

David Slays Goliath: A Chechen Perspective on the War in Chechnya
(1994-1996)

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Executive Summary

On 11 December 1994, 40,000 troops of the Russian Army attacked into the breakaway republic of Chechnya, with the intent of removing Chechen separatist leader, Jokhar Dudayev, and replacing his government with one more favorable to Moscow. Two years later, the last units of the Russian force withdrew from Chechnya, culminating two years of humiliation at the hands of a much smaller and far more modestly equipped foe.

How did the Chechens defeat the “Bear?” This paper tells that story through the eyes of some of the Chechen key leaders, including their Chief of Staff and his aide-de-camp, their communications chief, and several key commanders. Included are excerpts from interviews of seven of the Chechens who participated in the 1994-1996 war, interviews that were conducted in the summer of 1999 and the winter of 2000. Major findings from these interviews include:

- *Know your enemy.* The Russians never developed a comprehensive understanding of the Chechen culture, e.g., the complexity of clan-based (*tiép*) relationships. Therefore, they were never able to exploit potential “fault lines” in Chechen cohesion. As a result, Russian heavy-handedness proved counterproductive by unifying various Chechen factions instead of dividing them. Also, many Chechens had previously served in the Soviet and/or Russian armies. The Chechens knew the Russians far better than the Russians knew the Chechens, which gave the latter a tremendous advantage in a number of ways.
- *Tactics.* In urban fighting, the Chechens conducted highly mobile, fluid, decentralized tactics. The Chechen base unit was an eight-man squad consisting of three riflemen, two RPG gunners, two machine gunners and a sniper. Squad members were often relatives or neighbors. Three squads operated in 24 man platoons, which roamed throughout the city in irregular fashion. Sometimes the Chechens operated in 75 man companies, but rarely in larger size units. In the defense, the Chechens preferred to conduct ambushes, springing traps, withdrawing and then often reappearing in areas that the Russians had previously secured. This unpredictable, non-linear way of operating proved extremely successful against the slower moving, conventional Russian forces, who’s commanders were not prepared to fight an unconventional enemy.
- *Communications.* Despite having far fewer radios, the Chechens had better communications than the Russians did. This is because the Chechens used modern, off the shelf equipment, such as Motorola and Ken radios, while the Russians used older, bulkier radios that were less capable. The Chechens also had a flatter command structure, which facilitated rapidity in transmitting information. Almost all Chechens spoke both Chechen and Russian, while few Russians understood Chechen. This facilitated communications security and enabled the Chechens to interfere with Russian communications far more effectively. The Chechens employed hand held radios very successfully at the squad level and would have issued them to individuals had they had enough.

- *Logistics.* In terms of quantity, the Chechens were frequently at a severe disadvantage in comparison to their Russian enemy. At the beginning of the war, the Chechens had no organized logistics infrastructure. Their logistics network was an improvised system that relied heavily on the local population and on captured or purchased Russian supplies. Most units were self-reliant, i.e., they supplied their own food and ammunition from village or clan stockpiles. By contrast, the Russians had a conventional logistics system that proved vulnerable to Chechen raids. The Russians experienced severe corruption problems; it was not unusual for Russian soldiers to sell ammunition to Chechen fighters, who later used the same ammunition against the Russians who sold it!
- *Intelligence.* Throughout the war, the Chechens had a well-developed human intelligence network that provided them with a substantial advantage. Chechen fighters rarely wore uniforms and, therefore, easily blended into the local population. The local population proved to be an excellent source of information to the Chechens, although their information had to be checked. In particular, young women were the best collection agents because of their ability to move easily throughout the city.
- *Leadership.* Russian leadership was generally weak and ineffective, sometimes appallingly so. Russian troops had little faith in their commanders, and their morale was never very high. By contrast, Chechen leadership was bold, innovative and confident. Chechen fighting spirit and cohesion were far superior, and the Chechens were far more comfortable fighting “up-close-and-personal,” than were their Russian adversaries. Chechen commanders lead from the front, leading by example and sharing the burdens of their troops. More than any other factor, superior Chechen leadership may well have been the main reason for their success.

This paper presents a remarkable contrast in fighting styles between two very different organizations. The Chechens epitomized maneuver warfare, i.e., a highly cohesive organization led by bold, confident leaders, one that practiced fluid, innovative tactics based on the ambush. By contrast, the Russians appeared slow and methodical, overly reliant on firepower to solve tactical problems through mere attrition and destruction. Tactically, Russian units seldom had the initiative, and, strategically, they lost the initiative after the June 1995 raid on Budyonnovsk. In terms of combat power, the Chechens were far more efficient and effective.

At the beginning of the war, the Russians labeled the Chechens “bandits” and demonstrated their disdain for them in their first attack into Grozny, which turned into a Russian debacle. By the end of the war, Russian leaders had a very different understanding; they learned about Chechen combat effectiveness the hard way and at a tremendous cost in lives and material. The Marine Corps can learn much from their experience by studying the perspective of the winners—the Chechens.

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Introduction

On 11 December 1994, 40,000 Russian Army troops launched a three-pronged attack into the breakaway republic of Chechnya, with the intent of eliminating the secessionist government of Jokhar Dudayev and replacing it with one more favorable to Moscow (see Figure 1). Escorted by helicopter gunships and fighter attack aircraft, the armor heavy force was the largest deployment of Russian troops since the war in Afghanistan.

On paper, the Chechen resistance appeared puny. Russian intelligence estimated that Dudayev had no more than 5,000 – 7,000 fighters,¹ and only a small minority of those were considered well-trained soldiers. It was known that the Chechen's had only a handful of tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery and anti-air weapons as well as an insignificant number of aircraft, and none of the equipment was state-of-the-art. Indeed, the Russian Defense Minister at the time, Pavel Grachev, predicted only a few weeks earlier that “one parachute regiment in two hours” would be all that was needed to bring the Chechens to heel. A slightly less optimistic view was prevalent among Western intelligence agencies.²

Yet just over two years later, the last remaining units of the Russian Army were withdrawing from Chechnya, suffering a stinging defeat to a force clearly inferior in size and material. Just how was this 20th century David able to slay a Goliath that had been widely feared throughout the world only a few short years before?

This paper provides “David’s” perspective on the war. It contains excerpts from six interviews of key Chechen leaders that were conducted in June 1999. The interviews, which were obtained by the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity (MCIA) early in 2000, provide a powerful collection of first person accounts of one of the most remarkable military victories of the late 20th century. A short biography of each Chechen leader is contained in Appendix A.

The excerpts are organized both chronologically and functionally, and they include selected editorial comments that either provide additional context, where needed, or draw out significant lessons useful to the Marine Corps. The excerpts were specially selected with the latter goal in mind.

Historically, the 1994-1996 war in Chechnya may be viewed in five phases:

Dec 94 – Feb 95

Initial Russian attack through the capture and consolidation

¹ The actual number at the beginning of the war was much smaller.

² The author had a first hand experience that is revealing. In a late night briefing on the day the invasion began, the HQMC Intelligence Center Watch Officer confidently predicted a Russian victory and that the whole thing “would be over in a matter of days.”

	of Grozny
<i>Mar 95 – Jun 95</i>	Chechen withdrawal to the Caucasus Mountains
<i>Jul 95 – Nov 95</i> Budyonnovsk	The first cease fire & negotiations following the raid on
<i>Dec 95 – Jul 96</i>	“Semi-guerrilla” warfare
<i>Aug 96 -- Dec 96</i>	Chechen seizure of Grozny, final negotiations and Russian withdrawal

Appendix B contains a chronology of key events.

It must be noted that the interviews contain raw data; they have not been processed and evaluated in any sort of intelligence-related process. As with all first hand accounts of combat, one must consider the participant’s bias and limited perspective before drawing definitive conclusions. Nevertheless, the fact of the Chechen separatists’ victory lends great credibility to their accounts, and no obvious or glaring misrepresentation of facts has been noted. The interviews provide remarkable insight into a first rate, guerrilla-style fighting organization, one like that which the Marine Corps may well have to fight in the 21st century.

Chechen Morale & Leadership

Moral forces are difficult to grasp and impossible to quantify. We cannot easily gauge forces like national and military resolve, national or individual conscience, emotion, fear, courage, morale, leadership, or esprit. ... Although material factors are more easily quantified, the moral and mental forces exert a greater influence on the nature and outcome of war.

MCDP 1 Warfighting

The easiest and simplest explanation for the Chechen’s victory lies in their vastly superior morale and leadership, a fact undisputed in any account of the 1994-1996 war in Chechnya. Truly a warrior culture, Chechen males learn how to handle weapons early in life as a basic element of manhood. The following excerpts provide remarkable insight into the Chechen mindset, and they make a very interesting contrast with how the Chechen’s viewed their “Goliath” adversary (see next section).

Maskhadov: Analysts said that we had 5,000 to 10,000 fighters, but we always felt that it was important to show that the whole nation was fighting. We lacked everything, but each house was a haven. Everywhere we were fed and could rest. Of course it was dangerous for the people but nobody refused to give us refuge. Each household had reserves. The Chechens are rich because they always have reserves; they do not live day to day. We asked people to hold demonstrations, block the roads, etc. This was the struggle of the whole nation.

