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Commander of the Shali Tank Regiment till 1994, then commander of the Southern Front
Chairman of Parliament since 1997

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[Ruslan Alikhadzhiev was arrested at the beginning of May 2000 in Shali after he had left the mountains to visit his mother who was ill. The Russians issued a brief announcement about his arrest two weeks later, and since then nothing has been heard about him. His comrades presume that Moscow is trying to put pressure on him to declare Parliament as “working” under the administration of Mufti Kadyrov. The attempt to forge a new alliance between Maskhadov’s colleagues and commanders, which seems to have worked with Apty Batalov, has so far failed with Alikhadzhiev. He has not uttered a word since his imprisonment.]

I was a senior NCO (*praporshchik*) in the Soviet army since 1986. I was stationed in Shali with a battalion of the Tank Regiment. I served in various capacity – as a technician, commander of a platoon, in charge of the warehouse. In 1992 when the Russian army left Chechnya I was given the grade of captain by Dzhokhar Dudaev and appointed commander of a battalion. When armed clashes erupted with the Chechen opposition in 1994, I was replaced the commander of the Tank Regiment. At the beginning of the war until February 1995, I remained as commander of the Tank Regiment. On 3 February I was appointed commander of the Southern front.

The retreat from Grozny

After the retreat from Grozny, the situation was difficult. We were positioned in open fields some 8/9 km from Chechen Aul, in full view of the Russian troops. We stayed there from 3 February till 29 April 1995. We set our defences in the field with the Russians deployed some 600/700 metres in front of us out of grenade launchers' range. We dug trenches and defended our positions for two months.

Our people suffered heavy casualties on 4 February near Chechen Aul before when our front was still disorganised. It happened when Russian columns reached a cross-road on the main Rostov-Baku highway. While the Russians advanced along the road, they shot anybody they encountered. Many civilians, elders, women and children were killed. People were arrested and beaten up, women were raped. I had left the regiment for a meeting with volunteers from the surrounding villages. We knew that the Russians were advancing on the highway and we decided to check the situation the next morning. But many partisans decided to attack the Russians without waiting. Nobody had ordered them to do so, they had no commanders, and they just went.

The Russians had deployed their artillery and heavy tanks on the crossroad. They began artillery fire. Snipers also went into action from all directions. In the evening, we counted the dead - 49 people from Shali, Chechen Aul, and Belgatoy.

We held the position for two months under intense Russian artillery and air fire. During these two months I do not remember a single day when fire would stop for more than 2 hours. At the beginning, the partisans refused to dig trenches however much I tried to force them. After the disorganised attack of 4 February, the men became more cautious and we did not suffer so many casualties.

The Russian offensive against the Southern front

On 15 April 1995, the Russians launched an attack along all the Southern front. As a rule tanks and APCs lead the attack. If we managed to hit the leading tanks the Russians retreated behind their front line and did not re-attack in the same place immediately. They continued with artillery fire and attacked again two weeks later. On this occasion (15 April), it was different. They deployed their forces for a full frontal attack and kept on coming. I was amazed. It reminded me of the old WW2 films I saw showing German offensives. The behaviour of the Russian troops was so out of character that I suspected they were given narcotics.

We destroyed many APCs and inflicted heavy casualties but we were nevertheless forced to retreat behind the river Argun. We set our next line of defence some 2 km from the river, again in an open field in the direction of Shali. The Russians crossed the river Argun near Mesker Yurt. They positioned the heavy artillery and GRADs on high ground above Mesker Yurt and began hitting us. We held for approximately one week. During that week, the Russians left the corpses of their dead soldiers lying near the river although we were a good 2 km away. Some of our dead comrades were also lying there. In the end we exchanged the bodies and were able to bury our friends. We retreated to Shali.

When Shali was surrounded Shamil Basaev came with a unit of 40 men but it was useless to put up a defence. We were surrounded on all sides with only the road to Serzhen Yurt opened. We left our positions at night. The next defence position was on a line between Agishty, Vedeno, and Makhkety. I took position on the Agishty front as ordered by Maskhadov should we be forced to retreat from Shali.

The Russians could not break the Agishty line in a frontal attack. Instead they crossed the river Vashta avoiding Gelaev's front, and attacked us from the rear. We had not expected it and we allowed a major tactical mistake to occur. Vashta flows along a narrow gorge that 14 men could easily defend against an armoured column. When the Russians were bombing Selmenhausen the river Vashta was our link between the fronts, mine in the centre, Gelaev's on the left and Basaev's on the right. It was enough to seize Vashta to immobilise us and to sever our links.

