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In 1992 I was commander of the “Baysangur” battalion – approximately 150 men. In 1994 I was decorated and received a sword of honour. Afterwards the Chief-of-Staff, Aslan Maskhadov, appointed me commander of Nozhay Yurt district.

31 December 1994

We had more possibilities in 1994 than in August 1996. In December 1994, my task was easier. I had 150 men, we had more equipment and transport than in 1996. I had vehicles to move weapons from one place to another. Maskhadov ordered my battalion to Pervomaiskoe when Russian tanks were advancing. He did not tell us which positions to occupy, just to go there and meet the tanks. When we reached Pervomaiskoe, we met an APC and a tank, which we destroyed. We were pleased with ourselves thinking that was it, and that the Russians had run away. We did not realise that they were the advance party of a huge column. When we crossed the bridge, which is near the factory, we saw a double column of tanks. I found myself surrounded with 8 men. We hit one tank with a grenade launcher. I had little experience of such fighting then. I thought that with 3 grenade launchers we could manage, that we could attack the front and the rear of the column and escape. We hit the crew of one tank but it did not stop the Russians advancing into Pervomaiskoe.

I then thought of escaping by making a detour at the rear of the column. Until the evening we hid in a house next door to where the Russians had set their HQ. Through the windows we could see them. I waited and expected that they would check our house at any moment. We had placed all our weapons and ammunitions in the kitchen. We thought that it was the end; fighting was going on in Grozny; we had no news of Maskhadov. We waited 2 or 3 hours expecting to fight our last battle. We were calm.

Then we got fed up. Some of us decided to go to sleep while others stood guard. Around 6 or 7 pm, we heard shots and cries. I ran out, expecting to be caught, but found myself surrounded by Chechens. They began threatening us. I thought at first that they were pro-Russian people of the opposition but they were not. They had noticed us in the house and thought that we were marauders. Fortunately, someone recognised me. As for the Russians, they had left for Grozny while we were sleeping.

The next day we found our units and left Grozny for Berdikel and Mesker Aul where we stayed for 15 days guarding a bridge on the railway line near Barguny. Then Maskhadov ordered me to Gudermes. In Gudermes, we could not attack the Russians because they did not come close, and used only helicopters, bombers, and long range artillery. At that time, they were holding back from attacking from Khasav Yurt in Daghestan. I do not know why, maybe they were scared of alienating the Chechen Akkins. They were firing from Barguny and Mairtup which they had occupied. In April, we retreated from Gudermes to Nozhay Yurt district where we took defensive positions, digging trenches. Maskhadov had ordered me commander of that district.

After the Russians had occupied Gudermes, they began advancing their troops from Khasav Yurt towards Nozhay Yurt. It was very difficult territory to defend – mostly fields and flat areas, and naked hills with no forests. We were saved by the fact the Russians did not know where we were dug in. We knew the area, were able to find secret hiding places, mine others. We defended the district until the end of May 1995, then had to retreat to Sayasan in the direction of Benoy. That was before Budennovsk we were retreating everywhere, from Vedenov and Shatoy. For 2 or 3 months we were fighting on the territory of Daghestan. We took position on the other side of the border, which was not populated.

After the lull of Budennovsk, the Russians began attacking again in winter 1995. We had not expected them to counter attack so fast. In November 1995 they started attacking Benoy but after we captured Gudermes in December 1995 everything changed – we regained the initiative.

### The “truce” period post Budennovsk

During the truce period which followed Budennovsk we were supposed to constitute joint Russian-Chechen “self-defence” units. I remember a Russian colonel who was my counterpart. He used to chat with me about his family, told me where he lived, that his daughter was ill. It was a short-lived truce and later during the war, I came across him again. Abalaev warned me that the Russians were planning to establish a post in Zandak despite the agreements we had reached after Budennovsk. I was sent to negotiate and there was the same colonel. He pretended that he was not responsible for the decision, that orders had come from above. I said “fine, but I want to speak to you alone, without witness”. I asked him “is your daughter still sick?”, “is she in such a place?”, “is your family still living at this address?” He answered “yes”; maybe he had forgotten that he had given me that information. I told him “if you do not remove this post from Zandak, the situation of your family will get even worse. I am giving you half an hour to get out of here”. He went out to give orders and 15 minutes later they were gone.

