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Later Deputy in the Chechen Parliament elected in 1997

Took part in the operations against Gudermes (December 1995), Pervomaiskaia, and Grozny.

[This was a curious interview with a recurrent theme throughout – that of death. Bustaev was more concerned with moral issues and the reaction of the individual to war, than with the practicalities of warfare, which he almost completely overlooked. Suleiman Bustaev and Hamid Iangulbaev are close friends. Both are active members of a Sufi brotherhood (Naqshbandi). Their interviews were taken simultaneously. Paragraphs starting with “HI” refer to Iangulbaev’s input.]

HI- Pervomaiskaia in which Suleiman Bustaev took part was the fiercest battle of the war. His group assumed most of the fighting during the battle. I do not know whether professional foreign forces could use lessons from our war. Your Western armies are well equipped; even commando units are unlikely to find themselves in situations when one man, short of ammunition, has to face 100 better-armed men. Yet, we had to deal with such situations on a daily basis. Before Suleiman tells you his story, I would like to add one more point concerning the Russians: they considering their soldiers as cannon fodder. They did not value their lives. They did not bother to collect and bury the corpses of their dead soldiers. We were frequently amazed by their behaviour during combat operations. That human beings could behave as they did in our supposedly civilised day and age seemed impossible.

SULEIMAN BUSTAEV

How did our small nation withstand the war? The most important factors that helped us in our struggle were: 1- the idea [of independence], 2- the leadership, and 3- comradeship among people sharing the same idea. But as the war went on the idea alone became insufficient - something deeper, more spiritual, had to replace it. People were dying and there was no turning back. If we did not go through the ordeal we would be squashed like worms and be lucky to be shot or executed quickly. We needed faith (*iman*).

I studied at the oil institute of Grozny. My father had died in 1994 and I was the head of the family. I was working on my apiary on 26 November 1994 [first Russian attack on Grozny], listening to the radio. When I heard the news about an imminent attack, I joined our armed forces the same day. My thoughts on joining were that Russia had always defeated Chechnya. Maybe this time Russia would win again. But past victories were always at the price of the morale of the Russian nation.

All people are selfish, nobody wants to die for the sake of others, and neither did I. But what if Russian soldiers came into my house and insulted my mother? How could I face her if that happened had I not done my utmost to stop the Russians? If I joined the fight against the Russians, it would be easier to face death with the conscience of having done my duty. How many of our people have died without even a grave to remember them? For me it was easier to die fighting rather than stay at home and be ashamed to face my mother.

War was a constant effort. War was not romantic, it was hard labour - carrying heavy loads for miles, sitting in damp freezing trenches, being always tired, so tired that one became stupid. One never saw the end of the labour, one never knew what other superhuman efforts would be required, but somehow every new stage of the war demanded a greater effort. Some people could not support it and dropped out. The lack of understanding we met from the people we were struggling to defend was the most difficult to bear. When military operations were taking place near a village, the chances were that the villagers would object.

Before the war, I was not involved in politics. I had the impression that our government was not always serious. Influential and talented people had left or were co-opted by Moscow. There was a feel of Klondike about Chechnya between 1991 and 1994, a free for all. Chechens are great individualists, they like to compete in everything. Russian propaganda was very strong. The only thing that saved us from complete chaos was the fact that our nation always had to struggle to survive. Besides, Chechens have nine lives like cats!

Why did the Russians send the tanks into Grozny? The tactic worked in Azerbaijan: a few tanks in Baku were enough to stop all dissent. Moscow assumed that a deployment of tanks would be enough to bring Chechnya into line, that Chechens would not react differently from other nations of the Union. But that tactic did not work with us.

When war started, when Russian troops were everywhere, Dzhokhar Dudaev joked: “the enemy forces are here, the task is to encircle them and not to let them out!” When I heard him on the radio, I thought he was a schizophrenic. Later, after much combat experience, I understood that to remain calm and cool and to be able to joke in all circumstances was a great comfort. Dzhokhar had that quality, there was no room for panic with him.

