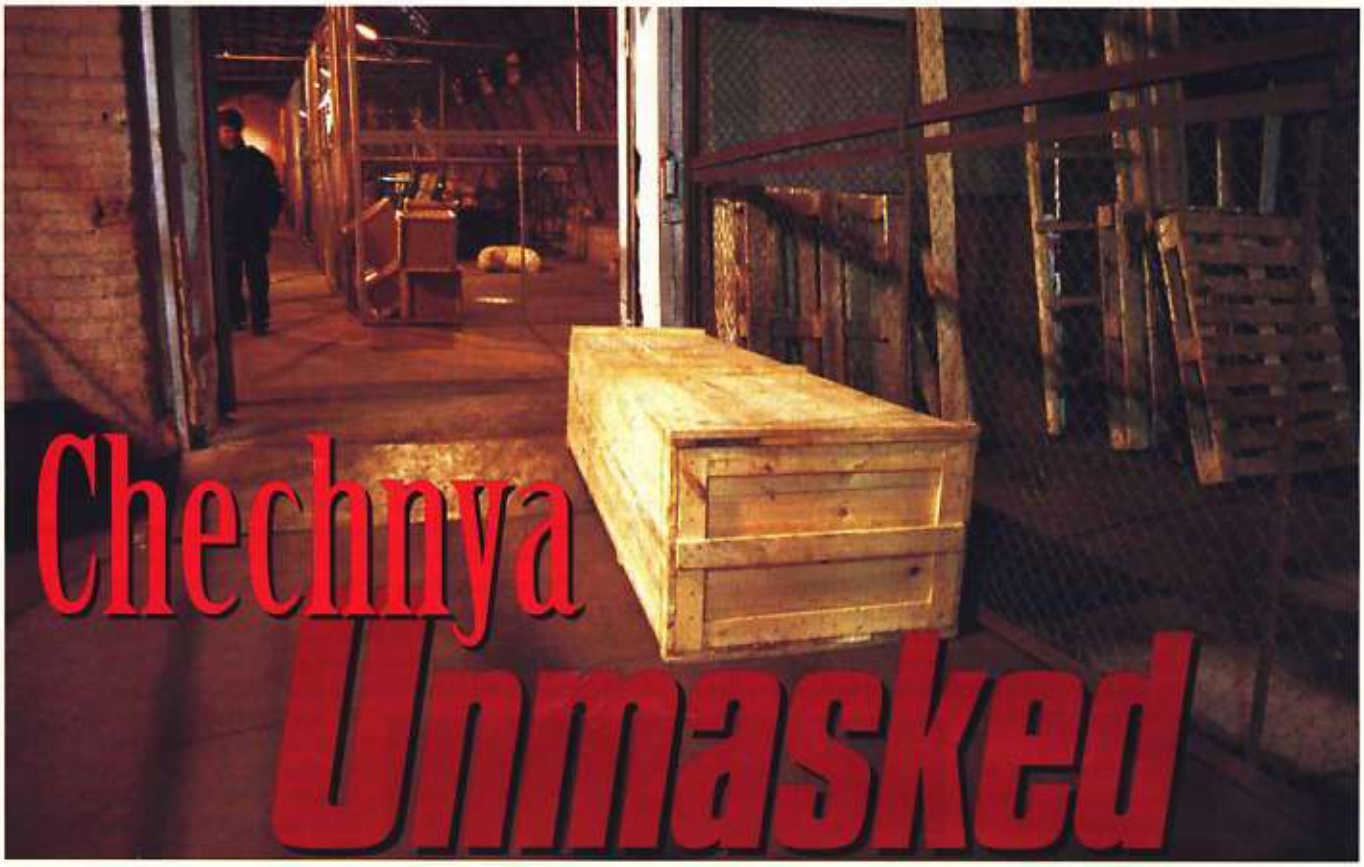

Chechnya Unmasked

Russian Gains Are Measured In Liters Of Blood

Text & Photos by
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Editor's note: Since this article went to press, the Russian army has finally succeeded in taking Grozny, albeit at a terrifically high cost in both casualties and morale. They may have received a "rose" for their victory — but for each rose one encounters a corresponding thorn — and the Russians must endure many such thorns on their bloodied crusade to consolidate territory, and to break the back of the Chechen resistance.

