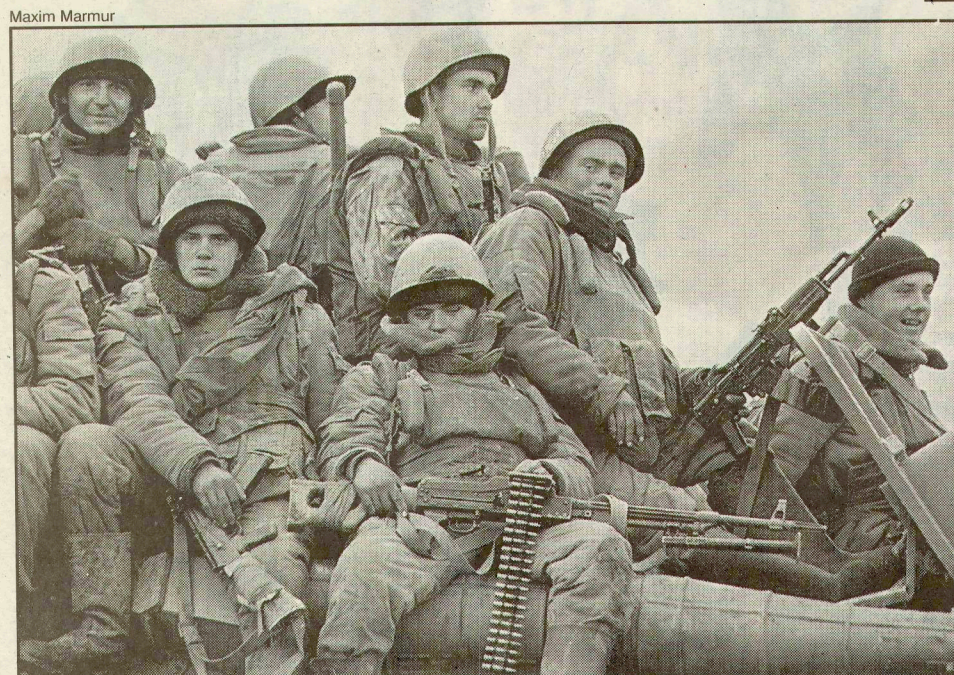


# Russian paratroops move



Maxim Marmur  
The final surge: Russian soldiers advance towards Grozny after seizing Urus Martan

**AIR FORCE**

- Tupolev Tu-22 bomber, carrying 1,100lb concrete piercing bombs
- Mi-8 'Hip' attack helicopter equipped with night vision
- Mi-24 'Hind' support helicopter equipped with night vision
- Ka-52 'Alligator' two-seat close-combat helicopter
- Sukhoi Su-25, ground attack aircraft
- Sukhoi Su-24, all-weather, low-level attack aircraft

Russian air force has flown 83 sorties over Shali in 24 hours; army said to be ready to move in. Rebels seen taking new positions in surrounding hills

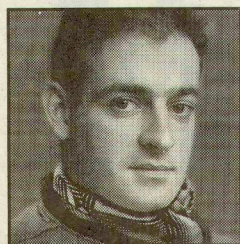
**LAND FORCE**

- T-72 Main battle tank
- Infantry fighting vehicles

**KA-50 'Black Shark'**  
High performance combat helicopter with day and night capability, heavy firepower

## Thousands trapped in city that may fall block by block

IT WAS only 9am but Stanislav, a hardened deputy commander of a Russian paratrooper battalion, was already exhausted. He had just returned from a clash with rebels a few miles southeast of Grozny, the bombed-out capital of the break-away republic of Chechnya.



**Mark Franchetti,** the only western newspaper reporter in Shali on the Russian front line

Dressed in combat fatigues with a Kalashnikov and anti-tank grenade launcher strapped to his back, the 28-year-old officer was dispensing the latest souvenirs taken from Islamic militants on the front line: a piece of a handgun bearing the head of a wolf, the Chechen emblem; the keys of a four-wheel-drive destroyed by Russian forces just hours earlier; and a tattered leather folder filled with personal documents that belonged to a Chechen deputy field commander taken prisoner.

It had been a successful morning. Shortly before dawn one frosty day last week, Stanislav led 100 Russian paratroopers in a night-time ambush against Chechen fighters and snipers holding two strategically important bridges between Grozny and the town of Shali, a rebel stronghold 10 miles southeast of the capital. It took the Russians three hours of fierce fighting to gain control of the area.

But as Stanislav awaited his next orders, resting inside the damp tent of a muddy field command surrounded by dozens of Russian tanks, he was already preparing himself for a much more dangerous mission: taking Grozny.

Few know the risks better. A veteran of Russia's 1994-96 campaign in Chechnya, he will never forget the heavy casualties the Russians suffered in their last fight for the ravaged capital. Five years have passed since the day he was seriously wounded in the chest by auto-

matic gunfire while attempting to storm the city.

