



'The female suicide bombers were drugged and kept smiling at us. They were executed and their bodies blown up. They got what they'd craved'

This man was a senior officer with Russia's elite Spetsnaz special forces. He has risked everything to give the reporter Mark Franchetti this disturbing diary: a chilling record of executions, torture, revenge and despair during 20 tours in Chechnya. Photographs by Dmitry Beliakov

The war in Chechnya was one of the world's most brutal conflicts, writes *Mark Franchetti*. Islamic rebels decapitated Russian prisoners and carried out a wave of shocking terrorist attacks against civilians, including women and school children. The Russians abducted, tortured and executed suspected militants in extra-judicial killings — brazenly violating Russian and international law. Up to 100,000 people, mostly civilians, are thought to have died in the region's two conflicts, the first of which began in 1994. At least 5,000 Chechens simply disappeared.

The wars were hidden from view. Access was severely restricted, especially on the Russian side where the most controversial, dangerous and secret work was carried out by the Spetsnaz — Russia's elite special-forces units.

The deeply personal diary on the pages that follow was penned by a senior Spetsnaz officer who served nearly 20 tours of duty in Chechnya's second campaign, launched by Vladimir Putin in late 1999 and declared officially over last year.

Nothing like it has ever been published. It is a first-hand account of the war as waged by one man and his unit. It does not claim to be a historical overview of the war. It is his story. The terrifying world he paints, with shocking detachment and sharp emotion, is one of appalling cruelty, despair and suffering; a world in which he struggles to retain what is left of his humanity and sanity.

The author wrote over a 10-year period, at times nearly every day, at others every few months. The following extracts were penned at the height of the second war, between early 2000 and late 2004. To protect him from retribution, his identity, the names of people and places, and dates have been withheld.

Soon off to Chechnya. I feel foreboding and apprehension. We have been told our unit has sustained the first casualties. Our column was attacked and the Chechens set fire to our boys as they sat concussed in their armoured personnel carrier (APC). The column's commander was shot in the head. That's how Chechnya's second war kicked off for our unit. I readied myself, already knowing what awaited us.

Rebels hiding on rooftops suddenly fired at us with a heavy machinegun. Bullets whizzed by rhythmically over my head as I threw myself to the ground. The boys fired back to cover me as I crawled. We did everything instinctively. I wanted to live. We hit back with heavy firepower and managed to retreat. It was my first firefight. It was scary. Fear is a self-preservation



instinct; it helps you survive — just as crucial are the men at your side.

We took up position on the edge of a settlement, and slept outdoors on wooden planks in the snow. It was below zero and windy. You become accustomed to everything and can survive pretty much anywhere; it's down to training and strength of character. There was firing at night. We slept in turns.

Into another settlement. Locals stared at us with hatred and anger. We moved towards the local hospital where rebels had taken up position a day earlier. There'd been a firefight. The road was littered with body parts and covered in blood. On the way, locals told us of a Russian soldier, a prisoner the rebels had left behind when they moved on. They'd broken his legs and hands to stop him from escaping.

Our troops had seized the hospital. We were ordered to guard a group of some 30 wounded rebels who'd been crammed in the basement. The wounded stared at me with such loathing when I went down there that I felt trigger-happy.

Back outside, two women begged me to release one of the wounded. I'm not sure why I agreed to let him go. I could have executed him there and

then. But I felt sorry for the women. The fact that the locals had pointed us to our wounded soldier also influenced me. The women couldn't stop thanking me and stuffed cash into my hands. I took it, but it then weighed heavily on my mind because I felt guilty towards our lads who'd died.

After a while, justice ministry soldiers came to take away the wounded prisoners. It wasn't pretty. They dragged them out, stripped them naked and crammed them into a truck. Some walked on their own, others were beaten and dragged out by force.

One Chechen who'd lost both feet stumbled out on his own, walking on his stumps. After a few steps he fainted and collapsed to the ground. The soldiers beat him, stripped him naked, and threw him into the truck. I didn't feel sorry for the prisoners. It was just an unpleasant sight.

Snow, dirt and slush. We've encircled a settlement, digging up positions in a field. We froze but spent the night in foxholes. In the morning, we moved into the village, carefully clearing each house on the way, weapons ready. Soon, we were caught in a fierce gun battle, bullets flying everywhere. Our scouts were cut off. The Chechens launched an assault. We came

Clockwise from left: Dagestan in September 1999; Russian forces enter Grozny in December 1999; dead Chechen rebels are dragged behind a Russian APC in Chechnya, in April 2002



IN THE BASEMENT, WE FOUND SEVERAL WOUNDED RUSSIAN MERCENARIES. THEY SCREAMED, BEGGING US NOT TO KILL THEM BECAUSE THEY HAD FAMILY BACK HOME. SO WHAT? WE EXECUTED THEM ALL

under very heavy fire but mowed them down like Germans in 1941.

