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The battle of Gudermes, December 1995

I was the chief of staff for that operation, Salman Raduev was the commander. At that time we had groups whose military skills were only average but the operation was well planned. As a former Komsomol leader, Salman Raduev was thorough although few people today would admit that he could do anything right.

All the commanders met before the attack. As head of staff I recorded everything – how many men we had, what weapons and ammunitions. We distributed weapons, ammunitions, radios, gave precise instructions on call-up codes, all men knew who directed and co-ordinated the operation at HQ level. Every man knew what he had to do.

The fighters came to Gudermes from different directions and at a pre-ordered time. Beforehand the group commanders had reconnoitre the city. We entered Gudermes, but did not attack immediately to allow the civilian population to move out. Gudermes was our first important counter-attack and few people believed that the resistance could capture the town because of the number of Russian troops stationed there. We stayed in hiding in Gudermes for 3 or 4 days without taking action. Secrecy was essential but the Russians knew that fighter units were in the town. However, our disinformation was effective and the Russians did not know for what purpose our units had entered the town. Before the attack our groups positioned around Gudermes, or surrounded by Russian troops, as in Zandak, were ordered to remain quiet – when they suddenly appeared in Gudermes, the Russians did not know what to make of it.

We brought all our heavy armament to Gudermes in advance and hid it. We had planned where our units would remain in hiding, in which houses, where they would be fed and could rest. (The Chechen soldier is much more resistant than the Russian – he can remain without food or live on dried bread for days. But we never had any problems with food supplies – the population was always helping. Our men always had hot food.)

The town was completely under Russian control. They had a garrison in the railway station which had underground tunnels. In the *Komendatura* they had another garrison with 400 men. The Russians had defences around the town and they controlled the roads. They had stationed their troops in what they considered the best strategic positions but we infiltrated the town and hit them from within.

The operation was to start at 4 am – at the time of least awareness among the Russian troops. Our units were not allowed to use radio contact before 4 am. Unfortunately we were not ready on time. Had we been, we would have inflicted a lightning attack. As it was the attack began at 6 am. Yamadaev gave the first. Our men had taken position within a perimeter of one kilometre around Gudermes, and near the railway station and the *Komandatura* which were the first targets.

We set up our HQ in the centre of town not far from the railway station, right next to the Russian HQ in a building which had a good cellar in case of air attacks. We always chose buildings with cellars for the HQ, and the medical personnel. As soon as we entered Gudermes we evacuated the sick and wounded from the 2 hospitals.

We “smoked out” the *Komendatura* with NURS and S-8 rockets of which we had a few. They are good rockets – they can go straight through walls and can be very frightening. Our units came so close to the *Komendatura* and the Russian positions that the helicopters could not shoot from fear of hitting their own troops (although they were many times when they did not mind doing it).

Our tactic was to prevent outside Russian troops from coming to the rescue of the Gudermes garrison. We broke up their forces by allowing small groups into the centre of town and destroying them there while other units were destroyed on the outskirts. We had 330 men for this operation. The largest group was the General Staff's – 60 men. We also had between 20 and 24 snipers in Gudermes. They played an important role preventing Russian movement through crossfire. Our planning was good.

We gained control of the town the same day. All Russian units were besieged or immobilised, the movement of Russian troops around the town stopped. At first they were in a state of shock. After a while they managed to regroup their forces but with the experience of Grozny, their tactics had no secrets for us. They moved tanks to a hill above Gudermes and began destroying civilian houses on the outskirts of the town. On the 6th day we came an order from Dudaev saying that the job was well done and that we could withdraw. We held Gudermes for 7 days. We were sorry to leave. From a psychological point of view we did not want to give the impression that we were just storming the town and leaving when the bombing started but when we saw the destruction of civilian areas, we realised that it was time to leave.

We left Gudermes right in front of the enemy's nose. The Russians knew that we were withdrawing but they were too scared to fire at us. We got into cars – the cars we had captured from them, loaded them with weapons, and left. It was winter and very cold, the visibility was good, they could see us clearly as we drove 250 metres in front of their positions. I must admit that as chief of staff I was scared – with one artillery shot we could have lost 30 men at once.

