

General-Major Tourpal-Ali Kaimov

On Urban Warfare in Chechnya



The Wolf – Chechnya’s Symbol

“The Chechens are peaceful by day – but a wolf at night.”
Russian Major in Chechnya – January 2000

David P. Dilege

Introduction.

In 1998, the United States Marine Corps was presented with an opportunity to conduct interviews with Chechen commanders and key staff officers who participated in combat operations against Russian forces in the 1994-1996 conflict. The Corps was particularly interested in obtaining the Chechen view as it was then conducting a series of experiments (Urban Warrior) designed to improve its capability to conduct urban operations. Having studied the horrendous losses the Russians experienced during its first incursion into Grozny, and faced with the dilemma of finding solutions to the high casualty rate inherent to the city fight, the Marines thought it prudent to gain the perspective of those who had planned and conducted an urban insurgency against a modern conventional force.

Approximately 20 interviews were conducted during June and July of 1999 in Chechnya by Dr. Marie Benningsen-Broxup¹, a Central Asia expert who had close ties with the Chechens. Dr. Broxup spent time with the Marines to include the author in preparation for the interviews and after the fact for translation, transcription and clarification. In February of 2000, the Marines also had the opportunity to conduct an eight-hour seminar Q&A with another commander, Tourpal Ali-Kaimov, who was visiting the US as part

of a Chechen "government delegation". This report summarizes the results of that Q&A session.

Excluding the background information on the 1994-96 Russian-Chechen conflict and clarifying notes, this report summarizes the words of a Chechen commander who participated in most – if not every - major engagement during this time period. It addresses military issues only and its intent is to provide insights to U.S. military personnel who may be faced with a situation that pits conventional against irregular forces. Though other environments are addressed, the primary focus of this report is on urban operations. These are his recollections on the engagements he participated in and his opinions on Russian and Chechen military capabilities and limitations, as well as tactics, techniques and procedures. As with all first hand accounts of combat situations – consider the participants, their possible bias's and the overall situation at that moment in time as you draw your conclusions. For the purpose of this report Chechen names, titles, and organizational designations are used for consistency and ease of understanding. Where Chechen and Russian unit designations or ranks are described a U.S. equivalent will be provided if applicable.

Background.



The Chechen people have a long history of resisting Russian control. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, they began in earnest to seek full independence. In 1994, Chechnya became a civil war battleground between pro-independence and pro-Russian factions.

In December 1994, Russia sent approximately 40,000 troops into Chechnya to restore Russian primacy over the breakaway republic. After reaching the Chechen capital of Grozny, approximately 6,000 Russian soldiers mounted a mechanized attack into this urban area.

The attack was launched simultaneously from three directions and featured tanks supported by infantry riding in BMP armored personnel carriers

(APCs). Instead of the anticipated “cake walk”, Russian forces encountered heavy resistance from Chechen forces armed with large quantities of antitank weapons. The Russian attack was repulsed with shockingly high Russian casualties. It took another two months of heavy fighting and changing Russian tactics to finally capture Grozny.

Grozny had nearly 490,00 residents in 1994. The city was composed of many multiple-storied buildings and industrial installations and covered some 100 square miles.

The initial campaign against the irregular Chechen forces can be broken down into three phases. Phase one lasted until the end of February 1995 and consisted of the initial intervention, the Chechen repulse of the first assault on Grozny and the eventual occupation of the city by Russian forces two months later.

Phase two consisted of anti-partisan operations in the Chechen countryside to gain control of the rest of the republic.

Phase three can best be described as the recapture of Grozny by Chechen forces in August of 1996. Later that month Russian President Boris Yelstin’s national security advisor brokered a cease-fire that eventually led to the total withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya.

Biographic Information.