Before this happened I remember a meeting in Shatoy with Dudaev. Maskhadov, Abu Musaev, Batalov, Khambiev and many others were present. We had a report that the Russians had come to Duba Yurt, demanding passage at 10 pm that night. They had promised not to harm the village, claiming that they only meant to close the Vashta route to prevent the resistance using it. We had agreed at the meeting that this should not be allowed, and that we should defend that position until our death. The meeting ended in the morning and we left Shatoy at around 3 pm. At 5 pm the Russians had already captured the entrance of the canyon. We were convinced that the Russians had an informer present at the meeting. There was also a confusion between Gelaev and I. We both thought that the other had posted men to defend the canyon.

Later during the negotiations, I remember talking with a brigadier-colonel. He was amazed at the achievement of the Russian troops marching for several kilometres on mountain roads. "Imagine, how we went through these mountains and captured them!" he told me. I knew they had 5 or 6 brigades facing each of our fronts. One Russian brigade counts 5000 soldiers. They had approximately 25,000 men standing against us on the Agishty line. I told him that I had at most 100 men facing their Armada, which he could not believe. However, it was easier to hold defensive positions in the mountains than to lead an offensive and to find the right place for a breach.

The tanks

The Shali Tank Regiment had 6 tanks at the beginning of the conflict but few rockets for T-72. They took part in the battle of Grozny but mostly we used the reserves of the Regiment to supply the fighters in Grozny and later distributed them among the fronts. The T-64 we abandoned at the beginning of the conflict because we knew that we would not be able to find the right rockets. 4 tanks were given to Magomed Khambiev to defend Nozhay Yurt district. It was difficult terrain – rolling hills and mountains with no vegetation. Khambiev was able to use the tanks to prevent the Russians mounting an

offensive from Daghestan. The Regiment had GRADs but no rockets – only twice do I remember getting rockets for GRADs. The supplies of our other regular units, such as Arsanukaev's, fell in the hands of the Russians at the beginning of the war.

Russian tactics

The Russians had no experience of fighting in mountain villages. I remember defending our front line in Elistanzhi. I had 40 men, one tank, 16 rockets, and 500 rounds for 2 *BNPs*. The battle lasted 3 days. The Russians were unable or incapable of approaching the village. There were many cases like that. When one of their men was killed they lost the will to fight.

Russian offensives followed a regular pattern: first artillery bombardment, a constant fire for approximately 2 weeks, followed by air attacks on our positions. Then came the reconnaissance planes. The Russians relied heavily on air reconnaissance. When we saw these planes, we knew that the attack was imminent. Only then did they start moving the infantry, always preceded by tanks. When the attack began helicopters and *pulimet* were firing constantly. Above our positions, helicopters flew very high. At a distance they flew low and fired their rockets.

APCs (*BNP*) were sent ahead of their columns to reconnoitre. If one or two leading APCs were hit the whole column would stop for several weeks. However, there were inconsistencies in the Russian tactics: the 15 April offensive in Chechen Aul was rapid; so was the operation in Grozny when they overran Minutka crossing the nearby park. They moved quickly and decisively, deployed the tanks and then stood there for two months. The same scenarios were repeated at every stage of the war. After Grozny, they had the advantage. I do not understand why they did not push with the offensive. I know that if I were in their place, sitting in a tank, I would have advanced. I would not have stopped. They lacked an offensive spirit. They were afraid.

One other exception was the offensive against Nozhay Yurt in January 1996. The Russians attacked forcibly and swiftly. There was fog, one could not see or hear anything, and our men were digging trenches. Suddenly a tank appeared 5 or 6 metres from us, immediately followed by the infantry. We did not even have time to shoot. I was surprised and could not understand the sudden change in tactics.

The Russians were always entrenching themselves, keeping defensive positions wherever they were deployed. As soon as they stopped somewhere, they immediately laid mines around their positions. The Russians always drove in convoys. An average column would number 200 to 300 vehicles. It would stretch for 2 km.

Under occupation

At the checkpoints Russian troops abused civilians but when they recognised fighters they pretended not to notice them. On many occasions, we crossed the checkpoints with our men and weapons. But they picked on civilians, bullying, harassing, sometimes killing and burying them secretly. They also air dropped troops on the roads between villages, patrolling and arresting the civilians. They avoided the mountains, choosing points between Grozny and Argun. This was usually an MVD speciality. The MVD troops were the marauders.