Khambiev: 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. For me, this was 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.

H. Iskhanov: After Budennovsk³ a Russian-Chechen commission was established for the exchange of POWs. I was nominated a member of that commission. Wherever I traveled in Chechnya with Russian officers from the commission, they were accosted and insulted by children and teenagers. Had the Russians defeated us they would still have had a problem with our younger generation.

Maskhadov: Spirit is the most important factor. For example: as commander of a resistance unit, I tell my men: “You stay in this house and do not move.” They considered it humiliating to just sit and wait. After two or three days they would not stand it any longer, they would automatically make a sortie, try to destroy something. Afterwards, they would explain military tactics to me. I responded: “Russia has thousands and thousands of tanks. The fact that you burned ten APCs will make no impression. Also, it is the only army which does not count its casualties. Therefore I beg you, stay in your position as long as I order. If you go, at least let me know.” Nevertheless, it was difficult to keep them on their positions for more than three days – they were overactive! Every Chechen is a general, a strategist and tactician, each one has a plan to defeat Russia! So I had to allow a certain amount of initiative. This was the recipe of our success. It was due to the mentality and character of our people. *The Chechen spirit of initiative, courage and skill made possible the non-linear ambush tactics that were used so successfully against Russian armored forces in the first battle of Grozny.*

Maskhadov: There was also the religious factor. As a military man I knew the capacity of the Russian army. When a Russian column was advancing and you had no proper ammunition left and you were waiting for them to move 200 or 300 meters to destroy them and you succeeded – these were miracles. That was when the religious factor came into play. You began to believe that the outcome was in the hands of God.

Khambiev: ... we were lucky that the strategist was Maskhadov. A lot can depend on one man. Maskhadov was a very well organized commander-in-chief. He took account of every detail. 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.

Maskhadov: As a Chechen officer, I had to re-adjust all one’s concepts, become another kind of professional. All our men were volunteers; I could not even give them a machinegun or pistol. All had their own ideas about tactics, and it was impossible to give them orders; much diplomacy

³ Chechen raid on Russian town 14-19 Jun 95 that changed the course of the war (see later section).

was needed. When men explained to me how to fight, I had to listen politely for 30 minutes, praise them, and then impose my will. This was a different approach from the Russian army.

H. Iskhanov: In those early days, people only fought for their own village or town. Grozny was an exception – it was the capital, it belonged to all of us, and everybody wanted a part of the action. Furthermore, commanders were reluctant to take defensive positions on their home ground due to family pressure. They preferred to fight away from their villages. *As the largest city in Chechnya, Grozny was also a much more favorable environment for light infantry to fight armored forces, especially in light of the Russian’s poor quality infantry. The Chechens also avoided defending in their villages because the Russians tended to fire indiscriminately into them if fighters were present, resulting in heavy non-combatant casualties. This gave the Russians a tactical advantage over the Chechens during their retreat to the mountains in 1995, although heavy-handed Russian tactics steered the Chechen population against them.*

H. Iskhanov: I found a place for the headquarters after a day’s search. The headquarters had to be fairly close to the front line - if it was too far away, panic could start with rumors that the General Staff had run away. Too close was dangerous because of artillery fire. I chose the factory “Krasnyi Molot”. It was well reinforced against air bombing and conveniently located for access on the edge of town. *The requirement to locate the headquarters close to the front line makes an interesting contrast with the U.S. military’s efforts to remove the headquarters from the battlefield.*

H. Iskhanov: We stayed in Argun if I remember correctly until the end of March 1995 (see Figure 2). We defended Argun well. ... The spirit of the men improved. They realized that it was possible to fight the Russians after Grozny. They were not the terrifying adversaries they were claimed to be. At the beginning of the war people used to think that the Russian army was so huge that it could just roll over and squash us, and that nothing would be left of Chechnya. I heard such opinions a few times. The myth of “powerful Russia” was strong.

Maskhadov: 820 men took part in the operation, the August, 1996 attack on Grozny. I gave the order that every commander should lead his men, whether he had 20 or 200. The leader had to be in the forefront. I considered that most important. If they died we would all die. *In that attack, approximately 1,000 Chechens infiltrated Russian positions south of Grozny and attacked approximately 12,000 Russians troops garrisoned in the city. The attack succeeded, and led directly to negotiations that ended the war in a Chechen victory.*

Khambiev: 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, and I was in the kitchen. There was a balcony, but if I went out there I would be killed. I looked around. ... I jumped on a table and fired without thinking or aiming properly. I don’t remember exactly what happened afterwards, because I was burned and fell off the table. I thought the tank was firing, and 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. *Note that Khambiev—the battalion commander—was the best shot of his battalion. Chechen commanders were selected based on*

skill and leadership, not seniority. The best Chechen field commander—Shamil Basayev—was only 29 at the beginning of the war.

One could say that every military action we undertook was heroic. When we went to fight, every single man wanted to achieve something. Each one fought in his own manner. When I was asked to choose men for decorations after the war, I could not make up my mind because all were heroes. They did not know fear. Once in Grozny, one of my men was trying to hit a tank with a *mukha*,⁴ but he could not manage it. He shouted to me for help. I fired 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 him. 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.

Lest we turn the Chechens into supermen, Husein Iskhanov gives us a more balanced assessment.

H. Iskhanov: Not all men with weapons were fighting. Many were holed up in the district of Minutka. Perhaps they gave confidence to the residents of Minutka, but they were of no use to us. They were a nuisance because food supplies and ammunition were diverted to them by suppliers under the assumption that they were fighters. They remained in the cellars of the apartment blocks. Most of them were people from the villages. They had chosen their own commanders and came to Grozny’s rescue! Many for various reasons never reached the front line. They spent a week or two in the cellars and returned home telling their wives how brave they were. There were people like that, not all the nation was fighting.

I will give you an example: at the beginning of January 1995 Maskhadov sent me to Minutka to gather volunteers. When I got there, I rounded up the men, made a stirring speech, sent a group to Salamov, an aid of President Dudayev. They went through the railway line, crossing Belikovski Bridge because it was dangerous to cross the main bridge (the Russians had just reached the Petrol Institute and there was fighting on the main bridge). After sending them off, I gathered another group of 70 men. I lead them back to the Presidential Palace through the main bridge. When we got near the bridge, heavy mortar fire began. I told the men that we must wait 15 minutes for the shooting to abate and then cross rapidly in groups of four or five. After 20 minutes I was left with one man. All these brave resistance fighters had gone. I sent the man back to Minutka, but he did not manage to get anybody back. I had to return to the Palace alone.

Goliath: David’s View

It is not surprising that the Chechens hold the Russians in such low regard; their views are confirmed by countless journalistic accounts and even many accounts from Russians themselves. Indeed, one of the most remarkable findings of the war is how poor the state of the Russian Army was in by 1994.

⁴ Russian made anti-tank weapon.

Maskhadov: The Russians did not wage war properly, they were just prepared to take enormous losses and destroy everything. They did not value their soldiers, whereas we counted every man.

H. Iskhanov: Their tactics were always to crush the enemy through sheer weight, using their soldiers as cannon fodder when lives could be saved with better thinking. The generals had no pity for their young troops. They threw them in the line of fire without any compunction. They did not care if they lost one soldier or one thousand.

Khambiev: The (Russian) POWs used to tell us that they were forced to obey orders; otherwise, they would lose their apartments, their pension, whatever. They used to tell us that they knew what they were doing was wrong, but that they had no choice. Of course prisoners would say that sort of thing 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, and we had no way out.

Maskhadov: By August 1996, we gave up counting how many Russian troops were stationed in Chechnya. Their main garrisons were at Khankala and Severnyi airports. Their collapse had nothing to do with the level of training. It was morale – *strakh*, a gut fear which gripped them after the December (1994) storming of Grozny when they saw their comrades eaten by dogs and cats. When the first vehicle in a column was blown up, the others lost heart and stopped.

H. Iskhanov: The negotiation phase⁵ showed the true character of the Russian forces. The character of our relationship with the Russians changed during the negotiations. We stopped overestimating them. As a rule, they were usually drunk. They lost their alertness. We were able to bring weapons and ammunition back into Grozny. We learned where the Russian posts were and how to bypass them; we learned what controls they applied, what searches they made. We knew details of their daily routines, the time of changeover of the watches. We used the information to plan our offensive against Grozny in March 1996.

H. Iskhanov: If we have a war tomorrow, I am sure that the Russians will repeat all the mistakes they made during the course of this one. Their officer corps was incompetent and constantly drunk. It was obvious on 6 August 1996 that the Russians had not learned any lessons during the course of the war. First, they underestimated the number of our troops entering Grozny - you will remember how Russian media announced at first that only 250 *boiviki* had entered the city. Then, when they realized their mistake, General Pulikovsky gave his ultimatum – another proof that they had not amended their tactics. Their only option was massive air bombing.

Maskhadov: The Russians were reluctant to use infantry. I had the impression that they were scared, all they wanted was to dig themselves in a defensive position, hide in their tanks, but it was impossible in these conditions – on the contrary it was more frightening. So the tanks and APCs burned, and soldiers perished in them. There was no effort to defend or camouflage the tanks or accompany them with infantry. They just advanced in a huge mass, and as they advanced they were destroyed.

