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APTY BATALOV

Commander of Naursky and Nadtechny raions

One time commander of the Naur Regiment

Chief of President Maskhadov's administration in 1999

Interview June 1999

[The Naur Regiment was admired throughout Chechnya for its military performance. It was a mobile regiment, which was called in for every difficult and desperate situation. Batalov was initially the commander of the Regiment but he quickly faded from the military scene to take on political and administrative responsibilities. His co-commander, Taus, took over and led the regiment until he was killed in combat. He had a reputation of great bravery contrary to Batalov. The information provided in the interview is reliable and verified by other sources although it is short on military details. When assessing Batalov's interview one should not be influenced by his recent escapade and prompt release from jail (where he stayed only 3 days). The information provided is sound whatever compromises he made recently. The Russians had the mean to put pressure on him – his 16-year old son who was in college in Moscow was arrested at the beginning of the new conflict.]

I was head of the criminal investigation department of the Chechen MVD. In June 1994 I took part in actions against Ruslan Labazanov in August 1994, and was appointed commanding officer of Naursky and Nadtechny raions. From 6 January 1995, I took part in the fighting in Grozny. I was heading a battalion of 90 men which by our standards was almost an army. When we arrived in Grozny, Maskhadov ordered us to defend the

area stretching from the Pedagogical Institute to the MVD, at the rear of the Presidential Palace. We defended the position until 18 January under the attacks of the elite Naval Infantry (Marine commandos).

Learning the skills

The battle of Grozny showed that the Russian army could be held at bay by small groups of fighters. Spirit, daring, and dedication were determining factors of our ultimate victory. The Russians' lack of co-ordination, lack of manoeuvrability, lack of direction and competent command, prevented them from fighting effectively. On the eve of war, Dzhokhar Dudaev said that Russian tanks burned like match-boxes, that there was no need to be afraid of them, and that planes could be shot down with automatic machine guns. It did not seem real at the time for those of us who had no military training. I for example served in the Soviet army in a construction battalion and I never used an automatic machine gun during military service. Before the war, we had no real armed forces and we were not prepared for war. Chechens seldom served in the elite and commando regiments of the Soviet army. At best they were recruited into the tank regiments or the infantry. Few of our people had specialist knowledge of how to fight an urban war. On 26 November 1994 most of the action was lead by the "Abkhaz" battalions of Basaev, Gelaev, Dashaev (killed in the first days of the war) – the only battle-trained troops we had. Others followed their example, listened to their advice and learned to fight from them.

Our partisans acquired great confidence after the battle of 26 November (1994). They realised that Dudaev was right, that Russian tanks indeed burned easily, and that Russian troops could be thrashed. Near the Presidential Palace, two tanks were destroyed with one shot: they were moving very fast; a grenade man hit one tank, the ammunition on board exploded, the detonation set the other tank on fire. Russian tanks burned easily because they were always packed with spare rockets and ammunition, just thrown inside the tanks.

In urban conditions, it is most effective to fight in small groups of 5 or 6 men with one grenade launcher, one *pulimet*, and automatic machine guns. We moved from building to building to defend our positions from several directions. This allowed small groups to control a large area. The tactic was simple: an advancing tank was stopped in one street, it would turn in another undefended street trying to attack our position from another direction; we moved there quickly, across buildings and courtyards, to confront them again. Thus, the Russians had the impression that the area was defended from all sides. The Pioneers' House was defended by a group of 10 men who had come and left - the Russians kept on bombing the empty building for a long time.

After the retreat from the Presidential Palace on 19 January 1995, Maskhadov ordered me to take positions in Trampark. There was fierce fighting there. I remember certain battles in Grozny when the Russians were going on the attack without any sense of fear or caution as if they were drunk or drugged. They wore huge protective coats and very large helmets. With machine guns and sniper rifles, we had to aim at the head or at the feet.

There was a hotel near the railway station. We occupied the first and second floor, the Russians the fourth and fifth. The Russian commander decided to negotiate. We gave him an ultimatum to leave in 20 minutes or we would blow up the building. In fact, we could not have done it - we had only half an hour supply of ammunition left and no explosives. However, Isa Ayubov [killed soon afterwards], a deputy of Maskhadov and a professional soldier, used the right arguments and in 20 minutes the Russians had surrendered.

