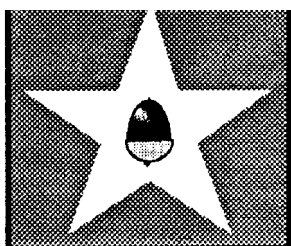


**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

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**Chechnya:  
Two Federal Disasters**

**April 2002**



**P38**

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# Chechnya: Two Federal Disasters

C W Blandy

## Introduction

Military actions where there are unexplained circumstances, suspicions of neglect or concealment of the truth relating to loss of life demand investigation. This paper examines the circumstances and consequences of two such incidents in March 2000 in Chechnya, which have attracted much adverse publicity because of the large number of casualties sustained by federal forces. One concerns the deaths of 84 *desantniki* from Pskov who perished at Ulus-Kert on the night of 29 February 2000, the other 22 servicemen of the Sergiyev Posad OMON (Special Militia Detachment) two days later. The month of March 2000 was probably the nadir of the second federal counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya, for:

*“Three times ... Chechen boyeviki have been successful in destroying whole subunits of Russian federal forces. On the night of 1 March a company of Pskov desantniki perished, 2 March a detachment of OMON from near Moscow were crushed, 29 March militiamen from Perm were shot up in an ambush. Funeral marches resounded in the Sergiyev suburb, Pskov and Perm, but Russian generals continued to maintain that the main forces of Chechen boyeviki had been routed and armed resistance would be finished in the very near future.”<sup>1</sup>*

A significant proportion of deaths and injuries amongst ordinary Russian servicemen happens as a direct result of neglect, avoidance of responsibility or even criminal activity within the federal forces' command. So, the information handling of these events, and the processes of investigation, in both public and the more secret military legal spheres, and of remembrance can reveal a great deal about the uniformed forces' relationship with Russian society at large. The court action over the attack on the Sergiyev Posad OMON detachment may well be another indication of the desire to bring these services within the norms of civilised accountability by continuing the momentum of investigation generated in the case of Colonel Budanov over the death of Kheda Kungayeva at Tangi-Chu at the end of March 2000,<sup>2</sup> but in the case of the Pskov airborne forces (*desantniki*), the fallen are honoured as heroes while those responsible escape investigation.

This paper first of all analyses the action involving Sergiyev Posad OMON on 2 March 2000, before moving on to the annihilation of the Pskov airborne company on the night of 29 February-1 March 2000. While this is in reverse order to their occurrence, the OMON incident serves as an introduction to the events at Ulus-Kert, which obliterated it in terms of media coverage. The saga of Ulus-Kert in particular has implications not only for the Russian Ministry of Defence but also for other

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.itogi.ru/paper2000.nsf/Article/Itogi\\_2000\\_04\\_07\\_144848.html](http://www.itogi.ru/paper2000.nsf/Article/Itogi_2000_04_07_144848.html), *Itogi*, 10 April 2000, “*Budushcheye v ‘zelenke’*” by Aleksandr Gol'ts.

<sup>2</sup> See C W Blandy “*Chechnya: Dynamics of War - Brutality and Stress*”, P35, CSRC, July 2001.

armies under pressure, starved of financial resources and committed to fighting in mountainous terrain. Conclusions are therefore drawn from both episodes in terms of tactics and the military's handling of the public outcry.

## Ambush Of Sergiyev Posad Omon

*“If during the first military campaign only the centre of the city was destroyed, then today the whole city has been transformed into ruins, only on the outskirts, in areas of private building, one comes across houses which are possible to restore. As a whole the city almost resembles a desert. The only thing that enlivens the gloomy landscape are the well fortified OMON blokposty, which outwardly recall mini-fortresses... Everyone living here is required to have a pass from the town’s military commandant. Document checking takes place at every blokpost, which are established every 300 metres.”<sup>3</sup>*

The incident took place barely a week after Grozny had been captured by federal forces. The territory of the Chechen Republic was divided between OMON subunits and the newly formed militia units under the command of the former mayor of Grozny, Bislan Gantamirov. Towards the end of February 2000 a disagreement developed between the chief of the Staropromyslovskiy (Gantamirov’s) militia (ROVD) and the head of the ROVD who had arrived from Sverdlovsk. There were claims that the Sverdlovtsy had fired at a Chechen blokpost. Gantamirov took offence. In the course of unravelling the dispute the head of the Staropromyslovskiy ROVD remarked that reinforcements would be coming to him from Urus-Martan in the shape of an AGS-17 (automatic grenade launcher). The Sverdlovsk chief believed this would undermine the balance of forces. The Grozny commandant gave instructions that a fire subgroup under Major D’yachenko should oversee the changeover between two OMON subunits, namely the incomers from Sergiyev-Posad and those from Podol’sk completing their tour. D’yachenko was allotted two BTR-70s.

On 1 March 2000 the commander of the Podol’sk OMON Nikolay Tikhonov went in a ‘Ural’ truck to Mozdok, where a special echelon was due to arrive from Moscow, including the composite detachment of Sergiyev Posad OMON who were due to relieve Tikhonov’s detachment. The Sergiyev Posad OMON under the command of Colonel Dmitriy Markelov duly arrived at around 0630 hrs at Mozdok for a three month tour of duty<sup>4</sup> and were met by 11 army trucks which then proceeded to take them to the Podol’sk OMON’s base situated in a northern suburb of Grozny, Podgornoye, close to Pervomayskaya<sup>5</sup> and known by the locals as Sobachevka. Posted high up on the leading ‘Ural’ was the transparent placard “OMON. Sergiyev Posad”.

The planning of the changeover was complicated by the fact that 1 March had been designated as a day when local inhabitants could have access to Grozny. The commanders believed that *boyeviki* might take advantage of this by mixing with ordinary people going about their shopping and penetrating the city. Major D’yachenko also had instructions to prevent the AGS-17 being positioned at the Chechen blokpost.

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<sup>3</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 16 March 2000, “*Boyeviki po-prezhnemu opasny*” by Igor Rotar’.

<sup>4</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 19 March 2002, “*Kto strelyal?*” by Akhmed Tagimov.

<sup>5</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 18 January 2002 calls the settlement “Pervomayskoye”. However, maps clearly show it as Pervomayskaya. It should not be confused with Pervomayskoye in Dagestan which attained a degree of notoriety in the aftermath of the Kizlyar raid by Salman Raduyev in January 1996.

Diagram 1: Blokpost No 53<sup>6</sup>

### Box 1 - Podgornoye - the Ambush<sup>7</sup>

Early in the morning on 2 March 2000 Grozny and its suburbs were covered in thick fog. **At around 0800 hrs** a blue Volvo-460 and a white Niva drive into Podgornoye. Armed men get out of the vehicles and in the thick fog conceal themselves in the industrial zone. The vehicles depart. An hour goes by, at approximately 0900 hrs local market traders in the centre of the settlement hurry to close their stalls and leave, rumours abound that very soon there will be a serious gun battle on the central street.

At about this time information about the *boyeviki* arrives at Blokpost No 53 [manned by local home guard, close to the Podol'sk OMON's base]. The home guard believed *boyeviki* would make an attempt to get into Grozny via Podgornoye. There was also additional information that a detachment of genuine home guard could possibly arrive in two Uaz vehicles or even in armoured vehicles, in which case they would have to 'get a move on', to give permission for heavy equipment to enter the settlement. Also, the impending arrival of the Sergiyev Posad OMON was well known. A few days ago one of the streets leading into Grozny had been partitioned off with an old "Icarus" bus, so that any approach into the Chechen capital from the north west was only possible through blokpost No 53. The local militiamen went towards the BTRs as reinforcement. Amongst all those present the rumour about bandits travelling in UAZ vehicles gathered momentum.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 18 January 2002, p8, paraphrased.

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**At 0920 hrs** two BTRs from the Sverdlovsk militia arrived in the village from Grozny. D'yachenko met the chief of staff of the Podol'sk OMON and reported that he had the task of stopping and disarming the Gantamirov column.

**The Ambush initiated at 0950 hrs**

At 0950 hrs the leading Ural with the Sergiyev Posad OMON was driving into the outskirts of the village. When the truck reached the auto service station, the Volvo unexpectedly blocked the road. At that moment the sound of a bullet rang out: a sniper's bullet fired from near the "Icarus" hit the driver of the leading vehicle in the head. The Ural, which was out of control, left the road and immediately firing began from grenade launchers and heavy machine guns. The very first shots achieved the targets: already two Urals had been hit and were ablaze. Under withering fire the *Omontsy* jumped out of the vehicle bodies enveloped in flames and attempted to hide themselves in the ditch by the roadside. In the first minutes of the battle Dmitriy Markelov was killed – a bullet killed the colonel in the head, seated in the last but one Uaz in the column [Vehicle No 10].