⁵ July – November 1995.

H. Iskhanov: When in the spring of 1996 it became evident even to the Russians that their tactics had no impact, they began surrounding villages to conduct cleaning-up operations. It was of little use because they could not check all the houses. They went through villages very scared of being attacked. They walked through the central street, having agreed beforehand with the local administration that the operation would be a simulation. “We will not touch you if you don’t attack us.”

S. Iskhanov: We always knew where and when a *zachistka* (“cleaning-up” operation) would take place, because the Russians used Chechen militia. The militia warned us; even the collaborators had family members on our side. When a place was surrounded, we had to have an escape route. When I got information about clean-up operations - even if the information was unconfirmed - I immediately passed it on to other groups who in turn warned others. We used radios when we could, or we sent couriers otherwise.

These operations were predictable: the Russians started at one end of a district and moved along the main street, only glancing into the courtyards. They seldom managed to encircle an entire district completely and to prevent people from moving out. There were many exits. Usually it was enough for those who had to hide to disappear through a back road while the Russian were checking the main street.

Once we had a clean-up operation in our borough. We simply moved to the other side of the main road and watched the soldiers. We did not even need to take cover. We did not generally keep a large amount of weapons. The groups working in Grozny had no more than five or six grenade launchers, some mortars and some ammunition. Sometimes the Russians used metal detectors in houses, but only an idiot would keep his weapons at home. There were plenty of places where we could bury our weapons. We hid light weapons, such as rifles, close to our houses. With advance warning, we had plenty of time to move them.

... generally *zachistka* had no organized character, no specific aim. We had the impression that clean-up operations were just a manner of “fulfilling the plan,” not so much to scare the population of Grozny as to reassure Russian troops themselves and for propaganda purposes.

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

H. Iskhanov: At the beginning of the war, the Russians did not know what type of radio we had. Later they managed to lay their hands on a transmitter and worked out our wavelength. At first, they made no attempt to monitor our communications systematically or to interfere with them. It seemed the Russian military in Chechnya was not equipped for that purpose. Only in the second year of the war did they begin to interfere. But the jamming was done by voice - silly sounds, swear words – it was primitive and ineffective.

One example of a successful Russian tactic:

H. Iskhanov: I saw one commando unit dropped by helicopters in the mountains around Vedeno. On that occasion, the Russians had managed to fool us: they had previously dropped parachutes with weights from airplanes. We thought they were commandos, rushed to the area of the drop and realised our mistake. Our attention was lowered. The ruse was followed by a second drop with weapons, while commandos landed by helicopters. The same tactic was used in Makhketi towards the end of the war, using 18 helicopters.

First Battle for Grozny

... the center of gravity in urban operations is never a presidential palace or a television studio or a bridge or a barracks. It is always human.

Ralph Peters
“The Human Terrain of Urban Operations”

On 11 December 1994, Russian forces attacked into Chechnya on three axes, all aimed at the Chechen capital, Grozny. By late December, all three columns had reached the outskirts of Grozny in the West, North and East, and mechanized and armored units were poised to initiate the assault on the city. Approximately 6,000 Russian assault troops were in position to attack against not more than 1,000 Chechen regulars and irregulars defending in the city.

On 31 December, following a ten day aerial and artillery bombardment of increasing intensity, two units--the 131st Maikop Brigade and the 81st Motor Rifle Regiment--launched mounted attacks into the city. The 131st Maikop Brigade first seized the airport on the outskirts of the city unopposed, then it was ordered to continue the attack to seize the downtown railway station, its lead units arriving by early afternoon. The 81st Motor Rifle Regiment was ordered to thrust into the city from the North, down Pervomaiskaya Street, also toward the downtown area (see Fig. 1).

In retrospect, it is clear that Russian commanders expected any Chechen resistance to melt away at the arrival of armored forces, and the crisis would be resolved without any significant fighting by rapidly seizing the Presidential Palace. Instead, the Russians' initial success proved illusory; soon, both Russian units would be engaged and fighting for their lives against skilled swarms of Chechen infantry, armed with automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). Over the next three days, the 131st Maikop Brigade would be totally destroyed, with only a handful of survivors among its 1,000 troops, and the 81st Motor Rifle Regiment would suffer 50% casualties.

Khambiev: Despite Grachev's assurance that Chechnya would be conquered in one week, Russian 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.

Maskhadov: On 31 December, the 131st Maikop Brigade, the 81st Samara Regiment and other units were able to enter Grozny without opposition. We had no regular army to speak of to oppose the Russian forces, only some small units trying to hold various points in the city. The Russians were able to ride into Grozny on their APCs and tanks without using infantry as if they were on parade. They surrounded the Presidential Palace; the city was filled with tanks. I was at my headquarters, surrounded by Russian tanks. I decided that we must engage battle, therefore, I gave the command to all the small units we had in and around the city to leave their positions and come to the Presidential Palace. They did not know that I was surrounded, but I knew that when they arrived they would face the enemy. Our units started arriving, saw the Russian positions and the battle began. The Russians did not expect it. They were sitting ducks, most of their troops positioned as if on parade around the Palace and on the square opposite the railway station. Their tanks and APCs were burned down in less than four hours. The Russians were on the run, hunted across Grozny by our units with grenade launchers, and even by boys with Molotov cocktails. This lasted for three days. All the Russian hardware that entered Grozny, some 400 tanks and APCs, was burned. The city was filled with corpses of Russian soldiers. For us, it was a tremendous success.

H. Iskhanov: We allowed the Russians to penetrate, then destroyed the first APC of the column, the last one and a couple in the middle. The Russians were squeezed because it was difficult to maneuver tanks and APC in the city, visibility was bad, and drivers could not see where they were going. We surrounded them and destroyed almost a whole regiment. We also took prisoners. That was how the 81st Samarski Regiment perished. According to our estimates, they had lost between 4,000 and 5,000 soldiers between the Maikop Brigade and the Samarski Regiment. *A more realistic estimate is that the Maikop Brigade lost almost all of its 1,000 troops and the Samarski Regiment lost as much as 50% of its approximately 1,100 troops.*

H. Iskhanov: In Grozny ... it was easy to prepare an ambush. We used concrete obstacles, putting dynamite inside and camouflaging them. But this did not inflict much damage; it was merely delaying tactics – it would take the Russians half an hour to clear these obstacles. They towed the concrete blocks with tanks, which gave us the chance to shoot at them. But as a rule, our aim was to draw them into the city. The best opportunities to hunt them were when the tanks were moving along the streets. In open fields and in the mountains, it was difficult to fight them.

The best tactic when facing a column in the city was to destroy the first APC and the tail one, because they always moved very close to each other. In city streets, it was difficult for them to maneuver and to establish combat positions as this took time. Panic spread rapidly when the head vehicle was immobilized; the following ones continued to move, there was a pile-up, and nobody thought of reversing. All one had to do was to shoot in the middle. *Appendix C provides a more detailed description of the Chechen urban ambush technique.*

Maskhadov: One of the reasons for our success during this (31 December) attack was the operation of 26 November, when Chechen opposition stormed the town with 50 armored vehicles. The officers and crews were Russian contract troops. They reached the Presidential Palace where the first tank was destroyed. After three hours all the hardware was burned or captured including 11 tanks. This battle was a kind of rehearsal. People lost all fear of Russian

tanks – they were mere matchboxes. This first success gave confidence to our men. During the 31 December attack, when they saw a tank, they considered it their duty to burn it. In some cases it became a competition – “leave this tank, it is mine.”

Maskhadov: Following the battle at the Presidential Palace, the battle raged on around the Council of Ministers building, the hotel Kavkaz, and the old “Neftianny” Institute, where we had twelve fighters. The building was surrounded by tanks, which were firing relentlessly. My men asked me for help, but I could not provide it. “Allah will help you” I told them. One hour later, they blew up one tank, then another. The Russians’ nerves broke, and they retreated. This is how we fought.

After the initial New Year’s Eve disaster, the Russians regrouped and initiated a deliberate assault on the city, using dismounted infantry and supporting arms to clear routes into the city, block by block. By 17 January, the Russians had reached the Presidential Palace, where Chechen resistance was centered, and the Chechens were forced to withdraw to the South across the Sunzha River on 18 January.

Husein Iskhanov’s account provides some interesting examples of the “friction” of war.

H. Iskhanov: After retreating from the palace, we moved the headquarters to the “Youth” cinema near the tunnel on Lenin Street. We spent 3 days there but Russian mortar and artillery fire was so heavy that it became dangerous. To avoid casualties, we moved further away from the center to Minutka. I was responsible for choosing a building for headquarters and decided on the City Hospital No. 2. My choice was determined by whether the building had a cellar where we could live and secure approaches. The hospital was a large building surrounded by small one story houses. It was destroyed, but the cellars could be used.

