

Small Wars Journal

www.smallwarsjournal.com

RADIO COMMUNICATIONS

ALI DEMAEV – Head of communications for the Commander-in-Chief in the South-East, June 1999

I was not a specialist before the 1994-6 war. I finished a Soviet communication course but had no theoretical knowledge. Today I am responsible for all our radio communications (we do not have any other means of communication like telephones) and we have become experts with the Motorola, Ken and Iyesu equipment. The Russians in Moscow who have a greater choice of modern equipment than us, dismiss our claims that we can communicate in a 100 km radius with one radio -“You cannot possibly do it in your mountain conditions”. But we look for the best spots on the highest mountains, and it works. The same applies to urban areas – you have to be in the highest position to coordinate communications.

During the war we had 10 portable radio stations Motorola GP 300, 2 GM Motorola stations and one Motorola GP repeater with two antennas. This was professional equipment, not the rubbish the Russians had. We also had Russian equipment -11 mobile stations taken from the 66th airbase. It was far from satisfactory - a range of 10/20 km at best

I did not have a single expert radio operator at the beginning of the war, not even for the Russian equipment. For the foreign equipment we did not have the operating instructions in Russian. The first time I saw a Motorola radio station and transmitter was in December 1994. I was not familiar with that equipment, even on what wavelength they operated, but I knew that they had a range of some 20 km. When we first set our Motorolas on the mountains we were surprised at the quality and range of the communication, and were amazed to find that we could intercept the communications of the enemy. In time we

learned how to use it properly. The difficulty was the lack of computerised backup. The other problem was that we did not choose the equipment ourselves, we took what was brought to us. The equipment we got from Moscow was usually brought hidden among food supplies. Today we are mainly using “Ken” equipment. It is of the same quality as Motorola but better suited to field conditions – you do not need the backup equipment.

Usually I had six men working on our central communication network fulltime, although sometimes we were only 3. There were people in all the districts who kept in touch with us and gave us information. They were usually amateur radio operators. In fact Maskhadov had ordered us to get one of these radio “hams” to work with us and keep in contact with others round the country. We had such a man with us at most times.

We had 4/5 of these amateurs in each region of Chechnya on top of our permanent staff of six. To tell you the truth there was a time when I was left alone with a Russian prisoner and a German shepherd dog, 2 repeaters, a Honda generator and a Russian jeep. Some of my men had left, others were ill. I was alone with the Russian for one month. It was at the time of the Budennovsk operation. Everybody was laughing at me – “one Russian, a dog and you to work on our communications!” The dog had escaped from the Russians, they did not feed it! In all for the whole of Chechnya we had no more than 20 professionals. The amateurs numbered 20/30.

You must employ radio operators who know each others, know each others’ names and voices. If your operators know each other well they do not need to use cyphers. I usually had one or two men on duty full time in the mountains (except in the south-west). These men directed and coordinated all the military movements. When the men were fit and dedicated to their work, all was fine.

Russian capability

Today with American and Japanese equipment you can set up a system of communications that the Russians could not imagine in their dreams. During the war their range of communication was less than 10 km.

I will give you an example: we were driving in a convoy to Roshni Chu from Grozny to meet Dudaev after negotiations with [General] Romanov. Maskhadov's car was stopped at a roadblock by soldiers who refused to let us pass. Maskhadov argued with them: "We are returning from official negotiations, use your radio, get in touch with Romanov in Grozny". We were some 50 km from Grozny. They did not know who Romanov was and could not communicate with the next road block let alone Grozny. Maskhadov then asked me to get in touch with our own man in Grozny. The Russians were amazed and upset at the ease with which we communicated.

The Russian commander of Argun did not have a radio station which could reach Grozny. He had to send a car with escort to communicate with Khankala 10 km away.

Furthermore, Ministry of Defence units and MVD units would not communicate. As a result they were frequently firing at each other. They were often drunk, and a drunk does not care where he shoots. When we heard firing we joked "the Russians are shooting at each other". Sometimes it would go on all night. They did not know where we were, but their units were everywhere so they were bound to hit their own men sooner or later.