We drove to a village where we were greeted, had tea, then moved to another village still surrounded by Russian positions. The next morning we took a Russian post on the main road and drove home straight through Russian positions. It was the daring that defeated the Russians. People say that if you are fearless you can move mountains.

After the battle we estimated that out of 400 men in the *Komendatura* only 130 were left alive. (Some of our people claimed that only 30 men were left in the *Komendatura*.) Altogether we killed some 800 Russian troops in Gudermes. The maximum estimate was 1200 Russians dead. We lost 13 fighters.

The attack on Gudermes was meant to humiliate Moscow – it coincided with the “election” of Zavgaev (17 December 1995) when Russia had loudly proclaimed that Chechnya was electing a new parliament and head of state. We demonstrated clearly that Gudermes at least could not hold elections.

Tactics

There were occasions in the beginning of the war when we did not entirely control our fighters. For instance in Gudermes, we had people who joined in independently, taking positions and starting military operations just to help, but they did not know where the HQ was, and did not know where to go for orders. As we knew where Russian positions were, we understood that these were Chechens. We would send a man to check their numbers and weapons and brought them in as reserve. The HQ usually had reserve units.

Our tactics were to mislead the Russians. As head of staff I knew how weak our forces and reserves were. Half of our men did not have weapons. They were going to battle unequipped in the hope of acquiring weapons from the enemy or from a fallen comrade. That was common practice although we did not encourage it.

In strategic positions where we expected a certain win, we would send a strong group. In positions where we thought that we only had a 20 per cent chance of winning, we would send a weak group.

When our commanders were under attack or engaged in heavy battle they complained by radio that they did not have enough weapons. I would tell them on the open waves: “we are sending 20 men to support you with 6 grenade launchers and 3 gunners” – in reality it

meant that I was sending 2 men. The Russians knew that the Chechens spoke without cipher on the radio, that they liked telling where they were, what type of positions and defences they had. So I would say that I was sending 20 men. Very soon, the attack would weaken and the Russians would begin to withdraw and our men could rest. I remember one case with Suleiman Bustaev - he was in a very difficult position and his unit was not very strong. He was asking for help continuously. I got fed up repeating that I was sending him support. I was afraid that the Russians would stop believing my radio transmissions. His call up number was 05. As soon as I heard it, I would order him to start combat, open fire from all type of weapons (as if he had heavy weapons!) and destroy the enemy. Then I cut the communication before he had time to reply. It worked.

When we mounted an operation such as Gudermes, we called men with weapons. We would state how many men we needed with automatic rifles, how many snipers and so on. Any extra were kept as reserves. The commanders decided how many reserve troops they needed. If a commander was in difficulty he would send a message for reinforcement. If he felt that his men were tired he would send them away and call for fresh troops. Generally, we worked a shift system. If a group held a position during the day it would know that in the evening another group would replace it. The men would go home, boast to their wives, and let them pamper them. It was very rare for men to have to hold 3 or 4 days in a row. Of course if it was needed they would do it, but the occurrences were rare.

Surprise was an important tactical aspect - the Russians never knew where they stood (*zabluzhdenie*). The Chechen fighter is a free man, he could be in one place one moment, and a few minutes later he would move to where nobody would expect him. If he had a reason to check something in another place, he would go there. The Russians who observed our movements would see our men moving around, and think that the frontline had moved. But in fact we seldom had a fixed frontline. The Russians expected battle where they could see our trenches and reinforced lines. The Chechens would move their positions, the Russians would re-adjust theirs, only to be attacked in the original position or in yet a third unexpected place. The Russians did not realise that the Chechens moved

around so much. They thought that they were dealing with different units. If our men did not like a position, if it was dirty, with no sunshine, they would move. That type of independent uncontrolled behaviour on the part of our fighters was an asset because it deceived the enemy. It often resulted in the Russians firing at positions which had been abandoned.

For operations like Gudermes we used men from all over Chechnya. The scouts and guides were locals. At that time we did not have proper maps. In one night I made an exact plan of the town with the help of our guides. I also made a map of all the railway lines and bridges. If we had to retreat we needed to know where and how to retreat. I asked people to give me estimates of distances. We worked from these maps.

We knew all the Russians' movements – where they were, what units were moving where, we listened to their communications, we knew how many losses they had and how many men they had left alive. We knew it all, and thus we were in control.

