

# Some Russian Tankers' Experiences In the Second Chechen War

by Adam Geibel

At the twilight of the 20th century, Russian tankers once again found themselves crossing into Chechnya. The Kremlin committed over 400 MBTs to their second campaign in the North Caucasus; Nizhniy Novgorod's 3rd Motorized Rifle Division deployed 251 MBTs (mostly T-80s), Volgograd's 20th Motorized Rifle Division's 93 T-72s, the 205th Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade's 50 T-72s and the 136th Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade's 32 tanks. Some T-55s and a handful of PT-76s were apparently assigned to Interior Ministry units as fire support weapons.

This time, the Russians lost fewer tanks to Chechen action than during the First Chechen War. In September 2000, Colonel-General Sergey Mayev, the Chief of the Main Armor Directorate of the Russian Federation Ministry of Defense, said that only ten tanks were lost in the Second Chechen War, compared to around 200 vehicles in the first war. (Presumably, Mayev meant ten unsalvageable write-offs, since both Russian and Chechen sources make mention of more than ten MBTs knocked out (specifically, the mujihadeen claimed a total of 400 AFVs destroyed by 20 March 2000).

Major Tsimbalyuk, a former tank platoon leader and currently the chief of staff of one motorized rifle brigade's tank battalion, as well as a holder of two Orders of Courage, said simply that, "We learned some serious lessons from the last campaign."

While the Chechens had around 100 tanks and armored personnel carriers<sup>1</sup> (including a couple of dozen T-62s and T-72s in varying mechanical states), there were no known tank vs. tank confrontations. At an 11 March 2001 briefing at the unified federal headquarters in Khankala, there were claims that nine Chechen tanks and 32 APCs had been destroyed during the war, but it was not specified how this was done.

One of the worst problems for Russian tankers was the sheer age of their armor fleet, which led to many cases of mechanical unreliability. Yury Toichkin, a

sniper from Kursk, told the *Boston Globe* how one tank in his unit had to be towed into battles. "They'd drag it in, then drag it back out again, then they'd put it there on the front line as a prop, for looks. This is how we go to war — with tanks as props, to fight. The Chechens have better weapons than we do."

## The Nomad Tank and other T-72s

Before the war broke out in Dagestan, the Russian Army had a small T-72 group in the 136th Brigade, while MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs] troops units were using T-55 tanks. When the Chechens first crossed over into Dagestan in August, 1999, there was a minor curiosity in one of the Russians' tank sheds at Boktiah — a T-72 fitted with ERA set up "for export" to India. Rumor had it that the deployment of a battalion of these to the 138th MR Brigade was stopped when it was discovered that soldiers had been selling the explosive from their tanks' reactive armor.<sup>2</sup>

When the Russians struck back, this T-72BM was put at the head of a company column along the route to Buy-naksk. It was soon nicknamed the "Nomad Tank." The crew would receive information from either an artillery forward observer or even a local resident, then drive covertly, but at high speed, into the area indicated. The tank would move independently, without accompanying infantry. Moving off-road along mountain ravines, the tank remained unnoticeable to observers until it reached a suitable firing position, where the crew would fire four to five rounds at the target indicated and then disappear back into the ravines.

Over several days, the Russians claimed that a mujihadeen weapons caravan, three mortar teams, and two munitions dumps were destroyed by this method.

During the battle for Rakhata, the Nomad rejoined the company. Gunner Sergeant Aleksey R. was employing the main gun to suppress Chechen assault riflemen firing from windows, when

return fire from four sides by grenade launchers hit the tank several times and the engine died. The driver-mechanic tried to start it, but the engine wouldn't turn over until several tense minutes had passed.

The Russians were convinced that the tank survived the battle only because of the reactive armor blocks. The shaped charge grenades burned through several layers of the turret armor, split the side, and completely removed the sights. The crew came out of the battle bruised and the officer acting as vehicle commander was only wounded.<sup>3</sup>

For the rest of the T-72 crews, life was full of interesting problems. One T-72 driver-mechanic, contract service Warrant Officer Protsenko, noted in a May 2000 interview that, "In the mountains, the engines overheated. There was not enough power; in fact, it was necessary to stop at 1200 meters. The tracks did not reliably grip the stony soil, especially if there was ice. And it was cold in the tanks. If heat was maintained in the combat compartment, then there was none in the control [driver's] compartment."