Dudaev and Shamil Basaev used to tell us “be ready to appear before Allah”. Before Pervomaiskaia, I could not understand what was the point of telling us that. Sitting hungry and cold in a trench for days on end, I thought I was as well prepared to die as Dudaev and Basaev. But I did not. Dudaev forecast what was ahead and was getting us psychologically ready for the worse. Had we expected success rapidly we would not have been able to endure the effort of the war. I realise now how much he helped us. Often when you go to combat, although you know that you may die, you have a gut feeling that you will survive. Dudaev took away that hope and helped us to face death. I stopped worrying that I may not behave with bravery at the time of death, who knows even cry or call for my mother. I was only concerned about what my last words would be to my comrades.

When one engages in one's first combat the most important man is the commander. Everything depends on him. The commander must have two qualities: he must be able to fight better and longer than his men, and he must rest less than the others. He must assume the worse himself. The commander cannot be appointed, he must be chosen by his men. In the regular army, the commanders are appointed and it takes several operations before they can prove their superiority. If the men do not respect a commander or do not recognise him as a leader, combat operations can become very dangerous. If fighting began when the commander was absent, it usually meant 30 per cent losses at the start of the battle.

The men accepted practically all our commanders. An appointed commander who was not worthy of the task would not have survived in that role. At the beginning of the war, before we knew each other's capacity, the oldest of the group was usually chosen as commander. But later we followed Imam Shamil's advice. He used to say: "we will choose commanders according to the sharpness of their wits and the length of their swords" – that is intelligence and bravery.

Pervomaiskaia

In December 1995, Russia was holding elections in Chechnya. Had these elections taken place without combat Moscow could have claimed that Zavgaev's administration was legitimate. We had had nearly 6 months of cease-fire and the elections could have been presented as valid to the rest of the world. That was why we decided to launch an offensive against Gudermes during the elections. Gudermes was my first major operation and the most difficult. The Russians had enormous casualties there. I seldom saw so many Russian dead in one battle, the asphalt was red with their blood. Gudermes prepared me for Pervomaiskaia because I was fully battle trained by then. When we took Gudermes we telephoned the UK, the USA, Jordan, Turkey, the press agencies, to announce that we had taken the town and that no Russian sponsored elections could be held there.

After the withdrawal from Gudermes, my group began planning a raid inside Russia north of the Terek. We needed to make some noise so that the world would know that military operations had not ceased. Every day our villages were bombed without a word being mentioned. We were forgotten. That was why I agreed to join the expedition. But I only learned the exact destination after we crossed the last Russian post. The operation was badly planned – in fact, there was no preparation to speak of. Nobody knew Kizliar, we had insufficient intelligence, a few men had been sent to Kizliar but their information was not thorough. The Russians knew about the expedition from the start. Most of the men decided to go on nevertheless from fear that the Russians may think them faint-hearted. I decided to follow.

We did not have enough money to fill the cars with fuel in Daghestan - the price of petrol being double than in Chechnya. We spend 3 days waiting before we found the money. We were short of 2 cars. We stopped 2 cars on the road and asked the drivers to take us to Daghestan. The Russians had placed 2 guns in Borozdinovka, which we bypassed. We drove along deserted places that I did not know. We were told that the target was Kizliar as we left Chechnya. None of us knew the town. We finally reached Kizliar but were nearly ambushed before reaching it. One of our cars broke down, we stopped a bus and with all our weapons drove through the centre of Kizliar.

I had 19 of my men with me. We had 2 *pulimet* with 4000 patrons, 3 *mukhi*, 2 grenade launchers, one of which we had borrowed for the occasion, and automatic machine guns. My own supplies of patrons for the automatic was 250, another man had 150, a third 180. We put all our hopes in the *pulimet* but both of them broke down during the first battle.

