

## NIGHT SNIPER

by

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*Before the first Chechen War, there was not a single combat-ready division in the Russian Army. There had not been a single regimental or division-sized exercise in two years and most battalions were lucky to get to the field for a week of training in a year. Units were chronically under strength. Consequently, the Russian Army formed composite units from untrained and partially-trained companies and battalions from across Russia. Normal Russian TO&E motorized rifle units had a “sniper” per platoon. This was not so much a sniper, in the Western understanding of a field-wise crack shot who would hunt his prey in the combat zone, as a platoon marksman who made the hard shots beyond the 300 meter maximum effective range of the Kalashnikov assault rifle. The “sniper” was supposed to be protected by one of the platoon riflemen. The sniper’s assigned weapon was the Snayperskaya Vintovka Dragunskaya (SVD). The SVD was introduced into the Soviet Army in 1963. The SVD is a 7.62mm 10-shot semiautomatic rifle that mounts a four-power PSO-1 scope and is calibrated out to 1,300 meters but is not very effective over 800. The SVD is not nearly as rugged or soldier-friendly as the rugged Kalashnikov family of small arms. Like many Western small arms, it requires careful cleaning and will easily jam when dirt or sand gets into the mechanism.*

*The author was a member of the 131<sup>st</sup> Maikop brigade, a composite brigade which formed in Mozduk, about 100 kilometers from Grozny, shortly before the war. The brigade crossed into Chechnya on 11 December 1994, moving from Mozduk to Ken’-Yurt on the South bank of the Terek river. Ken’-Yurt is some ten kilometers from the suburbs of the capital city of Grozny. The 131<sup>st</sup> garrisoned Ken’-Yurt for over a week until New Years Eve at the end of 1994. On New Year’s Eve, the 131<sup>st</sup> was one of the units that tried to capture Grozny from the north. While the 131<sup>st</sup> was waiting to go into action, the author was detailed to train the new snipers in the brigade. The author’s account starts during the last week of December 1994.*

“Let the people know what it was like in this war. The truth. Let them know how it was.” –One of the few survivors of the 131st Maikop Brigade.

### **Training the “Cubs”**

We were waiting for New Years Eve and the dawning of 1995. Columns of Russian forces had crossed the administrative border and the forward regiments took up positions in the village of Ken’-Yurt. South of us was the crossing site of the Sunzha river. Intense mortar and BM-21 “Grad” multiple rocket launcher fire fell on both sides. There were no casualties yet. My job was to train snipers. The work was interesting yet painstaking. My subordinates were young inexperienced kids, many of who had never seen a sniper rifle before.

It is very important for a sniper to intimately know and love his weapon and I attempted to impart this feeling to my young replacements which might encounter a real enemy the very

next day. The first thing I explained was that the SVD sniper rifle required special care. I devoted particular attention to the correct preparation of the batteries—both the primary and reserve and to recharging them. Then I showed how to pull the rubber butt pad onto the SVD stock (the rubber butt pad that comes with the GP-25 below-barrel assault rifle grenade launcher also fits the SVD). I showed them how to check the trigger action to determine if it was smooth, light and without any catches. In time, each sniper does these “little things” individually. They will know that they cannot forget spare light bulbs for the sight.

When preparing a weapon for combat (weapon zeroing) and during its follow-on combat use, it is necessary to use the same lot of B-32 sniper ammunition. And it is mandatory to always use the scope rear sleeve—the soft rubber eyepiece for the sight [in order to maintain the same distance from the eye to the scope for each shot].

Before firing, the SVD barrel must be dry and oil-free. I usually use a piece of field telephone wire with a white patch to do this. The guys in my subunit have noticed that I am so fussy about the care of my SVD that they have often called it “the Stradivarius rifle”. There is a saying “you can hit a kopeck [small coin] with that rifle”—which is what I try to teach my students to do. Indeed, thanks to proper use of the weapon, I have been able to cut a playing card in half with six shots at a distance of 100 meters.

Everything that I managed to teach my guys came in handy for them later on when our hungry, ragged, untried “motley crew” bravely worked wonders. And these are not just empty words. After the battles in Grozny, I am deeply convinced that the innate strengths of the Russian soldiers, combined with proper training, make them more than a match for any foreign cutthroat.

### **Far from trivial**

Major emphasis was devoted to psychological preparation. Forty-five days of uninterrupted combat is a long time [the time that the Russian Army fought to subdue Grozny during this first battle]. The soldier is quickly exhausted by the constant psychological and physiological stress. Western armies study the stress factor on military personnel “on the firing line”. For example, before the conduct of military operations in the Balkans, [their] psychological services were busy working in NATO units.

Before and during combat, the Russian soldiers were not only on reduced rations but also periodically ignored by their commanders. Humanitarian aid, as a rule, only gets as far as the rear services units. In combat, soldiers sometimes have nowhere to bathe and no place to wash or to dry their uniforms and boots. This lack of sanitation and hygiene at the front had a critical impact. Diseases such as lice and fungus infections are wide-spread among the troops.

### **Raid**

At six in the morning, I returned from a night raid.