At the same time the Podol'sk militia deployed on Ht 319 south of Podgornoye moved off to their base, for they saw firing on the column from every direction: from the elevator, from the greengrocery, from the village itself, from the oil towers situated behind Podgornoye and even from the OMON base itself – from behind a row of hangars. Nine Podol'sk OMON start to fire in response from Ht 319 on the oil towers situated close to a water tower - here the silhouettes of the attackers were obvious. Unexpectedly fire was opened up on the height from near the village of Armyanskaya gully.

At 1020 hrs several soldiers from the Sofrinskiy Brigade broke through from the direction of Grozny to the battle area; they assisted in the evacuation of the wounded, pulled them to into cover. The majority were transferred to the former auto service station building.

The battle did not quieten down until 1230 hrs and at this time from the direction of the Sunzha ridge heavy armoured equipment appeared, and in the sky helicopter gunships provided fire support. The attackers left in the direction of the oil towers nearer to the mountains. Behind them through Podgornoye swooped BTRs, but fire was not effective. The attackers left taking the wounded away with them. At this time on the outskirts of the settlement a flood of about 30 young women appear with coloured bags in their hands. From a distance these looked like mothers with very small children. The soldiers, naturally, stopped firing in this direction, only the tankists continue. Pursuit of the boyeviki is continued. At 1330 hrs troops coordinate helicopter operations by radio. By 1430 hrs in Podgornoye firing quietens down. Wounded, 38 of them, are loaded onto vehicles and they depart. Zachistka is carried out in the village and 20 local inhabitants are held.

## Questions & Theories

Andrey Skrobot, the NG correspondent, was able to view a video about the events filmed by one of the servicemen who happened to be in the centre of the village. Even in the fleeting film, it was clear that the people who fired on the column were superbly trained snipers. The very first bullets not only hit the driver of the lead vehicle but also the commander's vehicle. Bullets unerringly went through the windscreen of the Ural. Naturally, the column was made to halt and became an excellent target for the attackers, despite displaying the Russian flag and OMON insignia. According to Skrobot it cannot be excluded that in the turmoil of the battle somebody from the Podol'sk OMON fired on the column. It is also possible that from the direction of the Sergiyev-Posad OMON return fire was opened up. But how was it possible to continue firing when the range between them was no more than 50 metres? And how did they fail to recognise each other for over an hour? The Podol'sk commander, Major Igor Tikhonov, was also in the column and he had a radio. Under the circumstances it is not at all clear at whom and what did the

servicemen stationed on Ht 319 fire, whom did the BTRs pursue and to where the helicopters were directed.

According to Skrobot firing at the column was said to have come directly from the Podol'sk base location, though this is physically impossible, for the ground is intersected by concrete enclosures and hangars on the street along which the column was travelling. Nor would the Sverdlovsk militia be able to fire, for the blokpost was round the corner and it would not have been possible to see what was taking place. The machine guns of the Sverdlovsk militia's BTRs were silent, as witnesses testified. In Skrobot's words only one explanation remained "*the Sergiyev Posad OMON fell into a carefully organised extremist ambush*".<sup>8</sup>

On 16 March an operational investigation group from the Moscow GUVD (Interior Ministry directorate) arrived in Pervomayskaya, comanded by Colonel Nikolay Vagin. At that time there were four versions of who carried out the attack:

- Ruslan Gelayev's *boyeviki*.
- Local inhabitants from Podgornoye and Pervomayskaya.
- A group of *boyeviki* who were illegally in the Staropromyslovskiy district of Groznyy with the collaboration of local militiamen.
- The *boyeviki* who on 1 May 1995 carried out an attack on a motorised column of a composite detachment of the Moscow district GUVD OMON under the command of Colonel V A Tin'kov.

All four possibilities were corroborated by operational sources, and by the facts in Box 2 below.

#### **Box 2 - Corroboration**<sup>9</sup>

It was established that before the exodus of fighters from Groznyy in January 2000, Brigadier General Ruslan Gelayev left a group of 150 fighters in the area of Podgornoye and Pervomayskaya. In the main they were snipers, mine-layers and grenade-launchers tasked with carrying out 'acts of provocation' and terrorist acts against Russian MOD and Internal troops. This was confirmed by by a fighter from one of Gelayev's subunits, Issa Nal'giyev, who stated that this detachment was under the command of a brother of Ruslan Gelayev (the truthfulness of this testimony was checked with a polygraph).

Women traders in the market said that they knew one of the attackers - he was a former bureau section chief of Staropromyslovskiy ROVD, Adam Isayev.

The first shot fired on the column was from V Askayev - a brother of a worker in the town militia in Groznyy.

According to other information, field commander Bakuyev had personally taken part in the attack. After the battle the local militia took him away and hid him.

On the evening of 2 March 2000 close to the village around 15 new graves appeared. It is well known that according to Muslim tradition the deceased are buried on the day of their death.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



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However, it will be remembered that on 28 February 2000 “... at noon the Russian flag was hoisted over Shatoy”.<sup>10</sup> Ruslan Gelayev had already moved to Komsomol'skoye, and judging by the previous Russo-Chechen conflict was also very much involved in the defence of Shatoy, making it very unlikely that he was involved in the events at Podgornoye.

The OGV North Caucasus press centre they said that around 80 *boyeviki* had been arrested on suspicion. But some two years later a somewhat different situation was being presented: it was said that the Podol'sk OMON, who failed to keep abreast of the situation, opened fire and are responsible for the deaths of the the Sergiyev-Posad OMON. Questions arose, such as why the column route had not been agreed and why no BTRs or helicopters were made available to cover the movement of the column.<sup>11</sup>

## The Criminal Case

A criminal case, Number 59030, was initiated on 4 March 2000 in connection with the deaths of 22 servicemen of the Sergiyev Posad OMON. Several MVD (Internal Troops) servicemen were implicated following a special investigation by the Staropromyslovskiy District Procurator. Amongst the accused were the deputy head of Moscow Oblast' GUV D Major General Boris Fadeyev, the head of the Podol'sk OMON Major Igor Tikhonov and the director of the OGV (MVD) command group in Chechnya Colonel Mikhail Levchenko. The officers, subsequently relieved of their posts, were accused of “neglect, entailing loss of human lives”.<sup>12</sup> In essence, the procurator's case rested on the fact that the convoy route had not been agreed by the people responsible with the joint headquarters, and that commanders had not organised the necessary helicopter cover and protection by armoured vehicles. However technically just these charges might be, they revealed several unanswered questions.

### Box 3 - Questions<sup>13</sup>

How should the movement route be properly agreed if there is only one road from Mozdok?

Having just arrived at the location the militia general could hardly make arrangements with someone else's armoured vehicles and helicopters. As far as it is known from documents, the military echelon from Moscow to Mozdok met no one from the local military or the MVD command but on arriving in Mozdok the officer in charge of the echelon Major General of Militia Aleksandr Ved'dyayev commanded Fadeyev to accompany the echelon by rail to the final point - Gudermes. Why then was it decided to transport the OMON by truck? Tikhonov must have received an order about the start of the movement from the command.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.segodnya.ru/w3s.nsf/Archive/2000\\_46\\_news\\_text\\_viktorov2.html](http://www.segodnya.ru/w3s.nsf/Archive/2000_46_news_text_viktorov2.html), *Novosti*, 1 March 2000, “Eto yeshche ne pobeda” by Andrey Viktorov.

<sup>11</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 January 2002, p10, “Tayna rasstrelyannogo omona” by Andrey Viktorov. For further discussion of the incident see <http://www.smi.ru/02/03/22/284165.html>, SMI.ru: “Kto napal na OMON Sergiyeva Posada?; SMI.ru, *Gazeta.ru* “Omontseva ubil komandir” by Maria Tsetovka; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 22 March 2002, “Tayna blokposta # 53” by Sergey Kozlov.

<sup>12</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 January 2002, p10.

<sup>13</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 18 January 2002, p8.

Boris Fadeyev only heard that the OMON had been killed on 2 March at 1800 hrs when he arrived in Gudermes. He was not able to leave Gudermes: in accordance with the chief's order he was occupied with the arrivals. Besides that the situation in Gudermes was tense. The servicemen under Fadeyev remained in a situation of all round defence until 2300 hrs.

It is unclear whether helicopter or armoured support could have saved the subunit from falling into an ambush. In the history of both Chechen campaigns there are examples when the *boyeviki* made short work of columns consisting only of heavy tanks. There is one further detail of interest: the incident occurred on the territory of Staropromyslovskiy ROVD in Grozny, which had the responsibility to ensure security in its zone of responsibility. Why were there no representatives from there summoned to Moscow? And finally, what exactly was the role of the Sverdlovsk Militia?