Following the expiry yesterday of a Russian ultimatum to Chechens to leave Grozny, Russian special forces soldiers and paratroopers such as Stanislav are likely to be the first to enter the city.

The Russians suspended their air and heavy artillery bombardment to let the civilians flee. Sergei Shoigu, the emergency minister, was personally supervising the evacuation through a "safe corridor" on the orders of Vladimir Putin, the prime minister.

During the next two weeks, however, the Russians are expected to resume the bombardment to try to dislodge about 5,000 rebels who are barricaded inside the city's Soviet-era nuclear bunkers.

To minimise casualties before Russia's parliamentary elections next Sunday, Moscow may opt for a siege rather than a swift confrontation. But some Russian generals are believed to favour sending in small groups of men to take Grozny district by district.

Should they succeed, Moscow may then move the capital to Gudermes, Chechnya's second largest city. It would establish a new Chechen govern-

ment there, comprised of politicians close to the Kremlin. Grozny, apparently all but destroyed, is unlikely to be rebuilt.

Up to 40,000 civilians are believed to be still trapped in Grozny. Most are said to be too old, sick or terrified to leave. Chechen sources denied Russian claims that they are being prevented from going by rebels intending to use them as human shields.

At their summit in Helsinki, European Union leaders threatened to suspend economic aid and transfer the funds to humanitarian projects instead if Moscow destroyed Grozny. But Putin warned that Russian forces would take decisive action to crush the rebels if there was no surrender.

"The ultimatum was not a warning to the civilian population to leave or be destroyed," said General Gennadi Troshev, commander of Chechnya's eastern front, as he flew over the territory in a military helicopter to Russian forward

positions. "It was a warning to the rebels still hiding in the city of what awaits them if they don't surrender."

"We are doing everything possible to limit civilian casualties. This is not a war against the Chechen people. It is a war against bandits."

A stocky, hands-on veteran of the first Chechen war, Troshev, 52, one of four generals leading the campaign, is fast becoming a familiar face on Russian television screens. Hardly a day passes without his being shown in helicopter cockpits, mulling over military maps, shouting out orders and describing the latest victories with supreme confidence.

He flies into Chechnya daily from his command in Makhachkala, the capital of neighbouring Dagestan, where he often sleeps in his office overlooking the Caspian Sea. The general, who was born in Grozny, raises his gruff voice to threaten Chechen rebels on air, only to soften his tone as he guarantees protection to innocent civilians.

Most ordinary Chechens, he says, are welcoming the Russian advance as a liberation from terrorists.

As Grozny awaits its fate, Moscow is on the alert for a repeat of events in 1996 in the southern Russian town of Budyonnovsk. There, in an act that turned him into a Chechen national hero and Russia's public enemy number one, Shamil Basayev, the Chechen rebel leader, took more than 1,000 hostages, forcing Russia to back down.

Last week Troshev led several helicopter reconnaissance missions from Dagestan up to the Chechen border. It is only a few miles from Vedeno, the home village base of Basayev, who is accused by Moscow of orchestrating bomb explosions that killed nearly 300 people in Russian apartment blocks in the summer.

As Russian forces tightened the noose around Grozny last week, heavy artillery, helicopter gunships and fighter planes targeted rebel positions south-

east of the capital, taking several villages in operations to push rebel forces southwards into the mountains. By today the Russians were expected to start moving into Shali, the last rebel town before Chechnya's southeastern mountain ridges.

Dozens of explosions flashed through the fog on the horizon as Mi24 helicopter gunships working in pairs pounded rebel positions holding out on hills north of Shali. The barrage filled the air with deafening blasts echoing across a muddy plain scarred by bomb craters and mounds of earth concealing tanks.

"We don't get to see the enemy," said Nikolai, a 19-year-old conscript from Irkutsk, Siberia, as he crouched beside a small camp fire burning by the side of his tank. "Special forces and the paras — they clash with Chechens. But until now we have left the artillery and the aircraft do the job. The only Chechens I have come across are dead ones, but I didn't kill them."

Nabi Bisultanov, 50, a refugee who fled Grozny with his family last month after their home was destroyed by a Russian bomb, said: "I can't say that I am happy to see the Russians here again."

Now sharing a room with 12 people sheltering from the cold behind windows made of plastic sheeting, he hardly had the strength to be angry. "Yes, there are bandits in Chechnya and, yes, there are problems here but a full-scale war with artillery and aircraft is not going to solve that. Those who are bearing the brunt are people like us, civilians. Not bandits. They can escape, we can't."

As for Stanislav, he is determined not to go away empty-handed from his fourth tour of duty in Chechnya. "We are moving far more carefully to avoid full head-on fighting and local Chechens are less supportive of the rebels. They are fed up with war. I almost died in Grozny and I want to go back there to finish what I could not do the last time," he said.

## The endgame

Sunday Times Graphic