The crews were able to overcome some of these problems. Claws were fitted to the tracks to improve traction. In the mountains or in low temperatures and humidity, the reloading mechanism's control unit sometimes failed, so the crews would warm them up over a campfire until they ran normally. Some problems were endemic to the T-72's design. The installation and removal of the tank's AKB storage batteries was difficult even under ordinary conditions. The batteries ran down quickly during the winter, and in order to change them, the 70 kg driver-mechanic's seat had to be removed and the equally heavy AKBs raised vertically through a hatch.

The mujihadeen took advantage of another of the T-72's weaknesses: after firing, the main gun stops on the hydro-stop for reloading, giving the Chechens an opportunity to attack the tank. Sergeant Petelnik, a T-72 tank commander and contract serviceman, noted that,

“The rebels tried to attack the left side of the turret and the space beneath the turret, trying first of all to knock the sights out of operation. Sometimes they were successful.”

After five or six hours of continuous firing, the sabot ejection rack in some T-72s became unserviceable and the magazine lifting mechanism failed. In that case, the ammunition stowage location in the tanks’ fighting compartments made it difficult for crews to load the gun from the manual ammunition stowage racks.

After the basic load of ammunition was expended, the tank had to leave its position in order to reload a container. Valuable time was lost and in leaving the position, the crew exposed its position and was also forced to leave the vehicle, thereby subjecting themselves to small arms fire. Russian tankers said they wished for an armored transport-reloading vehicle like those supplied to the missile troops.

Others complained about the T-72’s fire suppression equipment (PPO), the difficulties detecting the enemy in “complex” conditions with the current vision devices, and the need for secure communications equipment (updated R-174 tank inter-phone systems were mentioned). The mujihadeen had a nasty habit of eavesdropping, sometimes even interjecting bogus commands on unsecure Russian radio traffic. This occurred even down to company and platoon level. Combat operations also illustrated the necessity of equipping all crew members with assault rifles.

At the beginning of October 1999, Private Aleksandr Pavlovich Perekrest, a tank driver-mechanic, found himself in Chechnya. Having served for 18 months, he was only six months short of being demobilized. Perekrest described being under fire:

“The most horrible thing is when they fire at you for the first time. At first, I let go of the control levers while under fire. The first time was horrifying and later it was nothing, you think: ‘I’m sitting in an armored vehicle — nothing will happen.’”

Ironically, the private’s tank was attached to an infantry platoon and at a position two kilometers from Samashki, it was hit by Chechen mortar fire.<sup>4</sup> Even though Perekrest had jumped into the tank’s hatch, the explosion tore off his hand, temporarily blinded him, and riddled his chest with shrapnel. He regained his sight after three days in the hospital. Perekrest considered his T-72 obsolete, but noted that “there were even older ones — there were T-62s.”

### T-62s and “Ilich’s Eyebrows”

In September, 1999, the chief of armaments for the Russian Federation armed forces, Anatoliy Sitnov, said there were T-62 and T-55 tanks operating in Chechnya because they were lighter and better able to function on narrow mountain trails. This might have been considered rationalization by the Russian tankers forced to man those relics. While true that they were lighter and functioned better in certain situations, some T-62s’ diesels also had power and overheating problems at higher elevations. The T-62s, lacking ERA boxes, were only fitted with “Ilich’s eyebrows” — the BDD hollow armored boxes developed during the Afghanistan War that were welded to the turret front.

The Siberian Military District Guards Tank Regiment was one such unit re-equipped with T-62s. The crews claimed to be glad for the extra room left by the lack of an autoloader and noted that ATGMs wouldn’t create over-pressure if the hatches were left open. Apparently, the Siberians didn’t want to get too close to the Chechens. In one engagement, the deputy regimental commander took out an ATGM that was firing at them at a range of 3,900 meters.