## Outcome of Trial

Both Fadeyev and Levchenko were found 'not guilty', but the trial of Major Tikhonov was postponed due to illness, and he therefore has to stand trial at a later date.<sup>14</sup> However, the Procurator's office is appealing against the verdict on the grounds that neither Fadeyev nor Levchenko took the necessary measures to ensure the safety of the column.<sup>15</sup> The verdict handed down by the court did not explain whether *boyeviki* had participated in the firing or not. However, in the opinion of the father of one of the dead OMON servicemen, Nikolay Grachev: "*The 'not guilty' verdict is only the beginning of the matter. We, the victims are not able to support the accusation. Because what is true: if they blame Tikhonov, Fadeyev and Levchenko, we will certainly never know who was the real perpetrator of the tragedy.*"<sup>16</sup>

From the research carried out by Grachev, it was most likely that it was the *boyeviki* who had launched an attack on the column. Grachev's reasoning is given in Box 4 below.

### **Box 4 - Nikolay Grachev's View that *Boyeviki* carried out an Ambush**<sup>17</sup>

"The column of Omontsy arrived at 9.40. The Sverdlovtsy started to let through their "own", but all of a sudden a shot was heard, as a signal for the attack, one single shot. No one has established who fired it. Immediately a maelstrom of fire fell on the position of the Sverdlovtsy and the vehicle column. Fire came from grenade launchers, sub machine guns and sniper rifles.

The attack was organised in such a way that nobody could ascertain who was firing and from where. In such circumstances, of course [people] could fire on their own. But maintaining the obvious, the large casualties were caused by aimed shots from hidden, previously prepared covered shelters in the populated point of Podgornoye, **to the right of the road**, where it was not possible for 'our' people to be." [It will be remembered that there was a query with regard to the presence of the two BTRs belonging to the Sverdlovsk OMON parked in position on the northern (left hand) side of the road. There was no evidence of any shots being fired from the BTRs under charge of Major D'yachenko.]

<sup>14</sup> ORT, Novosti, 22 March 2002, 1150 hrs.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.nns.ru/press-file/dagestan/chron/2002/03/25.html>, Sobiya, 23-25 March 2002, p2.

<sup>16</sup> SMI.ru, Gazeta.ru "Omontseva ubil komandir" by Maria Tsetovka.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

There are so many different and conflicting factors in the various accounts of the incident that a full explanation may never be revealed. The search for the truth is made more difficult by factors such as the foggy weather and the number of different security organs involved. Undoubtedly, the most likely scenario is that of a Chechen separatist operation. Yet one is left with the question - how effective was the system of command and control?

## Ulus-Kert: The Battle Against Overwhelming Odds

*"Ulus-Kert. The name of this Chechen mountain village, the word is a splinter of pain resonating in my heart... I know that in the consciousness of many of my countrymen, who are not indifferent to the fate of Russia and its army, a firm hackneyed image has been formed: they say Russian generals are solely to blame in the deaths of the Pskov desantniki. Journalists, politicians, throw questions and rebukes like grenades at us: why no rescue, why was no assistance given, why were the terrorist leaders allowed to escape retribution."*<sup>18</sup>

Two years ago in a battle against unequal odds in the Argun gorge 84 *desantniki* perished belonging to 6 Company, 104 (Cherekha) Parachute-Desant Regiment, 76 (Pskov) Division of the Airborne Forces when they held the onslaught of 2,000 *boyeviki* and killed 700 of them. Within 24 hours of the action at Ulus-Kert rumours had started to spread around Pskov oblast'. The lack of confirmed information added to the anguish of relatives.

### Situation Prior to Battle

Federal forces had by the middle of December 2000 started to set about 'liberating' the mountainous parts of Chechenya. The Commander OGV (East) Lieutenant General Gennadiy Troshev had already defined the concept of operations for the next phase. The essence of the operation was to use airborne forces with a series of tactical airborne or heliborne desants to capture dominating heights and only after these had been taken would the main forces be brought in to the mountain operation. *"We intended to attack the boyeviki not from below, but from above, from the mountains"*. Soon afterwards *desantniki* were landed in the Sharo-Argun gorge in the area of Day. Somewhat later in the south, subunits of 56<sup>th</sup> Airborne Assault Regiment landed by helicopter in the area of Yalkhoroy with the task of blocking-off the Argun gorge. Measures were also taken to reinforce sectors covered by federal troops in the foothill areas. Sectors with systems of strong points and mined obstacles covered by every available weapon were established in a bid to prevent *boyeviki* penetrating the sectors and infiltrating down into the Central Plain. So by the beginning of February 2000, the bandit formations were blocked off in the mountains by a sector covered by federal forces in the north and by tactical heliborne landings in the south, the latter being instrumental with the federal Border Troops in maintaining interdiction of the *boyeviki* supply line to Georgia and the south. It was now possible to activate the operation for the liquidation of *boyeviki* in the mountain areas.

### February 2000

At the beginning of February 2000, after the 'liberation' of Groznyy, the Chechen separatist and Wahhaby extremist *bandformirovaniya* numbered some 5,000 men in mountain areas.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/CHECHNYA/troshev.txt>, Gennadiy Troshev "Moya voyna". Unless otherwise indicated, quotations and the description of events below are taken from General Troshev's memoirs.

**Box 5 - Chechen and Wahhaby Extremist Formations****Approximate Locations**

**Argun Gorge.** Emir Khattab with up to 2,000 fighters. Khattab had stationed himself and his fighters to the side of Dachu-Borzoy and Zony.

**Vedeno rayon.** Up to 600 men, overall command being exercised by Shamil' Basayev; however after his wounds and leg amputation, one of the field commanders deputised for him.

**Nozhay-Yurt rayon.** Up 800 men under the command of Shirvani Basayev.

**Itum-Kale and Shatoy rayony.** Several groups amounting to 1,000 men under the command of Ruslan Gelayev. Gelayev had led his band to his native village of Komsomol'skoye.

**C3 & Tactics**

The system of command, control and communication was based on the use of VHF radio which was vulnerable to intercept and interdiction by federal artillery systems. The *boyeviki* also started to use special vehicle-mounted radio-relay rebroadcast systems. To enhance security for command and control they used procedures and code tables, and besides this, they used the old methods of using women and children to convey messages.

In order to hold out in populated points for as long as possible or to hold off the movement of federal forces, they resorted to the most extreme diverse, artful and cunning methods.

On likely troop movement routes they laid cut-off portions of piping with highly inflammable liquid into the road bed.

Immediately in front of trenches they fitted out powerful minefields. Mining took place 'at two levels'. At the bottom of the hole they laid the first mine, covered over with earth or clay. On top of it a second mine was laid and all this was then hidden. If the first mine was found and removed the second one remained to do its work.

*Boyeviki* either left their populated points or visited them at night in small groups, along almost impenetrable terrain.

In order to uncover and locate the system of protection, defence and disposition of weapons belonging to federal forces, the *boyeviki* often used dogs with torches fixed to the dogs' collars, in the hope that such objects would be taken for the movement or activity of people.

For the defence of mountain villages the *boyeviki* widely used the tactic of operating from an ambush. Allowing our subunits to pass by, they covertly left bunkers and cellars, opening up flanking and cross fire. Grenade launchers hit our tanks and BMPs from minimal distances of between 60-100 metres.

First and foremost they used snipers in pairs. As a rule they would shoot from prepared openings in the foundations of buildings. Snipers picked out commanders and other officers without difficulty: obvious reconnaissance personnel and the presence of radio operator with a radio. It goes without saying that this once again underlines the fact that our troops must be equipped with compact and less bulky means of communication.

**Strong Positive Characteristics**

The *boyeviki* have an accumulated six years experience of warfare. They have a national-religious fanaticism which also engenders a preparedness to die for their cause.

There is an implicit subordination to field commanders with a clear-cut organisation (replacement) of fighters in the zone of operations. They also have access to detachments of foreign mercenaries and instructors together with comprehensive training and preparation in special camps in the Near East and Central Asian countries.

Other matters include: well developed knowledge and skilful use of terrain; timeous preparation of populated points and terrain for long-term defence; creation of weapons caches, ammunition and material means; wide use of vehicles and horse and donkey-drawn transport; modern weapons and shells (as a rule of foreign manufacture); use of local population (women and children) for reconnaissance tasks; tiered network of control and communication.

#### **Weak Points by January 2000**

- Partial loss of morale and demoralisation of detachments which suffered defeat and destruction on the plains area and in particular after the exodus from Groznyy.
- Loss of support from a significant portion of the population.
- Deeper and more wide-spread disagreements between field commanders.
- Decrease in availability and supply of weapons, ammunition and technical-material means.
- Difficulties in provision of timely and necessary medical treatment.

On 10 February 2000 federal forces took full control of the rayon centre of Itum Kale. By 19 February engineer work was completed on the construction and improvement of routes to be used for the move forward into the mountains. "*Over two months more than 60 km were accomplished, in other words, one kilometre per day.*" Conditions were not easy for road building engineers, for problems were encountered in pushing roads through at heights of 1,500-2,500 metres with the added threat of mining. Some 384 mines and 236 explosive devices, including 16 radio-controlled fougasses were found, detonated or dismantled.