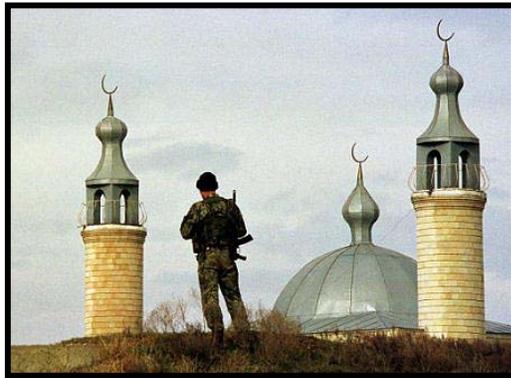
General Tourpal-Ali Kaimov is the President of the Budget Committee of the Chechen Parliament. He was elected a deputy in the 1st polling district in Grozny in 1997. From 1996-1997 he was the chairman of the Freedom Party (Marshonan Toba) of Chechnya. From 1991 to 1996 he served as a special adviser to President Dzhokar Dudayev. In 1991 he graduated from the Economic and Planning Department of the Food Institute in Moscow, Russia and from the Grozny Pedagogical Institute, Chechnya in 1978. In 1990 Kaimov helped found the Chechen National Congress.

Kaimov served in the Soviet Military (possibly Airborne Forces) from 1978 to 1979 in Tartu Estonia. Dudayev served there at the same time, in a Soviet Air Force (VVS) unit that supported Kaimov's unit. Kaimov currently holds the rank of General-Major (Brigadier General equivalent) in the Chechen Army.

General Kaimov's Recommendations on Conducting Urban Operations.

Recommendation One – Cultural Intelligence.

The first thing you must do – and it is **priority number one** – is study the people. You must know the psychological makeup of not only the combatants you might face but that of the local populace as well. Understand your enemy in detail – but not only from a military and political sense – but also from a cultural sense. If you underestimate this, you are on a road to decisive defeat. The Russians – given 400 years of conflict with the Chechens – have not learned this lesson. This is a matter of understanding your foes mentality – precise force must be applied to defeat that mentality. The Chechen people are proud of their heritage and especially in regards to their resistance to Russian authority. Hatred of Russia still remains from the Soviet imposed forced exile of the entire Chechen populace during the 1940's and 50's. (Note – On 23 February 1944 the Soviet Union began the forcible relocation the entire Chechen population to Central Asia. Conservative estimates put the death toll at approximately one-third of the Chechen population – other estimates are higher.)



Understanding the psychological makeup of urban warfare participants extends beyond that of the enemy and non-combatants – it applies to your own troops. Chechen forces suffered minimal psychological trauma despite the close-in and intense nature of the urban combat operations they were engaged in. This immunity to combat neurosis and a stubborn will to resist was not only a product of Chechen warrior ethics and a heritage of resistance to Russian control, but also of a sense of survival. Each Chechen was fighting for their home and family – there was nowhere to go.

Captured Russians, on the other hand, often displayed a variety of psychological problems – primarily as a result of Russian propaganda about the mistreatment their Chechen captors would instill. These Russian

prisoner's feared repercussions from superiors upon repatriation - often resulting in Chechen attempts to return prisoners to their families rather than back to Russian units.

Other Russian psychological problems were the result of a loss of faith in their commanders – they “sat in the rear” while the average Russian was watching their comrades die. Other contributing factors were feelings of failure and a regret that they were unable to support their families back home.

The importance of building up the morale of soldiers prior to the conduct of urban operations cannot be over stressed. The Chechens believe they can win against the Russians because their hearts are in the war. Chechen leadership is comparable to that of Alexander the Great who cried for the mere forty men he lost while conquering Persia. The best strategy of all is to protect your men. The Chechens placed great value on keeping their fighters alive while the Russians often used their least experienced troops as cannon fodder in able to protect the more capable and experienced. This value on human life was also a military necessity, as the Chechens did no have a large population base to replenish their ranks.

The psychological knowledge of the urban battlefield extended to the influence of non-combatants on the military situation as well. Some villages were subordinated to the Chechen Ministry of Defense (MOD). These villages were designated for strategic planning, command and control, and logistic purposes as “pro-Russian” or otherwise non-committed to the conflict. Chechen combatant forces never occupied these villages but instead established “agents provocateurs” within their confines – the agent's mission was to convince the Russians that these areas were “friendly” to the Russian cause. The exact opposite was true – this was part of Chechen Information Operations against the Russians. There was no shortage of village elders in Chechnya willing to support the rebel forces. As a result the Chechen rebels would use these villages to plan, conduct command and control and/or stage logistics.