For the first time after a month of heavy fighting the (Russian) infantry moved into the city center as far as the University, some 60 meters from Lenin Street. If their infantry managed to reach Lenin Street, our units still remaining on the other bank near the palace would be surrounded. We immediately threw additional forces into Trampark (tramway park) area. For the first time since the beginning of the war, we managed to repel the enemy pushing him to the outer circle road of the city in Microraiion. I must stress that we had no anti-tanks weapons and no artillery; only grenade launchers, mortars, and light weapons. It was our first offensive, and it gave us much encouragement and confidence. *See Maskhadov’s account of this action below.*

Unfortunately the usual happened: a Chechen observation unit stationed on the Sunzha had left without notifying headquarters. The Russians managed to cross the Sunzha, and they penetrated the district unnoticed following the riverbank. The Russians observed Chechen movements carefully and immediately occupied the positions that our units left. Lack of professionalism and discipline was a great handicap to us at the beginning of the war.

There were approximately 100 (Russian) APCs in Trampark. Fighting was heavy. The Russians used mortar fire, 82mm and 122 mm. Our positions on the right bank stretched to the railway bridge. It was convenient because there were no more other bridges beyond. We had to

defend that bridge because we failed to blow it up completely; one side collapsed but APCs could still cross. A subdivision of the DGB (Department of Government Security) was guarding the bridge in Voikov near the Krupskaia cultural center by the railway. After being bombed, the subdivision left without warning headquarters. Russian infantry was able to cross the river and approach along Saikhanov Street, getting closer to our position. We only realized what had happened when the infantry was within 200-300 meters of our headquarters. We tried to repulse them, calling several units to the rescue. The first to arrive was the Presidential Guard, which had remained with Dudaev. But we lost contact with them. I tried to call them throughout the night but could not raise them on the radio. In the morning, we were told that they were surrounded or captured. The information was false. We sent other units to the rescue, and fighting broke out on Saikhanov Street. We learned later that the Guard got lost somewhere near the bus station.

The *okhrana* (bodyguards) of the General Staff, who had fought well in November 1994, was dispatched next. They also got lost. Maskhadov sent me to Basayev⁶ to get reinforcements, and he went himself to Minutka to find volunteers. We got as many people as we could to strengthen the frontline. The fighting was fierce. ...

We had some moderate success; in places the Russians retreated. They had reached a school on Saikhanov Street. In order to dislodge them we had to use tanks. We still had three tanks left, but there was a problem: our tank crews were scared of being shot by our own units. Today people say that tanks for Chechens were like a red rag to a bull, that all tanks were supposedly Russian, which was why we shot our own tanks by mistake. Personally, I think that our tanks were shot deliberately by Chechens serving the Russians. That was why our tank crews were scared to get near the front line, even with a large Chechen flag on the tank.

Fighting continued along Saikhanov Street. In my opinion, we had strengthened our positions sufficiently to counter-attack the Russians and force them to withdraw to their previous position beyond the Sunzha. There was a strong subdivision of 40 well-armed men near the bridge not far from Shamil Basayev's position. I asked them for reinforcement but they refused claiming that their commander was absent and that they needed his consent. They left, and the always-vigilant Russians drove their tanks across the bridge to support their infantry on Saikhanov Street.

We made the decision to lift the defense of Trampark and withdraw our forces, approximately 400 men. We spent 2 or 3 days in the 12th District but it was impossible to build defenses there, because the houses were too small. The Russians occupied most of the city. It did not make sense to fight for Grozny after the center had been captured.

Maskhadov: It was then that we decided, against all military logic, to counter-attack. It was a first in terms of military tactics and we forced tank units to retreat. How was it done? Our soldiers did not know how to dig trenches, they considered it humiliating, but there was no choice – the houses were too small and fragile, they could not withstand a tank attack. So we made a line between the Sunzha and Minutka, dug trenches, and with approximately 40 - 50 men facing the tanks we advanced meter by meter, digging more trenches as we crawled forward until

⁶ Basayev was the commander of the elite 500 man Chechen National Guard.

we reached the tanks and burned them. We pressed them until the tanks retreated, then we build more trenches and advanced further. It was highly unconventional trench warfare!

Some logistics-oriented observations of the battle:

H. Iskhanov: We had an acute shortage of ammunition right from the start of the war. We also lacked ammunition for grenade launchers, RPG-7s, for our 7.62mm automatic AKM rifles, and we had no 5.45mm ammunition for our AK-74s. ... That day (31 December 1994) we had 34 rounds of RPG-7 ammunition left under our beds. We felt great, but there were times when we had only three or four rounds. The fighters came constantly to ask for ammunition. We were lucky; somebody always turned up bringing ammunition when we most needed it.

In Grozny the supply and distribution of ammunition and food was already well centralized, because we were using the reserves of the Shali Tank Regiment. Throughout the battle of Grozny, we received ammunition from Shali. All the Russians had to do to stop the supplies were to cut the Baku highway. But they did not do it until the last moments. In fact, they cut the road when the supplies in Shali had run out. I saw Russian military and FSB maps. Their estimates of our forces were usually wrong, on a par with Grachev's claim that they could take Grozny in two hours. They were not assessing the situation realistically. That was probably why they never attempted to cut our supply route from Shali during the fighting in Grozny.

In January 1995, it became very complicated to evacuate the wounded. We had two troop carriers, which we used for that purpose in the evenings. One day the troop carrier was shot and destroyed by Chechens. (Here was another case when one of our armored vehicles transporting supplies was blown up, supposedly by our own people.) When we were leaving the Palace, all the remaining medics were volunteers. We carried the wounded on stretchers, on our backs, and we took all the medicine we could with us.

Maskhadov kept on demanding that the Russians should take away the bodies of their dead soldiers. He offered a cease-fire of two or three hours. We were scared of epidemics; you could not move around without stepping on a dead body. Each destroyed APC had on average 10 or 11 corpses. They were lying around half burned or eaten by dogs.

Withdrawal to the Mountains

Following their withdrawal from Grozny in February, the Chechens fought a series of delaying actions as they withdrew south toward the Caucasus Mountains (see Fig. 2). Because the terrain between Grozny and the mountains was generally open, the foot mobile Chechens were at a disadvantage against the vehicle mobile Russians and their air power, which frequently threatened to get behind them and cut off their retreat. The Chechen's situation was also adversely affected by their desire to protect other Chechen cities from destruction, thus they usually gave up, or were forced to give up, defending in favorable (urban) terrain.

By June 1995, the Chechens, literally, had their backs up against the mountains, and the war hung in the balance. The Russians had seized all but a few of the southernmost villages, and popular support for the resistance effort was waning. The Chechen resistance forces had been

split into two groups—an eastern group under Maskhadov and a western group under Dudayev—and they were preparing to revert to guerrilla warfare, hoping just to survive in the short term.

Maskhadov: (Following the retreat from Grozny), I was often criticized and advised that we should switch to partisan warfare. Dudaev advised hit and run “Afghan” style tactics. These were the tactics of the foreign volunteers (Khattab). I was against it because in a small territory such as ours, had we used such tactics we would have been pushed to the depth of the mountains in less than a week. During the whole war we kept a line of defense, whether in the city or in the mountains, we always had a territory to retreat to. In the beginning our tactics were purely defensive, then we switched to offensive maneuvers, later on to commando tactics and war along communication lines.

H. Iskhanov: In the first year, we waged war according to classic military rules – we held positions, we dug trenches, etc. In the second phase of the war, after our retreat from Vedeno, we decided to wage a more economical partisan war. We switched to commando style operations and did not try to hold a large front. It was pointless because, among other reasons, we did not have a centralized supply line after the withdrawal from Grozny. Food, money and ammunition were always lacking.

Maskhadov: At first our tactics were to engage the Russians, then leave and take position between villages and along the roads, hit them along the communication routes, then re-attack Russian positions in the towns, then retreat again. Later we launched commando operations to cut lines of communications.

H. Iskhanov: Meanwhile our units were using “attack and retreat” tactics and night raids. Wherever the Russians found themselves at nighttime, they immediately dug themselves in, buried their artillery and tanks. It was the best time to attack them. We used our knowledge of the territory and our experience during military service with Russians. We knew how Russians built their defenses; we knew Russian habits and language. The raids caused much panic but the Russians’ reaction was interesting: they refused to engage our units; instead of fighting off the attackers they turned their guns on Grozny or Argun aiming at residential quarters. Obviously, it was in the hope that the population would turn against us. Most of the casualties among the civilians were due to such indiscriminate bombardments.

H. Iskhanov: Maskhadov and I had a lucky escape in Argun. It was March 3rd, the day of Uraza. We had three tanks left. The idiotic tank crew, probably out of high spirits, fired at Russian positions from headquarters. The Russians found our position and began an artillery bombardment. Their aim was accurate.

Khambiev: 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 concentrations of forces. We could not take on a base with 500 or more tanks and APCs, but we knew everything and saw everything. We changed tactics constantly; sometimes we held defensive positions, sometimes we not. The Russians could not understand what kind of army we were.

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

Khambiev: They (the Russians) did not patrol at night. On the contrary, our men made the best use of the night for surveillance, locating minefields, and so on. The Russians only fired at random during the night.