On 18 February 2000, the first echelon of a special reinforced reconnaissance detachment, consisting of several reconnaissance groups, a surveillance-observation troop, a mortar platoon, anti-tank, flamethrower and engineer-sapper sections, was dropped on Al'piyskiy mountain. In the course of 72 hours the 30 *boyeviki* who had dug themselves in on the height were destroyed. The detachment later carried out observation and surveillance, using the data for fire missions and aerial strikes on enemy objects. Justice Ministry sniper pairs armed with 12.7 mm "Vzломshchik" sniper rifles showed high effectiveness in the area and on the Gumurtaikort ridge.

From a federal perception the turning point in combat operations came on 22 February when they occupied Sel'mentauzen and Makhety, thus putting themselves in a better position to intercept bandit formations operating in the area of Shatoy, in particular movement between *boyeviki* base locations in Urus-Martan rayon, Shatoy rayon and Vedenno rayon. On 25 February General Troshev announced that "*Shatoy rayon is sealed off, the ring is being tightened, sanitising will begin next*".<sup>19</sup> On 27 February it was reported that in the course of the last few days OGV subunits had cut the Argun Gorge in the area of Volch'i Vorota, sealing off Duba-Yurt from the south, and Chishki and Dachu-Borzoy from the north, having "*divided the bandit forces into two separate groups with the aim of destroying them piecemeal*".<sup>20</sup> Yukerch-Keloy, some 5 kilometres to the southeast of Shatoy, had

<sup>19</sup> Natsional'naya Elektronnaya Biblioteka. Sobytiya, 25 February 2000.

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been sealed off from the east by airborne forces. Commander of OGV (Centre), Lieutenant General Vladimir Bulgakov estimated that the *boyeviki* amounted to approximately 2,000 men, though he was more than a little over-confident in saying they “*have fortifications but no fighting spirit*”. He went on to state that the task of federal forces was to finish off all the remaining bandits in the mountains “*to the last bandit, and this task would be resolved in the immediate future*”.<sup>21</sup> Russian military maintained that “*Chechen boyeviki controlled no more than 1% of the republic*”.<sup>22</sup> Amongst the command of the federal forces, there was the widespread belief that the active phase of the operation was nearing completion with federal forces moving on the last fortified stronghold, the populated point and rayon centre of Shatoy in the Argun gorge. “*In a word, the euphoria of victory reigned*,”<sup>23</sup> which tended to blind the mind of the federal forces to the fact that the *boyeviki* bands had coalesced.

*“The bands of other field commanders, Shamil’ Basayev, Vakha Arsanov, Bagaudi Bakuyev, the Dzhamaat detachment had tagged themselves onto the Arab mercenaries. As it became clear, in the area of Ulus-Kert then, around 1,500 well trained boyeviki had been concentrated.”*<sup>24</sup>

The Deputy Commander of Russian airborne forces, Nikolay Stas’kov, remarked that: “*The operation in Chechnya was going to plan, without forcing events, in the strict observance of the line directed on minimisation of casualties among personnel.*”<sup>25</sup>

However, the *boyeviki* probably hoped to percolate through the cordon formed by the *federaly* and their resistance could become sharply intensified. In the area of Shatoy only five populated points remained in the hands of the *boyeviki*: “*Bol’shiye and Malyye Varandy, Syukhi, Zony and Yarishmardy*”.<sup>26</sup> And yet, “*despite the positive statements of the authorities about the most rapid conclusion of the military operation, the situation in Chechnya remained complicated*”.<sup>27</sup> However, in the military assessment, the *boyeviki* had based their hopes on a long drawn out defence of Shatoy and had called the rayon centre their last fortress. The Argun Valley situated between Shatoy and Itum-Kale was notable for its complicated ground relief due limestone rock, where there were not a few recesses and caves. It was here that they expected to find the refuges of the last remaining bandit formations. Many of the *boyeviki* in Shatoy, which is situated some 60 km from Groznyy, had managed to break out from the federal encirclement and make their way northwards to Komsomol’skoye and Alkhazurovo. Federal artillery carried out

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Natsional’naya Elektronnyaya Biblioteka. Sobytiya, 27 February 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.pskov.ru/event/memorialday/index.html>, “Chto sluchilos’, 1 Marta 2000 goda na vysote 705.6”.

<sup>24</sup> <http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/CHECHNYA/troshew.txt>

<sup>25</sup> Natsional’naya Elektronnyaya Biblioteka. Sobytiya, 28 February 2000.

<sup>26</sup> *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 2 March 2000, p1, “*Organizovannoye soprotivleniye boyevikov slomleno*” by Sergey Babichev.

<sup>27</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 7 March 2000, “*Voyska menayut taktiku*” by Andrey Korbut.

fire missions against collections of *boyeviki* in Syuzhi, Chishki, Khatuni, Benoy and Yarishmardy. Front aviation inflicted rocket-bomb strikes on *boyeviki* strong points on the outskirts of Vostochnikh-Dattykh, Zony, Maliye Varandy and Lake Galanchez. The actual 'liberation' of Shatoy by federal forces on 28 February 2000 was carried out by OGV (Centre) commanded by General Bulgakov with a tactical grouping of 31 Separate Airborne Brigade under the command of Colonel Khasym Tyngizov.<sup>28</sup> Internal troops and OMON servicemen carried out the initial sanitising of the rayon centre. Troops under the command of OGV (West) Lieutenant General Vladimir Shamanov 'liberated' the populated points of Borzoy, Neykhaloy (Nikhhaloy) to Vysokogornoye, just to the west of Shatoy.

The choice of location for Emir Khattab to make his break-out from this area was by now severely limited. In order for him to make passage through to Vedenno, "*where the Black Arab had a network of small mountain bases*" and thence possibly into Dagestan, it was necessary for him to move out towards Sel'mentauzen from above or along the river bed of the Sharo Argun or its tributary the River Abazulgol. At this time of year movement along slippery mountain tracks or trails at night was highly dangerous and consequently slow. General Troshev also made the point that at that time they could not assume that the enemy would risk 'punching' his way through to the east with large scale forces. In support of that view it should also be remembered that the *boyeviki* had only recently suffered significant casualties through Major General Shamanov's Operation 'Wolf Hunt'<sup>29</sup> in the mass breakout of *boyeviki* on 29 January 2000 from Grozny,<sup>30</sup> when some 1,700 *boyeviki* lost their lives.

## The Battle For Heights 776.0 & 705.6

### 104 Guards Parachute Desant Regiment

On 28 February 2000, the regimental tactical group of 104<sup>th</sup> Guards Parachute Desant Regiment, at the disposal of Commander OGV (East), was given the following mission: by 1400 hrs on 29 February to complete the move forward to a line 4 km southeast of Ulus-Kert. Part of the regiment was blocking the area of Sel'mentauzen with the aim of preventing a breakthrough by the *boyeviki* in the direction of Makhety, Kirov-Yurt, Elistanzhi and Vedenno. However, as time was to show, the *boyeviki* pushed their way through regardless. The dominating feature here is Dargenduk<sup>31</sup> which lies to the south of Ulus-Kert and curves gently in a south easterly direction from Ht 1410 to Hts 1682 and 1806 (Mt Petkhoylam). Table

<sup>28</sup> Natsional'naya Elektronnyaya Biblioteka. Sobytiya, 29 February 2000.

<sup>29</sup> See Natsional'naya Elektronnyaya Biblioteka, Interv'yu nedeli, *Versty*, 22 February 2000, "*Komandarm*" - Interview with Army Commander, Hero of Russia, Vladimir Shamanov by Vladimir Galayko.

<sup>30</sup> See Boris Karpov "*VV: Kavkazskiy Krest - 2*", FID, "Delovoy Ekspres", Moscow, 2000, p123.

<sup>31</sup> This is the same terrain as the Tsarist General Yevdokimov fought over. Moshe Gammer "*Muslim Resistance to the Tsar - Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Dagestan*", Frank Cass & Co, London, 1994, p280, "Yevdokimov carried out several attacks, the most important of which was the seizure, on 12 March [1858] of Mount Dargin Duk, which controls the rear of Greater Chechnia". In Map 21 of Moshe Gammer's book the position of Mount Dargin Duk is at variance with the position shown in Map 2.



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1 shows the actual distances involved as the crow flies between Ulus-Kert, the other populated points in the Makheti micro-rayon and the main physical features of relief.