The Russians do not understand enough about Chechen culture to properly exploit the differences among the various Chechen *teips* – nor do they care to learn. (Note – *teip* is the Chechen tradition of clan relationships. *Teip* members fight fiercely to preserve their clan's independence, culture and separate



identity. Relationships between *teips* are based on blood feuds. There are more than 150 *teips* in Chechnya, whose membership ties a Chechen to a large extended family and to an ancestral piece of land.) Even if the Russians had understood teip it is doubtful they could have exploited this knowledge given the long Chechen hatred of the Russians.

Recommendation Two – Know the Territory – Use Reconnaissance Assets Extensively.



Know the territory – day and night – the locals do and will use this knowledge to their advantage. Detailed reconnaissance is a must to be successful in the conduct of urban operations. First perform a map reconnaissance, follow with a foot reconnaissance and then bring the reconnaissance asset back to headquarters with his map and update it. Chechen scouts

briefed commanders and planners personally. If at all possible, order another reconnaissance mission to confirm the results of the first.

Chechen reconnaissance personnel were not told why they were performing a particular mission in case they were captured. Traditional reconnaissance methods were augmented by human intelligence and reconnaissance performed by elders, women and children. Virtually every Chechen was an intelligence collector. Reconnaissance personnel to include mobile patrols as well as women and children were provided Motorola radios to enable timely reporting.

The scale of maps is very important – key terrain is at the micro level. Do not rely on streets, signs, and most buildings as reference points. They can be altered in such a way during urban combat as to be deceiving. Use cultural landmarks, prominent buildings, and monuments as reference points – they usually remain intact and are easily distinguishable. If they are altered in



any way this must be annotated on your maps. The Chechens had a good supply of maps and “to scale” drawings and sketches of Grozny. This greatly facilitated Chechen command, control, and communications. The Russians did not possess the same quality or quantity of maps, nor did they conduct effective reconnaissance of the city to verify or validate the maps they did possess. The Chechens did use captured Russian maps – but only after confirmation and updates performed by reconnaissance personnel.

Counter-reconnaissance is also crucial. The Russians performed reconnaissance during daylight hours and subsequently either attacked during the day or employed indirect fire or air that night. Chechen forces performed daylight reconnaissance in support of a night attack. Chechen counter-reconnaissance enabled Chechen forces to conduct a night movement closer to Russian positions or other pre-planned alternate sites in anticipation of a Russian indirect fire or air attack based on the results of the Russian daylight reconnaissance. Being well versed in Russian reconnaissance doctrine, the Chechens often let the Russians observe their daytime positions as part of their deception plan.

The Chechens placed so much value on detailed knowledge of the urban terrain that upon receiving 40 Ukrainian volunteers with military backgrounds, they required them to perform extensive reconnaissance with attached Chechens before entering combat. Only then, were the Ukrainians deemed combat ready and as a result performed their combat missions and tasks with great effectiveness.

The importance of detailed reconnaissance and accurate intelligence cannot be understated in the conduct of urban operations.

Recommendation Three – Study Your Opposition’s Weapons and Equipment and How They Might be Employed in an Urban Environment.



Irregular forces engaged in urban combat will alter weapons and equipment to suit the situation and improve effectiveness. They will also use commercial items not normally found in traditional military inventories. The Chechens used captured Russian weapons systems and equipment extensively. The “national weapon” of Chechnya was the Russian Rocket-Propelled Grenade (RPG) launcher. The standard Russian RPG warhead

needed four rounds on target to penetrate a tank – the Chechens altered the RPG-7 round by removing the detonator cap and increasing the explosive components in such a way that they could penetrate a tank’s (to include the T-72) armor and “blow the turret off” in one shot. (Note – This same lesson in regards to weapon system alteration was learned in Mogadishu as the Somali’s added a blast deflector to the RPG enabling it to be used as an anti-air launcher against rotary wing aircraft.)



The Chechen’s considered the destruction of Russian armor as critical for controlling the ground campaign and to inflict great “psychological” (morale) damage on Russian troops.

City combat allows for increased effectiveness of weapons systems that may not be initially identified as a significant combat multiplier in the urban jungle. While mines were the highest producer of Chechen casualties in rural areas – Russian mortars were the most feared weapons in the city.

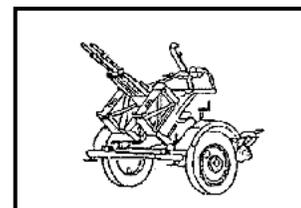


They were the largest casualty producer. Mortars were used with effectiveness by both sides. Chechen mortar crews were assigned quadrants – studied them carefully – and could register and pinpoint targets within a couple rounds. The primary Chechen mortar was the 82mm

pictured to the left.