Our targets were the helicopter base and the factory of Kizliar. Khunkar Pasha Israpilov and I meant to burn down various military and militia administrative buildings beyond the Terek. We agreed to meet at the bridge. But there was already shooting at the factory with helicopters flying over and Khunkar was delayed. I waited by the bridge. I had a hand-made map indicating that it was 600 metres to the centre of town and thought that I

could make it on my own without waiting for Khunkar. In fact, it was 1.2 km. I could hear sniper fire along the route. I asked Khunkar on the radio whether my flank was covered. He answered “no problem”.

It is easy to thwart a well-planned operation. What saved us on that occasion was our total disorganisation. I was still waiting at 2 o'clock when all the other groups had gathered in the hospital. [When I decided not to wait any longer] we grabbed a few militia cars (but let the militia men go) and shot down a helicopter on our way to the hospital. We had to make our way through sniper fire. When we reached the hospital, I realised that 3 men had stayed behind with a wounded hostage. I could not leave my 3 men behind. I took 11 men and we went to their rescue. As a result, of my decision we wasted 18 grenades and all our patrons which we fired in the air but we could not find our missing men. One man died and 4 were wounded. Accounting in war must be ruthless – it was not worth the losses for 3 men. When I told my men that we would return without the three we had come to rescue, one young chap started to cry, saying that even if one of us was left alive, we should still attempt to save them. I swore at the youngster to stop him philosophising. We tried some more but our attempts did not succeed. Later, when I returned to the hospital my missing men called on the radio and indicated where they were hiding.

Later when we were negotiating our retreat with the Kizliar militia, I told the Daghestanis that I would not go until I collected the bodies of my dead comrades. They agreed and I drove with a militia man to collect the body of the man we had lost in our failed rescue attempt. As we stopped the car to collect the body, some 30 men pounced. They knew we never left the bodies of our dead and they were waiting for us, hiding behind a hedge. I grabbed our militia man by the scruff of the neck and pushed him ahead to face his colleagues. I had another comrade with me and told them that if they fired they would shoot all three of us. Finally I found my 3 missing men and we were ready to leave Kizliar. I put my men in a separate bus together with those hostages who wanted to come with us, but I refused to take female hostages. Men should cope with war situations – there is no reason for women to die. We left.

I was very tired and slept all the way. Everybody thought that the operation was finished. I was woken up brutally on reaching Pervomaiskaia, firing exploded around us, we had fallen in a proper ambush: helicopters were flying, commandos were being air-dropped, soldiers everywhere. My group was very disciplined. They immediately broke down the windows of the bus not to be hit by flying glass, took combat positions and returned fire.

The Russians had deployed approximately 200 or 300 APCs (mainly *BNPs*) near Baronovsky. We took the military post on the bridge by storm. The soldiers did not oppose any resistance. We took their weapons and ammunitions – it was lucky because we were desperately short after Kizliar. There were 38 dual cumulative (? exact translation from Russian, hollow charged?) rockets. It was the first time that we got such rockets. They can take on T-80 tanks. We distributed the rockets and organised the defence of the village. My position was on the side of Sovetskoe. There were few of us and it was very difficult the first days. During the first night, we send 4 men to reconnaissance with a local guide. We gave them night-sight binoculars, which we had found in the post. We had radio with scanners and we could follow their progress across the Russian defence lines. On that first day, the Russian lines around Pervomaiskaia were not airtight. The Russians had seen our men but let them through. They probably thought that they were the vanguard, that the rest of us would follow, and that they would be able to take us all in the open field.

But we had decided to make the best of what was available for our defence in Pervomaiskaia. They say that necessity is the mother of invention. That was true in our case. We made missiles out of whatever we could find - gas balloons with *limonki* (hand grenades), rockets and other projectiles that had fallen and not exploded. We adapted and used anything that made noise and could affect the nerves of the enemy. An old saucepan with a piece of string buried in the ground made to look like a mine delayed the Russians for a while.