**Table 1 - Approximate Distances of Populated Points and Features as the Crow flies from Ulus-Kert**

Sel'men-Tauzen	Makhety	Tevzana	Khatuni	Yukerch-Keloy	Ht 1140	Ht 1682	Ht 1806	Elis-Tanzhi	Vedeno
7.5 km	10 km	11 km	13 km	15 km	7 km	10 km	12 km	15 km	19 km

**Map 1 - Ulus-Kert & Surrounding Area<sup>32</sup>**



### Deployment of 3<sup>rd</sup> Company

The *desantniki* of 3<sup>rd</sup> Company commanded by Senior Lieutenant Vasil'yev occupying dominating heights 5 km to the east of Ulus-Kert were the first to be tested by the *boyeviki*, who unsuccessfully attempted to punch their way along the River Abazulgol through the company's organised system of fire. The *desantniki* had prepared themselves extremely carefully by digging trenches to the full depth, organising all-round defence and a fire system which permitted full observation and coverage of the ground to the extent that "*such foresight and prudence would be a godsend to them*".<sup>33</sup> They did not have time to consolidate themselves, as lower

<sup>32</sup> Obshchigeograficheskkiye Karty Rossiyskoy Federatsii Ingushkaya Respublika, Chechenskaya Respublika 1:250,000 Federal'naya Sluzhba Georgezii i Kartografii Rossii. Map series N501, Sheet NK 38-5.

down the gorge and coming in from the north, a leading detachment of *boyeviki* was attempting to move into the gorge. Encountering dense automatic fire they hurriedly withdrew. Twice they repeated the attack, but the strong position offered so much resistance that the *boyeviki* were rolled back, suffering significant casualties. It was probably as a result of this engagement that Khattab decided to avoid the positions of the *desantniki* by going along the other bank of the river.

### Deployment of 6<sup>th</sup> Company

2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion subunits had taken no part in the action. They were positioned on dominating heights above the Sharo-Argun gorge. In order to minimise the possibility of *boyeviki* being able to infiltrate along the mountains between the Sharo-Argun and Abazulgol rivers, the Commander 104<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Colonel S Melent'yev, ordered the Commander of 6<sup>th</sup> Company Major S Molodov to occupy yet one more dominating feature, Istykort in the vicinity of Ulus-Kert. However, since the company commander had only just joined the unit the day before and had not yet had the time or the opportunity to get to know his men, it fell to the Commander 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Lieutenant Colonel Mark Yevtyukhin to take charge of the company.

As General Troshev remarked, no small experience awaited the *desantniki*. To meet the deadlines it was necessary to complete a 15 km forced march along slippery, winter mountain tracks, in field service marching order, including carrying the heavy equipment required for the new base camp, tents and stoves, without which *“they would not be able to survive winter in the mountains”*. Even though they moved as fast as possible they did not make Istykort within the time required. To keep to the narrow tracks along mountain ridges through the old beech forest it was necessary *“to go like geese one behind the other”* and the equipment would not go easily through the forest. Several men fell down the steep slope with equipment. Much time and strength was spent on hauling men and equipment back to the top.

*“On these grounds I was forced to hear reproaches: and why was it not possible for the desantniki to be transported by helicopter to the designated area. Actually, the weather conditions would have allowed this, yes our helicopters were working wonders. But it was not possible to execute such an operation: aerial reconnaissance of the old mountain forest did not reveal one single area for landing the desantniki.”*

According to Vladimir Vorob'yev, a former airborne officer who conducted his own research into the reasons for the deaths of his son and son-in-law, this was the third error on the part of the command, for:

*“The march should have been carried out without baggage and only the bare necessities should have been taken... If they had reached the height, consolidated themselves in such a way that no one could smoke them out from there, only then would it be possible to send for the tents.”<sup>34</sup>*

It is of interest to note the difference in approach between General Troshev and Colonel Vorob'yev on the question of how much kit should have been taken by the

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<sup>33</sup> *Novaya Gazeta*, 23-25 April 2001, p6, *“O chem ne znala 6-ya Rota”* by Yuriy Moiseyenko.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Vladimir Nikolayevich Vorob'yev, Colonel retired, was awarded the Orders of the Red Star and the Combat Red Banner. The distance, subsequent loss of radio communications and the fact that no prior reconnaissance had been carried out were the first and second errors in the opinion of Colonel Vorob'yev.

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*desantniki*. General Troshev “by the standards of Russian generals - personally kind and considerate,”<sup>35</sup> was a *tankist*, whilst Vorob'yev had been an airborne soldier who had seen service in Afghanistan and was a former commander of 104 Regiment, 76 (Pskov) Airborne Division. His views on the conduct of the march are outlined below.

**Box 6 - Comments on Move of 6 Company**<sup>36</sup>

The decision to occupy the dominating height known as Istykort, Ht 705.6, some 4-5 km from Ulus-Kert was correct, but the *desantniki* did not take powerful fire support weapons with them, in fact all that they took were small arms and grenade launchers.<sup>37</sup> The attachment for the radio to ensure security of transmission had not been taken either.

The [2nd] battalion had only arrived at the end of January 2000, the soldiers of the [6th] company of 104<sup>th</sup> [Regiment] were not battle-hardened in practical terms.<sup>38</sup> On that day, 29 February, the reconnaissance group went ahead under the command of Aleksey Vorob'yev who had remained in Chechnya for a second tour. We will note also that the *desantniki* went to the height immediately after a complex march along the route Dombay-Arzy, that is without a proper break.

On Ht 776.0 not noticing any traces of the enemy, the recce group went on further [towards Istykort]. And the company started to climb Ht 776.0. They moved with difficulty, which was not surprising since each one wore a flak jacket weighing between 22-27 kg (the Russian Army did not have the money to buy lighter ones), they carried weapons, tents, stoves, water, food and ammunition. The subunit was stretched out over 5-6 km and did not cover more than 1 km an hour. “Seen from the position of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion the company was very sprawled out in a distended column. The march in the mountains, along a narrow trail was much more complicated than the battalion commander had envisaged.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See Blandy “Chechnya: federal Retribution “Encirclement, Forceful Intervention and Isolation”, P34, CSRC, March 2001, p52 Box 18 & “Chechnya: Dynamics of War Hounded Out”, P36, CSRC, September 2001, p13 on Troshev's character.

<sup>36</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1 March 2002, p4.

<sup>37</sup> The view of a commanding officer of a Commando in the Falklands campaign is of interest on this point. *The Sunday Telegraph* 24 March 2002 page 24: “We don't need food, just ammunition - and tons of it,” interview of Major General Andrew Whitehead by Olga Craig on lessons from the Falklands. “The most vital lesson, believe it or not, was in terms of what constitutes essential equipment. Forget the food, the clothes: you need ammunition and tons of it. It was firepower which captured Two Sisters. Fresh socks were a luxury. Something to keep you dry and a good sleeping bag are essential. After that it is about carrying as much weaponry as you can. That is what makes the difference in this type of warfare.”

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.pskov.ru/event/memorialday/page3.html>, Sobytiye “Kakimi oni byli, nashi rebyata”. “Guards Lieutenant Colonel Yevtyukin arrived in Chechnya with his battalion on 31 January 2000. Immediately the battalion was employed in carrying out tasks on the liquidation of illegal bandit formations. Already on 9 February the battalion received its first baptism. Moving in a column in the area of the populated point of Dyshne-Vedeno, a subunit of the battalion fell into an ambush set by the *boyeviki*. Quickly orientating himself in the complicated situation the commander in short time competently organised the defence. The *boyeviki's* intention was confounded. In the course of the battle 30 *boyeviki* were killed and two vehicles were destroyed by the *desantniki*.” There is also a point about acclimatisation. Whilst the altitudes in Chechnya do not produce the same problems for operations as in Afghanistan, a requirement still exists to become fit for working at altitudes up to 2,500 metres.

<sup>39</sup> <http://2001.novayagazeta.ru/nomer/2001/29n/n29n-s13.shtml>

Lieutenant Colonel Yevtyukin reported to Colonel Melent'yev that they [rece group] had reached Ht 776.0 in order to continue the march to Istykort. The fact was that they would have to march through most of the night to reach it. The rece group of five men under Senior Lieutenant Vorob'yev would be the first to get there. The group of five men moved quickly, and when the [rece group] commander transmitted the message that Ht 776.0 was clean, they moved on forwards to Ht 705.6.

*"It was not until 1100hrs that the first platoon of the company climbed up [Ht 776.0]. Slowly the second platoon hauled themselves up. The third could not reach the summit: the boyeviki fired at it from behind, when the cordon was finally locked".* It was midday on 29 February 2000 when the main body of 6 Company was situated on Ht 776.0. The advance party or rece group of 5 men under the command of Senior Lieutenant Vorob'yev without being burdened with heavy baggage had already reached the height of Isty-Kort or *"in military parlance Ht 705.6 m"*.<sup>40</sup> At about this time, as it was established later, the rece group noticed a forward patrol of some 20 *boyeviki* at the foot of the mountain, in fact *"the first concealed enemy fire position"*.<sup>41</sup> Using natural folds and undulations in the terrain the rece group succeeded in closing with the enemy, bombarding them with grenades. This in turn of course broke their cover, revealing their position to the enemy. The *desantniki* started to beat a hasty retreat back to the company main body on Ht 776.0. The *boyeviki* immediately set off in pursuit of the five *desantniki*, trying to outflank and encircle them. Meanwhile Major Molodov the company commander set out to rescue them from Ht 776.0, but the forces were so unequal that the *desantniki* were forced to return with the wounded on their shoulders to Ht 776.0. Major Molodov was the first of the *desantniki* from 6 Company to be killed.