H. Iskhanov: All (Russian) garrisons outside Grozny had to be supplied with food, ammunition and fuel. Columns of approximately 40 - 50 APCs transported the supplies, escorted by helicopters. Because of the sheer number of troops involved, we did not attack supply columns very often, except in a few spectacular cases, for example, in Yarishmardy. The terrain there served our purpose – it was a narrow mountain road, with a cliff on one side and a precipice on the other. We mined the road on a one-kilometer stretch. When the Russian tanks entered the area, one explosion was enough to throw them into the precipice. There was a similar case near Vedeno involving a commando battalion. We captured their APCs and artillery. But these were rare cases - the helicopter escorts prevented us from getting near the columns unnoticed.

The Raid on Budyonnovsk

On 14 June 1995 with the war at a critical point, Shamil Basayev and 148 Chechens staged a daring raid 100 miles into Russia that changed the course of the war. Posing as Russian mercenaries returning from Chechnya, Basayev's group bribed their way past Russian border guards and police until they reached the town of Budyonnesovsk, which was not their intended target. Their hand forced, Basayev's group improvised: they shot up the police station, then seized the town hall, took hostages, and raised the Chechen flag of independence. As Russian reinforcements arrived and the battle heated up, Basayev realized that they could not hold the town hall. So they rounded up additional hostages and moved, by foot, almost a mile to the town hospital. By the time they reached the hospital and took it over, they had at least 1,200 hostages.

The Russian military took the hospital under siege, while negotiations ensued. In a press conference broadcast nationwide, Basayev demanded that Russia remove all troops from Chechnya and guarantee safe passage of Basayev and his men to Chechnya. Not surprisingly, the Russian Government denied the request, and the Russian military stormed the hospital on Day 4 of the crisis, an assault that resulted in the deaths of many hostages but failed to dislodge the Chechens, who still had more than 1,000 hostages. Two more assaults ensued, neither successful, and more hostages were killed in the crossfire.

On the 5th day of the crisis, The Russian Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin negotiated directly with Basayev. The Chechens released 200 hostages during the day, and Chernomyrdin agreed to Basayev's demands to an immediate cease-fire in Chechnya, the opening of peace talks and safe passage for Basayev and his men (accompanied by 150 hostages). The Chechens returned to a hero's welcome, while the Russian Government, because of its mishandling of the crisis, experienced public relations disaster.

The raid was rightly condemned worldwide as a terrorist attack; even Dudayev condemned the action. Yet it may also be viewed from the Chechen perspective as a successful special operation: a tactical action that achieved strategic goals. The raid shocked the Russian public, which assumed it was immune to casualties, and it discredited the Russian Government, which had been boasting that the war was in the mopping up stage. The raid boosted public support among the Chechens, and, by initiating negotiations, it gave the Chechen separatists time to rest and rearm. The Russians never recovered the initiative.

Maskhadov: ... I was never keen on raids such as Budyonnovsk and Pervomaiskaia.⁷ We had to fight with honor, to show not only courage but also the quality of our people. The rules of war should apply despite our small numbers. *Maskhadov and Basayev were the Chechen's two top commanders in the war. Maskhadov had been an artillery commander in the Soviet Red Army; Basayev had gained his military experience in guerrilla operations in low intensity conflict. Their different perspectives on the raid make an interesting contrast.*

I wanted to show the superiority of our code of honor as well as our military skills. I think I succeeded. I did not approve of operation such as Pervomaiskaia - I knew that victory would be ours anyway. Budyonnovsk was more important: it brought the Russians to the negotiating table. It was the first time when people in Russia understood that there was a war. It was very important psychologically – Russians could not believe that civilians could be killed in broad daylight in “peacetime.” What kind of peace was it? They still did not believe that war was raging. It was important to demonstrate that people could also be killed in Russia. Budyonnovsk opened the eyes of ordinary Russians.

H. Iskhanov: The majority of the population was loyal to us. However, when we were pushed into the mountains after Vedenovsk and Dargo, we began to have problems in Benoy and Nozhay Yurt. People thought that we had failed, that the war was lost. The attitude of the population became ambiguous. People watched us with suspicion, tried to spy on us. They began saying that we were creating problems for the nation, that we should perish or retreat deep into the mountains, and leave them to lead their lives undisturbed. It was a difficult time. Everything changed after Basayev took the decision to march on Budyonnovsk.

Until Budyonnovsk we had our back to the mountains; there were no more villages beyond. The enemy was within 5 or 6 kilometers. ... Basayev's raid changed the course of the war. We gained time. During several months of negotiations in Grozny, our confidence grew. The population's mood changed, once again we were welcome everywhere. When we drove for

⁷ Pervomaiskaia was a raid into Daghestan on 9 Jan 96 that was similar to the raid on Budyonnovsk conducted earlier, although the former was not as successful. The Chechens lost almost 100 fighters in the raid, and it resulted in the loss of Daghestani support for Chechnya.

the first time to Grozny with Maskhadov, an enormous crowd gathered to greet us in Novogroznensky. Everyone wanted to touch us, as if we were saints!

S. Iskhanov: Budyonnovsk was probably the only operation, which was prepared in complete secrecy. All other operations, as far as I know, like the attacks on Grozny, were known in advance and talked about in the bazaars. With Pervomaiskaia, there was no need to advertise it – the whole world had forward knowledge. But Budyonnovsk was different.

It was a breakthrough in the war. It raised our spirits. Until then we had retreated everywhere. It was impossible to cross the frontline, because we did not know the situation behind Russian lines. Budyonnovsk gave us the possibility to break through and reach behind Russian lines. Our confidence grew, and we started making forays in the lowlands. These were easier than fighting in the highlands, struggling up mountain slopes pulling our guns.

H. Iskhanov: Before Budyonnovsk, our shortages were critical. With great difficulty we brought some weapons through Dagestan but they were pathetically few. During the negotiations (following Budyonnovsk), we amassed more ammunition than we ever had before.

... The raid on Budyonnovsk was prepared in utter secrecy. I did not know anything about it beforehand. It was known that something was afoot, that a group was going somewhere. People even thought that the fighters were planning to run away. Geliskhanov and Khultygov⁸ may have heard something because they tried to ambush Basayev's commanders. It was the first time that Chechens managed to keep a secret.

Second Battle for Grozny

After the raid on Budyonnovsk, a cease-fire ensued, and negotiations continued through the fall of 1995. Two events marked an end to the cease-fire: two car bomb attacks on senior Russian official in Grozny in October, and major battle between Chechen and Russian forces in the town of Gudermes in December, resulting in heavy civilian and Russian casualties. The 9 Jan 96 raid on Pervomaiskaia added further impetus to the war's resumption.

On 6 March 1996, Chechen fighters initiated a surprise raid on Grozny, striking from three directions, surrounding outlying Russian posts and Chechen police stations, and catching the Russians off guard. The raid demonstrated that the Chechens could strike anywhere in Chechnya in force, and it proved to be a rehearsal for the culminating battle of the war five months later.

H. Iskhanov: The March 1996 offensive against Grozny coincided with an important meeting of the Russian Security Council that was due to decide a new policy for Chechnya. We intended to make a political statement - we wanted to show that we had an army with a centralized command. But it was nearly impossible to drive the Russians out without artillery. Automatic weapons were not enough.

⁸ Geliskhanov and Khultygov were prominent Chechens who cooperated with the Russians.

S. Iskhanov: The March operation was kept reasonably secret, which was surprising, because it was difficult to keep a secret among Chechens. As a whole, it came as a surprise although people were expecting something of the kind. I was ordered to leave Grozny just as our armed units were entering town. I watched the fighting in the early morning; by around 6 PM, most positions were occupied. All Russian posts were surrounded and immobilized, but our forces did not have the order to storm them. Blocking them was enough. Those Russian groups that were caught along the routes of our units were destroyed. We heard their calls on the radio asking for help. They could not understand what was happening, who the attackers were, or where they had come from. There was a good panic.

The Russian garrison in our district tried to sortie to the aid of the *Komendatura*, but we met them. There was a good fight, and we burned most of their equipment. But we could not fight for long because of lack of ammunition, and they managed to move back to their base with one APC. After that, they made no further attempt and buried themselves quietly in their base. After three days, our units withdrew. The Russians waited one week before moving back in.

Before the March 1996 attack on Grozny, the Russians made no effort to patrol Grozny or scout a route before troop movements. Afterwards they became more alert, especially as our units had intensified their sabotage activity in spring 1996 – mainly exploding Russian staff cars and APCs. They closed streets and crossroads and had snipers at every corner. In the morning, around 6-7 am, they would bring their units out of their bases, together with engineers in 2 or 3 APCs, to check the roads. When they began patrolling we had to find new methods.

Third Battle for Grozny

On 6 August 1996, the Chechens initiated a surprise attack on the Russian garrisons defending Grozny, an attack that caught the Russians completely by surprise, and one that proved to be the decisive battle of the war. It was, to the Russians, what the 1968 Tet Offensive had been to the U.S. war effort in Vietnam.