The Russians tried psychological pressure - loudspeakers were beamed at us all the time with exhortations, in Chechen language, such as: “take pity on yourselves, think of your mothers, everybody has turned away from you, surrender, your life is in your hands!” They played nostalgic Chechen songs and tried to talk to us on the radio. I forbade my men to listen.

We dug trenches with the help of the hostages. Those of our men who dug the trenches with the hostages were unarmed but we kept 2 men with automatic machine guns on watch. Their orders were to shoot everybody in case the hostages tried anything. I argued that we all wanted to survive therefore the hostages were going to co-operate. On the fourth day around 8 am after breakfast - we had found a duck, some rice, and a loaf of stale bread - I went out to tell the men keeping watch in the trenches to go and have something to eat quickly. As soon as they dashed to the house all hell was let loose. The Russians had given their third and last ultimatum to surrender. The attack began with our flank. It was the most dangerous side to defend. The men knew that they would be sacrificed and could not survive a frontal attack. Our position had no easy access and no exit. The Russians could easily advance to within 5 metres of our trench.

The Russians had reached the lock [? *domba*] on the canal and were within grenade launcher firing distance from our flank. We managed to stop the first attacking party. But the terrain was not in our favour. The Russians were above us by some 2 metres and could see inside our trenches. We could not force them out - I did not have enough men and they were exhausted. The first shots were aimed at the hostages who were taking cover in the trenches. This was done deliberately, they were sniper shots and none hit my men that first time. It was easy to distinguish the hostages- they were holding white flags. Then a rocket hit our trench.

There was a hedge in front of us. A minute after the attack it was gone. I could see one man's leg jerking his body buried under the earth. My cousin was wounded and in pain. My radio packed up just as the Russians were breaking through. My priority was to warn the rest of our men that the flank has been broken. I threw the wounded some bandages

and told them to deal with their wounds themselves while I was trying to work some life out of our battery to radio the others to expect an imminent attack from our flank.

We retreated to our main positions in the village. The streets were narrow. The Russians were at one end of the main street and we were at the other. They send specially trained commandos. When one of their men was hit, they would run out of the house, make a summersault and retrieve their comrades. They looked like actors, in smart military gear and flak jackets. We were so tired for lack of food and sleep that six of us could barely drag one wounded man along.

The Gerzel group was in difficulty, literally bombed out. I sent a grenade man to back-up the group. We recuperated Russian hand grenades, which had not exploded. The Gerzel group threw 57 hand grenades across the road from the trenches. They were hoping to throw them over the houses on Russian positions but more often than not, they only managed to throw them a few metres. We realised then that we were so tired that we could not aim properly. The water level was very high in Pervomaiskaia. When we dug trenches water would seep through. We put mattresses at the bottom of the trenches to avoid being drenched. When hand grenades hit us, the mattresses exploded. It was crazy with grenades and mattresses exploding!

The houses in Pervomaiskaia were not strongly built. Suddenly one of my men told me “look the wall of that house is moving!” A Russian was trying to knock the window off. He asked “why don’t I shoot him with the grenade launcher?” I told him: “No, it would make too large a hole and he will be able to aim at us. Wait until he shows his head and we will get him with a rifle!”

We had so many wounded who could not cope with fighting anymore. I was wounded in the arm and a friend from Budenovsk was wounded in the leg. There was a small house, which it was essential for us to hold. I left my men in the trenches and went with my friend to the house. We had to dig a hole for cover – he was digging with his good leg and I with my good arm. Thus, the fighting went on for 3 days.

On the 3rd night of the siege, we had decided to force our way out through Russian lines. We wanted to make one last attack, shout our war cry, and die with panache. We had planned it for 2 am but failed to even attempt it because fighting never stopped for long enough to attempt a sortie. The Russians had tried to storm us three times in the last 8 hours. They had APCs (*BNPs*) backing them. The troops had black and dark navy uniforms. They kept on retreating to the protective line of the *BNPs* and moving forwards again. Nobody paid any attention to the helicopters, the heat of the battle was too strong, and it would have been a luxury to worry about helicopters.