At that moment, two numerically similar detachments of *boyeviki* were moving along the Sharo-Argun and Abazulgol rivers, in an outflanking movement from two sides of Ht 776.0 where the subordinates of Lieutenant Colonel Yevtyukhin were situated. The *boyeviki* moved in battle formation with two reconnaissance groups each consisting of 30 men, behind them two further detachments, march security, of 50 men each. They moved stealthily under strict orders not to open fire unless ordered. These were in fact the 160 *boyeviki* under Khattab and Basayev pursuing the groups of Vorob'yev and Molodov. They were finally spotted by the *desantniki*, though the question remains: how was it that the Command did not know about them?

**Box 7 - Intercept of Radio Conversation between Khattab and Basayev**

**Basayev to Khattab**, who is leading the breakthrough: If the dogs [name given by the boyeviki to Internal Troops] are in front it's possible to negotiate.

**Khattab**: No, it's goblins [*desantniki*].

**Basayev**: Listen, maybe let's pass round them? They won't let us go ...

**Khattab**: No, we will intercept them.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.pskov.ru/event/memorialday/index.html>

<sup>41</sup> <http://2001.novayagazeta.ru/nomer/2001/29n/n29n-s13.shtml>

**Comment**

It should be remembered that Basayev had just undergone the amputation of a foot and was also suffering from other wounds after the breakout through the minefield from Grozny. Few thought that he would survive the amputation, let alone avoid gangrene setting in. Note that Basayev knows the behaviour of federal servicemen better than Khattab, leaving an impression that Internal Troops could be bought, but not the *desantniki*.

In General Troshev's account of the ensuing action, almost immediately Khattab gave the order to use every type of weapon to prevent the *desantniki* from digging in. A fierce mortar bombardment began. After the first strike a proposal was made to the *desantniki* to lay down their weapons and surrender in exchange for their lives, "*But not one of the desantniki trembled, they did not lack spirit at that moment in not falling for the enemy provocation ... After the refusal to capitulate the desantniki returned to battle with renewed strength.*" The cannoners of 104 Regiment's artillery discharged:

*"1,200 rounds in the area of Ht 776.0 between midday 29 February and early morning of 1 March 2000. Over one night 900 rounds! The paint on the barrels became burnt, recoil mechanisms burst and leaked ... The senior member of the artillery observer group of the SP battery, Captain Viktor Romanov, was himself on the same height together with the Kombat [battalion commander] Mark Yevtyukhin and corrected fire from the regiment's guns. The battery commander Aleksandr Tolstykh throughout the whole 24 hours maintained communication with them and sent shells to where the encircled desantniki directed. V Romanov continued to call for fire even after both his legs had been blown off by a mortar bomb."*

In *Novaya Gazeta* article a slightly different account unfolds, which starts with carrying the wounded and the body of Major Molodov back to Ht 776.0.

*"A powerful mortar bombardment began. Attention must focussed on the following fact: the mortars beating the height were not only from the position of the boyeviki, but also... from the aul of Sel'mentaufen which was to the rear of 6 Company. Two 120 mm mortars. They continued working until the boyeviki stopped reaching the height. Sensing a grave disparity in the correlation of forces against the company (more than 2,500 boyeviki) the Kombat called for helicopter fire support. After a certain length of time a pair of Mi-24s appeared over the height, but they did not fire a single salvo. They turned round and flew home. There was no forward air controller in the company. In the opinion of [Vorob'yev] even if they had fired unaimed shots they would have scattered the boyeviki.<sup>42</sup>*

Another error which compounded all the other deficiencies in tactical skills and basic soldiering was the fact that the Kombat's radio operator did not appear to have a special attachment which encoded transmissions. Thus, the *boyeviki* were fully aware of what was taking place on the height. They heard every transmission Lieutenant Colonel Yevtyukin made to Colonel Melent'yev with requests for urgent assistance. On each occasion they heard the reply, "*Mark, don't panic, help will ...*"<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

The company was not reinforced. It did not receive artillery support either. Colonel Melent'yev removed the tank company from its fire position which could have provided valuable fire support against the advancing *boyeviki*, though "*several times the [tank company] commander turned to him with this request.*"<sup>44</sup> Even if fog and mist precluded the use of army and front aviation, why did Colonel Melent'yev not turn to the artillery howitzer regiment which was located not all that far away, particularly when the regiment heard the battle going on and asked on the radio, "*What's going on? Is assistance required?*" All these proposals were turned down.

According to General Troshev, the commander of the airborne regimental group, acting to save his encircled soldiers gave the order to 1st Parachute-Desant Company to make their way to the battle area. Having completed the march over mountainous terrain the *desantniki* were then faced with the task of attempting to cross the mountain river Abazulgol. However, before the attempt could be undertaken they fell into an ambush set by the *boyeviki*. The *desantniki* were then forced to consolidate their position on the river bank. Even with fire support from regimental artillery they repeatedly made further attempts to cross the river, but all their efforts were in vain. Fierce fire from the enemy stopped them every time. They were only able to reach Ht 776.0 by the morning of 2 March 2000. Troshev states that the attempts of the military leadership to carry out the operation to relieve the encircled *desantniki* and evacuate the wounded were unsuccessful due to the fierce fire of the *boyeviki* and the complicated and difficult mountain conditions in winter. The old beech forest, the superior numbers of *boyeviki* and the overall dynamics of the battle hampered and restricted the use of helicopters, Troshev went on to say:

*"Yes and in general, combat experience shows that to use army aviation and artillery is extremely dangerous. It is easy to destroy aircraft and crews. Therefore the main weight of fire support for the encircled men was thrust on the shoulders of the gunner."*

There were other stories as well, for instance the miraculous progress of the battalion deputy commander, Major Aleksandr Dostavalov, who during the night with a platoon from 4<sup>th</sup> Company went to assist 6<sup>th</sup> Company and managed to feel his way round the enemy cordons.<sup>45</sup> How Major Dostavalov and his party managed to avoid the *boyeviki* encirclement of covering detachments is unknown, for the height was already surrounded by a dense ring. Evidently, the *boyeviki* "*simply did not take into account the audacity of the desantniki for their vigilance had slackened*".<sup>46</sup> It was probably not so much that the *boyeviki* had ruled out any attempt by the *federaly* to bring up reinforcements, but that they were tired, maybe even utterly exhausted, their strength sapped by the encirclement and recent breakout from Groznyy, carrying their wounded, trying to escape federal retribution and traversing the mountains to sanctuary in the remoter areas of Dagestan or the Pankisskiy Gorge in Northern Georgia. The obvious route along the tracks from Duba-Yurt or even from Dachu-Borzoy across the high ground via Ht 1006 which would normally have led them to Agushty, Tevzana and Makhketi had already been blocked by federal forces.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1 March 2002, p4, according to which this amounted to 15 men only.

<sup>46</sup> *Novaya Gazeta*, 23-25 April 2001, p6.

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As it was, the recce personnel led by Senior Lieutenant Aleksey Vorob'yev and the recce platoon of Dmitriy Kozhemyakin fought fiercely against the bandits. A survivor, Aleksey Komarov, said that it had developed into hand to hand fighting with the bandits: hacking with sappers' shovels, kicking with legs. Vorob'yev, his legs taken off with mortar bomb splinters, one bullet in his stomach, another in his chest, struggled until the last drop of blood.

*“When 1<sup>st</sup> Company on the morning of 2 March broke through to the summit, the body of the hero was still warm. This brave officer had killed in battle Idris, a friend of Khattab and a commander of the vile detachment of cutthroats. To the last round Dmitriy Kozhemyakin covered the retreat of his subordinates senior sergeant Suponinskiy and private Porshnev. Not one of the Guards had let down his military compatriots. There on Ht 776.0 a diverse collection of people - Christians, Muslims, different nationalities - Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians and Jews fought side by side ... There in miniature almost the whole of the former Soviet Union was represented.”*

By dawn (0500) on 1 March the elite ‘white angels’ battalion of Basayev and Khattab had arrived on the summit. At 0611 hrs the battalion commander M Yevtyukhin by radio called down fire on his position for the last time. Communication then ceased.

*“A group of officer volunteers [eventually] got to the height by night [2 March]. Having searched the battlefield they did not find anyone alive: soldiers and officers were mutilated (Khattab had ordered that no one was to be taken alive) and several had been decapitated.”<sup>47</sup>*

There was profound horror at the scale of devastation: mature beech trees of many years standing had been shattered by shells and mortar bombs, like grass cut by a mowing machine.