DUBA-YURT, CHECHNYA (*SOF*) — It was a little before 0500 when we arrived at Moscow's Paveletsky railway station amidst complete darkness, freezing temperatures and a steady snowstorm, looking for a boxcar filled with "cargo 200."

"Cargo 200," for the uninitiated, is the Russian army quartermaster corps code number for Russian soldiers killed in Chechnya. The code appears in the "description of goods box" on the paperwork that accompanies every corpse from the battlefield to the grave.

The previous day, a friendly railroad worker had told us that he'd personally counted 27 coffins aboard the overnight train from Rostov-On-Don (home of the main Russian army med-

(top) A Russian railway worker in a freight warehouse at Moscow's Yaroslavsky railway station comes to retrieve a coffin containing the body of a Russian soldier killed last week in Chechnya and identified only as "Gavrikov, A.A." Each day the bodies of soldiers killed in Chechnya are shipped by train from the battlefield back to their home cities. Estimates are that upwards of 3,000 Russian soldiers, most of them conscripts, have been killed in combat in Chechnya since the beginning of hostilities in mid-September 1999. (left) A Russian soldier examines the bodies of four Chechen rebels killed the evening before in a battle outside a Russian army base.

(above) Russian army troops advance through a recently liberated village near Chechnya's second largest city. (inset) A column of Russian Army armor makes its way south from a Russian army base toward the front lines of Chechnya. (right) Russian ministry of interior grunts fire their mortar at suspected Chechen rebel positions just beyond their camp's perimeter.

ical corps forensics lab and morgue for the North Caucasus). He told us that if we'd come back the next morning we'd be sure to see as many dead soldiers as we wanted.

The Russian capture of the Chechen capital Grozny was still a month away, and from what we'd seen during our two tours of duty with Russian forces in Chechnya since last December, we knew that the Russians were taking a pounding at the hands of the Chechen rebels.

We also knew that Russian troops were dying at an alarming rate.

In a report issued in mid-January, the Soldier's Mothers Committee claimed that 3,000 soldiers had died since the start of hostilities last September.

The Russian ministry of defense denied the validity of the Mothers' claim, and maintained that casualty figures were much lower, nearer to 500 and not much more.

The ministry continued to stick with those figures for more than a week after the Mothers' report made headlines, then in a complete about-face, issued new figures showing that 1,055 soldiers had been killed with more than 3,200 injured in Chechnya since October.

The ministry figures did not include soldiers who later died of their wounds or bodies too badly damaged to be identified. Nor did the ministry publish figures of troops missing in action, a category that covers dead soldiers whose bodies were never recovered.

Many Russians were stunned at the news. *SOF* wasn't.

Four times a week — Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday — a single boxcar is attached to the Rostov-Moscow overnight

and loaded with all of the past days' dead for the final 600-mile trip home.

Misery Train

Thinking that the friendly railroad worker we met the day before would again be on duty when we arrived before daybreak, we took along a bottle of vodka and some cigarettes to act as icebreakers before we got down to the task at hand — photographing and counting the coffins before they were whisked off by the small Russian army honor guard that takes possession of each coffin after someone signs for them.

This morning's train, one of the baggage handlers told us, carried nine bodies.

We quickly calculated that if the average boxcar carried somewhere around 10 bodies a day to Moscow, four times a week, that meant that the Mothers Committee figures were pretty damn accurate.

Chechnya was a vicious meatgrinder with an unstoppable hunger for Russian conscripts.

"What are you doing over there?" shouted the darkened figure at the end of the concrete platform. "Stop!"

We quickly spun around to find ourselves challenged by a not-too-friendly man of about 40 years old, who later identified himself as the freight yard boss and who emphatically told us a dozen times that under no circumstances could we remain there or take one single photograph.