I insisted that one group rested while others were fighting or keeping watch. When I was on watch duty, I sent all my men resting keeping only one man with me. We managed to establish reasonably good radio communication with HQ from the roofs. We knew that our forces were nearby for a rescue operation. I always kept the radio myself because I did not want the men to use it for personal messages to their families. One day the reception was poor. Shamil Basaev kept on shouting: “answer us, why are you not responding, are you all right?” When I got through, I answered him: “everything is under control, do not worry, we have everything we need here – we have the enemy, we have war, the enemy has the guns but we have the fighters”.

My group was the last one to leave on the night we escaped. We were covering the retreat. We kept the fighting going to mislead the Russians. On one side of the village was steppe territory. It had been subjected to artillery fire but had only been stormed once during the siege. We chose that route for our escape. The strongest men were leading. The hostages followed them with the Zandak group carrying the wounded, my group came last. I did not see the men blown up on mine fields but I saw rockets exploding some 20 metres from me, blowing up 4 or 5 men at a time, torn bodies flying in the air. I did not believe that we could have sustained such an attack and escaped. Throughout we thought that we were condemned and going to die. We wanted it to happen quickly. Because of that conviction, trying to force a sortie or dying in Pervomaiskaia made no difference. We just wanted it to end fast.

Pervomaiskaia was indeed surrounded by a triple ring. When I was on the roofs trying to keep radio contact with HQ, I could see how the Russians were bringing fresh troops uninterruptedly from the direction of Sovetskoe. They also deployed small guns on the fields around. From a distance, it looked like an enormous hedgehog but I did not understand what they meant to do with these guns. The Vitiaz, SOBR, and Alpha commandos were present. I met them later in Novogroznensky. They had some other jackals dressed in militia uniforms.

The Russians killed many of their own people in Pervomaiskaia. On three occasions they attacked and fired at their own troops. During one offensive, after the *BNPs* had stopped firing at both our men and their own troops, 6 helicopters appeared and bombed the street where Russian commandos were holding.

Pervomaiskaia was an extreme situation, everything was intensified, and men found resources in themselves that they did not know they possessed. There was a young man from my village whom I had refused to take to Pervomaiskaia because his 2 brothers had already been killed. He had a good job at the stock exchange in Moscow. When his second brother died, he returned to Chechnya and joined Salman Raduev's group. He died in Pervomaiskaia facing the enemy guns. He aimed a *pulimet* at the Russians and shouted to his dead brother "Isa, I am coming to join you, meet me!" Many men had been wounded in previous battles, in Grozny or elsewhere. There they waited patiently for help. In Pervomaiskaia, it was different. One of my comrades was shot in both legs. I worried about how we would be able to carry him with his grenade launcher during the escape when we were weak from exhaustion. I thought it would be a miracle if he could hop along supported by two others. But he ran as fast as the others without any help! Another chap had been shot through the arm, the bones were untouched but he was afraid of fainting through loss of blood and falling behind. He arrived safely in Shelkovski, covered in blood – the cold slowed the blood flow. I was contused, I had forgotten that I was a commander. When I reached the pipeline through which we escaped, I found myself alone, and did not know where I was going. But I quickly recovered, found

another man who was paralysed, and dragged him along. The pipeline was full of water, we spend 2 nights there. Not one of us got a cold!

HI- I had 72 men from Nozhay Yurt raion for the Pervomaiskaia rescue operation. 39 heavy tanks were burned all together in the ring surrounding Pervomaiskaia but the Russians only managed to bring back the bodies of 4 men. I talked to a colonel from the Uralski Regiment whom I had faced 3 times on the battle field - on the Nozhay Front, in Pervomaiskaia, and during the recapture of Grozny. He could not understand how we could have burned down so many APCs and inflicted so many casualties in Pervomaiskaia. The badly damaged bodies were left to rot as manure. It shows utter contempt for their men. I do not know how to qualify those responsible.