## Aftermath

### Outcome of the Battle

Only six *desantniki* survived the battle. 84 men lost their lives. General Troshev believed they gained a victory: the *boyeviki* band of some 1,500 men was stopped, destroyed and dispersed around the area, for Khattab was not able to break through *en masse* to his immediate objective of Sel'mentauzen and to his more distant objective of Vedeno. Some small groups did break through several days later, such as a group of 70 which surrendered by Sel'mentauzen. They were a frostbitten, demoralised band who saw no point in continuing resistance. It was claimed at the time that the *desantniki* had not only destroyed their plans but they had also broken the will of the enemy to continue fighting.<sup>48</sup> However, whilst these claims some days later turned out to be more myth than fact,<sup>49</sup> in the short term,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> <http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/CHECHNYA/troshev.txt>

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.nns.ru/press-file/dagestan/expert/dag627.html>, *Itogi*, 21 March 2000, “*Boyeviki razbity na melkiye gruppy*” by Aleksandr Gol'ts. “At first glance all the trumps are now in the hands of federal forces. The *boyeviki*, if the announcements of the Command are to be trusted, are reliably blocked in the Argun gorge. The detachment of Gelayev is crushed in the village of Komsomol'skoye. But the formations of Khattab and Basayev, although the leaders themselves have managed to escape, are scattered, and now are dealing with them

the operation to drive the *boyeviki* under the command of Ruslan Gelayev out of Komsomol'skoye during March 2000 was directly affected by the need to preserve the lives of federal servicemen following the disaster at Ulus-Kert. Due to these restraints the operation took a comparatively long time to complete: the siege took almost 14 days, for the engineer fortifications were highly sophisticated,<sup>50</sup> but it also resulted in the escape of Ruslan Gelayev to cause renewed problems for Russian and Georgian authorities right up to the present time.<sup>51</sup>

### **Delayed Announcement of Disaster - Implications**

It was so unthinkable that a disaster should befall a subunit belonging to the elite air desant forces that it took until 7 March for the casualty figures to be made public. The news slowly trickled out with "*the falsehood of the generals on TV that 20 men had been killed. Then the figure of 31, but in fact 84 men were killed.*"<sup>52</sup> Many recriminations, accusations and explanations were to follow, for example:

*"The boyeviki as a rule select a narrow sector for a counter offensive, and having concentrated their main forces on it strive to break out from the cordon. This for example explains that during the time of the breakthrough close to Ulus-Kert in the battles 3-4 March many desantniki were killed. In fact their breakthrough took place on an airborne company frontage of around 700-900 metres and 31 servicemen had died. Boyeviki casualties on the breakthrough were 100 men."*<sup>53</sup>

The authorities may have needed a further 10 days to confirm the losses sustained in the bloody battle at Ulus-Kert. Marshal Igor' Sergeyev, the Russian Minister of Defence at the time, confirmed the results of the battle on 10 March 2000 by stating that 85 servicemen of the Pskov Division had lost their lives. Even then the figures were not correct, for at the same time as the Defence Minister's announcement, the Deputy Commander of Airborne Forces, General Nikolay Stas'kov, announced that 84 men had died.<sup>54</sup>

Not only that, but in the initial announcement on 7 March it was stated that the battles close to Ulus-Kert took place on 3-4 March, when in fact the company had been wiped out by 1 March. Whilst the military staff and press machine would

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in the area of the villages of Ulus-Kert and Sel'mentaufen. Only all these conversations about a reliable cordon [block-system] summon great doubts".

<sup>50</sup> <http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/CHECHNYA/troshew.txt>, p126. "The battles in Komsomol'skoye in fierceness were comparable only with the battles for Grozny (the battle of the *desantniki* at Ulus-Kert was a special occasion). The village seemed very well fortified in the engineer sense. Here were not a few fortified structures which conformed to the rules of military science. Cellars had been transformed into strong points and withstood direct fire from tank shells. The majority of cellars were connected by underground corridors, blocked by steel doors. In essence every house had been transformed into a fortress..."

<sup>51</sup> See C W Blandy "Pankisskoye Gorge: Residents, Refugees and Fighters", P37, CSRC, March 2002.

<sup>52</sup> <http://2001.novayagazeta.ru/nomer/2001/16n/n16-s06.shtml>, *Novaya Gazeta*, 5 March 2001, "Pamyati pskovskikh desantnikov" by Vyacheslav Izmaylov.

<sup>53</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 7 March 2000, p1.

<sup>54</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 11 March 2000, "Geroizm vmesto voyennogo iskusstva" by Aleksandr Shaburkin.



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appear to function extremely well with regard to pre-planned deception, in the case of an untoward event involving a mixture of factors which could have a potentially negative impact on the public's perceptions, such as the scale of casualties in this instance or the missile strike in Grozny market on 22 October 1999,<sup>55</sup> public relations organs appear confused; the system appears incapable of providing a rational response. There seems to be a constant inability to face an unpleasant truth, or more accurately to announce it straightaway, thus minimising speculation and building trust and confidence.

Perhaps the worst outcome of this disaster for the Russian Airborne Forces is the fact that "*many officers of the Regiment continue to believe that the 'corridor' for the passage of Khattab's band had been bought and only the desantniki did not know about the 'deal'*".<sup>56</sup> This of course adds grist to the allegations that the military wish to continue the war for as long as possible to strengthen their position in terms of prestige, allotment of funds and hardware, and underlining that the army is of vital importance to Russia. There have been other instances where allegedly money has changed hands between members of the two opposing forces, involving corruption and treachery, namely Pervomayskoye in January 1996 when the Chechens were able to break out of the cordon,<sup>57</sup> Lieutenant General Shamanov's Operation "Wolf Hunt" during the Chechen breakout from Grozny in January 2000 when the Chechens suffered heavy casualties<sup>58</sup> and an episode at Duba-Yurt when tanks from Colonel Budanov's 160 Tank Regiment saved Russian servicemen's lives on 31 December 1999.<sup>59</sup> Unwitting action from federal troops unaware of an

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<sup>55</sup> See Blandy "*Chechnya: Federal Retribution - Encirclement, Forceful Intervention and Isolation*", CSRC, P34, March 2001.

<sup>56</sup> *Novaya Gazeta*, 23-25 April 2001, p6.

<sup>57</sup> See C W Blandy "*The Significance of Pervomayskoye*", P19, CSRC, March 1996. "Officers of the Army and Internal Troops speak frankly about the existence of prices to be paid for guarantees to the rebels for release from a siege or for a population centre not to be subjected to a 'combing' operation for gunmen. The sums cited range between US\$20,000 and US\$40,000. The OMON blames the Army for being open to corruption and the Army blames the OMON for the same. "It transpires that agreements for escaping from a siege are concluded between Dudayev's commanders and federal officers at the rank of battalion or regimental commander. It is hard to believe this, but gunmen are known, as a rule, to get out with no difficulty from "triple" circles of blockade. This, however, is the subject for legal investigations."

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.nns.ru/interv/int1059.html>, Natsional'naya Elektronnaya Biblioteka, Interv'yu nedeli, *Versty*, 22 February 2000, "*Komandarm*" - Interview with Army Commander, Hero of Russia, Vladimir Shamanov by Vladimir Galayko.

<sup>59</sup> *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 22 June 2001, "*Tyna Chechni*" by Valentina Ostroushko. "Russian servicemen who fought in Chechnya in 1999 charge Major General Aleksey Verbitskiy with betraying a group of *razvedchiki*. They claim that the General received money from Khattab for sending them into ambushes." Tanks from Colonel Yury Budanov's 160 Tank Regiment saved some of the *razvedchiki* [20 out of a total of 100]. "After the tragedy, Major General Verbitskiy and Colonel Budanov became the worst of enemies." Lieutenant Colonel Mitroshkin who was associated with this episode at Duba-Yurt "tried to exchange counterfeit dollars after returning to the Ryazan region. He is too unimportant to Khattab to be paid with real money." Major General Verbitskiy was later to arrest Budanov after the episode at Tangi-Chu. There may be a coincidence that this was published during the Budanov trial.

'arrangement' would tend to cover the trails of those who planned or become involved in such acts.

According to press reports,<sup>60</sup> the pain of those affected by the deaths of the men in 6 Company has been sharpened by the fact that the fatalities have not aroused sufficient interest to justify a criminal investigation. The deaths of 118 officers and men who perished in the *Kursk* are the subject of a criminal enquiry which still continues today. In the case of 6 Company, the military command has developed the notion that "*the company carried out its military duty and perished heroically*".<sup>61</sup> At the same time the *desantniki* of 76 Division suggest that in the correct command of a subunit such casualties would not have been necessary.