The Chechens infiltrated more than 1,500 fighters into the city from three directions in a carefully orchestrated assault. They didn't try to immediately reduce the Russian garrisons; instead, they surrounded them and cut them off from escape or reinforcement. Additional Chechen reinforcements over the next several days brought the total force to around 3,000 fighters. Numerous Russian efforts to relieve the besieged garrisons failed, and the Russian Leadership was forced, by 21 August, to negotiate a cease-fire and the eventual withdrawal of all Russian forces from Chechnya by the end of the year. Although a final decision on the issue of Chechen sovereignty was put off for five years, the Chechens had *de facto* gained their independence.

The boldness with which this operation was planned and conducted can hardly be overstated. The Chechens were badly outnumbered, especially in light of the large number of Russian forces outside the city that could react to the Chechen's attack.

Khambiev: I personally was weary, and I was hoping to be sent anywhere but 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 that I would not be able to escape from Pervomaiskoe⁹ 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.

Two or three days after the start of the operation, I began to change my mind and realize 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.

Maskhadov: The attack began at 5 am on 6 August. All our targets were met. It was a success. Our men moved through different routes into the city, they had to approach their targets - the posts, bases, *kommendatory*, the garrison in Khankala, hit them by surprise, then move on to cut the roads and not let anybody through, leaving a few snipers and a machine-gunner. Each unit knew precisely which section it had to operate in. In a very short time all the roads in the city were cut as far as Severny airport and the Russians tied up. When Russian columns tried to move in from outside, it was too late. All the bases were captured or disarmed. We could not take the government building and the MVD, so we burned them instead.

Khambiev: It was much easier to fight in Grozny than in Nozhay Yurt. Nozhay Yurt district was open territory, and one had to wait until the tanks approached within 500 meters to hit them. This was the maximum range of our grenade launchers. The Russians knew it, and they never approached any closer.

Azimov: When they arrived in the first village, Michurin, the road divided toward Argun and Atagi. ... That was where our units ambushed them using grenade launchers. The Russians had tied themselves to their APCs in order not to be thrown out by explosions. There were legs, arms, heads and other body parts flying all over the place. They left the main road and followed a railway line behind the village. On one side of the railway line was another small village facing fields on the other side. The Russians moved along the fields on a parallel line to the road. The infantry was marching ahead in battle order; behind them moved the tanks. They bombarded the village. After the village, they had to cross open wasteland before reaching Minutka. From a ten story building in Minutka, we saw their approach. We had snipers in that building and they inflicted heavy damage on the column, which was forced to turn back. Approximately six successive columns tried to reach the city but had to turn back.

Chechen Tactics & Organization

Khambiev: 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.

⁹ Pervomaiskoe was a supporting attack, intended to isolate the Russian forces in Grozny from reinforcements.

Khambiev: Discipline was excellent, but every one took initiative. 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. No one needed specific instructions. The men knew what they had to do without being told.

Khambiev: Some commanders claimed that they had 500 or even 1,000 men, but I never had more than 150. 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, and I knew I could trust them. We won together.

S. Iskhanov: Among the enemy, in civilian clothes, it is very easy to fight. Of course we felt bad about those who fought on the frontline – there you were, clean shaved and in civilian kit while others were in the trenches. But despite the ease, our opportunities were limited – one had to be on the lookout for opportunities – not for the enemy, but for the right moment to start an action.

... To sum up our tactics: there was no question of holding positions, of fighting for every inch of territory as during World War II. This is probably a tactic of the past. In Chechnya, it did not apply. When we built defensive positions and trenches in the countryside, we were always close to a village, which could become the target of Russian retaliatory fire. If this happened, we had to leave. They were our people, and we could not subject them to certain reprisals.

H. Iskhanov: In Grozny, the Russians preferred to use armored forces rather than infantry. Without knowing the city, they lost direction. Our units were positioned in high rise buildings from where it was easy to destroy APCs. But the Russians changed their tactics during the offensive against Vedeno - they used infantry, aviation, and APCs simultaneously. In these conditions, it was difficult to counter Russian offensives, and we always left our positions to safeguard the population. When the Russians reached their designated target area, we quietly moved into the positions they had left. It was a cat and mouse game. Thus, the Russians “took” Vedeno two or three times. Each time we left in the direction of the lowlands. They had to kick us out of there again and again.

H. Iskhanov: Once we armed a unit with 12 grenade-launchers. By our standards, it was considered a very powerful unit. As a rule, a group of 10 men had only one grenade-launcher. Our average units numbered 10-20 men – there was no point in having larger groups because headquarters was not in a position to feed and supply them. Also, it was difficult for large groups to move around in the city.

Khambiev: 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 “tankers.” 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 here.” It was rather the men who came to us and said “I have a sniper rifle, I want to use it, can I help?”

Intelligence, Surveillance & Reconnaissance (ISR)

H. Iskhanov: In the first six months of the war, until Budennovsk, we had difficulty getting information on the situation in the zone under Russian control. We could not bypass Russian forces to attack them in the rear. Controls on the roadblocks were dangerous. We had no organized communication network and no mobile agents gathering intelligence. Later we used the civilian population besides our own agents. But the information provided by civilians was not detailed, and we had to check it.

S. Iskhanov: After Budennovsk, I was sent to Grozny by Maskhadov to set up an intelligence network. I was answerable to the General Staff. I had to gather information on Russian positions in preparation for the March 1996 attack against Grozny, although I did not know what was planned at the time. I guessed that something special was brewing, but it was only with hindsight that I understood much of the purpose of my work. I had to collect information on the Russians’ exact positions, their numbers, the routes in and out of Grozny, the possible ways of bringing weapons into the town, but I had few concrete instructions from headquarters. My mission was broad – to gather information everywhere.

I began on my own. I had no team. I started by using friends and relatives. I had no way of paying them and no money to pay for information. At first I tried to be casual and did not tell them the real purpose of my inquiries. Throughout the remainder of the war, my helpers were all volunteers. I had a map of Grozny and its surroundings. I began by travelling to the districts where the Russians had their bases and garrisons. I checked the people I knew in the area – usually 5 or 6, and I recruited them.

The first task was to find the best routes to reach the Russian bases. We had no training in intelligence work; to find out the number of Russian troops and equipment was pure improvisation at first. Each tried in his own manner. I often used young women. When I traveled to report to headquarters with documents, I always took a young woman with me (she was very brave and survived the war). It was a safeguard.

To gather information around the capital, we had to walk. We explored routes through woods and forests on foot: between Grozny and Urus Martan, the piedmont, and escape routes to the southern mountains. Sometimes we walked as far as the positions of our units in the pre-Alps.

After we had explored a district and verified that passage for our units was possible, we selected some local people to watch and report any changes, in particular, changes in the position of road blocks, any movement of troops and/or weapons, or any unusual movement or development. Once checked, these areas came under constant surveillance. We knew that we had to update our information all the time.

One of our best sources of information was the market. People in the market were in touch with traders who, themselves, were in contact with all the principal Russian garrisons. These garrisons usually had small markets nearby which provided them with goods, alcohol, narcotics and so on. The traders had their favorite clients among the Russian soldiers, in particular, those who had plenty of money, which they had stolen during clean-up operations. The soldiers chatted with the traders who, naturally, got information. When we were organizing a special operation, it was essential that we knew when a Russian column would be on the move. That was when the traders were useful.

Of course between the time we gathered the information and the March 1996 operation, changes inevitably occurred. Mumadi Saïdaev grumbled afterwards that some of our numbers were not accurate. But we could not update information every day. Passing on information was not easy. Our radio communications were poor, because priority was given to military operations. Our radio did not reach all the mountain regions. We had to get to the highest houses in Grozny to communicate. We would waste two or three hours to get the headquarters. When we got it, communications would often be cut off. More often than not, we had to report in person with all our notes.

Our key asset was that we were able to melt among the civilian population. The phenomenon of *dedovshchina* in the Russian army helped us greatly in our intelligence gathering. As a rule, we did not bother with small posts of 20-30 men. They became useless as soon as they were isolated among Chechens. But we always watched the larger garrisons, watching for Russian soldiers wandering out through the minefields surrounding them. We caught the soldiers, and they gave us information on their bases, their numbers, weapons, ammunition stores, relations between officers and troops, and so on.

The greatest difficulty we faced was travel because of the constant identity checks by military roadblocks. The Russians had lists of people to be detained. Nobody was safe from these checks; having the same name as somebody on these lists would put you in danger. We tried to avoid crossing checkpoints. In the city, all the danger spots could be bypassed with the exception of the Sunja crossing, although on foot you could even cross the Sunja. When transport had to be used, it became more dangerous. We avoided using private cars and taxis and used public buses instead. One knew that in case of difficulty, the chances were that people in the bus would help, and one could escape. When you were in a bus surrounded by women, you felt more secure. If you were stopped at a checkpoint, the women would start a row in order to prevent your arrest.

... There were many cases when we captured Russian officers in the market, in the center of town, next to the FSB building. It was easy to get them out of Grozny - the local militia helped us. They accompanied us with their armed cars when we had to get people out of town.

S. Iskhanov: Dressed in Russian uniforms, we were able to drive around town in broad daylight across Russian posts. The Russians could not identify us as Chechens, because they had many foreigners serving in their ranks – Tatars, Dagestanis, and North Caucasians. It was not your looks which mattered but your attitude. If you were not confident, it was better to avoid going through a Russian post.