Between March and August 1996, the situation in Nozhay Yurt was quiet. There was no military action, only reconnaissance and intelligence work. Russian commanders contacted us several times during that period begging us not to start any action because negotiations were imminent. The Russians did not want to die, and neither did we. They just stayed in their bases and waited. They had everything – aviation, GRADs, but still it was very difficult for them. Our small numbers helped us – had we had huge concentration of troops like the Russians, it would have been easier to fight us. But we had only small groups of 10, 20 or 30 men who were everywhere and nowhere; the Russians had huge concentration of forces – we could not take on a base with 500 tanks and APCs or more but we knew everything and saw everything. We changed tactics constantly, sometimes we held defensive positions, sometimes we did not. The Russians could not understand what kind of army we were.

## August 1996

I did not expect in January 1996 that we would win the war so quickly. We knew in what state our army was and although the Russians may have been cowards who did not want to fight, they had occupied almost the whole of our country. We had practically nowhere left to hide, our Republic being so small. We were encouraged because we were well received in all the villages. This gave us hope that we would be able to sustain the fight for a long time. But we knew that it was very difficult for our population, we knew that because of us the population suffered, that the MVD was killing civilians. We never thought that we would win promptly, but we thought that in time we would be able to achieve something. There was a small hope.

After March 1996, it changed. We understood that we could re-capture the capital or any other raion of the republic at any time we chose. Maskhadov always told us “we have Grozny in reserve as a last resort”.

Maskhadov gave the order to the commanders to prepare for the storming of Grozny at the beginning of June. At that stage it was kept secret, only the commanders knew. We had divided the raions among commanders. My section was Pervomaiskoe. I had a map of the district. I sent men there to check the route, to find out what we would be faced with – for instance the Russians had a filtration camp in Pervomaiskoe. This could prove a major problem, the Russians using the prisoners as hostages. I had to liberate them before we could advance into Grozny. That I knew would be very difficult because the camp was extremely well protected and defended.

I personally was weary, I was hoping to be sent anywhere but not to Grozny. I knew that when we went to Grozny it would mean victory or death. There would be no way back. Russian troops were everywhere and I knew I would not be able to escape from Pervomaiskoe if things went wrong. I would also have difficulty evacuating the wounded. I wanted to stay in Benoy and fight and die there rather than in Grozny. I knew my district of Nozhay Yurt. I was worried that on the way to Grozny we could be caught in an ambush and die unnecessarily. But orders were orders. However, 2 or 3 days after the

start of the military operations I began to change my mind and realise that maybe we would manage. I understood then that the Russians did not want to fight us any longer. But I doubted until it became obvious that we were winning. Although I knew that fighting in Grozny would be easier, by inclination I wanted to fight on my home territory. I am sure this was the feeling of many men.

Pervomaiskoe was the gate to Grozny and to the airport. It was in Pervomaiskoe that the fighting was the fiercest. After the Russians gave a 48-hour ultimatum, they transferred more than 1000 tanks and APCs from the Doikar-Oil building to the airport which housed approximately as many. We waited for the deadline of the ultimatum when this armada would move against us. We had prepared barrels with petrol, grenades, mines whenever we had the time, and so on. They had tanks that had anti-grenade protection and some with trinitrotolud (?). We collected that stuff from the tanks and made bombs out of it. We were 80 men and we waited. We had 12 grenade launchers, with 3 or 4 rounds. I had one Shmel; this was for extraordinary measures! Nobody even raised the question as to what may happened to us.

I got my orders from Maskhadov on 5 August. The Russians occupied the Nozhay Yurt raion. I set off with my men immediately. We drove from Benoy to Dzhalka. From Dzhalka we went on foot to enter Grozny. We carried all our equipment. I carried 65 kg of weapons and ammunitions. Around 8 am we reached our positions - Pervomaiskoe main street and the tin food factory - on the way to the airport, amidst high rise buildings. The order was to be on position between 5 and 6 am but we were delayed because we had to fight our way in, with several ambushes along our route. Basaev was in the central market.

We found a convenient position in the high rise buildings. We found water and food. Some days we even managed to have a bath at night! There was heavy fighting between 7 and 12 August and I nearly run out of ammunitions because we could not get through to other units to get fresh supplies. Fortunately, we managed to find ammunitions from the

tanks we destroyed – 37 in all for my group. We controlled the only way out of Grozny for Russian tanks.

We fought in the district for 12 days. 3 of my men were killed and 3 wounded. We listened to Russian military radio communication that Russian forces had lost 200 men in one place, so many lost without news in another – in this way we learned what our side had achieved.