**Box 8 - Colonel Vladimir Vorob'yev's Search for the Truth<sup>62</sup>**

The anniversary of the dead was marked with great ceremony. There is no doubt that the *desantniki*, taking part in the unequal battle with numerically superior enemy forces by the entrance to the Argun Gorge, deserved all the honours awarded to them by the official authority. And nevertheless, the chiefs in big shoulder boards sat at the table, again and again the thought arose "Was everthing done to save the boys? This question was directed at Colonel General Georgiy Shpak, the commander airborne troops. At the Orlets cemetery by Pskov, he replied, "We analysed the battle and came to the conclusion: everything." The father of the Hero of Russia Aleksey Vorob'yev, Colonel (Retd) Vladimir Nikolayevich Vorob'yev was convinced that it was not so. **A cadre officer, he asked fellow servicemen about Aleksey and other *desantniki* who had been in this ill fated gorge, and on the basis of all the meetings he came to a bitter conclusion that it was possible that what befell 6 Company was avoidable.** [My emphasis - CWB]

General Troshev has often asked himself the same agonising question.

*Would it have been possible to avoid such losses, did we do everything to save the *desantniki*? In truth it is your remit, General, in the first place to care about the preservation of life. It's not hard to realise, but for sure we did not do everything then.*

*Establishing the chronological facts of that battle, I think about the actual possibilities of landing the *desant* by helicopter. And again I turn down such a variant, as a future adventure. Did we know the number of terrorists and where they were located? No. What does it mean to drop a *desant* into an ancient beech forest?<sup>63</sup> And helicopters could be easily destroyed. Could the risk have been taken? Yes, not to know that you killed, saving one company, another company together with aircraft and their crews.*

Yet the incident does reveal several fairly elementary errors by the Russian forces and commanders.

<sup>60</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1 March 2002, p4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Novaya Gazeta*, 23-25 April 2001, p6.

<sup>63</sup> Into very tall trees with branched canopies of foliage.

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**Box 9 - Summary of Errors**<sup>64</sup>

- Distance and subsequent loss of communications in mountainous terrain.
- Why, in issuing the order to capture Ht Istykort, was no reconnaissance carried out beforehand? 2,500 *boyeviki* could not appear from nowhere<sup>65</sup>
- Too much equipment, non-essentials taken but essentials omitted.
- Lack of appreciation of time and distance calculations on route adopted.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon unable to disperse and take cover when caught by *boyeviki*.
- No artillery defensive fireplan. Why, when the company had become encircled was there no artillery support?
- The Commander of OGV (East) General Makarov knew that 90 *desantniki* for almost 24 hours were engaged in a bloody battle with numerically superior enemy forces
- No Forward Air Controller - unable to contact helicopters for offensive fire support. Why was there a lack of action on the part of front and army aviation? Why did not front aviation drop mines on the approaches to the height? The weather on these days for a change was sunny.
- Inability to encode messages.
- Why was the tank fire support removed by Colonel Melent'yev?
- Poor map-reading skills.

Some of the comments and remarks noted above were sent in a letter to Defence Minister Igor' Sergeev, but no reply was received.<sup>66</sup> It is also unclear whether the letter actually ever reached the minister. The widow of Senior Lieutenant Vorob'yev, Lyudmila Vorob'yeva, is experiencing problems over the rate of the widow's pension she should be receiving.<sup>67</sup>

Relatives of the fallen servicemen now meet annually in Pskov: "*On 1<sup>st</sup> March 2001 at 1200 hrs the largest bell of Troitskiy Cathedral thundered reminding every one that a year ago in the Argun Gorge 84 men of the 6<sup>th</sup> Company, 104<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Airborne Forces were killed. Of these 30 were from Pskov or residents of the*

<sup>64</sup> *Novaya Gazeta*, 23-25 April 2001, p6.

<sup>65</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1 March 2002, p4. On this point Vladimir Vorob'yev makes some telling points about the current state of training and the deficiencies of the federal airborne elite, and the loss of skill gained in Afghanistan. "First of all before going into the mountains it is necessary to have full knowledge of the enemy. In Afghanistan we fought differently, we occupied a position, consolidated ourselves on it and only then moved further on. And here they moved on in a heap for 15 km ... in the mountains that does not happen. Its necessary to be like a pawn on the chess board. Regimental commander Melent'yev of his own free will asked for the withdrawal of the company, but the Commander of OGV (East) General Makarov did not give the decision to withdraw."

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

*oblast*,”<sup>68</sup> or to put it in another way, “*in 6<sup>th</sup> Company of 104<sup>th</sup> Regiment every third serviceman was from Pskov and its oblast.*”<sup>69</sup>

On the eve of the second anniversary of Ulus-Kert, a company group from Pskov visited the St Petersburg Serafimovskoye cemetery where sailors from the Kursk and a *desantnik*, Hero of Russia Guards Lieutenant Dmitriy Kozhemyakin are buried. On 1 March 2002 a remembrance ceremony was held in Cherekha, the permanent base location of 104 Regiment.

**Box 10 - Day of Remembrance at Cherekha on 1 March 2002**<sup>70</sup>

1130	Relatives, families and guests assemble by the Memorial Stone (RCP Cherekha)
1130-1140	Parade of regimental personnel by the Memorial Stone, Guard of Honour
1200	Meeting devoted to the memory of the hero- <i>desantniki</i>
1215-1235	Laying of flowers at the Memorial Stone
1235-1250	Consecration of the memorial site
1300-1325	Mass in the Chapel. Georgiy Victory Hymn
1315-1325	Move to 6 Company location, meeting of relatives with the divisional commander, representatives of Pskov city and oblast' administration, presentation to the heroes' relatives of the 21 volume oblast' Book of Remembrance

On 5 March 2002 the Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov on a working tour of troop formations in the northwest of Russia visited 76 Guards Airborne-Desant Division at Pskov. He was accompanied by the airborne forces commander Colonel General Georgiy Shpak and the Commander of Leningrad Military District Colonel General Valentin Bobryshev. Sergey Ivanov met the divisional commander and visited the military township of 104 Parachute Desant Regiment. Whilst with the regiment the minister attended battle training and laid a wreath at the memorial. He also took part in a medal presentation ceremony, congratulating the men on their excellent service and noting that:

*“76<sup>th</sup> Division was one of the very best divisions in the country ... The Ministry of Defence will take all the measures possible and do everything in the plan of new weapons and the social status of servicemen, which was very low ... Soldiers and officers will be able to observe the measures taken by the Ministry of Defence from 1 July in their pockets.”*<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *Novaya Gazeta*, 5 March 2001, “*Pamyati pskovskikh desantnikov*” by Yuriy Moiseyenko.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.pskov.ru/event/memorialday/index.html>

<sup>70</sup> <http://www.pskov.ru/news/2002/010302.html> Pskov oblast' official site “*Segodnnaya - Den' pamyati geroyev-desantnikov*”.

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.pskov.ru/event/ivanov-050302/index.html>, Sobytiye.

## Conclusion

If anyone has any doubts about the disastrous effect of long-term financial neglect on an elite fighting element of a military machine, then that person should read the saga of 6 Company, 104 (Chereshka) Parachute-Desant Regiment, 76 (Pskov) Airborne Division in the operation at Ulus-Kert. Many of these failings were due to lack of training and cooperation. They embraced individual training, from minor tactics to operations at formation level and the lessons learned from past campaigns. The continual and incessant use even of supposedly high grade elite troops degrades their combat capability without proper rest periods and time spent on an ordered training cycle. Sergey Ivanov, the Russian Defence Minister touched on this point when visiting the Division on 5 March 2002:

*“A deep, serious inspection and examination has been completed in the division recently ... At night I read the results, actions and documents. As a whole the condition is good. Two regiments of this division emerge absolutely excellently on the background of the remainder. The difficulty for the division lies in the fact that a regiment of the division is situated in Chechnya on rotation.”*<sup>72</sup>

Their relatives, perhaps even *desantniki* themselves, are concerned at the constant deployment of servicemen from Pskov to the toughest assignments: *“The Pskovichi did not organise the war in Chechnya, but in this Caucasian war, why exactly are Pskovichi often sent in the spearhead of the fiercest battles?”*<sup>73</sup>

Clearly, in analysing these events, little criticism if any can be directed at the bravery and courage of the Russians who once again demonstrated one of the enduring characteristics of the Russian soldier in defence - not to yield: *“At the end of the last century 6<sup>th</sup> Company of Pskov desantniki performed a similar feat. True, in that and in other instances the feat in one became the consequence of neglect in others.”*<sup>74</sup>

Suffice to say that the allegations of incompetence *“alas, are drifting apart somewhat from the official version.”*<sup>75</sup> Even two years later, no answers have been given to the questions of relatives. When the Memorial Stone, with its parachute canopy designed and sculpted by Anatoliy Tsarik, is dedicated on 2 August 2002, these questions will again be raised.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. It later emerged that the main reason for his visit to Pskov and Headquarters 76<sup>th</sup> Division was to evaluate the experiment on forming a contract army - 76 division had been selected for the start of the experiment.

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.pskov.ru/event/memorialday/index.html>, Sobytiye.

<sup>74</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1 March 2002, p4, “*Zadolzhala Rodina geroyam*” by Andrey Riskin. Plainly the author was of the view that the new century did not begin until 1 January 2001.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

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