One of our snipers, a close comrade, ran over to us. He said he'd killed several rebels, grabbed more ammo and ran back to his position. The rebels moved back a bit and started firing at us with rocket propelled grenade (RPG) launchers and heavy machineguns. Suddenly my mate, the sniper, crawled back. He'd been hit in the head and chest. He had left behind another soldier who'd been shot in the legs but was still returning fire. My friend fell into my arms.

"Please brother, save me, I'm dying," he whispered before going quiet. I gave him an injection of powerful painkillers. "You'll be fine,"

I said. "You still have to see the day when you'll buy me a drink to celebrate your discharge."

I ripped off his flak jacket and ordered two of our men to carry him to a nearby house where our boys had dug in. But as they ran in between houses they were sprayed with machinegun fire. One was hit in the leg, the other in the hand. My friend who was being carried was hit everywhere. The two wounded crawled back to me, leaving him on the ground. Another soldier and I kept firing back, from behind a burning house.

Our men covered us as we struggled to get the wounded out. We still needed to go back for our mate, the sniper. We ran back, grabbed him and crawled over a fence. As we dragged ourselves to safety one of the men covering us was hit in the neck. He collapsed to the ground, splattered in blood. We evacuated all the wounded with an APC and rushed back to fight on. As we later found out, my friend didn't make it. The next day, we went back into the settlement, passing the

house where we'd been pinned down, where our boys had died. The ground was covered in blood, empty cartridges and torn flak jackets.

In the basement of a house, we found several wounded rebel mercenaries, all Russians, fighting us for money. They screamed and shouted, begging us not to kill them because they had family and kids back home. So what? As if, by contrast, we'd come from an orphanage into this shithole. We executed them all.

We slept in foxholes next to another unit which had lost seven men that day. Night, on the outskirts of the settlement. I pulled out some vodka and we sat by a campfire to dry. We drank in silence and remembered the dead.

The other unit told us that one of their men had been killed in front of his twin brother who, instead of losing it, had fought on. The truth is that the bravery of those who are fighting in Chechnya isn't valued. I was once struck ➤➤➤

ON THE FRONTLINE

1994, December Russian troops enter Chechnya to quash the independence movement.

A 20-month war follows. Spetsnaz units are at the forefront of combat.

1995, June Chechen rebels seize hundreds of hostages at a hospital in southern Russia. Spetsnaz forces are deployed. More than 100 people die in the raid.

1996, August The Kremlin and the rebels sign a ceasefire agreement. An agreement on Russian troop withdrawal follows. Spetsnaz units feel they have been stabbed in the back by Moscow.

1999, August Chechen rebels stage armed incursions into neighbouring Dagestan in an attempt to create an Islamic state. Spetsnaz are deployed to push militants back. Thirty eight Spetsnaz are killed by friendly fire in one attack.

1999, September A series of apartment-block bombings in Russia are blamed on Chechen rebels; around 300 people are killed in the blasts. The new prime minister, Vladimir Putin, sends troops back into Chechnya.

2000, February Russian troops led by Spetsnaz units capture Grozny. Much of the city is razed.



Clockwise: Russian troops capture Grozny in 2000; a Russian policeman cradles a baby released from the Beslan school siege in 2004; the Moscow Theatre siege of 2002

2000, March The Russian army, led by Spetsnaz units, encircle more than 1,000 rebels in the village of Komsomolskoye. They are besieged for three weeks. Hundreds of militants and dozens of Spetsnaz are killed in the fighting.

2002, October Chechen rebels seize a Moscow theatre and hold about 800 people hostage. The terrorists are killed when Spetsnaz forces storm

the building and 130 hostages die, most from a toxic gas that is pumped into the theatre.

2004, May The pro-Moscow Chechen president, Akhmad Kadyrov, is killed, along with many others, in a bomb blast in Grozny.

2004, September Hundreds are killed or wounded, many of them children, at a siege at a school in Beslan. Eleven Spetsnaz officers are killed in the fighting with the hostage-takers.

