

Small Wars Journal

[www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com)

COMMANDER HAMID IANGULBAEV

Deputy in the Chechen Parliament elected in 1997

Interview June 1999

From 1991 I was carried away by the nationalist and patriotic movement, which embraced Chechnya. As a youth, I read history. My father used to tell me stories about the conquest of the North Caucasus, about Imam Shamil and Sheikh Mansur. I knew that our people had fought every 50 years against the Russians for the last 400 years. When Dudaev came to power, I was committed to the national cause. In 1994, I found myself totally involved in political events. I understood that war was unavoidable because of the numerous provocations engineered by Russia.

On 31 December 1994 when the Russian army entered Grozny most villages were already on a war footing and had appointed commanders. I was appointed commander of my village in the Nozhay Yurt raion, with 31 men under my command. I exchanged my motorcycle for a machine gun. My brother did the same. On that night, we took the oath to fight the Ghazawat at the mosque of our village.

I do not think weapons were the most important factor in our victory – had we had the same weapons as the Russians and no motivation we would have been unable to defeat them. It was the psychological and ideological aspect, as well as our faith in God, that helped us in our struggle, as it did in the case of our ancestors for the last 400 years. When I went to fight on 31 December 1994, I bid farewell to my family, I had the authorisation of my mother to join the Ghazawat. I had not left myself any option to return to civilian life [while the Russians occupied Chechnya]. I knew there was no way back.

At first, the fighting was irregular – we were learning and so were the Russians. But the lack of talent of the Russian army was truly amazing. We had served in the Soviet army and had some knowledge of weaponry. For the last 70 years, we have been fed lessons by Soviet propaganda on how to wage a partisan war. We put the lessons to good use. What we did not know was how a bullet kills, what violent death means in reality. In the past, Russians had the experience of urban warfare with Stalingrad. But the generation who fought in Stalingrad had gone and the know-how was lost. In the case of the Chechens, things were different – from childhood we were taught about war and military traditions at home. Military values were bred in us with mother's milk.

### **Fighting in the rural districts**

While the fighting was still going on in Grozny, we began organising resistance groups and defence lines in our raion along the border with Daghestan. We had our first major battle on the border in April 1995. My ear-drums were damaged in the attack. It was our first experience of helicopter attacks in rural areas. We learned to cope and to protect ourselves from these attacks. At first, the helicopters were afraid of flying close to our positions because they did not know what weapons we had. We had a grenade launcher, 11 automatic machine guns and 5 *pulimet*. They circled us, we were firing but with little success because the helicopter gunships were well armoured. When they realised that we had no anti aircraft weapons, they became more daring.

We were positioned in open terrain, a Russian division facing us some one and a half km away. We had gained experience in urban fighting but we had no experience of position warfare. Some skirmishes took place which left us time to learn, organise reconnaissance, and gather intelligence. The Russians were using deadly mortar fire. We had to find means of protecting ourselves against it.

We knew that once the Russians had found our positions, they “worked them out” in such a way that according to their military manuals, 70 per cent of the enemy forces should be

destroyed and the remainder captured. Therefore, we used to choose our positions some 2 weeks beforehand allowing ourselves an easy escape route because we knew that we could not fight the Russians for very long. The idea was to hit them as hard as we could and withdraw. We did not go through military academy but we knew instinctively how to choose the best places to fight and where to organise ambushes. We also knew how and where to retreat after the fighting.

On 22 June 1995, we mounted another attack in mountain terrain. We had 50 to 60 men for the operation. They were a group of ordinary village men facing Russian troops, 82 APCs, supported by 5 or 6 helicopters ("Akula" type) and 2 fighter aircrafts. The Russians also had back-up forces on the next mountain range. We had planned our withdrawal in two separate groups after the battle. For protection against helicopters, we positioned men on the mountain heights. We understood by then how combat operations developed. The Russians would try to cut our access and retreat routes, to surround us, and prevent us from receiving outside help. We knew that. Their helicopters used to fly to the combat zone from the side or from the rear very high up. To counter that, we used to put DShK and KPVD [or KPVT?] on high ground – the most powerful pulimety we had. But our standard weapon was the grenade launcher. We also mined the ground on approximately 100 metres. We added nails to the mines and used a system on which one had to pull a detonator manually. We let the helicopters approach as near as possible and let a volley with the grenade launchers. When we managed to hit a couple of helicopters it was very frightening and damaging for the morale of the enemy. We build trenches using our experience of how best to protect ourselves against mortar fire and helicopters. We build double rows of trenches where we could lie during mortar and rocket attacks. Even with a direct mortar hit on the trenches we had very few casualties.