### Lines of communication

It was not difficult to disrupt the Russians' lines of communication. For example: they had a HQ in Nozhay Yurt and a base in Sayasan. The HQ had to provide logistics for Sayasan – we used to send 2 or 3 men to mine the passage over the river which controls the approach to Sayasan. They were very scared of mines; they always had engineers walking in front of their tanks and APCs.

We had no real difficulties of communicating among us. We could move around freely. I could easily walk to Vedeno from Nozhay Yurt if necessary. I did it several times along secondary roads and paths. The best proof was when we entered Grozny despite the helicopters, the fighter planes, and the roadblocks - it was no problem.

### Snipers

The Russians described any man with a machine gun as a “sniper”. But we did not have specially trained snipers. Of course I could boast that I had grenade men, snipers, engineers, even “tankist”. But in reality, the roles were interchangeable. All Chechen fighters knew how to use different weapons. It was due to our natural interest in weapons and necessity. Whatever weapons we could lay our hands on we would use. We could never tell our men “you are a sniper, this is your position, you stay there”. It was rather the men who came to us and said “I have a sniper rifle, I want to use it, can I help?”.

### Shmel

I remember a funny incident: we had one Shmel, which I carried everywhere because I was the best shot of my battalion. A tank was facing the building we were in. It could have been awkward because we had nowhere to hide and visibility was poor. One of my men shouted “hurry, shoot!”. The canon was already aimed at us. The house was small, I was in the kitchen. There was a balcony but if I went out there I would be killed. I looked around. The ceiling was low, there was a table, I jumped on the table and I fired without thinking or aiming properly. I don’t remember exactly what happened afterwards, I fell off the table, I was burned. I thought it was the tank firing. I ran out of the house screaming that I was on fire. But it was the heat of my Shmel - I was firing too close to the wall. The tank was destroyed.

The only Shmels we had were those we took or bought from the Russians. All the Russians units, MVD and Ministry of Defence, were equipped with Shmels. The MVD units had many *kontrakniki* – it was more difficult to buy weapons from them. They were also selling weapons but it was more dangerous to buy from them than from the young conscripts.

### Anti-aircraft missiles

I had one heat-seeking missile in Nozhay Yurt with which we managed to shoot down a helicopter. This was the only case I witnessed during the war. The man who shot it down got a decoration. Afterwards we used machine guns against helicopters but to no result. I could see sparks from helicopters but that was all. When you start firing at a helicopter, it turns its side which is plated with titanium in the direction of fire.

### “Trophy” weapons

I remember how Isa Ayubov, the deputy logistics chief, was besieged in a house near the “Jubilee” cinema in the centre of Grozny. (He was a lieutenant colonel, a very good lieutenant of Maskhadov.) When we came to his help there were so many corpses, it was frightening. Some 100, maybe 200 were lying dead in a heap. The Russians kept pushing their troops at Ayubov’s building. As they moved forward they were killed. They did not

understand where they were going; they did not know where from they were being fired at; they were just moving as a human wave without having the time to fire. The siege ended when it got dark. We went out of the building, collected all the weapons – there was everything, grenade launchers, sniper and automatic rifles, canons. One could pick and choose.

Many people did not have weapons. Men and youngsters followed us on the off chance of finding weapons. We always distributed weapons to them. Sometimes people were looking for weapons in order to sell them because they were hard-up. They sold them to other Chechens at half price or bartered them for flour, sugar etc. In some cases entire battalions were formed with trophy weapons. We usually fought with Russian weapons. We did not have our own manufacturing or supplies from abroad.

### The Russians

Russian propaganda was claiming that all Chechens were business men who were only interested in a good life, that Dudaev had a 100 men, no more, who would run away from the Russian army. Despite Pavel Grachev's assurance that Chechnya would be conquered in one week, Russians officers quickly understood that this would not be the case. When they crossed the border from Ingushetia into Chechnya, they saw that nobody was running away. Already there they became reluctant then to march on. I remember how Russian helicopters were firing at the rear of their own troops to make them advance during the invasion.

I did not notice any difference in performance between the Russian military formations. Maybe the Russians had their heroes during that war but their commandos and MVD troops did not perform substantially better than ordinary troops. They had no strategic thinking; they did not know how to fight; their intelligence service was poor and usually wrong; they did no reconnaissance before a sortie; they had no offensive tactics against our groups; they knew nothing and they were scared all the time. For example, when we had a group of 5 men positioned somewhere, their intelligence described them as 200. As a result our small groups could usually maintain their positions with no problem, stay

relaxed and fire from time to time to keep the Russians on their toes. What kind of assessment can you give of Russians troops in these conditions? They knew that they had lost the initiative. When a soldier is scared he cannot think of strategy and tactic.