In urban warfare you need to know the city you are fighting in extremely well. The Russians were not prepared. They came with a huge force expecting that the sight of their tanks and military might would be enough to discourage resistance. Their first failures broke them morally and psychologically. The Russians were not good strategists and psychologists - in their place I would not have brought heavy tanks into the city, certainly

not after the experience of 26 November. I would have attacked with small commando units.

Necessity forced us to be inventive. When we had to storm Russian positions we filled the grenade launchers with “*dust*” and pepper [*dust* does not mean ‘dust’ – it is some kind of itching or sneezing powder]. We also added petrol to rockets – the area where rockets exploded caught fire. Russian mass media claimed that we used chemical weapons and had access to the latest and most sophisticated weapons. We also adapted NURS rockets from helicopters and TURS (or PTURS?) from fighter planes using 82 diameter pipes. The Russians at first thought that we were using low flying aircrafts.

On 29 March 1995, Khunkar Israpilov ordered me to attack infantry troops accompanying a heavy tank column. That was after the Russians had captured Gudermes and were ready to move on Novo-Groznensky. They had intended to attack from Daghestan but the Chechen Akkins blocked the roads. However, after the capture of Gudermes opened the road to Novo-Groznensky. The infantry and commando battalions advanced on the high ground and woods along the road to give cover to the heavy tanks. I had to be cautious because the day before a group from Benoy had lost 9 men in an attack on the same convoy. The Russians had the choice of two routes. One crossed open fields where I took my battalion of 120 men, making pretence of digging ourselves in and building trenches. I knew their intelligence would be informed. After showing our presence, we left discreetly to prepare an ambush along the other route, leaving 2 men and mining the field. The Russians fell into our trap. The battle lasted 2 days. On the 3rd we had to retreat but not before giving the Russian battalion a good bashing.

We had plenty of vodka and wine and the Russians had weapons – it made the trading easy. We bought or exchanged weapons and ammunitions either directly from the soldiers or through civilian intermediaries. The Russians sold their ammunition, shot one or two rounds, and wrote a report claiming that they had been attacked to justify the loss of supplies. During the fighting in Grozny, we got ammunition from APCs. On the eve of the August Grozny offensive I had 2 or 3 tonnes of ammunition.

The Russians

The Russians did not know the terrain in Grozny and in the rural areas. Frequently they did not even have maps. The regiments fighting in Chechnya were newly formed regiments and had no *esprit de corps*. The Russians were politically short-sighted and over-confident. In 1917, the national elite was exterminated and replaced by scum and former serfs. Because of their stupidity and arrogance, they thought that the threat of a Russian offensive would be enough to create panic.

When mounting an offensive the Russians worked the area with “preparatory” artillery fire, then came the APCs, and the infantry last. Often infantry rode on board APCs, which made them easy targets. Infantry was prone to panic. Helicopters often fired at retreating infantry troops to force them back on the offensive.

The Russians’ rules of engagement were to arrest, to capture, and to execute. 1500 people have disappeared in filtration camps. Perhaps one per cent among them were partisans. We had very few cases of resistance fighters being lost without news. They answered the partisans’ attacks by turning their guns on peaceful villages. They wanted to incite people against us. When we attacked the Russians in Khankala during the offensive against Grozny [August 1996] they turned their guns on Argun. Sometimes they used provocateurs who shot at the rear of their troops only to justify bombing a village.

In 1995 Russians began using a new military expression “*kvartirnyi strel*”. At first, we did not understand what it meant. We realised after a while that it referred to the complete destruction of high rise apartment blocks, from top floor down, supposedly to eliminate the odd sniper. The inspiration was obvious: Stalin used to say that it was better to execute 9 innocent people rather than release one guilty man.

The majority of soldiers serving in Chechnya came from disinherited rural areas of Russia. They were poorly educated and marginal. Their loss did not matter. The soldiers were often surprised when they saw our well-appointed houses. They thought that Chechens were *bourgeois* - they saw foreign gadgets, TVs, and carpets in our houses, wealth that in their Russian villages they had not even dreamt of. There was an element of pent up rage, jealousy, and spite in their attitude towards us – “how could it be that we members of the great Russian nation are living like pigs when the Chechen savages can afford such things”.