Weapons

We had no heavy weapons. We captured some mortars, then we captured Russian mortar units. We bashed them with their own weapons with the help of their own men. The Russians who knew that we did not have mortar thought that they were the victims of friendly fire. We also had rockets (“NURS”) from shot down helicopters.

The Russians

Grozny in August 1996 was a similar operation to Gudermes. We came in openly as if we were going home. The Russians were photographing us. My group, 120 men, took control of the sector by the bridge where we surrounded a Russian unit. Their command was calling continuously on the radio, ordering them to force the bridge. They knew we had reinforced our defences because they had observers in the high rise buildings around - we even had a cannon, and that we would never let them through. In the morning they tried to break through. We killed 20 of them. An hour later they tried again, without any

concern for the life of their men. They have no pity for their soldiers. The Russian command did not obey any normal rules of behaviour.

I served in the Soviet Army but I do not understand what tactics Russian officers are taught today. When military operations were under way, they would go straight for the area where there was fighting without checking what was going on, or sending scouts. In Gudermes, and on other occasions, they would march straight in, as if on parade, where we were waiting for them. After 20 minutes they could have as many as 400 dead.

Their main problem was weak command. The planning of operations may have been good but not the execution. In the heat of battle their command structure would disintegrate - while they regrouped, found new commanders, had a good drink, we would have ample time to relax. Troops moved slowly, the equipment was faulty, officers were drunk and forgot to give orders on time, some troops advanced while the rest dragged behind. Those who advanced would get killed. The remainder would then refuse to advance. They always moved at snail's pace. There were cases of cowardice. Their soldiers were young and not trained for military action. Mass destruction scared them - when a man saw his entire company destroyed he could not function any longer.

Their officers were also terribly ill prepared. They never took care of their soldiers. For us the death of one man is a tragedy, if 2 or 3 men got killed at once, all Chechnya would talk about it. This did not happen more than twice or three times a month. The Russians just threw their young boys into fire. I did not understand how they could do it - their soldiers went to certain death. This was the rule. There were a few exceptions: we had a Russian prisoner who had shot his captain - he did it deliberately under cover of crossfire.

Russian soldiers had no television and newspapers. Talking to soldiers during negotiations with General Babishev I was surprised to find out that his troops thought that the Chechens had captured Rostov. They genuinely believed that all Chechens were bandits. This scared them, like ogres would scare small children. Sometimes they could

not fire their rifles because their hands shook. I think this psychological aspect played a role in their defeat.

From the rank of major upwards, Russian officers were all “businessmen”, selling weapons and ammunitions. (The lower ranks served more conscientiously.) This disorganised the army. Soldiers would see that their officers were stealing, that they were better fed, that they would go to rest while sending their troops to fight. The soldiers did not trust their officers. Our commanders always lead their men to combat, like Shamil Basaev.

The Kontrakniki were there to force ordinary soldiers to fight to the bitter end, preventing their surrender, while escaping themselves at the first opportunity. They did not resist any better. They were a mixed bunch – bandits, failures, people out of jail, schizophrenics, a few patriots.

Had we been equipped like American commandos or French legionnaires, fighting would have been easy. We could have simply lied down in waiting and aimed. But we had to economise each bullet, this was very dangerous

Logistics

I was Maskhadov’s deputy for logistics and responsible for the whole of Chechnya. We tried to lighten his burden. I had 4 men working on logistics at HQ. They were very active. They visited all the fronts. Our neighbours from the other republics helped us. We had channels for humanitarian aid and medicine. Our military hospital continued to work even when surrounded by Russian forces.

I became logistics commander by chance. The original commander was a former officer in the Soviet Army. He was killed in the early days of the war. After his death logistics collapsed. At the beginning of the war there was no need for it. Each group brought its own supplies or found them on the spot. After the withdrawal from Grozny the situation changed. People could not return home to the northern districts which were occupied. So

we had to organise our logistics starting from nothing. We collected what we could from everywhere. We made charts. At the beginning we did not even know how many fighters we had except for the regular troops. Later each front commander reported how many men he had. It was important for Maskhadov to know what forces he could call up. We worked out what each front needed down to the smallest details. After the retreat from Grozny we had 3000 men. I organised our supplies for 6000 men to be on the safe side.