The regiment was initially split up to reinforce other units. After crossing the Terek Mountain Range, serious engagements began. The Siberians’ first taste of Chechen ATGM fire was near Kerla-Yurt, then Achkhoy-Martan and Alkhan-Yurt, where one tank company fired 1,000 rounds in support of the attacking infantry.<sup>5</sup>



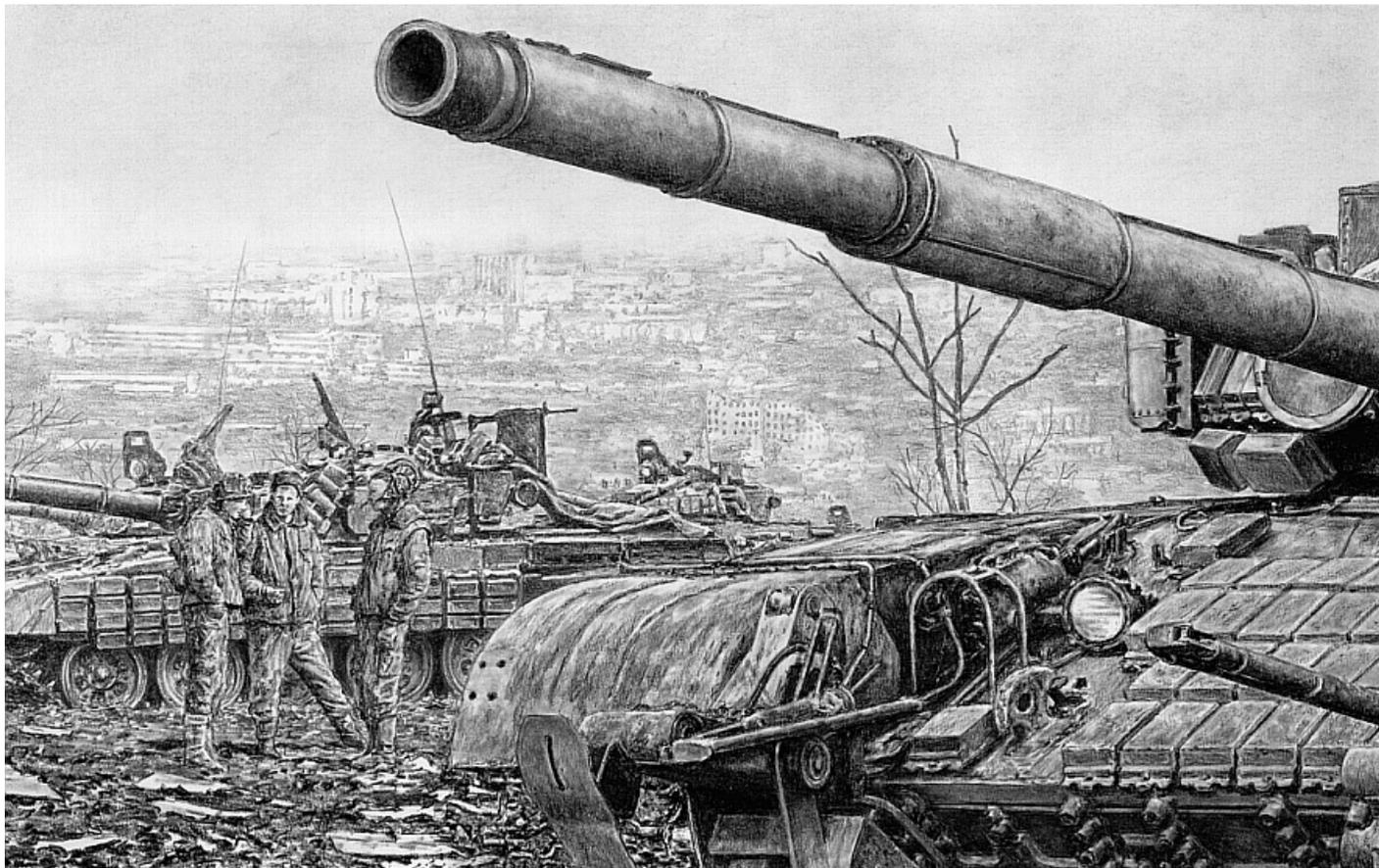
The regiment was reunited at the beginning of December for the battle of Urus-Martan, where once again the T-62s were used for direct fire support while facing return fire from ATGMs, “Schmel” flamethrowers, and air defense weapons.

After Urus-Martan, the regiment was divided again and two tank companies were sent to Grozny. The rest went into the mountains.