Funs and games

In 1996, a small group planned to capture a Russian base in Mesker Yurt. They needed tank drivers. I duly provided. They captured the checkpoint - 48 soldiers, 2 tanks and one APC (*BTR*), plus light weapons and ammunition. 2 soldiers were wounded with a pistol during the hold-up. The men squeezed the soldiers into a KAMAZ together with the weapons and ammunition and drove them to my house in Shali. One soldier managed to jump out in the centre of Shali. He was re-captured by a civilian who brought him back to

us. The lorry with the POWs stood in my courtyard for 24 hours. The captured tanks were driven through the centre of Shali to be parked in a medical warehouse on the outskirts of town, damaging the walls of the warehouse in the process. The next night we loaded the prisoners the tanks and APC and drove them through a large checkpoint outside Shali on the Agishty road. 300/400 metres beyond the checkpoint we crossed the river Bassa and drove towards Makhkety to deliver the prisoners in the care of Lechi Khultygov.

Shali at that time was in the Russian occupation zone, with a *komendatura* and a Russian administration. The incident ended with a row with General Shamanov issuing various ultimatums in the presence of the elders of Shali, the mayor, Tsigankov - the district brigade commander. I remember Shamanov leaving the meeting in a huff, muttering “just because you have put that wolf on your beret you think you can lord it here”. I also remember the Russian commander of Shali, with whom I had good relations, asking me “why do you argue with Shamanov? He is mad, he has muddled us up completely”. Shamanov was a second Ermolov. He had the same cruelty and was responsible for the death of many civilians. He was in charge of most of the “special” operations in 1996.

Searching for ammunition

Searching for ammunition before Budennovsk, was no easy task. After the retreat from Vedenov, Maskhadov summoned me to Benoy. My orders were to bring rockets urgently to Atgireyev from Mesker Yurt. 5 of us left Benoy at night in a Russian jeep, including a body-guard of Maskhadov whose order was to find ammunition for grenade launchers. We took a round about route because we knew that the Russians had seized the Bachi Yurt road. 2 km from the village we heard the distinctive noise of tank engines. We stopped, got out of the car. 500 metres beyond the river the Russians were setting camp with lights, tanks and APCs. I called Khunkar to check if the road was clear ahead. The answer was negative - the Russians had seized the whole area. The Russians were so close that we did not dare switch the engine of our car. We thought of leaving the car and walking back to Benoy. Finally, we decided to take a chance. We rolled the car down the

road, 2 of us walking ahead with our weapons. We reached the main road and saw that it was jammed with APCs. We walked along the road and hiding from Russian cars. Eventually a Chechen car stopped. The driver told us that the Russians were still in Mayrtup across the river. We hurried to Bachi Yurt to spend the night. 4 hours later, the Russians had invested Bachi Yurt and set checkpoints on the road. The Russians always installed temporary roadblocks near towns and villages when their columns were moving along roads. We waited until evening and finally made it to Mesker Yurt where we did not find any rockets. On the way back the Russians had occupied the area from Agishty to Bachi Yurt. We had to wait a week before returning to Aslan's HQ.

Maskhadov

Few military people remained with Aslan Maskhadov at the beginning of the war. During the clashes with the opposition in Summer 1994, most of the HQ staff found good reasons to leave - lack of money and stability, and so on. When the Russians invaded Chechnya, the few military cadres who remained ran away. Only 3 professionals stayed in HQ with Maskhadov.

Maskhadov was talking about an offensive against Grozny very early on. He kept on saying that we needed a large-scale operation to break the Russians' back. I was wondering how we could capture Grozny when we did not know where to find refuge from one day to another, when we had no territory left. When we were in Benoy [after the retreat from Vedenov], Maskhadov gave us our positions. Mine was Beno-Vedenov, a remote village in the mountains some 7 km from the border with Daghestan. The Russians were already within artillery firing range from the Daghestani frontier. We had no further retreat. But Maskhadov had the vision.

Conclusion

In war one needs daring and decisiveness. If you are brave but not decisive, it is not enough. The Russians had educated professionals and they had the weapons but they lacked both these qualities. From a distance, they were brave but they were scared of meeting us face to face. Had they been as daring as the Chechens, they could have won most battles, with the weapons at their disposal, in 3 or 4 days. Their greatest mistake was that they did not know what they were fighting for. Our people knew - they were fighting for their freedom, their homeland, and their honour.