There were other special (Chechen) groups operating in Grozny. They mined the roads, hunted for Russian officers and vehicles. Communications with them were difficult, because they were small groups -- 4 to 5 people -- never more than 10. These men had no specific bases; they lived at home, kept their weapons at home or near by despite the danger. We had no radio communications with them; we just met from time to time.

Weapons

Maskhadov: We had no mines, so we took ammunition from howitzers, removed the detonators, and turned them over so that they would explode when tanks would roll over them. My men became experts in mining and explosives.

H. Iskhanov: After Lomaz Yurt, another battle took place in Dolinsky. Maskhadov, a former artillery officer, decided to use GRADs directly against the Russian columns. It was a novel method of using GRADs. Nobody before Maskhadov had thought of putting them to that use. Later, when we started negotiations with the Russians in 1995, they admitted that they had lost up to 200 men in Dolinsky.

H. Iskhanov: At the beginning of the war we had 18 APCs and T-62 tanks, but they were old models, and we did not have enough ammunition. We also had some D-30 Howitzers, but we quickly realized that they would be of little use. Their impact was minimal, because our positions were bombed by air, and we had no anti-aircraft weapons. Our artillerymen were not trained for such a situation. It is one thing to use long-range artillery if you are positioned 10 or 20 kilometers from your target, but when you are facing a column of tanks close-up, it is a different thing.

It was difficult to transport the artillery when under air attack. We did not have enough tractors and lorries. ... We had overlooked that we would need transport for our equipment and had none readily available. We abandoned most of our equipment, taking the mortars, which were on wheels and easy to move, as well as some artillery equipment. It was no great loss because we had no ammunition anyway.

... We had another handicap: the men were reluctant at first to use tracer bullets, because they feared that they would reveal their position. I exhorted them to imagine the fear of the Russian soldier when he saw the bullet and knew that it would hit him. Gradually our men got used to the idea. They had to, since we had little else. And it proved true that these bullets created greater panic among Russian soldiers than ordinary bullets.

H. Iskhanov: When Russians heard single shots, they believed that they were sniper shots. We had sniper rifles but very few. We got them from the APCs and the tanks that we shot. We also removed some guns from Russian tanks and used them as hand-held guns. We got most of our ammunition during combat operations. We also got many automatic weapons at the beginning of the war, since few were around before December 1994.

Khambiev: 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 we started firing at a helicopter, it turned on its side, which was plated with titanium in the direction of fire.

Khambiev: 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.

S. Iskhanov: I am not an expert on mines, but I know that we started using mines that exploded with daylight. The mines were laid and covered with rubber and earth. After dogs had sniffed the mines, the engineers would uncover them and they would explode. We also used pipes filled with nails and other stuff. We tied them to posters to hit the APCs from above. It had a strong demoralizing effect on the Russians, and they would avoid clean-up operations in areas where explosions had occurred. However, they often did spot checks in the raion of Berezka, where there is a market, and, in general, around the main garrisons. At night they fired at random around the garrisons.

S. Iskhanov: When we retreated from Grozny, the Russians, in order to avoid risking their soldiers' lives, used the Shmel and grenades to systematically clear the cellars. ... We also used the Shmel in Grozny for our special operations; it is an exceptionally good weapon for urban fighting, in particular, for destroying a Russian post or a sniper position. One shot at a window was enough.

H. Iskhanov: At the beginning of the war, because of a lack of ammunition for grenade launchers designed for use against armored vehicles, we used anti-personnel fragmentation shells. They were not effective against the new T-80 tanks. They were powerful and had better protection around the caterpillars, the vulnerable spot in the older model.

Necessity forced us to play on psychological factors. Because it was so very difficult for us to destroy T-80 tanks, we would tie 100-200 grams of trinitrotolud to the grenade shells. It produced a great explosion without damaging the tanks, but it shocked the crews, and there were frequent cases where they abandoned a perfectly operational tank. When you were in a tank or an APC, you had the feeling of being trapped in a metallic coffin. Even a small hit often caused soldiers to abandon their vehicles. When they ran out of the tanks we killed or captured them.

When besieging a building we used pepper or *dust* (a smelling powder). The Russians did not realize what it was, and they thought we had chemical weapons. It caused panic.

We also used an inflammable mixture in Molotov cocktails. The population, especially children, prepared a great many of these at the beginning of the war. But it was not easy to throw a Molotov cocktail at a moving tank – one had to get very close.

We transformed grenades by adding an inflammable mixture, approximately 20 per cent petrol and 80 per cent oil (some people used different proportions). There is a little void at the head of the grenade. We unscrewed it and poured in 100 grams of the mixture. When the grenade exploded, the mixture caught fire. It did not do much harm, but the psychological impact was strong.

H. Iskhanov: In Serzhen Yurt, Russians used some chemicals, but as a rule they did not make much use of gas and smoke screens. They used smoke screens in defensive situations in order to be able to retreat unnoticed. As we did not mount many large offensives in wide-open areas, there was little use for smoke screens.

Azimov: In Grozny, the Russians threw barrels of chemicals out of helicopters during the March and August 1996 offensives. They picked certain districts in a quadrangle, trying to isolate them. The chemicals produced smoke and people felt oppressed. We had no protection against that. But in urban conditions, it did as much harm to the Russian troops as to us. It could have been effective against large formations across a front line or a battlefield, but it was useless against small mobile groups.

Deception

H. Iskhanov: ... we used our knowledge of the Russians. We also had the same communications system and radios. Our head of communications, Colonel Taimaskhanov, who was killed shortly after the beginning of the war, had served as a signal officer in the Soviet Army. He knew his job perfectly. ... We had a special room in the Palace for the radio operators. Whenever we had a moment, we would go there to “talk” to the Russians. We listened to their call-up and waited for the moment when they were giving orders, having determined who was in command and who was a subordinate. Then we intervened, giving different orders in a confident manner, providing false positions, and so on. As a result, the Russians suffered more losses at the beginning of the war through friendly fire than through our efforts. They lost direction in the town; it was the usual Russian *bardak* (chaos).

H. Iskhanov: In my opinion, the Russians made a mistake when they insisted on Grozny for the (post-Budennovsk raid) negotiations rather than a more neutral territory, such as Argun or Urus Martan. We arrived in Grozny like the Mongol hordes. At first, Maskhadov was only allowed to cross Russian posts with 12 bodyguards in 5 cars, the number and type of weapons carried by his bodyguards clearly specified. On the first occasion we respected these requirements, but that soon changed. As we got to know the men in the military posts along the road, our fighters began to show their contempt for them; we entered the posts and took photographs. Soon we drove through the roadblocks without stopping. ... I ordered, through friends in Moscow, a copy of the Russian High Command seal. We used it from time to time to bring our men into Grozny, but mostly we used personal contacts with the Russians. Our units began to infiltrate Grozny from all directions. Grozny was filled with our men.

H. Iskhanov: With the two operations against Grozny (March and August 1996), we deliberately announced our entry into Grozny beforehand. Our double bluff worked - the

Russians did not believe it because we kept on changing the dates to lower their alertness. After the rehearsal of March 1996, we did not expect too many difficulties for the August re-conquest of the capital. The March operation was entirely successful. We had achieved everything we set out to do with minimal casualties.

Demaev: Technically speaking, the Russians were much better equipped than we were, but their advantage was one of quantity rather than quality. We had 10 radio stations, while they had hundreds or thousands. But they were unable to use them properly; for example, they did not know how to switch channels or change wavelengths. They had Johnston equipment, but their communications were not stable. The APCs and tanks had radios that we could intercept, but their main problem was that their radio operators could not recognize each other's voice. We spoke Russian, and many of us had served in the Soviet Army. I had served in a communications unit and I knew how the system worked, so I had no problem talking on their wavelength and deceiving them.

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

Of course the Russians changed their wavelength and call codes. But their problem was that they had little time to concentrate on such details. If a unit changed wavelength and codes, other units would not have time to follow suit or would not know how to do it. As a result, the Russian commanders generally avoided communicating among themselves. Their operators could only cope with the basics – to find out where their soldiers were and where our positions were. If they changed anything it was generally only the call-up codes.

I was ashamed to have served in Soviet Army. Regardless of the quality of your equipment, if you have idiots using it, it becomes useless.

Demaev: I did not know that the March 1996 operation against Grozny was merely a rehearsal for August 1996. Maskhadov called me to his headquarters in Alleroy, gave me money for food, and said "here are your orders." They were written on 11 pages in his small neat handwriting and explained what I should do during the four crucial days from 28 February to 2 March. Every detail was taken into account hour by hour. I had 4 operators, one in Shelkovsky raion, one in Ishkhoy Yurt, another nearby and an assistant. They wrote down Maskhadov's orders and retransmitted all the commands: "move in that direction," "occupy these positions," "disarm this base," etc. The commands were addressed to imaginary units. We knew that the Russians were

listening. The operation was planned as if we were meant to move from all directions, Nozhay Yurt, Vedeno, the North, to regroup. During the operation, ...I listened to our radio and almost believed that it was for real - it was so convincing. I almost believed that we really had so many troops and weapons. Later when I met Maskhadov and Basyaev, they told me “it was a success, the Russians were firing at deserted regions around Zandak and Nozhay Yurt.