In February/March 1995 Dudaev convened the cabinet and gave precise instructions to the ministers. Each had his responsibility. Military supplies were the priority– that was my task. One minister had to supply meat, another sugar, and so on. After a while we reopened bakeries in Vedeno and Shali. When the war started they had stopped working. The Shali bakery supplied 5000 pieces a day for the front. Our logistics became professional. Each battalion had a man responsible for logistics who would inform us of their needs.

In the early days we had terrible problems with fuel. The small artisanal factories saved us. Had we not had them we would have been lost. When a small country like ours goes to war, it must have strategic reserves. Our country was too small to have a rear supply line. We had no factories, farms or industries in the rear, so we had to search. We took the small oil factories under control and told them how much we needed per day. Whatever was left they could sell for their own benefit. We allocated so many tonnes to each front, to the hospitals, the mills etc. (The old and sick were also our responsibility.) We ran the television and newspapers. This work was organised very fast, in less than 6 weeks.

The Russians knew of our work, they had their informers among us but usually they did not believe them. Some were lying deliberately or would exaggerate in order to get attention or rewards.

After Grozny, which we defended for so long, we thought that it would be easy to resist in the mountains. We even organised a potato plantation in Vedeno. I did not expect that the Russians could push us out of Vedeno, Bamut, Shatoy and Nozhay Yurt. But it was a good lesson. Had we remained in the mountains, we would have been forced to maintain a defence line, which would have caused many casualties. After retreating from Vedeno, our tactics changed from conventional to partisan warfare. Had I known what I know now, I would never have left Grozny. I would have retreated from the capital to a familiar place, allowing the first Russian onslaught to pass. Then I would have returned to Grozny, forcing the Russians to dislodge us time and time again.

Budennovsk – a turning point

After the fall of Vedeno and Shatoy in Spring 1995, many groups disbanded, went home to continue fighting independently. Shamil Basaev's raid on Budennovsk was a turning point. It gave us a respite. Little by little we reorganised, our tactics changed. The commanders contacted the HQ again, informed us how many units they had, their positions and so on. The HQ dispatched people to the districts, including to the North, giving instructions. We began attacks on the railway lines and Russian supply trains. Because we did not have the right weaponry, such as GRADs, the Russians were able to run the trains with impunity. But one day we derailed an armoured train in Chervlennaya Uzlavaia. This scared them. It was good psychologically – you must not always hold defensive positions.

People became bolder. Spirits were up. The Russians retreated from the mountains. We kept men on the defence lines so that they would not become lazy and idle. We instructed them to be ready at all times. We used that respite to train them. We taught them to fire grenade launchers, mortar and light artillery pieces, which we had acquired by then. We taught them how to address their commanders. We organised them into company, battalion etc. We trained commando and special troops. These were formed of 12 men headed by a commander. Each unit would include a sniper, 2 mortar men, 2 rocket launchers, a car, a nurse, and reserve manpower in specific areas. We acquired maps and

looked for places to lay mines – often it was primitive but we felt we had to “do something”.

Our men learned to be better engineers. In the early stages of the war it was impossible to force them to sit in trenches. Now they could dig a trench in 20 minutes. They knew where to dig them, how to provide an exit. The men were quick to learn. We organised caches for weapons and ammunitions, natural cold storage for food. We build them underground with ice bricks, covered with straw in the manner of our ancestors. We infiltrated people into Grozny, blew up trains and other targets.

We understood that it was a waste of time to destroy tanks and that we had to target the Russian troops. In the beginning of the war, tanks and APC were like magnets for our men. They destroyed them but often the soldiers would get away. Maskhadov reckoned that we had to kill 100 Russian soldiers every day, whether in large scale military operations or individual attacks, to make an impact. This was the goal we set our men, and the only way to assess our success rate when there was no longer a defence line with fighting everywhere, in Grozny, Gudermes, Bamut, Naur, Shelkovsky, and in Russian border areas.

Throughout the war our main concern was for the civilian population. The number of our people was so small - we had to safeguard and protect them. Had the population rejected us it would have been a catastrophe. We tried to avoid entering the villages. To have the confidence of our people was essential. We had to honour our word. We could not afford to show fear as cowardice is one of the worse sins for Chechens. If Chechnya became depopulated we would have turned into hunters not soldiers.