

Russian Army Route Reconnaissance: Key to Defeating the Chechen Ambush

by Adam Geibel

As the Second Chechen War began in September 1999 and swept across that Caucasian region's plains, Moscow's campaign against the mujihadeen began as a semi-conventional operation, the Russians pushing the defenders out of the towns and villages towards Grozny, the Chechen capital. After months of siege that would come to be called "the Third Battle of Grozny," the ruins fell to Russian forces in February 2000. The remaining Chechen units exfiltrated from that doomed city and sought refuge in southern Chechnya's mountains. From their hiding places, these mujihadeen were able to wage a guerrilla warfare throughout the winter.

The unconventional fighting that followed demonstrated once again the power of the well-planned, technologically-simple ambush and, conversely, how good air and ground reconnaissance can negate the effects of such attacks.

Journalist Viktor Sokirko, writing in the 26 April edition of *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, related the comments of a Russian Army reconnaissance captain in the mountains of Chechnya's Nozhay-Yurtovskiy region: "Now is the trickiest period of the whole operation in the North Caucasus. The gunmen have split up into small detachments and there is no longer the unbroken line of contact with them where the Army was able to use quite effectively heavy arms and aircraft. The Chechens now prefer to operate from ambush, harry the weak spots, and attack undefended convoys. They are using the so-called single-round tactic — after firing a single burst from an assault rifle, they immediately disappear amidst the 'greenery.' It is very hard to hit back and our casualties are more than high enough."

Based on tactics perfected during the First Chechen War (1994-96), the mujihadeen started laying ambushes triggered by command detonated mines. The 152mm HE round packed with several slabs of explosive was a favorite charge, usually initiated by wire or a



Sergey Snopkov/AFP file

A Russian convoy cautiously moves down a road in Chechnya, where rebel ambushes have repeatedly savaged supply and replacement convoys.

cell pager). This was followed by automatic weapons and RPG fire at extremely close range, allowing the Chechens to cause the maximum amount of damage and confusion.

Meanwhile, complacency had set in upon part of the Russian Federal command. Despite late March Russian estimates that 4,000 Chechen fighters were still operating in the southern Chechen mountains, and that 1,000 more had escaped back to the plains to blend in with the local population, Federal Interior Ministry unit commanders continued to be careless and failed to coordinate operations with the Army.

OMON Mistakes

The first targets of the Chechens were Russian OMON (special-purpose police detachment) units, who were as much policemen as soldiers. They were generally tasked with "sweeping" villages for Chechen fighters. Mounted in trucks, with few AFVs of their own, the OMON were fish out of water on Chechnya's lonely highways.

Since they were also a separate entity not under the direct command of the

Army, OMON units and their command structures often failed to satisfy all of the convoy safety requirements. Russian Army rear area operations required that supply and replacement convoys, as well as units shifting position, coordinate their moves and be escorted with an appropriate number of light AFVs (generally BTR-70/80s or BRDM2s). The Army would provide reconnaissance patrols to clear the road ahead of the convoy, as well as coordinated fire support from batteries in range along the route and a constant escort of helicopter gunships (either Mi-8s or Mi-24s) overhead.

When they realized that OMON habitually failed to coordinate for the necessary Army support, the Chechens took notice and decisive action. In the space of one month, they executed three deadly command detonated mine ambushes. On 2 March, a 98-man Moscow-area OMON unit traveling in nine Ural soft-topped trucks was struck in Grozny. Casualty figures varied, with 20 to 37 KIA and 12 to 17 WIA. The unit commander, Colonel Dmitry Markelov, was one of the dead. Most of the trucks were destroyed or damaged.

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On 29 March, an OMON column left Vedenov for a mission in the mountains and was ambushed near the village of Zhani-Vedenov. The result was 37 confirmed Russian KIAs, as well as two BTRs, two BMPs (from a relief column), and four trucks were confirmed destroyed.

On the evening of 5 April, a Nizhnevartovskiy OMON unit bringing replacements from the Khankala air base was hit on the road to Kurchaloy. The Russians admitted to losing one KIA and eight WIA.

In all three cases, the OMON units were traveling without proper radio contact with Russian Army units along the route, had no fire support plan or forward observers with them, had no armored escort and no helicopters flying cover. Furthermore, OMON radios were commercial types available to the public, so the Chechens were able to monitor the Russian broadcasts that were invariably in the clear.

The Army At Serzhen-Yurt

At 1400 on 23 April, a “rear (services) column” of the 51st Parachute Regiment, 106th (Tula) Airborne Division left the Russian base for Khankala. On a resupply mission to an airborne unit near Serzhen-Yurt, the Russians in the 22-vehicle convoy felt that they were safe enough.

Two combat convoys were on the road not too far ahead of them, fulfilling the requirement for route reconnaissance. The rear services convoy had its own combat reconnaissance patrol (a BMD and a BTR with a sapper squad) and reasonable protection — four BMDs and a ZU-23-2 AA gun mounted on a Ural truck. Furthermore, they were in direct radio contact with an artillery unit and had an Aviation Tactical Group (two Mi-24 gunships and an Mi-8 transport with 20 ‘spetsnaz’ troopers aboard) flying protective cover.

A 75-man Chechen unit had other ideas. Having identified the approaching target, they took up positions on the reverse slopes of a wooded gorge three km south of Serzhen-Yurt (about 25 km/16 miles southeast of Grozny).