On 29 December 1999, the Siberian tankers reached Duba-Yurt, near the northern entrance to Argun Gorge and a major choke-point for Chechen fighters infiltrating down from the southern mountains. Three tanks and armored infantry vehicles had reached the village’s southern outskirts, but the higher command did not appreciate the Siberian’s initiative and ordered them to withdraw.

Two days later, a reconnaissance battalion traveled along that same route and the mujihadeen were waiting for them. The tankers, sent to extract the reconnaissance battalion, found themselves under a crossfire from the hills.

Three T-62s rushed to the outskirts of Duba-Yurt and expended their entire basic ammunition load into the forested slopes and were then replaced by another three “loaded” tanks. The recon-



naissance battalion withdrew under this tank “umbrella” after destroying three of their own heavily-damaged armored infantry vehicles so that the Chechens wouldn’t get their hands on them.

There were other battlefield tales on imaginative armor use. During initial stages of the siege of Komsomolskoye, a mountain village, on 5 March 2000, a Russian reconnaissance group and a tank rushing to the village fell into an ambush. The tank was knocked out by an RPG and lost traction, and the mujihadeen forced back the scouting party, wounding five of them. For four hours, the bandits tried to force the tank crew to surrender (including barrages of RPG-18s). The crew wouldn’t surrender, but neither could they be rescued. Mortar fire drove the bandits back from the tank while another T-72 and scouting party moved forward. They also fell into an ambush when the tank hit a land mine. The scouts were unable to liberate the first tank’s crew.

When the infantry finally did fight their way through to the tank, it was too late. Lieutenant Aleksandr Lutsenko had called artillery fire in on himself, but the mujihadeen were able to get to the tank and blow open the hatches. Aleksandr and his gunner-operator were killed, while the mechanic-driver was captured.

Days later in the battle, Interior Ministry troops attacking mujihadeen positions were pinned down. A T-62 and a T-72, along with a “Shilka” ZSU-23-4, moved through a narrow side street and after barely getting past three burning Interior Ministry BMPs, began to work over some houses in which the mujihadeen had settled. The battalion commander, sitting in the tank commander’s seat, spotted a rebel with a “mukha” PG-18. The Chechen got off the first shot; two officers were wounded and the tank disabled.

The Russians got their revenge in the days to follow, using their tanks at point-blank range to blast mujihadeen out of Komsomolskoye’s basements.

### Going Home - Lessons Learned?

The first Russian unit to complete its tour of duty was the 131st Motor Rifle Brigade’s tank battalion. It was withdrawn from Chechnya on 20 February 2000 and sent to its home base in Mai-kop. Two tank regiments were part of the nine withdrawn from Chechnya by 15 June 2000. In the three months prior, a total of 167 tanks had been withdrawn, leaving 202 still in Chechnya.

The Second Chechen War showed the Russians that tank crewman training had suffered in a number of individual

and collective skills. One of the most basic mistakes, repeated from the First Chechen War, was that crews were hurriedly thrown together as units slated to go to the front were brought up to something resembling full strength. The most distressing and repeated rumor was that many AFV crewmen met for the first time as they were shipped to the front, which left zero time to build cohesion within the vehicle crew, let alone at the platoon or company level.

Where once the Russians could afford to send draftees who were graduates of professional technical schools and polytechnical institutes with three to four years of special training, they now had to rely on a dwindling number of what they called “yesterday’s school youths.” Major General Vladimir Fedota, chief of Siberian Military District’s Armor-Tank Service, remarked that draftees with only six months to a year or training could not be turned into a fully qualified tank operator who knew a number of closely-related combat duties. He also knew the Kremlin couldn’t continue relying on the eternal Russian luck.

He candidly pointed out the sloppiness of some Russian tankers, discarding engine access hatches in the warm climate of Baykal made maintenance

there easier, but that missing hatch could bring the tank to a screeching halt in a Chechen mudhole.

Major General Vladimir Fedota stressed their low technical competence and the need for additional training, particularly relating to combat situations and dealing with mechanical breakdowns. He specifically mentioned lessons in operating the stabilization, using night-vision devices, and servicing lubrication lifters and fuel supply systems under special conditions.