Many Russian soldiers were common marauders, and that with impunity. APCs served to transport stolen goods. Convoys of trucks filled with their robberies were sent back to Russia.

Naursky raion under occupation

In October 1995, I was co-chairman of the joint Russian-Chechen commission for Naursky raion. I stayed in the raion when the negotiations broke down after the attack on Romanov.

There was little military activity in the raion which was under Russian occupation as were Shelkovsky and Nadterechny raions. In the first months of the war, the partisans from Naur went to fight in Grozny and then on other fronts. Anti-Russian activity was political on the part of the civilian population with a round the clock demonstration

against Russian presence from July 1995 until the end of the war, and underground on the part of the resistance with assassinations of Russian officers, MVD troops and FSB staff.

In April 1996 after successful offensives against Vedeno and Shatoy the Russians became over confident, and wanted to crack down on the demonstration. They arrested the leader of the demonstration. The resistance gave the Russians a 24-hour ultimatum to free the man. They did not comply. In retaliation, the resistance captured the prosecutor of the district and the chief investigator of the militia. Followed an armed clash during which the Russians pushed the Chechen militia against the partisans. But they agreed to exchange prisoners after the resistance killed 3 soldiers and destroyed an APC. It was not in the Russians' interest to start military operations in the northern provinces which served as communication and transport route for the army. For my part, I could not start large-scale operations without orders from HQ. The raion was a safe-haven for many refugees from the war zones. I feared that I might lose the support of the population if I provoked retaliatory operations.

Naursky raion was surrounded by Russian garrisons on the Eastern, Western and Southern fronts but the resistance always had the possibility of escaping into Stavropol Territory. Whenever we were in a desperate situation this was our usual escape route.

The August 1996 offensive on Grozny

All Chechnya knew that Grozny would be liberated at least a month in advance. But I received my orders from Maskhadov to join the offensive against Grozny only a week before the attack. I used the week to verify information on Russian positions on the routes to Grozny. In order to avoid leakage I sent my men to gather information in three directions. None of them knew about the missions of the others. I did not tell my men which route we would use because I knew that sooner or later the information would leak and that we would be ambushed on our way to Grozny. But I had already decided to go through Nadterechny raion and Znamenskoe, through Russian lines. I bet on the fact that

the Russians would never expect us to cross their lines and the territory they supposedly firmly controlled. I received the final order to move on Grozny on 5th August. I continued to mislead my men until the moment of our departure, telling them that we would go through the steppe area of Shelkovski raion through Chervlennaia. We had to be on our positions by 5 am next morning.

We put our radios on the Russians' wavelength. Their radio communications made it clear that they were expecting "targets" to walk or crawl past their checkpoints. We went by lorries and cars - a unit of 186 men, all we needed was to make detours of some 200 metres to avoid Russian checkpoints. The Russians saw our KAMAZ - it never occurred to them that they could be full of fighters. I had sent scouts ahead on foot but the main of our force used motor transport all the way to Grozny. I got into my NIVA car outside my home and drove straight to Grozny. On arrival in Grozny, we had to fight our way past a Russian base. 3 men were killed and 5 wounded.

The leadership

A lot depended on Dudaev's will of iron and Maskhadov's professionalism. Nobody ever saw Maskhadov unshaven or stressed. In the Presidential Palace, with no food and water, Maskhadov always managed to be tidy, without a hair out of place. He remained calm and confident during the worst moments of the battle of Grozny. It reassured us all. The Russians have a proverb "a pack of sheep lead by a lion is worth more than a pack of lions led by a sheep". I do not mean to say that we were sheep but our leaders were indeed lions.

During the war, Maskhadov always insisted on quality rather than quantity. He said that it was better to have 10 fighters in one's group as long as they were the best rather than 200 average men. He instructed us to warn our men that however bad the situation was, it could get worse. He wanted to weed out the weak elements from our ranks.

Civil defence

We had no time to train the population on how to protect itself against bombings. But the experience was promptly acquired. Young children could tell where the Russians were firing from, where the missiles, bombs, and rockets were likely to land. I read somewhere that 2 bombs would never fall in the same crater. During air attacks, I encouraged people to take cover in the craters where bombs had exploded previously. This rule did work – I never saw a bomb dropped in the same place twice. You could sit quietly in your crater and smoke a cigarette with the confidence that you will not be hit. In some cases, we built reinforced covers over craters for better protection.