While it is unclear whether the Chechen unit was able to maneuver away

from the reconnaissance patrols or simply hid from them, they were in place by 1730. The mujahideen attacked the column with 15 radio-controlled mines and sniper fire, along with a volley from grenade launchers and automatic weapons. The mujahideen said that they got as close as 15-20 meters to the Russian tanks and BMPs, then broke contact when the Russian “Hind” gunships started their rocket attacks. The result: (despite conflicting claims by both sides) 17 Russians confirmed KIA and 3 WIA, along with a fueler and five ammunition-laden trucks lost.

The use of reverse slopes meant that the first aviation group missed the hidden Chechens (probably from the long shadows, as it was late in the day) and only a second, trailing aviation group was able to engage them 10 minutes after the ambush started. “Hugging” the target so closely prevented the supporting artillery from firing effectively.

The Army At Yaryshmaryd

Three days after the Chechen ambush near Serzhen-Yurt, the mujahideen struck again at Yaryshmaryd. This community, about 25 miles from Grozny, is near the mouth of the Argun Gorge, a strategic exfiltration route for the mujahideen. It was also the site of a spectacular Chechen ambush in April 1996, when, in the space of 15 minutes, Chechen field commanders Gelayev’s and Khattab’s units wiped out a 245th Mechanized Infantry Regiment rear convoy transporting food and fuel, killing 73 troops.

Another irony was that the Chechen National Guard held a two-week long tactical military exercise in the same area in early May, 1998. National Guard commander Magomed Khambiyev noted that his men had worked in “difficult conditions” on various combat tasks — a 10-km forced march, minefield breaching, crossing water obstacles, and grenade launcher and automatic arms field firing. (The targets were wrecked Russian AFVs left behind in 1996). Apparently, the Chechens used live minefields left over from the 1996 war for their breaching exercises.

The second time, the Russians were more prepared. The new Chechen “Kavkaz” web site reported that, at

1000 hrs, 25 April 2000, a 65-man unit under the command of Amir Yakub launched a classic ambush; first with mines and antitank weapons, followed by grenade launchers and mortars. They reported that the Russian column consisted of 30 vehicles — 15 tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, 10 URAL vehicles carrying ammunition, and five 120mm tracked mortars. The Chechens claimed to have forced the Russians to retreat to Duba-Yurt village, and that the Russians retaliated all day with artillery and air strikes on Yaryshmaryd and Ulus-Kert villages.

Chechen spokesman Movladi Udugov told AFP that “up to 30 soldiers and officers were killed” in the attack by 65 Chechen fighters, from a unit subordinate to field commander Shamil Basayev. He claimed only two Chechen fighters killed and four wounded in the 90-minute battle, while 10 out of 30 vehicles in the Russian column were destroyed. The Kavkaz web site listed four ammunition vehicles, two vehicles with mortars, two tanks and two infantry fighting vehicles destroyed.

The Russian version of the battle was that a 245th MRR reconnaissance battalion subunit and a motorized rifle company were on their way from Urus-Martan to Shatoy, tasked with an engineer and combat route reconnaissance. At 0950 hours, three km from the Volchi Gates (the entrance to the Argun Gorge) the Chechens opened fire on the convoy, using grenade launchers and automatic weapons.

The scouts and motorized riflemen instantly took up positions and returned fire, while the forward observers gave the coordinates to direct support artillery. Mi-24 helicopter gunships on station in the area launched missile strikes against the Chechens. In contrast to the Chechen claims, General Valery Manilov said the battle lasted just over an hour and only one Russian soldier was hurt. One infantry fighting vehicle sustained serious damage.

Neither of the successful Russian reactions deterred the mujahideen, or persuaded them to displace from the immediate area. A two-BTR Interior Ministry reconnaissance team ran into a 60-man force near Serzhen-Yurt on the 26th. This battle, which lasted 30 to 60 minutes until an Interior Ministry relief

column arrived, was one kilometer south of where the ambush of the 23rd had occurred. According to the Russians, they lost ten KIA (including Lieutenant Colonel Shevelyov, who was with the patrol) but took credit for 17-25 Chechens KIA. The mujihadeen would later figure 17-20 Russians KIA, two trucks and three AFVs destroyed with no friendly casualties.

The Chechens would claim that 130 Russians were KIA in the three actions near Serzhen-Yurt and Yaryshmaryd, with 28 vehicles destroyed (20 of them tanks, BMPs or BTRs), at the cost of two mujihadeen KIA and five WIA.

Despite the contradictory nature of these casualty reports, it was obvious that the Russian para-military units were continually getting the short end of the stick. What exactly saved the 245th's route reconnaissance patrol, when so many other Chechen ambushes had taken deadly advantage of Russian mistakes?

While press reports did not indicate whether the scouts expected imminent contact or not, they were far more mentally prepared for a fight on the road than their police comrades. Both Army units were also under coherent commands and following the standard operating procedures set down by the Russian Forces command. A functioning communications net allowed supporting arms to be brought to bear quickly, even though the mujihadeen had used every trick at their disposal.

Considering the popularity and effectiveness of the radio command-detached armor-killing mine to initiate ambushes on Chechnya's roads, this would not be the last such attack the Russians would face. Whether the lessons learned at Serzhen-Yurt or Yaryshmaryd are applied remains to be seen.

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The photo on page 24 courtesy Venik's Aviation Page, www.aeronautics.ru.

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