"No, no, no!" he screamed. "Get out! No photos. You can't look at anything."

When we tried to explain ourselves, he whipped out a walkie-talkie and began screaming for the police to come. The jig was up.

Four hours later we were finally released from police custody, but not until after we had been questioned by the federal security service (FSB), threatened with arrest for photographing military objects and attempted bribery of a policeman — we had tried to buy our way out with $50 and the vodka.

It had been quite a morning, but luckily we had overheard one of the honor guards talking about some of the bodies being transshipped over to the Yaroslavsky railway station, and if we moved quickly enough we'd get over there and get the photos we were looking for — of the macabre contents of the lone boxcar sitting next to the warehouse.

The main door still had its padlock and seal attached, but we noticed the conductor's door ajar and decided to see if the freight handler would allow us a peek inside before the Russian army honor guard took possession of the bodies.

A Russian Army transportation sergeant wearing a gas mask waves through a troop and supply train heading for the front. Local intelligence said that Chechen rebels in the area were going to begin using chemical weapons.

"In the first three months of the war," freight handler Vladimir Vasilchenko told *SOF*, "only one or two bodies arrived from Chechnya each week."

In the last few weeks, he went on, this Moscow train station alone has received up to 40 bodies a week. "It's a lot more," said Vasilchenko, barely visible under dim lights as he stood on a rail platform. "They used to put only one layer of coffins. Now they stack them to save space."

Vasilchenko told us about a friend of his, a fellow freight handler, who became sick recently after accompanying one too many boxcars of "cargo 200."

"The army sometimes doesn't do a proper job of preparing the soldiers for burial," Vasilchenko said. "They just don't care. They put them in the boxes and sometimes we have problems when they explode."

Vasilchenko went on to describe how his friend became severely ill when a number of bodies that weren't properly embalmed exploded, releasing a ghastly mixture of fluids that spilled onto the floor of the boxcar and nearly poisoned his friend.

Chechnya No Cupcake

Chechnya hasn't been an easy fight for the Russians. Moscow, after all, until very recently possessed a military that policed one of the modern world's most formidable empires and still remains the biggest in Europe.

However, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who's spent time humping through the mud on the road to Grozny who would disagree with *SOF*'s assertion that the Russian forces in Chechnya are corrupt, the soldiers are poorly trained, rarely paid and badly equipped, and consequently have no will to win.

The Chechens, on the other hand, are pursing a centuries-old vow to drive the occupiers from their land.

Russian soldiers routinely beg for their food in Chechnya. A loaf of bread will get almost anybody by a checkpoint. Throw in a bottle of vodka and a pack of Camels, and questions will be asked of *nobody*.

They freely offer to sell their weapons to the highest bidder. Many now, regardless of rank, will openly state their belief that they have no stake in ensuring that Chechnya remains a part of the Russian Federation.

The rebels rely on a tightly knit network of Chechen expatriates who have flourished by trading real estate and commodities and by running protection rackets in Russian cities to provide them with money and — most importantly — weapons.

Those weapons come from a variety of sources. Some are bought on the open market, some come from "friendly" border states with Chechnya, and still others come from the Russians themselves.

Chilling With The 245th

A few days earlier we'd been in the company of the Russian Army's 245th Gneznensky Guard, pushing through one destroyed village after another on the road linking the Chechen cities of Gudermes and Argun.

We had met up with the 245th in a village with no name as one of their recon units was returning from a scouting mission to determine if Chechen rebels still held the fairly large dairy cooperative that straddled a hilltop overlooking the road about six miles ahead of us. Beyond the dairy farm was the famed Argun gorge, and then Grozny.

While we pushed forward with the Russian Army's 245th on the road to the Argun gorge, we repeatedly heard stories of grunts selling their weapons to Chechens for cold cash, food and women.

Another portion of the weapons came to the rebels in a series of raids in early November 1999 on a number of strategic Russian Army weapons depots in Chechnya itself.