The troops of the Ministry of Defence were reasonably decent towards the civilian population. I think it was because they knew that we treated our Russian POWs with fairness. They were serving and had to obey orders as we were. The POWs used to tell us that we were forced to obey orders otherwise they would lose their apartments, their pension, whatever. They used to tell us that they knew that what they were doing was wrong but that they had no choice. Of course prisoners would say that sort of things anywhere. But there was real pressure and bullying, because it was clear to us that they did not want to fight. For us it was different, this was our land, we were defending our homeland, our families, our friends, we had no way out.

When we had news that the Russians were going to occupy a raion or a village, we warned the civilians and helped to evacuate them. This was the only way we had to protect the population. However, if the Russians knew that fighters were nearby, they were more cautious. But on the roadblocks and when they knew that we could not touch them, they became more daring and insolent.

The MVD was a different story. They made no difference between fighters and civilians. They could also kill their own soldiers with impunity. When we caught MVD troops we treated them differently from those of the Ministry of Defence. It was the MVD which was conducting *zachistki* and police operations. They would drag men from buses, force them to undress in front of women – a terrible shame for Chechen men – check calluses on their body as a proof that they had carried weapons, but Chechens are hard working people, everybody had calluses from hard physical work. Any man with a bruise or a wound would be arrested as a *boievik*, frequently to disappear without traces.

There was no pattern in Russian air attacks and patrols. They did not patrol at night-time. Our men on the contrary made the best use of the night for surveillance, finding out mine fields, and so on. The Russians only fired at random during the night.

### Personalities

Dzhokhar Dudaev was very amusing. He liked to joke, even when things were very bad. During the endless air bombings, he used to tell us that this was the last, that the Russians had run out of supplies. We believed him and took patience. But we were lucky that the strategist was Maskhadov. A lot can depend on one man. Maskhadov was a very well organised commander-in-chief. He took account of every details. He liked orders to be executed punctually. Of course, he would not discipline you if you failed, but one would feel ashamed in front of him if orders were not executed properly. This was just as effective.

### Lessons of the war

It was much easier to fight in Grozny than in Nozhay Yurt. Nozhay Yurt district was open territory, one had to wait until the tanks approached within 500 metres to hit them. This was the distance of our grenade launchers. The Russians knew it and never approached any closer. We had many casualties due to the fact that everybody at one time or another had to do the job of an engineer without having the know-how. We learned on practice, asking each other, teaching each other. The result, all things considered, was not bad. We had some brilliant successes.

Discipline was excellent, but every one took initiatives. We all took directives from President Dudaev and the Chief of Staff, Aslan Maskhadov. For example when we were told to hold a position, we held that position, but we each fought in our own way. We did not have to be told how to do it. Nobody was waiting to have specific instructions. The men knew what they had to do without being told.

I understood that our nation was invincible. From childhood I was told about how our ancestors fought the Russians. When I was young I always wanted to emulate them, but I

never really believed or understood how people could fight for years. Now I know that our nation will be able to withstand any ordeal. This was for me the truly amazing lesson of the war. Even today, I wonder how we could have accomplished such a miracle. The commanders were united. I saw the dedication and commitment that motivated the people who fought. Of course there were those who fought for showing off, who were ready to come to terms with the Russians but they were the exception.

One could say that every military action we undertook was heroic. When we went to fight every single man out of 50 or 80 wanted to achieve something. Each one fought in his own manner. When after war I was asked to chose men for decorations I could not make up my mind because all were heroes. They did not know fear. Once in Grozny one of my man was trying to hit a tank with a *mukha* but could not managed it. He shouted at me to help. I fire twice from a balcony and hit the tank. We all knew that it was dangerous to fire several times from the same window because the Russians would notice but that idiot jumped on the balcony crying “Allah-u Akbar” without any concern for the shooting around. I grabbed the fool and threw him back inside the room. I could spend days telling the deeds of my men, all of them were brave.

Some commanders claimed that they had 500 men, even 1000, but I never had more than 150 men. That was at the beginning of the war. Later our numbers varied between 50, 80 or 100. The lowest number was during our retreat to Benoy when I was left with only 40 men. But it was easier to operate with a small group. I knew all my men, I knew what each was capable of. I knew I could trust them. We won together. Pervomaiskoe during the storming of Grozny in August 1996 was our crowning glory.

