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Abalaev is a descendant of Alibek Haji, the Chechen leader of the 1877-8 uprising of Daghestan and Chechnya

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Pervomaiskaia

I met Salman Raduev one evening. He told me “be ready for an expedition tonight and bring 45 men”. It was too short notice and I was not well prepared. I always preferred to bring along more men and supplies than was necessary for an expedition, for insurance sake. But I could not take more than 20 men from their positions without endangering our defences in Zandak. I was reduced to enrol young men who had been around our positions but had not yet taken active part in combat. However, I was well equipped. I had brought heavy weapons supplies – DShK, mortar, *pulimety*, mountain guns that I had captured earlier during the offensive against Gudermes. In Pervomaiskaia my group was probably the best equipped.

We had planned to capture Kizliar, hold it for approximately 10 days and force the Russians to negotiate. We also planned to destroy the helicopter base from where the Russians were bombing Chechnya, destroy the munitions factory, and various military and MVD (OMON) garrisons. Kizliar is easily approachable by heavy tanks from two directions but we had NURS guns, which we had adapted to use against tanks and we thought we could manage. As safeguard, we had decided to take hostages. It was

essential that the hostages should be Russians because we knew that Moscow would not negotiate for Daghestani hostages and would rather see them killed.

The hospital of Kizliar was chosen to hold the hostages because it was the most convenient place and, should we have wounded, they could be treated on the spot. The helicopter base was disappointing – there were only 3 helicopters, which we burned, but no NURS. We burned a few other targets but failed to find any supplies of ammunitions. On our way out, we had brought a KAMAZ lorry full of weapons and ammunition, which we had taken in Shelkovski raion from 2 Russian bases on our way out of Chechnya. We also took Russian soldiers from Shelkovski as hostages.

My task was to capture the hospital, which was guarded by OMON, and to collect hostages. This was tricky because the chances were that there might be militia and military people among them. Some of my men were wounded while we were gathering the hostages. The MVD fired at the hospital several times and tried to storm it. Eventually Raduev accepted to negotiate and to withdraw to Chechnya along the route suggested by the Russians only to be ambushed in Pervomaiskaia.

In Pervomaiskaia, my group took position along the main road - from the military base guarding the access of the village to the village itself. We had acquired good experience of position warfare – we have been sitting in trenches for almost a year. On the other side of the road were canals. On our side were houses made out of clay and bricks. I dug corridors cutting through the houses. This allowed us to move without being seen by the Russians. I dug trenches along the road with reinforced passages for exits on to the streets of the village. During the three first days of battle, I did not have a single casualty among my men in these trenches. For 3 days, helicopters were circling photographing our positions. I knew that the Russians were bound to storm the military post at the entrance of the village because they could approach it under good cover. I therefore dug underground passages leading away from the main trenches towards makeshift bunkers where we positioned our most powerful weapons. These bunkers proved useful. They

were perfectly camouflaged. We had worked at night and the Russians had not noticed them.

On the fourth day, the Russians attacked massively from all directions. They destroyed the military post and the buses, which were parked nearby. (They thought that the hostages were held there.) The Russian attacking party included three different corps - some had black uniforms, some tan and yellow, some green. When they attacked, my bunkers were in their rear. We were able to fire at them from these points throughout the time that the battle lasted - from 9 am till 4 pm. They could not determine from where we were firing.

I had put 2 men on watch at all time in each bunker. When the Russians attacked on the fourth day, the men called me on the radio to say that they were running out of ammunition. I was helping one of Raduev's groups of some 20 men to repel an attack. When we set up the defences of Pervomaiskaia we were desperately short of time and we had not connected the bunkers to trenches and tunnels. There was a distance of approximately 50 metres that I had to cross without cover while the Russian offensive was going on at full blast. Crossing the open 50 metres was dangerous because firing did not stop for a second. But if my men remained without ammunition, the Russians would be able to advance quickly and we would not be able to raise our heads out of the trenches. I made 3 or 4 unsuccessful attempts to reach the bunkers. I prayed for inspiration, turned around and I saw three cows. I squeezed myself between them and managed to reach my men who were on their last 5 patrons.

Russian fire-power was approximately 300 times greater than ours. My eyes were nearly blind with strain. I was praying that one of my eyes at least should be good enough to aim. We could not rest for one second on that day. Finally at 4 pm the Russians withdrew.

We had decided to make our escape after the battle, taking the wounded and the hostages. My group was the support group that came out second with the wounded and hostages. I

lost 26 men during the escape - the biggest casualty my units suffered throughout the war. We had had fewer casualties in Gudermes. The ones who perished were my best men. 16 men were heavily wounded, near death. 11 made it unharmed. We managed to bring back all the bodies, the wounded and the hostages. I made the journey three times backwards and forwards to Pervomaiskaia to bring out all the wounded. I buried my heavy weapons. One week later I send a unit to recover them, to the great surprise of the Daghestanis. They watched in amazement but did not intervene.

Position warfare

We returned to Zandak where position warfare continued. What I remember most about the war were the trenches, the bunkers, the dirt, the hunger, and the cold. Before the offensive on Gerzel, we stayed for over a month on the same positions, eating, sleeping there with our weapons. I always envied the mobile groups who did not to have to worry about positions, trenches and so on, and were able to go back to sleep in a warm bed. We all envied Khattab because he had beds, dollars, and ammunition, whereas we were always short of ammunitions.