Most of the time the Russians knew the location of our radio stations, but they could not get to us to destroy them. If we were on one mountain we knew exactly where the Russians were trying to install their communication centres (they use to fire flares so we knew their position.). If they left we would move to their place.

Technically speaking the Russians were much better equipped than we were but everything was quantity rather than quality. We had 10 radio stations, they had hundreds or thousands but they were unable to use them properly, did not know how to switch channels or change wavelength. They had Johnston equipment but the communications were not stable. The APCs and tanks had radios which we could intercept, but the main problem was that their radio operators could not recognise each other's voice. We spoke Russian and had served in the Soviet army – so I had served in a communication unit

during my military service - I knew how the system worked. I had no problems talking on their wavelength and deceiving them.

At the beginning of the war when fighting was still raging in Grozny, the Commander-in-Chief's headquarters were moved to Argun (to the "Krasnyi molot" factory). I had one Russian radio ("159th" type) with which I could listen to Russian communication from the top (3rd) floor of the building. Our men were fighting in the Mikroraion, near the militia school. I intercepted Russian communications, pretended to be one of them and gave them orders to attack in another direction. The Russians had operators on the heights above Grozny who realised what was going on. They tried to stop me, kept on repeating their code names "I am black ribbon", "don't shoot, you are firing at each other, our men are not there, withdraw..." I began swearing and saying: "these are traitors, don't listen to them, they are trying to deceive you". It went on for nearly 10 minutes. Shamil Basaev who was also listening asked me afterwards: "Who was it swearing like a trooper? Where did you learn to swear like that?". I answered: "I served in the Russian army, the more you swear the more they listen to you".

We had a foreign visitor once who had been in Afghanistan during the war. He was surprised to recognise the Russian equipment: "I saw that type of radio in Afghanistan". As long as the Russians do not have better equipment, you can put one man on top of a mountain and lead them up the garden path until they destroy each other with friendly fire.

I was watching the military operations in Kosovo on TV. If I had the equipment NATO troops had at their disposal, I would be able to listen to Yeltsin's private telephone conversations! The Russians have kept radios dating from Stalin's days which can only intercept communication with each other.

Of course the Russians changed their wavelength and call codes. But their problem was that they had little time to concentrate on such details. If a unit changed wavelength and codes, other units would not have time to follow suit or would not know how to do it. As

a result, the Russian commanders generally avoided communicating among themselves. Their operators could only cope with the basics – to find out where their soldiers were and where our positions were. If they changed anything it was generally only the call-up codes.

Their communication centres were in areas where there was no fighting. It was easy to understand their codes. Everybody knew that a “ribbon” was a military column, “200s” meant soldiers killed, and so on.

I was ashamed to have served in that army. I was ashamed that when I served in the Soviet army I believed that it had good equipment. But whatever the quality of your equipment, if you have idiots using it it becomes useless.

Radio “Propaganda”

The Russians knew that we had our stations at altitude. That was why they bombed the mountains. In Nozhay Yurt we had our station at the top of the highest hill, 2/3 km away from a Russian garrison. The Russians could see us during the day going about our business, they could even see our antenna with binoculars. At night they fired at us but usually missed. We often spoke with them. At one time we had an inmarsat telephone, the Russians got to know about it and asked us to call their families in Moscow and St Petersburg to tell them to send telegrams so that they could be recalled from the front. I usually accepted to do it. Sometimes I had a queue of Russian soldiers waiting for news from their families.

These conversations with the Russian garrisons were used by the Russian High Command to claim that they had intercepted secret communications between Chechen commanders. They broadcast excerpts, and so my voice became quite well known on Russian radio! Chats with the Russian soldiers below our station would usually be on simple topics: “who is fighting where? What are you doing? What are you eating?” We got to know them quite well, where they came from, their family history. They were young lads who did not want to fight. They would put their headphones loud and listen to

us. Maskhadov instructed us to keep radio contact with Russian troops as often as we could. We had a mobile radio station with which we rode around and broadcast Chechen and Russian music. The Russians would give us requests for particular songs and composers. We read Maskhadov's addresses to the Russian soldiers and officers. We broadcast the songs of Imam Ali Sultan¹, we enjoyed talking to them and being able to influence them. We had a Russian POW who became a friend. He spoke with such conviction to his former comrades that some of them listened and believed him.