At ten o'clock in the morning, when I was already asleep, LTC Pika N. dropped by to see me. "Do you want to square off with a Chechen sniper?" As it turned out, this enemy sniper only worked at night in the region of an outpost across from the Sunzha ridge [about eight kilometers south of Ken'-Yurt and two kilometers from the Grozny suburbs]. This sniper's fire was able to keep the soldiers pinned down in a constant state of stress and had exhausted literally all of them. Due to the risk of "swallowing" a bullet, particularly at night, the soldiers were already on the edge of psychological breakdown.

There was practically no pattern to the enemy fire: a shot from one mound; after an hour-and-a-half to two hours, another shot from another mound; after another hour-and-a-half to two hours his third shot. The stress at this outpost might be compared to the presence of a persistent droning mosquito on a warm summer night, although the consequences were far more serious.

Toward evening, having rested, adjusted my combat gear and checked my weapon, I departed for the ill-fated outpost. The commander, Viktor Fedovich, was glad to see me. "Sasha, my own, we await you...and I owe you". The soldiers spilled out, looking at me as if I were a marvel. But they were also very angry. I looked around—the defense was laid out according to regulations—a cement circle surrounding a BMP. I could understand their frustration. Was it possible that they were really unable to deal with this one single problem?

I examined the map, studied the terrain and determined the location of the minefields. The commander showed me the approximate locations from where the sniper was firing. I attempted to determine the sniper's possible movement routes to his firing positions and to his withdrawal areas. I chatted with the officers and soldiers. I wrapped the "Stradivarius rifle" in camouflaging strips and put on the night scope. I arranged my return safe passage through the minefields. "Yeah guys, please pay attention. Don't shoot me." I did not consider this warning superfluous. I had done this before—as the enemy returned from a raid, I had shot him from his own firing position.

I could not return until morning. I waved to the guys staying behind in the outpost and a few minutes later I was in enemy territory. I selected an observation post in a forest belt. I found a depression in the forest floor and from there I began to search the surrounding area using night vision binoculars. I lay there for a long time listening to the night sounds. During a hard freeze, even the lightest steps are readily heard. Somewhere in the distance I could hear shots. I could hear motor vehicles moving in the suburbs. Two jackals ran right by me. As the night deepened, it got colder and, in an hour, I felt frozen to the bone.

Time passed slowly and it was boring. I used my will power to force myself to ignore the cold. It was now after midnight. My anger at this "phantom sniper" began to boil. That's how I spent the whole night. This was evidently the sniper's day off.

I was in a nasty mood. I waited outside the minefield corridor until dawn, identified myself and then returned to the outpost. I felt guilty as I approached these people whom I could not help. It gnawed at me like a grey rat. I did not want to look into the eyes of the soldiers. I returned to regimental headquarters in the first available vehicle. The 131st Maikop Brigade was busy, briskly preparing to advance.

## **Two shots—two corpses**

I woke up choking from all the cigarette smoke in the room. The soldiers were returning from a raid and now they were all anxious to share their impressions. After my unsuccessful hunt for the phantom, it was disagreeable and unpleasant. After dinner, I prepared for my next foray. I checked my weapon, ammunition, night vision binoculars and adjusted my equipment.

At twilight I set out for the outpost.

It was a repeat of the previous night. I went through the minefield, searched for shelter and surveyed the area. The enemy sniper showed up at about 2000 hours. From somewhere he fired a single shot at the outpost. I moved to another spot. I lay in my hide for two to three hours without result. I understood that the sniper had already left or had taken a rest in a prepared shelter.

I decided to move deeper into enemy territory toward the suburbs of Grozny. There was a farm and several houses not far off. A “Niva” four-wheel drive vehicle drove up with its headlights off and stopped 100-150 meters from the buildings. A man got out of the automobile and began slowly unloading something from the trunk.

I looked carefully. He was unloading ammunition cans! At that moment, a second man came out of a house and helped unload the ammunition. I got ready to fire. My first shot was reserved for the nearest combatant. I shot him in the head and he collapsed to the ground. His comrade instantly dove for cover behind the car. I had to wait until his head poked up over the hood of the car. I took my second shot. Now there were two bodies sprawled by the wheels of the car.

I was in for a big surprise when suddenly two combatants with assault rifles sprang out of the house. They began firing so wildly that they only increased their own panic. Nor did our artillery let them come to their senses—for it began a furious barrage on the area within two minutes after they had opened fire.

## **Death of a Sniper**

I tried to escape our own artillery fire by moving along a deep, wide gully in the dark of night. I climbed up a slope and suddenly found myself next to an enemy firing emplacement. Fortunately, the concrete structure was unmanned. Nearby were the empty field fortifications for a battery of BM21 multiple rocket launchers with their firing ports opened on opposite sides.

Two armed men appeared on a path next to an oil derrick. The cry of some magpies warned me of their presence. This pair had barely reached the fence when I gently squeezed the trigger. My shot rang out. I quickly moved out toward the outpost that was still a ways off.

My return route lead along the bottom of a gully. From time to time I would climb up the banks to look around, but because of the dense thickets of camel thorn, I could not see anything.