The most effective Chechen weapon system employed against “pure” Russian infantry was the SVD sniper rifle employed by a trained Chechen sniper. The SVD was not only effective as a casualty producer but also as a psychological weapon that reduced the morale among Russian ground troops.

The Chechens also possessed hand held anti-air weapons (SA-7 and SA-14). For mobile air-defense they mounted ZPU-2’s and ZPU-4’s (anti-aircraft machineguns) in the beds of trucks (GAZ and ZIL) in order to ensure a mobile anti-air defense. These truck-mounted systems were usually employed in the rural towns and southern mountain areas because navigating them through the



ZPU-2

streets of Grozny was too difficult. The Chechens experienced a high degree of success in bringing down Russian rotary wing aircraft to include the Mi-24D, Ka-40, and Ka-50. The Hind was not too much of a threat; we could down these helicopters by massing fire against the rotor heads. This was mostly a function in that the Hind was not that maneuverable. The Chechens even employed mortars, with some success against helicopters. However, the Russian helicopters did use countermeasures such as chaff and flares with a great degree of success against the SA-7's and SA-14's.



The Chechens made use of (and sometimes discarded) the often-plentiful stock of captured Russian equipment. This included Russian Night Vision Devices (NVDs) to maneuver at night, often while under Russian bombardment. The Russians normally did not move at night or during periods of heavy fog while operating in the city. The Chechens used fog to mask their movement. They also keyed on the Russian use of smoke as an obscurant taking it as an indicator of Russian movement. The Chechens would fire into the smoke with positive effect against Russian movements.

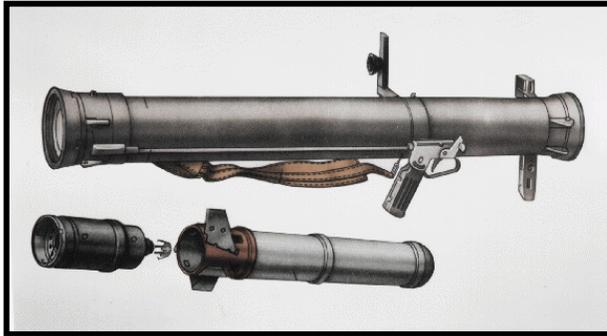
One piece of Russian equipment that the Chechens initially used but soon discarded was individual protective gear. The Chechens found the use of helmets and body armor (flak jackets) impaired the mobility of their fighters in the urban environment. Already weighted down with ammunition and supplies the Chechens found that when they used captured body armor it led to a higher rate of Chechen casualties due to the loss of speed and mobility.



The primary communications device used by the Chechens was a small hand-held Motorola radio. It was used at all levels below "Headquarters" – (national equivalent). At this level they had access to INMARSAT for communications to the outside world – but kept these communications at a minimum because of the monetary cost involved. The Chechens had a ratio of about one Motorola radios to each six combatants – but had they been able to afford more radios they would have issued every fighter one in the conduct of urban operations. The Chechens did not use "cell phones" in the conduct of operations within Chechnya.

The Chechens did not use any encryption or separate tactical nets. They maintained communications security by using their native language. Every

Chechen could speak Russian but few Russians understood Chechen. The Chechen Motorolas could be used for intercepting Russian radio traffic to include aviation and fire control nets. They even enjoyed some success in disrupting or otherwise redirecting Russian indirect fire missions by intercepting and/or interfering or using deception techniques on the nets between Russian forward controllers and artillery units.



The Chechens did capture a limited quantity of the Russian Schmel thermobaric weapon systems (pictured to the left). The Russian claim that the Chechens captured a “box car” load of these weapons was part of a Russian disinformation campaign. The indiscriminate use of these

weapons combined with its destructive capabilities produced a lot of collateral damage and deaths/injuries among non-combatants. The Russian claim was a ruse in order to place at least part of the blame on Chechen use of the Schmel.

A “heavy blast” direct-fire weapon system is a must for urban warfare. Such weapons are not only effective against vehicles and fortified positions but can also be used for breaching through buildings enabling covered avenues of approach and withdrawal. Anti-tank weapons are another must as they have many uses – not only against armored vehicles but also light vehicles and fortified positions.