Sometimes we interfered with Russian communications in a more obnoxious way - we would tell them: "look here, guys, get off our line, we are working here, you have nothing to do here, we will give you food if you do not interfere. We will send you a dog so you can eat it". They had nothing to eat.

The first attack on Grozny by the resistance – March 1996

I did not know that the March 1996 operation against Grozny was merely a rehearsal for August 1996. Maskhadov called me to his HQ in Alleroy, gave me money for food, and said "here are your orders". They were written on 11 pages in his small neat handwriting and explained what I should do during the four crucial days from 28 February to 2 March. Every detail was taken into account hour by hour. I had 4 operators, one in Shelkovsky raion, one in Ishkhoy Yurt, another nearby and an assistant. They wrote down Maskhadov's orders and retransmitted all the commands: "move in that direction", "occupy these positions", "disarm this base", etc. The commands were addressed to imaginary units. We knew that the Russians were listening. The operation was planned as if we were meant to move from all directions, Nozhay Yurt, Vedeno, the North, to regroup. During the operation, I was driving when my car fell in a ditch. While I waited to be pulled out by a tractor I listened to our radio and almost believed that it was for real - it was so convincing. I almost believed that we really had so many troops and weapons.

¹ Imam Ali Sultan sung in Russian. His songs, very powerful and with a strong emotional content, were heard everywhere in Chechnya during the war. "Gorit moi tank, goriu v nem ia..." – this song was written for the soldiers' mothers. It is about a Russian soldier being burned in his tank. Imam Ali Sultan was killed in Odessa in early summer 1996.

Later when I met Maskhadov and Basaev, they told me “it was a success, the Russians were firing at deserted regions around Zandak and Nozhay Yurt.

The recapture of Grozny – August 1996

Before the final attack on Grozny I was given the order to set up a communication base in Chechen Aul. I had lived in Grozny and I knew the Oktiabr raion well. I knew where the Russians were positioned and from where they could attack us. That is why I went to the 56th district to set up our station (a mobile radio station Iyesu 2500), Ken and Motorolas with which we were listening to Russian helicopters, at an altitude of 920 metres. We were able to communicate with all the commanders and retransmit. In fact we talked so much that the Russians could not make out what was true and what was false.

We listened to Russian telephone conversation. We even listened to Russian journalists talking to their head offices in Moscow saying that they could not get out of the government building. Moscow told them to call Mowladi Udugov. The journalists replied that Udugov’s telephone was switched off. I warned Udugov by radio and told him to contact the journalists. We told our men that the journalists would come out with white flags and not to shoot.

We listened to the helicopters, aircraft and satellite telephones. Thus knew what area would be bombed beforehand. We could then plan 10/15 minutes in advance – when we heard that a plane was ordered to bomb a spot where “there was yellow smoke” for example, we would give an alert which gave ample time to our units to move out. It was so simple, all you needed was the will to do the job properly. We coordinated all the movements, told our units in which direction they should move. As well as radios, we had couriers with written instructions.

The Russians saw us as we entered Grozny, they watched us without reacting, as if in shock. I talked afterwards with Russian officers in the Oktiabr raion through which we had entered. They confirmed to me that they saw us but that they had no orders to fire. So they just watched as we entered Grozny in the early morning, they watched when the

fighting started and our units arrived one after the other. The Zavgaev's administration kept on repeating "the rebels will come for a few days, rampage, then leave". The Russians believed it.

I was in the Tsatsan Yurt HQ when Maskhadov gave his last orders before the attack. He told us that this would be the last battle. "The game is over. Either we win or we perish". We were sure of ourselves, confident. I was proud to have taken part in this operation. I did not sleep for 3 days but never felt tired.