As I came close to the outpost, I suddenly heard the sounds that characterize a sniper at work. Almost running, I took off in the direction of the shot. Glued to my binoculars, I carefully searched the area. Somewhere nearby, I heard a buck deer snort. Some time after that, the frightened animal ran by me.

Through my binoculars, I noticed movement on the other side of the gully. I looked more closely and saw a man wearing binoculars around his neck. He was about 70 meters away.

I hid my binoculars inside my camouflaged smock and raised my rifle. As I was sighting in on the man, I could readily see the enormous rifle that he had on his shoulder. It seemed to me that the man in my scope was getting smaller with each step, but I thought that was an optical illusion. I had scarcely gotten ready to make the shot—and the target disappeared. I quickly shifted my aim to the place where I figured that he would have to reappear. But he did not appear. Despite the obvious risk, I had to go after him.

I moved to the spot where I lost sight of him and carefully examined the vicinity. It turned out that the footpath dropped sharply downhill. There was a sheep pen, a small house and an outhouse at the other end of the gully. It was about 200 meters away.

Again I hid my binoculars inside my camouflage smock and raised my rifle to look through the scope. There was my target! The man was unhurriedly walking toward the sheep pen. I took aim. I could feel how my breath interfered with a steady trigger squeeze. The man had opened the door to the house and was about to step inside....I felt the recoil from my shot. In the scope I could see clearly see the light spilling out through the open door and the legs of the man sticking out through the door.

I waited for a while. There was no suspicious movement from inside the house or outside. Apparently there was nobody else around, or they would have tried to drag the body inside the house. Cautiously I circled the sheep pen. I took out a hand grenade and straightened the safety pin, just in case, as I moved up to the doorway. I pushed the door all the way open and went inside. I lifted the body by the hair, then I kneed the body between the shoulder blades. I could feel his sticky blood on my hands. I did not need a kill shot or a knife to finish him off.

I let the corpse lie while I examined the premises. It seems that the corpse was indeed the phantom sniper. His excellent equipment indicated that. The house was equipped to serve as a refuge for a sniper—it was well-stocked to hold him for a long time. On the shelves were excellent imported combat rations and several cases of stewed chicken with peas. There was a teakettle on the stove. On the floor was a mattress with a pillow on it, an axe, a foreign-manufactured knife and a stack of firewood.

I thought to myself that it was not far to the outpost and the gully hides the sheep pen from prying eyes. I attempted to recreate the dead sniper's tactics. At night he will light the stove, drink some coffee and then leave to go hunting. One or two shots later, he returns to his shelter. He rests for two or three hours and then goes out again to the outpost.

He had no papers on him. I could not determine his nationality by looking at his face. His weapon attracted my special attention. It was a bipod-mounted “Heckler & Koch” 12.5mm [.50 caliber] with an excellent night scope. I also found a NOKIA radio transmitter. This was all evidence that the dead man was no shepherd.

I dragged the losing sniper to the gates of the sheep pen and then I wiped the blood off my hands in the snow.

When I returned to the regiment, it turned out that the majority of the military subunits of the brigade had moved into Grozny. The Communications Chief ran into my tent. When this captain was still in the doorway, he saw me, and began yelling “What are you doing sitting around here? There is a battle going on out there!” And, in truth, commotion was all around. However, any opportunity to catch up to the units that had left for the city was limited to an ammunition resupply column of “Shilok” and “Ural” trucks that would assemble the following morning. In the meantime, the 131st Maikop brigade column was burning in the middle of the city.

*The author found himself training snipers for the 131st Maikop Brigade, commanded by Colonel Savin, in the days and hours before it went into combat. Due to troubles with the border outpost, the author missed the movement of the brigade into Grozny. The 131st was badly handled in the initial fighting in Grozny. It lost 20 of its 26 tanks, 102 out of its 120 BMPs [infantry fighting vehicles] on New Year’s Eve. The Russian Army lost over 1,500 dead and wounded that night. Many of these were from the Maikop Brigade.*

*The author hunted alone without a backup, spotter or a security element—or even a radio. There was no apparent coordination between the sniper and available artillery. There were no emergency procedures for the sniper to return to the outpost before dawn. These are all high-risk options for snipers. Although sniper hunts are individual efforts, they are normally tied in with support from the parent unit. This hunt is highly individualistic and indicative of the state of the Russian Army as it entered Chechnya the first time. There were established tactics and procedures, but these were ignored.*

*What the Chechen sniper was really carrying remains a mystery. Heckler & Koch does not make a .50 caliber, bipod-equipped sniper rifle. There are several makers of .50 caliber sniper rifles, so the author may have mistaken one of these for an H&K. The author does not mention bringing the weapon back with him, but it is hard to imagine that he did not. Lacking witnesses, the weapon would establish his “kill” for his sniper book and intelligence personnel would certainly want the dead sniper’s papers and weapon for analysis. The rest of the author’s story does check out—the oil derrick, sheep pen, farmhouse and gully are all on the Russian field map and the sequence of events fits. The author was there and is a member of a unique group—the survivors of the 131st Motorized Rifle Brigade.*

Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> This article first appeared in the January 2000 issue of Soldat udachi, the Russian version of Soldier of Fortune magazine.