalists (VC). What he knew, he laughs, came from watching *Shark Tank*, a television show about business startups. But he had a plan.

His method was to build on any positive feedback he received. In the beginning, there was not much. But after each meeting, he would try to amplify what he was doing right and address his shortcomings before sitting down with the next VC. He also took their recommendations to heart.

"They didn't know me when I walked in the door," Komoni said. "But if I actually did the things I said I would do and addressed their concerns, then I started to build trust. It's not rocket science, right?"

Eventually, he found an investor who believed in him. But Hyperplane Ventures first wanted to see a lead investor. That meant building a prototype and nailing down his first customer, which turned out to be Nokia. That earned Tive seed money. In late 2020, Tive raised another \$12 million.

## LEADERSHIP

It was not a straightforward path. As Tive's sales rose, it lacked the money to expand. Komoni had to let 8 of his 15 employees go. "It was one of the most difficult things I had to do," he said. "I hired those people and I valued them."

Those who remained went on half-pay for a month. Komoni promised to do whatever it took to get them to full pay and compensated them with more shares in the company.

Komoni credits his extreme transparency with keeping the company afloat. He wanted his employees to know where they stood even when things were tough, and to let everyone know what he was doing to fix things. That builds loyalty. "Many leaders are afraid employees will leave if they give them bad news," he said. "I think they'll leave if you don't tell them the truth."

Discipline is also a key element of his leadership style. He credits **Dennis J. Tyner, Ph.D.** (MA E '85), a former TBII Executive Councillor and his advisor when Komoni led the Vermont Beta Chapter at Norwich. "He had an amazing work ethic," Komoni said. "He was in his office late. He might feel sick, but he would show up and he never let anything bring him down. Emotionally, he was very strong." Komoni emulated those traits and VT Beta completed more than 20 projects in a single year and won the R.C. Matthews Award for the Association's outstanding chapter.

And then there is risk. When Komoni was young, he heard people talk about an opportunity they did not take. "They thought the risk was too great and they wondered what if," he said. "I never wanted that regret in my life. That's why I look at risk the way I do. I don't want to look at the past and say, 'I wish I had done that.'"

Given his life's twists and turns so far, this is not a sentiment Komoni should worry about in the future.

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**ALAN S. BROWN** has written broadly about engineering, technology, and science for more than 30 years. He is a board member of Science Writers in New York, a writer for The Kavli Foundation, and a former senior editor of ASME's *Mechanical Engineering* magazine, and contributes to a wide range of publications. He graduated New College at Hofstra University *magna cum laude* in 1974 and can be reached at [insight01@verizon.net](mailto:insight01@verizon.net)