Our group had 7 sectors to control in Zandak region. One battalion was not enough to keep watch and defend all 7 positions. In the first few months of the positional war (after the retreat from Grozny), the Russians did not know the location of our units and defences. But they soon managed to find agents among our population, former Soviet sympathisers or members of the KGB. They knew everything - our positions, numbers, and supplies. When they attacked our positions, they hit very accurately. Nevertheless, Zandak was one of the few war zones where we managed to prevent the advance of the Russian front. As mentioned earlier, my group had become very experienced in positional warfare. To choose your positions carefully, to turn a bad terrain to your advantage – these skills are an extremely important aspect of warfare. With the proper know-how one should never loose a battle. In some areas, such as the district of Khankala (my regiment

was responsible for the attack on Khankala during the August offensive against Grozny), we built underground towns and defensive infrastructure.

In one of our first battle we faced a division. (This division is now stationed in Buinaksk. After the war, I bought weapons there for our National Guard.) I had one *pulimet*, 7 automatic machine guns, and 6 grenade launchers. Zandak is surrounded by hills. The summit of one hill was used as a football ground. It overlooked all the surrounding villages, one could even see Grozny from there. If the Russians occupied that position, they could bomb all the mountain villages of the region. We had set our positions just below the football ground, it was vital that we should hold on to them. The Russians knew that I had worked for the MVD previously. They send emissaries offering me US \$ 44,000 and any position I wanted in their administration for giving up my positions. I asked them to give me three days to make up my mind. I took a “Zil” car and drove immediately to Vedenov to Shamil Basaev’s base. I explained our situation. They loaded the car with all kind of equipment – mines, anti-tank and anti-personnel weapons. I returned the next day with 2 more cars, which we also filled with mines, weapons and ammunition. On the third day without waiting for my reply, the Russians attacked. Their officers told us later that they had watched us, got very angry, and began firing. They tried to storm our position five times without success. I had mined all the approach ground and they had no chances. The village of Zandak did not suffer. Our aim was only to stop them not to counter-attack. Unfortunately, we did not keep a map of the minefields. It was short-sighted but we lacked time and never thought that we could last the day against the Russian Armada. Often we considered ourselves lucky if we could hold a position until the next hour or evening.

I must stress that while holding defensive positions, we constantly mounted ambushes and offensive raids on Russians bases. This was necessary, among other things, in order to keep ourselves supplied with weapons and ammunitions.

The Russians

Our Russian POWs were usually reasonably well trained. Certainly their knowledge of weapons and their engineering skills were good, often better than those of our fighters. Their theoretic knowledge of conventional warfare was superior to ours was in the beginning of the war. Physically Russian soldiers, at least the *kontrakniki* and the professionals, were fitter than our men. After our men had sat for a year in trenches, their physical resistance was lowered, they were often ill and underfed. But the Russians lacked spirit - the most important equation, I think, in a war such as ours. If you have spirit, faith, and will-power, you can fight even with a hunting rifle. In Pervomaiskaia, I had only 21 experienced fighters. The others were 17-18 years old. These youngsters did not even know how to use a grenade launcher. At first, all they could do was hold a machine gun. But they had the spirit and fought with desperation.

However, to be fair I must say that the Russians did not always perform badly. On many occasions, we encountered units that fought well and with courage, even to the bitter end. In Zandak region, the Russians frequently changed their combat tactics. That gave them an advantage for a few days until we adjusted our own tactics.

Organisation of Chechen forces in Zandak

I tried to organise our forces on a professional army basis but I had to consider Chechen character! For example, it was impossible to nominate commanders for our various units. In each village, one man would stand out as a natural leader. Depending on the size of the village and the number of men, we formed companies or battalions. Their own leader commanded the village-based companies. The companies were formed into battalions whose overall commander was chosen among the company commanders. One man would always rise among them as the leader whose authority was accepted. When possible I always kept a company with me. Gradually the numbers of our regiment increased. 2000

men registered with us, almost an army! But I could not supply and equip more than 500 men. The rest were kept as reserve.

Relations with Daghestan

We had no problems across the border in those areas that were populated by Laks, Kumyks, and Chechen Akkins. The Chechen Akkins in particular helped us actively, supplying food, giving shelter to refugees. Relations, however, were always tense with the Avars, although our nations had been allied during the 19th century Russian conquest. This historical connection explains why anti-Chechen propaganda in Daghestan was designed to target the Avars. As a result, approximately 50/60 per cent of the Avar population of the Khasav Yurt and Novo-Lakski raions was ill disposed towards Chechnya, sometimes to the extent of actively supporting Russia.

Lessons

The war ended when we had learned how to fight. Another year or two and we would have become real professionals.

Conventional warfare, defending territory and positions, was only the work of real “fanatics”. You had to endure in the trenches and bunkers while the Russians hit you with accuracy. Mountain terrain did not make things easier for that type of warfare. Partisan tactics saved our resistance and brought us victory. However, my conviction at the end of the war was that if you chose your positions well, if your engineers dug the trenches and armoured bunkers properly, no GRAD, long-range artillery, or helicopters could be dangerous. Your positions became inaccessible and you had minimal casualties whatever enemy forces were facing you.

Finally, in a war such as ours, I consider human distinction - dedication, spirit, faith, and love of one's nation – equally if not more important than professional military training. Without these qualities you could not fight and might as well quit. When you do not hesitate to sacrifice your life for the future of your nation, your spirit will inspire your comrades - you can be killed but not defeated.