2006, July Shamil Basayev — the Chechen rebel leader behind the Moscow theatre and Beslan sieges — is killed. Most other rebel leaders are killed in Spetsnaz black-op raids.

2007, February Ramzan Kadyrov, the son of the slain Akhmad Kadyrov, is elected president.

2009, April Kremlin declares the Chechen war officially over. But Spetsnaz continue to be deployed in the Caucasus, especially in neighbouring Ingushetia and Dagestan, where Islamic insurgency is on the rise.



by the words of an idiot of a Russian general who was asked why the families of the crew who died aboard the nuclear submarine Kursk were paid generous compensation, while soldiers killed in Chechnya were still waiting for theirs. “Because the Kursk deaths were unexpected, whereas those in Chechnya are foreseen,” he said. So, we’re cannon fodder. There are plenty of f**ers like him in the army’s top echelons.

We pulled out of the settlement at night. The whole place was on fire. Another village razed to the ground. I felt empty inside at what I had seen. The rebels lost 168 men in that battle.

As darkness fell I got so cold I could hardly pull my frozen hands out of my pockets. One of

the lads got out a flask of pure alcohol to warm us up. We had to dilute it, so I sent two men to fetch water. Suddenly, they came face to face with about 15 rebels, some 30 metres away.

Everyone froze. I quickly woke the lads. The enemy fell to the ground, as did we, everyone waiting to see who would fire first. Time stopped. One of us let off a round from a heavy-calibre machinegun and all hell broke loose. The firefight lasted an hour.

We blasted at the rebels from an APC and a tank. They sustained heavy casualties. In the dark, our tank got disorientated and fired, just as I was running towards it. The blast threw me to the ground, leaving me concussed. The lads dragged me back. It took me 20 minutes to regain my

senses. The Chechens hit the tank with an RPG. The scene the next morning was bad. There were blood trails everywhere, marking where the rebels had dragged their dead and wounded.

We ran over to gather trophies, automatic rifles, RPGs and ammo vests. Machinegun fire broke out, followed by hand-grenade blasts. Our lads had encircled a group of wounded rebels. Hiding with them were two able-bodied Chechens, who blew themselves up with the wounded to avoid capture.

Many beds have become empty, marked with candles and pictures of the lads, back at our unit’s base. I feel grim. Our lads are dead while we’ve survived. Death has snapped its teeth ➤➤➤

Chechens, arrested in Grozny for not carrying identification in February 2000, are held in a pit



I WENT DRINKING WITH ONE OF THE LADS AND STUMBLED HOME AT 7AM, ONE AND A HALF HOURS BEFORE LEAVING FOR WAR. MY WIFE SLAPPED ME IN THE FACE. SHE'D BEEN WAITING UP ALL NIGHT

and grabbed at will. At times, I get used to the thought that one day my time will come.

We got hit from two sides crossing a settlement. Our commander told us to move faster, but we got hit anyway. We moved on, taking cover behind a row of houses, and could hear a firefight just ahead. Suddenly, my eye caught some shadows, one behind a window, the other at the entrance of a basement. I lobbed a hand grenade into the cellar and sprayed the window with machinegun fire. When we walked up to check on the outcome we found two bodies, an old man and a woman. Bad luck.

A rebel's voice came over the walkie-talkie of one of our commanders. "Allah is almighty," it said, "and knows whose side truth is on in this war." At once, we knew the commander had been killed.

For days we have had a large group of rebels encircled and trapped inside a settlement. Several times they tried, but failed, to break through our lines and get out. Our lads severed ears and noses off the dead bodies of rebels killed in the fighting. They are losing their minds as a result of what they are living through.

Filthy and exhausted, but happy because our six-month tour was coming to an end, we got back to base. The thought of going home softened the pain we had accumulated during our deployment. Relaxed with three shots of vodka, and started packing. Longing to see my child and wife.

Early in the morning a lieutenant-general came to hand me and another officer a medal for a black op we'd carried out. It took us by surprise. We set off on the long journey home, medals pinned to our chests. On the train, my friend and I dropped the medals into a glass of vodka to inaugurate them. We drank the third toast in memory of our dead. This tour has taken too heavy a toll.

Home for a month. After all I'd been through I started to drink heavily. My wife and I rowed often. Although she was pregnant at the time, I'd just lose it, big time. I didn't know what would happen to me on my next tour of duty. One of the lads stayed with me. We'd drink and go off the wall. Something burst inside me and I began to be cold and indifferent about everything.