We dug several trenches on approximately one kilometre connecting them by gullies. We were ready for various scenarios. We reinforced the trenches where we positioned our grenade launchers and pulimety. They could hold some 25 men. We built 4 such reinforced trenches. During the initial artillery fire we took cover and joined our positions when the infantry attacked. It was classical position warfare, as in the cinema! We

usually managed to hold 4 or 5 days in this hell. One commander held the right flank, I covered the left. I had on my flank 2 grenade launchers with 26 grenades, 1 pulimet, and 6 automatic machine guns. We had build our trenches like a maze so that when Russians reached one trench we could cut their rear and encircle them. We always had to reckon on surprise.

On that occasion the mines did not work because of our own inefficiency – the cord was not pulled properly and the mines exploded too soon. The Russians stopped 50/60 metres from our position and dug themselves in. We stormed them and managed to destroy 4 APCs and inflict casualties. It was open terrain. I could see clearly that the first to advance were the kontrakniki. But after our first attack they send the conscripts ahead. The tanks and helicopters were pushing them from the rear against our fire. The soldiers saw APCs on fire and it must have been very frightening for them. As far as I could judge, the Russians made more casualties among their own troops than among ours. It was sheer incompetence. It should not have been difficult to surround and destroy us.

I could not tell who was responsible for pushing the troops ahead by shooting in their backs. There were so many Russian corpses lying around after the fighting, but they did not care. We thought that Russia was cleaning its cities of beggars and other undesirable and sending them to Chechnya. The Russian army never had good morale. There is not a single example during the past World wars when the Russian army was truly victorious. They could only fight when they were defending their own territory. It is always easier to fight for the side that defends its land and families. That was why, on so many occasions, small groups of men - ordinary village men and boys - could stop whole regiments and divisions.

We did not attack units that were entrenched in their positions. We waited until they came out to attack them. A well entrenched unit, with modern technology, is almost impossible to dislodge without big losses.

The partisan war was uncoordinated at first and this fact played in our favour by confusing the Russians. They did not know where we were, how many fighters we had, what we were doing, or what our aims and targets were for the future. But soon we organised ourselves and the partisan war became well co-ordinated. For example, the offensives against Gudermes, Argun and operation “Jihad” for the recapture of Grozny were perfectly planned and co-ordinated. I do not know of any parallel in military history to the capture of Grozny in August 1996 when a small army entered the place forte of an enemy hundred times more numerous and won!

We used other tactics— we mined the roads, destroyed tanks and GRADs. We did not bother killing ordinary soldiers but we went for the kontrakniki and the officers. We knew the morale of the Russian army and knew how to demoralise them.

### **What made Chechens fight?**

We had no regular army with the exception of Shamil Basaev’s unit, some 60 fighters in all. If a man thought once about survival during that two years of war, he was finished as a fighter and would leave his unit. When the instinct of self-preservation began to work it was the end of the fighting. This happened to two of my relatives. They had fought throughout the battle of Grozny and some more afterwards, but when the instinct for survival woke up, I send them packing. Of course, the instinct of survival is natural. What helped us not to give way was, I think, our faith in God. It was not just the weapons and the need to kill the Russians – you could fight for 10 years without destroying the Russian army. Fortitude, spirit, the knowledge that we fought for justice, helped us. Logically, what could I do alone against a Russian battalion? But I did not give up and ran around for 2 years! The most important factor was that we did not doubt for one moment that would ultimately win. That was why our fighters - 3000/4000 or at most 5000 men - succeeded. We all felt the same.