Pervomaiskaia

I was with Basaev during the operation to rescue our men from Pervomaiskaia. I knew this operation was planned but we had no radio contact with the men before they set off. I was home when the news broke and I could hear their radio. I immediately put my set on their wavelength and began talking to them. The men held in Pervomaiskaia only had a transistor radio but we were able to use it as a "pager" to give them instructions. After speaking to the men in Pervomaiskaia, then quickly switched wavelength to feed false information to the Russian forces. The fact that we were listening to the Russians' radio communication, and could warn our men of Russian intentions, helped them escape.

Some anecdotes

I remember some incidents vividly. It was winter, we were on top of a mountain. We were testing our radio links with Udugov. We had just camouflaged a small railway cabin – our living quarters - and put our antenna up. Udugov told us "I do not hear you properly". We had spend the whole day digging around the cabin to protect it from air bombings. We got a tractor from the village and moved our cabin back to its original position. Udugov told us "I still do not hear you properly". We were furious. One of my young aides joked: "We cannot move from our mountain, it is the only one in the area. You move to another bed or armchair!". It worked.

Another time we were staying with a commander in Vedeno whose father did not know that we had set up our radio transmitter in his house. The old father went to the mosque

and announced to the village that he had heard on radio that everything would be fine. He did not know that the information was transmitted from his house. When we were in a particular area it was easy for the local people to eavesdrop on our communications. They did it frequently - this was natural, it was war.

On one occasion, Maskhadov brought a radio that Dudaev had given him which was set to communicate with the South-West. Until then we had no direct link with Dudaev's HQ. We had to contact his HQ through an operator on duty in or around Grozny. We were very excited. Maskhadov wanted to talk to Dudaev immediately. I pointed to the highest mountain we should climb to install the radio – he looked at it, looked doubtfully at me, it was winter. “You climb it for me and talk to him instead”.

Before the attack on Grozny, we were stationed between Nozhay Yurt and Vedenov, in a place called Ersinoy. I left my men at their post and while riding on horseback to the next village saw an air attack was take place. I had a radio with me but needed a battery, so I waived down a lorry. The driver was surprised - why did I need a battery on horseback? I got in touch with my men who confirmed that the attack had missed them. Later that day the Russians claimed that they had dispersed 200 fighters and had found weapons and supplies. But all we had was a bag of rice, some water, a piece of canvas and a horse tether.

Lessons

Our main asset was the fact that our equipment was more modern than the Russians'. But the most important factor was human: we kept a man on duty 24 hours a day on top of a mountain. The Russians could not do that. Had they tried they would have needed a whole regiment to maintain a station at altitude. We could communicate with practically anybody in Chechnya using one radio, a battery, a horse, some food and some water. From our vantage point we could also watch Russian movements with binoculars, follow their helicopters and tell the direction that aircraft were flying.

It was most important for the man on duty in the mountains to be concerned about the men below. He had to watch over them like a father, be at his post day and night. Then everything would be fine. The Russians often suspected us of having a sophisticated satellite network. But as I said earlier we only had a few radios brought by well-wishers. Motorolas proved very good, they did not get damaged in water or burn. But however useful good technology was, it was the operator stationed on the highest summit who mattered most. This may sound naïve, but it worked. You can hear everything on a mountain. By the end of the war we were able to communicate with Vladikavkaz, Mozdok, and Georgia.

The situation was difficult when the HQ was in Vedenov because of the altitude. Our station had to be higher than the village. If the road was bombed we were cut off from HQ. It was like that throughout the war with the HQ below us and our communication centre on the highest mountain or the highest tree in the area. Had we had radio stations which could be programmed with computers, we would not have had these problems, our communications would have improved greatly.

It is also important when the high command pays attention to radio communications. Maskhadov, his aide-de-camp. Husein Iskhanov, and Shamil Basaev did. We were constantly in radio contact, night and day. If there was no contact we began to worry, so we always kept communications open.

This was not the case with the Russians. There was one instance when a Russian unit was forgotten in the mountains. This unit kept calling its command base but it did not respond because it had probably changed wavelength forgetting to inform the unit. We heard them and told the Russians during negotiations at the end of the war, “you have a unit in this location, they are hungry and thirsty, get them out of there”. The Russians were astonished.

Good communications contributed to our success in the war.