The lightly defended armories were easy targets for the rebels and reportedly netted them hundreds of weapons and tons of ammunition.

As *SOF* prepared to pull out of Chechnya, we heard a rumor that Chechen commanders had given orders to their troops to shoot only at the tires of Russian army armored vehicles, so the rebels could use them.

It would be a bloody advance for the Russians.

Two MiG fighters could be seen burning doughnuts in the sky above us. Every few minutes the faint silver streaks would eject flares that would make for cheap fireworks. The steady thumping of artillery could barely be heard over the grinding of gears from the returning column of BMPs.

"It's a perfect place for snipers to keep us from moving forward," said Sash, a former policeman from Samara who refused to tell us his rank or family name, in reference to a bulb-shaped water tower that could barely be made out through the haze which was settling in as the sun began to set.

"They [the Chechens] control the night here," a junior officer, who only identified himself as Vitaly, told *SOF*. "I don't know any soldier who likes to be on night patrol or manning a forward checkpoint at night. The bandits are deadly."

We'd heard from a number of grunts that a favorite tactic of Chechen snipers was to shoot Russian soldiers in the groin or hip. Russian body armor was notorious for not coming equipped with drop-down groin protection and the Chechens probably reveled in that knowledge.

"If I got shot down there then I'd still be twice as big as you," one soldier joked with a friend, overhearing our conversation.

We all knew that in any other place such a comment would have been easily laughed off as just another episode of foxhole humor. In Chechnya, however, it just masked a sense of absolute terror that resided just below the surface in every grunt's mind.

Every conscript pulling this tour of duty knew how the game was played: Never volunteer for anything, keep from being put on any type of night patrol or watch, and get home in one piece.

In fact, while *SOF* was in the 245th's company the sniper threat became such a problem that we thought Moscow was going to have to bring in a team of psychologists to deal with it.

"We've lost six men in the past two weeks," a grunt who told us his name was Andrei said. "Four of them to snipers. The bandits (Chechens) are very good fighters and we're much younger than them."

The next day brought some progress. Helicopter gunships had been called up and were scheduled to ferret out the dairy farm. If the Chechens had evacuated the place during the night the 245th's commanders were going to send forward another recon unit backed by some mechanized infantry as muscle. If the Chechens still held the farm, the gunships were going to pulverize them.

A steady drizzle was falling as our ears perked up in recognition of the telltale *whap-whap* of the two giant Mi-24 gunships that were coming at us from the chopper base in Chervlennaya.

(above) Russian Army armor troops try to keep warm and catch a few minutes rest between fighting Chechen rebels. (left) Russian Ministry of Interior troops line up for a morning planning session before beginning their patrols of Chechnya's second largest city, Gudermes.

As they passed over our position a bunch of soldiers rushed out of their tents and shouted wildly, waving their hands in salute of the helicopters.

"I pray that they are able to take out the bandits," one soldier told us. "It will mean that we can take the position without having to risk any of my mates."

We could barely make out the Mi-24s as they swarmed over the dairy, firing bursts from their cannons into the compound. Smoke began pouring out of one of the buildings.

The helicopters then swung back toward the gorge and made one more pass over the dairy before flying over us so low that we could read the warranty tag on a bunch of cotter pins keeping an equipment bay door from falling off.

Vitaly, the junior officer we had met the day before, was calling together four of his best men for a foot patrol that was meant to reassure the ethnic Russian residents of the village that they were being looked after.

We asked the squad leader, an unlikable NCO who refused to identify himself to us, if we could follow the patrol. We took his lack of an answer for a yes, and began walking into town.

Everyone except the squad leader carried a disposable anti-tank rocket, something we found quite odd considering we'd never heard of the Chechens owning any armor.

"What are you taking those along for?" we asked.

"It's to take out the bunkers the bandits have built," one of the squadees told us. "In every village we've gone into they've reinforced almost every house. They've dug trenches and tunnels. They are good engineers, and we need these sometimes."