For protection in the city, the Chechens constructed reinforced bunkers in the basements and sub-basements of buildings. These bunkers had vaulted or sloped roof construction to reduce the effects of flechette rounds, bunker-penetrating and “vacuum” (thermobaric) munitions. This was a lesson learned from the 1994-1996 conflict and the Chechens endeavored to ensure they had enough engineering material on-hand for future encounters with Russian forces.

Recommendation Four – Go into the Urban Battle Light.

This is a high priority - urban warfare requires light and mobile forces. Tanks and other armored vehicles are ineffective in an urban environment

even when used with combined arms and attached dismounted infantry. The irregular force will find a way to kill them. The urban environment offers too many hide/ambush sites and allows for close-in protection against armor thus allowing tank killer teams the opportunity to decimate an armored force. Thus tanks and other armored vehicles becomes a psychological crutch to assaulting forces – anyone with an anti-armor capability can destroy armored vehicles producing an almost instantaneous drop in the morale of assaulting soldiers.

The Chechens centered their seven man subgroups (armor hunter-killer teams – squad equivalent) on the RPG (“Chechnya’s national weapon”). Each squad contained three riflemen/automatic riflemen/ammunition bearers, two RPG gunners, one sniper, and one medic/corpsman. The sniper was also often employed as a spotter. The tactics employed by this subgroup and its higher headquarters/units are discussed in detail later in this report.

Observations in the Conduct of Urban Warfare Between Conventional and Irregular Forces: The Chechen Viewpoint and Experience.

1. Tracer rounds are useless in urban areas as there are serious negative trade-offs in terms of any benefit they may provide. The Chechen experience was that they merely broadcasted the position of the rifleman utilizing them.
2. Snipers are a significant combat multiplier and the best counter-sniper asset in an urban environment is another sniper. But snipers must be employed wisely. The Russians had a high ratio of snipers versus regular infantry. But they employed them *with* the assaulting infantry rather than as a semi-autonomous asset – out in front. The Chechens on the other hand relied on “position” rather than weapon type or numbers of snipers employed to be successful. The Russians diverted significant combat power to search the Chechen sniper out but were unsuccessful. A major reason for this was that the Chechens had prepared infantry positions to provide supporting/covering fire against Russian forces engaged in counter-sniper operations.
3. Operations Security (OPSEC) is especially important in the urban fight. All Chechen plans were developed secretly and subordinate leaders were only briefed as they approached their objective. OPSEC was so important

that the Chechens avoided capture at all costs and put the highest priority on recovering wounded in even very difficult situations.

4. The Chechens did not move by “flanking maneuvers” against the Russians. Instead they incorporated chess-like maneuvers to hit them where they least expected and/or were most vulnerable. The Chechens used buildings and other structures as navigation and signal points for maneuvering and/or initiating ambushes and assaults.

5. The Chechens utilized “hugging” techniques to reduce casualties from indirect fires. They would set up positions within 50 to a maximum of 250 meters of Russian positions in order to render Russian artillery and rocket attacks ineffective.

6. The Chechens did not make use of Grozny’s subterranean systems for maneuver or other significant military operations. Excepting the use of basements and sub-basements as fortified protective positions, and the limited use of some utility tunnels near the northern airport for snipers and machinegun ambush positions, the Chechens found the sewer system too difficult to navigate and too easy to block at entrance and egress points to be militarily tenable or useful. Even the subterranean positions near the airport – though initially valuable – became unusable after heavy Russian bombardment.

7. Russian special operations forces were generally ineffective or not properly employed. The SPETZNAZ (or “Alpha” units) in particular were not a factor – they were not even deployed to the urban battle in Grozny. Rather, they normally operated in rural areas and their “combat” operations consisted mainly of harassing and terrorizing the civilian populations of villages in their sector. The SPETZNAZ also seemed to be demoralized during this time period and their value, even if they had been deployed to Grozny, is questionable. The Russian Naval Infantry, on the other hand, displayed a slightly better fighting spirit than other units. This was mostly true because they were better trained, as well as adequately equipped and supplied during their deployment to Chechnya.