Foreign units from Abkhazia and from Georgia such as “the White Eagles” regiment joined the enemy side. They were supposedly elite troops with the best equipment

available. When they tried to break through into Chechnya, they were wiped out by our men – ordinary resistance fighters from rural areas.

I could not imagine that we would surrender Grozny. The enemy marched across our territory. There was a fracture after the occupation of the country. Some people tolerated occupation better than other. I was shattered but not really in despair. Conditions dictated a change of tactics. At the end of June 1995, before Shamil Basaev's raid on Budennovsk, the Russians had advanced another 3 km towards the Nozhay Yurt front. We returned to the villages to form diversion groups. We met at night and made plans – to mine here, to attack there. By that time, we had a united command. There were many resistance groups before the occupation of the country, but afterwards only the elite remained. There were fewer of them but those who remained and endured were the most resistant and the most talented.

We were ready to sacrifice ourselves. I knew that if I died I would go to Heaven. Muslims are born for Jihad. Life is a marvellous gift – many men might feel “to hell with that I want to survive”. But the Russians came. In all wars only 2 or 3 percent of the population is ready to sacrifice itself for an ideal, faith, freedom, or the nation. Such people are usually described as fanatics. Had we not lived under Russian rule for several centuries our people might have been different, they would not have been Russified, we would never have surrendered Grozny. The political split before the war between Dudaev's partisans and the opposition has had its impact because many people did not know what they were fighting for. The real patriots, those, who were concerned about the future of their children and did not want them to live under the Russian yoke, went to war. But a large part of the able-bodied population that could have fought did not take part because of these political divisions. However, had the war lasted longer, they might have changed their minds and joined the resistance.

We knew that the cease-fire period after Budennovsk would not last forever. During that period, many villages armed themselves and prepared defensive positions to fight the

Russians anew. It was a period of transition and reorganisation, although we did not see it clearly at the time - our aim was still to kill as many Russians as possible.

### **The Capture of Grozny – August 1996**

I had a unit of 72 men from Nozhay Yurt under my command for operation “Jihad” against Grozny. My orders were to occupy our positions by 5 am. All units were given specific tasks and positions. On the way to Grozny we could hear how the Russians were calling each other for help; we could detect their panic, hear their orders and counter-orders, the begging for help. They were immobilised. To raise spirits further the commanders passed the rumour that the operation was commanded by Dudaev.

The Russians should have learned some lessons from the fighting in Grozny in 1995 and understood that to use heavy tank units in the city was suicidal. With the infantry that they had available, they could easily have defeated us, as we did not have enough ammunition to face the infantry. What could I do with my 72 men - even had we managed to destroy 1000 Russian soldiers – if we had to face the whole of the infantry contingent?

Why did the Russians not use their infantry in the new battle for Grozny? I think one has to take into account the human factor. Infantry consists of human beings; they must have a worthy reason to die for. When one does not know from where the next attack will come, when one sees one’s whole company destroyed and one’s comrades burning in their tanks as a result of the shots of a single man hidden in a building, fear comes into play. As I told you, a soldier driven by a survival instinct is of no use to his army. The soldiers lacked spirit, and the Russian strategists knew it.

The fighting began at 6 am and by noon, I had only 2 grenades left. Other units brought us supplies but we had to fire single shots to economise ammunition, though it takes only 11 seconds to use an automatic gun cartridge with 45 patrons.

## **Casualties and Friendly Fire**

Maskhadov was always furious when we suffered casualties. [He used to say that it was often due to our own foolishness.] He used to ask “how many groups do we have?”. Each day every group should kill one soldier, he said. “If you kill just one soldier per day it would mean that some 200 soldiers would perish daily, but if you shoot to destroy APCs it does not matter to the Russians – they have hundred of thousands in reserve”. But the Russians also had millions of soldiers. We could never dream of destroying the Russian army but we could demoralise it. Besides the soldiers we killed, they lost untold numbers through friendly fire or when they got drunk and decided to have a bash. Whole battalions could be involved.

I remember one particular case in 1995: we had retreated from our position because of lack of ammunition. Russian tanks and infantry occupied our position on a mountain height. Suddenly 2 fighter planes appeared and began bombing them. The ground troops began firing rockets and the pilots understood their mistakes. They flew off. It appeared that the ground forces included different units - some used a Russian flag, others a Soviet one. It confused the pilots.