Samashki

The Russians did us a service in Samashki. People were angry. They understood that Russians would not take pity on anybody, not the women, not the children. Any illusions about Russia as a democratic state were gone. The ranks of the resistance grew. Men who at first did not want to fight sold their belongings to buy weapons.

Collaborators

After Samashki Russia tried to find new Chechen allies. Two tactics were used – bribery and blackmail. We all knew that during Soviet times religious leaders were in the pay of the KGB or else were closely monitored by Russian services. Russian *apparatus* was put to work backed by KGB archives. It was aimed principally at our religious leaders, notables and elders. The elders remembered the deportation and the Russians managed to browbeat many of them, which explains why many lost the respect of the nation during the war. We tried to counter with our own propaganda. Maskhadov had strictly forbidden killing, harming, or stealing the property of these elders. He considered that it would

degrade our nation - “if today you are kidnapping traitors, tomorrow you will kill women, children, and elderly men”.

[The 2 following paragraphs are by Husein Iskhanov]

The pro Russian militia always had double standards. They wanted to keep their channels opened with us and with the Russians. I used to walk around Grozny with my radio and my weapons. They saw me but never attempted to stop me. However, we could never rely on them or trust them entirely. We kept track of the militia and their families. Sometimes I visited them just to show that they were under watch from the resistance. The Chechen militia furnished the names of the resistance fighters to the Russians. As a response, we also made list of pro-Russian activists and sometimes gave their names on our TV channel. They were caught in a vice and lived in fear convinced that we would hunt them, although we did not, we had too many other things to think about. Today many people claim that they were working for the Russians only to gather intelligence for the resistance. But I know that the majority of these people did not have any orders, from HQ or from the commanders, to that effect. [HI]

Before Parliament elections in 1997 I was witness to a row between Daud Akhmadov and Mumadi Saidaev regarding Islam Khatuev, an up and coming politician. Akhmadov claimed that he, as commander, had given a mission to Khatuev to infiltrate the Russian administration in Chechnya. I was furious because I considered Akhmadov a fake. I pointed out to him that Khatuev, whatever he claimed nowadays, had worked against us actively, and that I would have killed him had I been able to catch him during the war. Khatuev was obviously a traitor, and either Akhmadov had to admit his mistake or be considered a traitor Akhmadov himself. [HI]

Had the collaborators been confident in Russia's victory they would have left Chechnya. I had cases when men came to me saying that they needed a job to feed their families and asked my permission to go and work for the militia while remaining on our side. When I knew that it was a genuine hardship case I advised them to write to Kazbek Makhashev, our minister in charge of Interior Affairs, asking for permission to enrol in the Zavgaev's

militia. I warned them that should they betray us or not obey our orders their letter would go straight to the FSK. I had approximately 15 such cases in Naur district.

Women

At the beginning of the war it was easier for women to move around without being controlled. Women are our weak point – it is better that 10 men should be killed rather than one woman attacked or raped. The Russians knew that and were cautious. Cases of rapes were rare.

Other North Caucasians

The Ingush were the only nation that helped us actively. We may have had secret sympathisers in Daghestan but they cautiously avoided displaying any solidarity. Two Daghestani volunteers joined my battalion – on the second day they ran away with the weapons we had provided them with. After that, I always refused to accept Daghestanis in my group. The only thing we had in common with Daghestanis was Islam, but I personally did not see any solidarity on a religious level. Besides the Ingush, the only help we had was from our diaspora in the Russian Federation.

Conclusion

The most important lesson of war is to know your enemy. Not just how many troops or tanks he has, but his mentality, his weak and strong points. In the case of the Russians one had to understand the “Russian soul” and know that at any time they could betray everybody, friend and foe alike. People saw the ruthlessness of the Russians and gave us their support. Had the Russians not shown cruelty from the very first days, the population might have reacted differently. The Russians have a serf’s mentality, and a strong serf is

a dangerous animal, but they could not understand us - you cannot win a Chechen to your side by bullying. People knew that if the Russians won life would be impossible, and that ultimately Moscow's aim was the extermination of our nation. Once we had the backing of the nation, we could not be defeated.

In mountain and rural conditions mines were effective against APCs, in urban conditions grenade launchers were our best weapons though less effective in rural areas.