8. It is often asked how the Chechens learned to fight successfully against the Russians. It must be remembered that until 1990 nearly 100 percent of Chechen males were conscripted into the Soviet Armed Forces. But more importantly, Chechens learn how to fight from their families – effective



partisan tactics are passed down from generation to generation. The Chechens have been fighting for over 400 years so this is not only a natural way to convey military tactics but also essential to Chechen survival. (Note – Chechens were known for their “warrior spirit” and were often assigned to combat arms branches by the Soviets. Additionally – the Soviet Armed Forces did not have a professional non-commissioned officer (NCO) rank structure – rather they promoted the best of the raw recruits in “boot camp” directly to these junior leadership positions. Some - if not many - of these NCO’s were Chechen.)

The Chechen Ambush: Tactics, Techniques and Procedures.

The Chechens made no illusions about the Russians. We knew we could not meet them in the conduct of conventional combat and win. However, if we drew them into the urban environment we might be able to “punish them.” This was a lesson learned as we progressed through the Russian invasion from 1994 through 1996 – we now know that the city battlefield offers us distinct advantages.

In the conduct of armor and personnel ambushes, the Chechens configured their forces into 75-man groups. These were further broken down into three 25-man groups (platoons). These platoons were further broken down into three equal-sized teams of six to seven fighters each (squads). Each squad had two RPG gunners and two PK (machinegun) gunners. The 75-man unit (company) had a mortar (82mm) mortar crew in support with at least two tubes per crew.



Each 25-man group also included one corpsman/medic, three ammunition/supply personnel, three litter bearers and two snipers armed with SVDs. The snipers did not operate or co-locate with the platoons but rather, set up in “hide” positions that supported their respective platoons.

Again, the Chechens did not move by flanking maneuvers against the Russians but instead incorporated chess-like maneuvers to hit them. They

used buildings and other structures as navigation and signal points for maneuvering or initiating ambushes/assaults against the Russians.



The Chechens segregated Grozny into quadrants for ambush purposes (see Diagram 1 below). Each 75-man ambush group set up in buildings along one street block, and only on one side of the street – never on both sides of a street because of the crossing fires a two-sided ambush would create. Rationale for doing so was that the Chechens set up similar ambushes along parallel-running streets. The

Chechens would leave opposite facing buildings vacant (no mines or booby traps either) – by doing so, they could use those buildings as escape routes, or to reinforce less successful armor ambushes on adjacent streets. This also was an incentive for the Russians to abandon their vehicles for the relative safety of the unoccupied buildings.

The Chechens only occupied the lower levels of multi-story buildings to avoid casualties from rockets and air delivered munitions coming through the upper levels. One 25-man platoon comprised the “killer team” and set up in three positions along the target avenue. They had the responsibility for destroying whatever column entered their site. The other two 25-man platoons set up in the buildings at the assumed entry-points to the ambush site. They had responsibility for sealing off the ambush entry from escape by or reinforcement of the ambushed forces.

The killer platoon established a command point (platoon HQ) with the center squad. As the intended target column entered the site, the squad occupying the building nearest the entry point would contact the other two squads occupying the center and far building positions. Primary means of communications was by Motorola radio. Each squad had one – lack of funding prevented them from providing every fighter with a radio. Once the lead vehicle into the site reached the far squad position, the far squad would contact the other two squads. The commander at the central squad (platoon HQ) would initiate or signal to initiate the ambush.

The Chechens also employed minefields along the edges of the buildings leading into the ambush site to deter Russian infantry from forcing entry into

the end buildings (see diagram 1). The task of the two 25-man platoons in those end buildings was three fold. First, they were to cover the minefields and take out any reinforcing armor and infantry. Second, they were to reinforce to relieve the killer platoon in the event the ambush got bogged down. And third, they were to reinforce ambushes on adjacent streets if necessary.