## **Aircrafts**

Russians seldom employed reconnaissance planes. In 2 years I only witnessed one case when Russian planes hit a target accurately – one of our trenches. They flew very high and we had the impression that the selection of targets was guess work. We did not have high calibre guns to shoot down aircrafts but, nevertheless, they were afraid to fly low, and usually bombed from very high up. Helicopters also circled very high. We knew that it was impossible for them to hit our trenches and positions accurately.

## **Pervomaiskaia**

I was asked to join the Pervomaiskaia operation, but I refused because my group was already preparing another raid inside Russia, in the Aukhovski raion of Daghestan. We had no orders from General Staff but we were getting ready for such a contingency. When news broke out about the siege of Pervomaiskaia, I went immediately to Novogroznensky. Some 250 people were surrounded in Pervomaiskaia. All the resistance groups of Chechnya came to join in a rescue operation, except the Shatoy front that was too far away. Even Ruslan Gelaev sent a battalion from the South-Western front. Whatever high calibre guns Chechnya had were brought to Novogroznensky while some 700/800 men gathered there. The elite of Chechen troops was concentrated in a small 15 km zone between Novogroznensky and the border, virtually surrounded by the Russian contingent. The Russians had a regiment stationed in Novogroznensky and a division near Gerzel. We watched as the rockets and the bombs fell continuously on Pervomaiskaia for 4 or 5 days. The Russians fired flares. It seemed as daylight during the whole time of the siege.

Everybody was rearing to go; there was much shouting in Maskhadov and Basaev's HQs - the men were demanding that they intervene or allow us to intervene. Maskhadov and Basaev swore at us. They did not want to throw all our forces in the rescue, considering that 100/200 men would be sufficient for a diversion operation against Sovetskoe to open a corridor to Azamat Yurt and allow the men in Pervomaiskaia to escape. On that occasion rank did not count, we all understood that if the siege was to last one more day everybody in Pervomaiskaia would perish.

Finally, our battalion attacked Sovetskoe. We had to cross 15 km from Novogroznensky to the border across Russian lines, hit Sovetskoe, help evacuate Pervomaiskaia, and bring our people back, altogether a 20/25 km journey. Had the rescue operation failed it could have been the end of the war because all our elite troops were concentrated in one area and could easily have been destroyed. It would have been easy to surround us and bomb us out of existence. But Russian stupidity was colossal.

We did not sleep for 4 days. It is impossible to describe the mood of the men at the time. Only a Chechen could understand. The men knew that there was every chance that they would die during the rescue operation.

## **Conclusion**

The feeling of comradeship and familiarity among Chechens was another factor that helped us fight. We all feel that we belong to one large family, especially among the members of the Sufi brotherhoods.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia was a great empire and military power. In 1812 it could march across Europe and occupy France. A Russian army of some 400,000 men led by famous commanders such as Ermolov, Paskievich, Vorontsov, was stationed then in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. Then like today, we did not have a regular army, our population was small, but we fought for 25 years without interruption. And most of the fighting took place in Chechnya Ichkeria.

One of our ancestor said during the conquest of the Caucasus that if each Chechen village could provide 3 fighters it would be enough to sustain the resistance. During this war, we had at least that many men fighting. Interestingly the present war repeated many aspects of the Chechen struggle against Ermolov - military operations took place in the same areas during the same time of year.

As a commander I was very concerned about my men but I never tried to mislead them as political officers did with us in the Soviet army. I told them all I knew about our history, our 400 year-old struggle against Russia. I told them that we may perish and that our land may be occupied again, but that we would continue the Ghazawat. Our misfortune is to be Russia's neighbours. Gogol said that Russia was famous for its lack of roads and its

large number of idiots. Ruskoy quoted him after the bombing of the White House. All states neighbouring Russia suffer from that proximity.

A man must have faith to be ready to die for the sake of an idea although it may appear foolish to some. That faith and spirit were our greatest assets. Russia had 10 tanks and some 1000 soldiers against every Chechen but weapons were not enough in this case.

.