Communications

H. Iskhanov: Besides Russian radios, we had 13 Motorola radio transmitters. In the Presidential Palace, we used a radio from an APC. However, it used a lot of energy and was difficult to transport, so we destroyed it before leaving the palace. The Motorolas were a great asset, and we used them increasingly in the course of the war.

H. Iskhanov: We usually spoke in Chechen, which was difficult for the Russians to understand. We had a kind of code for our communications. To identify an area we would refer to a particular event that took place there. We never mentioned names. If the Russians or the Chechens working for them listened, they could not understand the meaning of our conversation. In the Soviet period, we saw films featuring Russian cipher experts who supposedly could decipher any code. It gave us the idea to use a numerical cipher. It was not sophisticated, but we changed the numbers frequently. When using the numerical cipher, we still disguised the meaning of our messages.

During the negotiations in Khankala, the Russians provided us with a large and heavy radio transmitter, which we installed in Grozny. We used it for 2 months to report to Maskhadov on the situation in the Southwest. Later the southwestern front complained that it did not have direct contact with headquarters. I moved the transmitter to Urus Martan with the help of the (pro-Russian) Chechen militia. I set up the transmitter, called all our radio operators, introduced them to each other, and instructed them to report twice a day, morning and evening. But they never did it. They told me later that they were afraid of indicating their position to the Russians.

In my experience, the Russians never attempted to locate our radio transmitters. They did not have the necessary equipment and know-how. In war conditions, it was practically impossible for them to locate our transmitters because they were using the same equipment and wavelength. They could not distinguish between their transmitters and ours. But the Motorola radios were safer because one could move around with them.

Ali Demaev was the head of communications for the Chechen separatists. His account of the war contains countless “nuggets” for communicators, and it presents a very unconventional approach that apparently worked extremely well. Highlights are included here.

Demaev: ... The Russians, who have a greater choice of modern equipment than us, dismiss our claims that we can communicate in a 100-kilometer radius with one radio. “You cannot possibly do it in your mountain conditions,” they say. But we look for the best spots on the highest mountains, and it works. The same applies to urban areas; you have to be in the highest position to coordinate communications.

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

I did not have a single expert radio operator at the beginning of the war, even for the Russian equipment. For the foreign equipment we did not have the operating instructions in Russian. The first time I saw a Motorola radio station and transmitter was in December 1994. I was not familiar with that equipment, even on what wavelength they operated, but I knew that they had a range of some 20 kilometers. When we first set our Motorolas on the mountains, we were surprised at the quality and range of the communication, and we were amazed to find that we could intercept the communications of the enemy. In time we learned how to use it properly. The difficulty was the lack of computerized backup. The other problem was that we did not choose the equipment ourselves; we took what was brought to us. Today, we are mainly using "Ken" equipment. It is of the same quality as Motorola but better suited to field conditions; you do not need the backup equipment.

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

We had 4-5 of these amateurs in each region of Chechnya on top of our permanent staff of six. To tell you the truth, there was a time when I was left alone with a Russian prisoner and a German shepherd dog, two repeaters, a Honda generator and a Russian jeep. Some of my men had left, others were ill. ... For the whole of Chechnya, we had no more than 20 professionals. The amateurs numbered 20-30.

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

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

The Russians knew that we had our stations at altitude. That was why they bombed the mountains. In Nozhay Yurt, we had our station at the top of the highest hill, 2/3 km away from a Russian garrison. The Russians could see us during the day going about our business, they could even see our antenna with binoculars. At night they fired at us but usually missed.

Before the final attack on Grozny, in August, 1996, I was given the order to set up a communication base in Chechen Aul. I had lived in Grozny, and I knew the Oktiabr raion well. I knew where the Russians were positioned and from where they could attack us. That is why I went to the 56th district to set up our station ... with which we were listening to Russian helicopters, at an altitude of 920 meters. We were able to communicate with all the commanders and retransmit. In fact we talked so much that the Russians could not make out what was true and what was false.

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

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

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

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

The situation was difficult when the headquarters was in Vedeno because of the altitude. Our station had to be higher than the village. If the road was bombed we were cut off from headquarters. It was like that throughout the war with the headquarters below us and our communications center on the highest mountain or the highest tree in the area. Had we had radio

stations which could be programmed with computers, we would not have had these problems, and our communications would have improved greatly.

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

Psychological Operations

Maskhadov: They (false announcements) were done to put psychological pressure on the Russians – the Chechen high command would announce that they would undertake a certain operation. As a result a number of Russian troops would be tied up while they attacked elsewhere. Alternatively we would sometimes announce in advance an operation that we intended to mount. This was the case with the recapture of Grozny in August 1996. The double bluff worked, the Russians did not believe it and were unprepared.

Demaev: Chats with the Russian soldiers below our station would usually be on simple topics: “Who is fighting where? What are you doing? What are you eating?” We got to know them quite well, where they came from, their family history. They were young lads who did not want to fight. ... Maskhadov instructed us to keep radio contact with Russian troops as often as we could. We had a mobile radio station with which we rode around and broadcast Chechen and Russian music. We enjoyed talking to them and being able to influence them. We had a Russian POW who became a friend. He spoke with such conviction to his former comrades that some of them listened and believed him.

Sometimes we interfered with Russian communications in a more obnoxious way. We would tell them, “look here, guys, get off our line, we are working here, you have nothing to do here, we will give you food if you do not interfere.”

Conclusion

This paper presents an unusual and unique perspective on the 1994-1996 war in Chechnya, however, it would be wrong to draw conclusions based solely on it. Yet many, if not almost all, of the Chechen insights compare favorably to those of both journalists who covered the war¹⁰ and even those of some Russian commanders and troops, who either participated in the war or who observed it firsthand. In this light, there are at least four areas where useful lessons can be drawn.

First, in light of the Marine Corps’ maneuver warfare doctrine, this paper presents a striking contrast of warfighting styles at the opposite ends of the maneuver/attrition spectrum. The Chechens were the epitome of maneuver-style warfare: bold, audacious, lead-from-the-front commanders; non-linear tactics based on high initiative and various forms of the ambush; and

¹⁰ See *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* by Anatol Lieven, and *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* by Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal.

confident, cohesive units that were comfortable fighting the enemy up-close-and-personal and skilful at withdrawing to fight elsewhere. On the other hand, Russian operations were characteristic of an attrition-style force. Relying on the unimaginative use of overwhelming firepower, the Russians advanced cautiously and methodically following their first blunder into the Chechens' hornet's nest in Grozny on 31 December 1994. In close-range fighting, most Russian forces were outclassed by the skilled and nimble Chechens, who almost always fought at a material disadvantage. Russian forces were extremely passive, a direct reflection of their low morale and poor fighting spirit. Most ominously, Russian troops lacked confidence in their commanders, who, at best, were simply out of touch with reality at the lower levels, or, at worst, knowingly and uncaringly committed their troops in situations that they knew were hopeless. It will be interesting to see how much, if any, Russian forces currently fighting in Chechnya have improved over the dismal performance of those who fought there in 1994-1996.

Second, extensive urban fighting reinforces many of the findings uncovered through Marine Corps Warfighting Lab wargaming and experimentation:

- In the close terrain of the “urban jungle,” small, highly cohesive units, operating independently, work best. Urban combat, as true throughout history, remains a small unit affair.
- Good, timely intelligence is essential, especially human intelligence. Urban combat is highly dynamic and close range; engagements may be sudden and last only a few minutes. Navigation is often complicated, and knowledge of micro-terrain takes on a greater significance.
- Command and control works best when organizations are “flattened” and decision-making is decentralized.
- Communications requirements are significantly different than they are in open terrain. For example in urban combat, communications security is best obtained through voice recognition and code familiarization techniques, not through electro-mechanical means. Also, small units have a greater need for radio communications, even down to the individual, if used correctly.

Third, this study once again demonstrates the difficulty state armed forces have in defeating non-state “actors.” As Martin Van Creveld explains in *The Transformation of War*, since the end of World War II, the record of state-sponsored armed forces against non-state forces is abysmal. This study illuminates a number of inherent difficulties that state forces face in fighting non-state forces, e.g., the challenge of sorting out combatants from non-combatants in a hostile populace. Despite overwhelming advantages in the number of troops and the amount of material, the Russians never regained the initiative after their initial offensive stalled six months into the war. How might they have been successful? As a state-sponsored force, the Marine Corps can learn much about fighting non-state forces by studying the record of others.

Fourth, Marines can profit from this study by addressing four questions that cut to the core of improving our combat capabilities:

- How do we adapt useful Chechen practices to our purposes?
- What deficiencies do we share with the Russians and how do we overcome them?

- How do we fight a first rate guerrilla force on his “home field” in urban terrain?
- What has the Chechen experience taught us about the characteristics and dynamics of urban fighting?

These and similar questions can form the basis for developing an understanding of what made the Chechens successful and the Russians unsuccessful and how this understanding applies to us. While it is unlikely that the Marine Corps will assume the role of “David” in any near term future scenario, it helps to understand a David-like force so that we may deal more effectively with others like him in future conflicts.