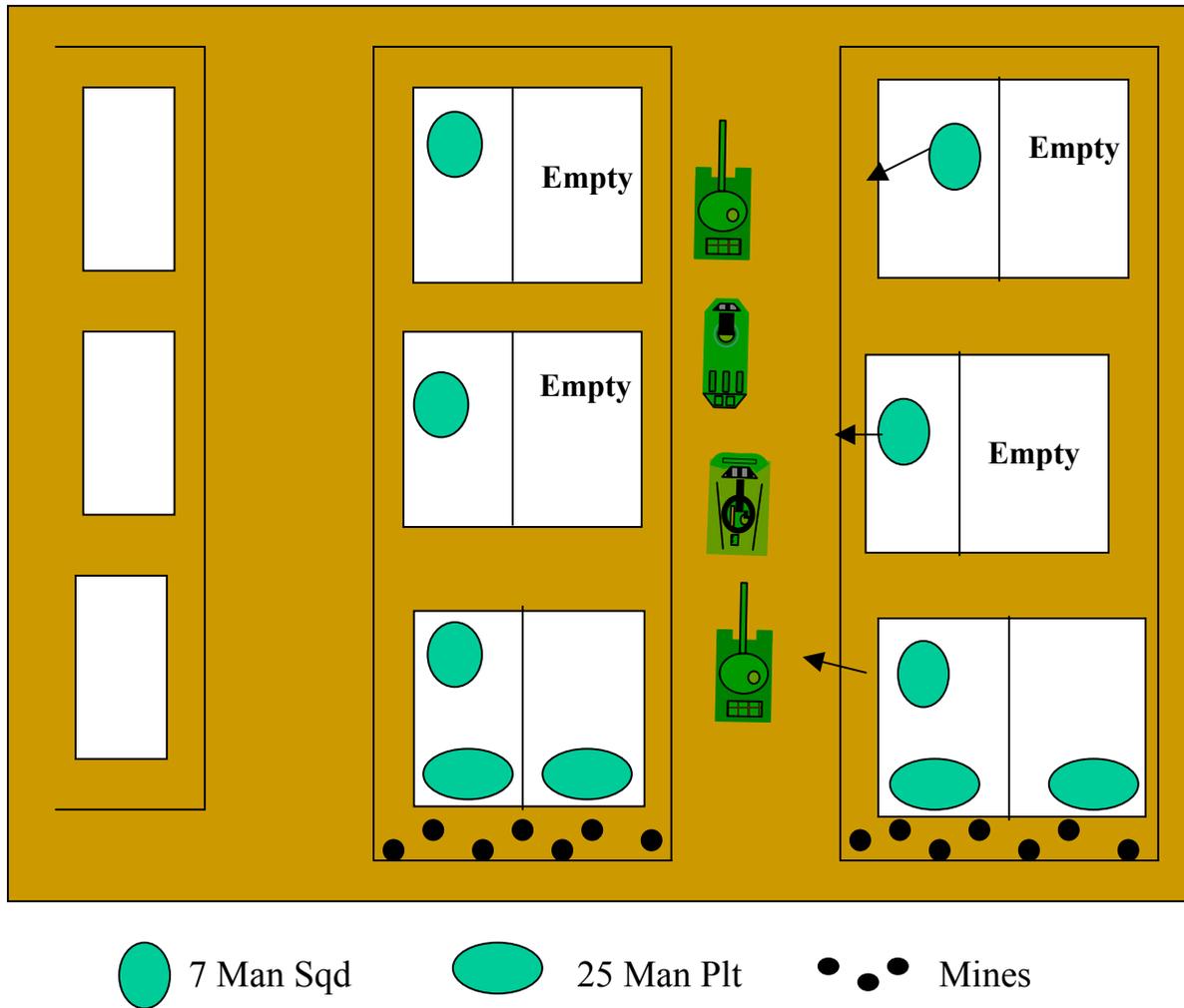


Figure 1. – Typical Chechen Anti-Armor Ambush

The Chechens repeated this setup on adjacent and adjoining streets and blocks. Note: buildings do not portray presence of courtyards, passageways, yards, etc.

7-man ovals indicate squads of the Chechen ambush “killer platoon”. The platoon HQ's was co-located with the center squad. 25-man ovals indicate

the sealing or cut-off platoons for entrance into the ambush sites. Note that the “cut-off” platoons in some cases might share buildings with other cut-off platoons, and also with first squad of the killer platoons. Dark filled circles along bottom edge of buildings indicate mines.

Each 7-man squad had 2 or more RPG-7s, 2 or more PKs, and the remainder with assault rifles. A support element with medic, litter bearers and ammunition bearers usually occupied building with the center squad (platoon HQ).

ⁱ Marie Benningsen-Broxup is the editor of the quarterly Central Asian Survey in London, has studied the North Caucasus for many years and has traveled there extensively.