The patrol walked sloppily down the village's unpaved streets. No one kept distance, and on a few occasions we watched three of the soldiers walk down the streets abreast of each other.

When that happened we tightened the Velcro straps on our body armor and hung back a few more yards for safety. The last thing we wanted was to be mistaken for Russian soldiers in civilian clothes. "Why didn't we bring an American flag to sew to our jackets?" we joked.

Three hours later we were safely back at company HQ, milling around at what passed as the officer's mess waiting for someone to begin handing out tins of food.

The Russian Army still hasn't discovered MREs. Food comes to the field in tins and cans, and is bulky, heavy and many

Continued on page 69

Chechnya Unmasked

Continued from page 47

times arrives totally inedible because of poor vacuum packing. Bread comes in from Mozdok, and sometimes a unit will have time to prepare fresh rice or boil potatoes. We even heard that there was an armored unit on our flank that had a full-time cook who prepared hot soup every day.

Culinary Of Fright

"If the Chechens don't get you," we were told a thousand times, "the food will."

We honored those words twice a day when we began looking for someone to part with a can of salmon or a tin of meat for a $5 or $10 "donation."

The Russians might not love Uncle Sam — but Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Hamilton and Ben Franklin all have places of honor in every Russian's wallet.

The next day brought progress. Vitaly told us that we could ride along in one of the BMPs that was part of a convoy of mechanized infantry unit that was under orders to take the village of Duba-Yurt, at the entrance to the Argun gorge.

The convoy moved slowly down the road, passing destroyed homes and a few cars flattened by Russian tanks which had come this way earlier in the week.

We were stuffed into the crew compartment of a rather small BMP, the *SOF* team and four rather thin, nervous-looking grunts. These guys were not the A-Team, but they were the only protection we had if anything happened.

"What kind of training did you get before you came?" we asked a pimply-faced kid of about 19.

"Four weeks in a camp near to Nizhny Novgorod," came the reply. "I didn't know we were coming here. I thought I would be learning how to repair trucks. I just want to get home without any problems. I'm no fighter."

All of a sudden we came to a halt. We tried to peer out the inch-thick glass window above the gun ports behind our canvas seats. All we could see was brick houses and little else.

Then it happened. Two short bursts from what sounded like the heavy automatic weapon mounted on the first three BMPs shook the ground and made our hearts race. We heard a muffled explosion, and assumed it was a grenade or mortar round landing not far enough away.

We looked at our shoes, making sure they were tied tight, and checked out cameras and film.

The driver yelled for one of the grunts to open the rear doors on the BMP, and we spilled out into the sunlight — immediately crouching behind the steel tracks.

"Come here!" one of the officers yelled at us from his BMP, which was ahead and a little to the right of ours. "Keep down!"

We sprinted over and fell behind two soldiers, using the huge rear tires of the BMP as cover as they steadied their weapons. The four soldiers who had accompanied us in the tracked BMP soon came behind us, and now we were eight plus an officer.

"Go over to that wall and stay put," four of the conscripts were told. "There are bandits somewhere ahead of us."

More gunfire crackled from down the road. Three tough-looking, blue cammo-wearing soldiers carrying Dragunov sniper rifles ran past us and cut down an alley way.

More gunfire echoed from behind the houses directly in front of us.

Someone was yelling for a medic to make his way up to the front of the column. We tried to follow him, but were told to stay put. Gunfire was now coming from the houses to our right and in front of us.

Hours went by, and by nightfall we hadn't moved an inch. Word had filtered back to our position that one of the company's best soldiers had lost his arm when he tried to open the door of a booby-trapped house and that triggered a firefight between our patrol and a Chechen unit that had waited in ambush.

The next morning we'd heard that the 245th had lost three more men trying to take Duba-Yurt.

It was still 10 more deadly miles to Grozny. It was clear that any Russian victory in Chechnya was going to have to be measured in liters of blood, rather than in captured villages or miles.

Mark H. Milstein is a longtime SOF *Foreign Correspondent.*