Russian tankers will have to learn to work with what they have for the foreseeable future. In November 1999, the Russian Army was promised 30 tanks and 130 armored transports. At a September 2000 meeting in Kubinka, Colonel-General Mayev noted that no provision for new tanks was planned for that year. Funding will cover no more than 100 new BTRs and the repair of damaged or worn-out tanks.

Another indicator that older-generation Russian MBTs will be around for a while longer is the modernization of the 9M117M ATGM. This laser-guided round can be fired from both the T-55 and T-62 tanks, as well as the BMP-3 IFV and MT-12 antitank gun. The Tulamashzavod company and the Design Bureau of Device Building told the press in early December 2000 that they would update the tandem-warhead round designed for taking out AFVs protected with ERA and fortifications that present small target profiles.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Rumor also had it that the Chechens had BTR-90s, of which the Russian have only five in the president's bodyguard service. The BTR-90 had increased firepower, armor, all-terrain capability and maneuverability. It was armed with a 30mm automatic cannon, a 7.62mm machine gun, an AG-17 grenade launcher and a "Konkurs" ATGM.

Prior to the 1999-2000 war, the Russians had been quite proud of their 1970's vintage workhorse BTR-80 APC. However, all the services equipped with BTR-80s experienced excessive mechanical breakdowns and most quickly bogged down in the mountains. The naval infantry replaced theirs with MTLBs and airborne units with BMDs. The BTRs were relegated to road-bound convoy-escort duty.

When the Chechens switched to mine warfare as their primary method of attack, the BTRs were the favored targets since they didn't stand up well to the 120mm mortar and 152mm HE shells used as field-expedient mines. The BTR-80 was also

vulnerable to some of the lighter direct-fire weapons.

Most Russian observers agreed that the BTR-80 was at the end of its capabilities. But in late November 2000, Alexander Yegorov, the R&D Institute of Steel's deputy director general for science, announced that his firm had finished development of technical documentation for the production of composite "grill" shields for the BTR-80.

<sup>2</sup>One former and three Russian soldiers were arrested in St. Petersburg at the beginning of February 2000 for stealing the explosives out of T-80 ERA blocks. An investigation by Northwestern RUBOP [Rayon Administration for Combating Organized Crime] and Leningrad Military District military counterintelligence started on 24 September 1999 caught former soldier Aleksey Kapralov, his brother, and two unnamed companions fencing plastic explosives four times more powerful than TNT.

They had been looting 270 grams of VVV-5a from ERA blocks taken off of decommissioned T-80s; 16.7 kg of the explosive were found in various stashes, with 350 plates holding 94.5 kg of plastic explosive moved aside at one warehouse for eventual dismantling. Apparently, the ERA blocks were part of a supply slated to be sent to Russian Forces in Chechnya as replacements. How many blocks shipped empty was unknown.

This may be a very likely reason why the Chechens were able to knock out at least 13 T-72BMs ("T-90 or T-72BM? Did the Rebels Misidentify Knocked-Out Tanks?", *ARMOR*, Nov-Dec 2000). The Russians consider "dynamic protection" to increase the level of a tank's resistance to shaped charges by a factor of two.

<sup>3</sup>Russian military scientists were shown one T-72BM tank which received nine direct hits from antitank weapons in a four-hour long battle. The tank lost its mobility but was able to continue firing. Crew members received no wounds or contusions, due to its dynamic defense (ERA blocks). The Russians claimed that if the tank had been equipped with the Arena defensive system, neither antitank missile systems nor grenade launchers would have been able to touch it. (See "Russia's ARENA Active Protection System," *ARMOR*, Sep-Oct 1996)

<sup>4</sup>Russian tankers also became targets for their own forces. When Federal artillery executed a fire mission against the command center at Khankala in mid-July 2000, one tank was hit; two crewmen were wounded, and another received a slight concussion.

<sup>5</sup>In November 1999, one enthusiastic but unnamed Russian armor officer told *Kommersant's* Sergey Dyupin that the "soldiers jump out of the foxholes and rush straight under our tracks. It's because with a single shot our T-62 can knock out an entire battery in the mountains. The battery that for three days has been preventing them from so much as sticking their heads out of the foxhole! But it is not all that easy to shoot from a tank. A prosecutor follows every machine and watches where the shell lands. God forbid we make a mistake...." Apparently, the Russian

command did make an attempt to reduce 'collateral damage' when the war started.

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