Organisation, training, decision-making

In a regular army, there is always somebody to plan and provide for you. In our case we had to think of everything and do everything ourselves. I had a good book – a manual for Russian commandos. I used that book to train my men. I taught them what to do if all the group had died, I taught them to manage and avoid panic if they were the only survivors in an unknown territory, I taught them how to find directions without maps, and so on. I tried to teach them self-sufficiency, and to keep calm in all circumstances.

We had discipline in our group. As the commander I would ask first: “are we accomplishing the tasks put to us?” Then: “how our we performing our tasks?” If somebody had specific ideas on how to deal with problems, how to plan an operation, we discussed them. That was in keeping with our democratic traditions. But I demanded utter compliance once all had agreed and a decision had been taken.

HI- I told you earlier about a battle in Nozhay Yurt raion when we destroyed 11 APCs and a helicopter. We had 34 men wounded and one dead during the 4 days that lasted the battle. Only 6 men were wounded in the trenches. The other casualties occurred among

men who came to our help and gave us cover. Concern for safety, the know-how of waging war, safeguards for retreating – we had it well developed. Before each operation, as Suleiman mentioned, we used to discuss everything – we took into account the cases of men who had problems at home, who might not be ready physically or psychologically for an operation. We considered only those who could walk 20 km at night, take part in an attack, and return the same night. There was no compulsion amongst us, every body came on a voluntary basis, but we had very few people who refused.

HI- When we mounted an attack on Gerzel I had 400 patrons for my automatic machine gun and 5 or 6 grenades. We had to walk 18 km at night through bushes and Russian posts to reach Gerzel. We had to be back home in the morning after the attack. This meant serious organisation. We never used more than 20 people for such operations. We planned every minutes of the attack depending on the quantity of our ammunition. We hit the Russians and left. We used to laugh afterwards when Russian media announced that so many boiviki were killed, so many captured – it lifted our morale.

Some anecdotes in lieu of conclusion

HI- During the offensive on Gudermes, my unit was giving cover to Suleiman. One of my men did not have boots. He borrowed galoshes from a neighbour, saying “if I die on Ghazawat, my family will return the galoshes to you”. For such behaviour, you need exceptional motivation brought by circumstances that could not be faced by commandos from a regular army. We were attacked; we had nowhere to go; we were trampled under the ground; our families, mothers, wives, and fathers were being killed.

HI- Professional soldiers would know or soon understand how to cope with urban warfare, how to defend themselves or attack, how best to use a grenade launcher. They should understand an urban combat situation within 20 minutes of fighting. We did not have lessons on how to fight but we learned quickly, helped by Russian incompetence and lack of logic. The Russians’ lack of consistency and logic will ultimately be their

downfall. My younger brother was defending the market building. Russian *BNPs* were circling around the building; they did not know where to shoot or why they were shooting. The battle lasted 4 minutes during which he destroyed 8 *BNPs* single-handedly with a grenade launcher. Dudaev was right when he said that Russian tanks and APCs burned like matchboxes.

HI- I had an ordinary village boy in my unit. He wanted to shoot tanks. Once under heavy artillery fire I caught him climbing a tree with his grenade launcher. He wanted to see the guns on top of the tanks to be able to aim. I ordered him down, the next minute he was up again. I threatened to shoot him myself if I saw him going up the tree again. But there was no holding him. Under the full blast of Russian artillery fire he made his way within 200 metres of Russian lines, shot a few tanks, and returned. Are we, Chechens, slightly crazy? Many brave men perished, especially during the first days of the battle of Grozny. Many people did not have weapons, yet they went to fight hoping to find weapons in hand to hand combat. They collected ammunitions and patrons from destroyed APCs and wrapped them in cloth soaked in petrol. I remember one case in Grozny when a group of youngsters, 12 to 16 years old, held a position under enemy fire for 48 hours.