I spent less and less time at home. My wife got more and more upset. We'd argue and she'd cry so much I couldn't calm her down any more. It was a tough time, full of contradictions, emotions, arguments and anxiety.

The last day before leaving on my next deployment I went drinking with one of the lads till the early hours of the morning. I stumbled home at 7am, 1½ hours before setting off back to war. As soon as I opened the door my wife slapped me in the face. She'd been waiting up all night. In silence, I picked up my bags and left for the train without even saying goodbye.

On the train, the lads drank. I lay on my berth and tried to come to terms with what had been happening to me. I felt pain and sadness inside. But you can't turn the clock back and put the past right.

Back to damned, bloodied Chechnya. First by train then on the back of an APC. Winter, snow and freezing cold. We spent a night at an army barracks. They put us up in the gym, on the floor in our sleeping bags. We made a cocktail; 50 grams of pure alcohol, 200 grams of beer and 50 grams of pickle. It warmed us up good. It went to the head of some of the lads and a fight broke out. It was hard to get up the next morning but we psyched ourselves up in the yard and one of

the lads fired a heavy machinegun into the air. The soldiers stationed at the barracks looked astonished at such shenanigans. That's how a true Spetsnaz should behave.

Counterintelligence got wind of a group of female suicide bombers. We stormed their safe house and nabbed three women. One was in her forties, the others were young — one barely 15. They were drugged and kept smiling at us. The three were interrogated back at the base. At first, the elder, a recruiter of *shahidkas* [female suicide bombers], wouldn't talk. That changed when she was roughed up and given electric shocks.

They were then executed and their bodies blown up to get rid of the evidence. So in the end they got what they'd craved.

We have lost too many men. During our first four months some 30 of our lads died and 80 were wounded. The hardest is to look into the eyes of the mothers of the dead. It's impossible to answer the question, "Why are you still alive when my son is gone?"

4am start. Heavy rain. Went to pick up a rebel runner who'd been detained, a young Chechen, no more than 15. We tortured him. I put him through a mock execution by shooting next to his head. He quickly gave up his fellow

Chechen men are led away in April 2002 during a Russian 'mopping up' operation, never to be seen again

Memoir



rebels. He told us everything he knew, pointing us to their training camp and an arms depot, and named several rebels. Swiftly, we returned to base with a second Chechen we'd nabbed. After we tormented him, he too spilt the beans, pointing us to several rebel safe houses. We acted on the intel at once and went to the home of three Chechen brothers who'd been behind a series of blasts. They spotted us as we approached and began sprinting across orchards.

As our men stormed the house, one of the lads sprayed gunfire into the night at the fleeing Chechens. One of the brothers was gunned down and one we caught. The third got away. We picked up the dead body without anyone seeing us and quickly went back to base where a crowd of protesters had already gathered.

At the base, information was beaten out of the detained Chechens with rough methods. It was decided to wipe the dead rebel off the face of the Earth by blowing him up.

We passed on all the information gathered to military intelligence, and fell asleep around 2am. I sat drinking with one of the lads and relaxed a little but not for long. Ordered up at 4.30am, we had to pulverize the dead Chechen very early to avoid witnesses. We wrapped him in cellophane and took him to a ridge where we dumped him in a pit filled with mud and dirt. I placed a kilo of TNT on his face and another between his legs and walked about 30 metres away. I connected the wire. A big blast

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followed. The corpse's stench hung in the air but there was no trace of blood. I felt no emotion whatsoever. That's how people go missing.

Most of all, I feel sorry for our boys. At times you start to have doubts, and ask yourself if all of this is in vain. Our motherland won't forget us, but it doesn't value us. In Chechnya now, everyone's against us — the law, Russia, our prosecutors [of the criminal charges brought in some cases]. On paper the war's over, but our lads keep dying there.

Going home doesn't get any easier. The day my second child was born I was so overwhelmed I went out to celebrate with the lads and lost all sense of time. I got to the maternity ward three days later. My wife was very upset. She asked me to buy some medicines and I vanished for another day. But when they finally came home and I held my newborn in my arms, I was happy.

Off to the scene of a fire and a powerful blast. An APC had run over an improvised explosive device (IED). Five guys died and four were wounded. We went to look at the dead, laid out on a helicopter landing pad, in silence. The

war has become much fiercer. We used to see the enemy and knew who we were firing at. Now, we wait to be shot at.

All around us is treachery. And in this dirty war, of course, it's the blood of ordinary soldiers, not that of the politicians who started it, that is spilt. They're even scamming us out of our warzone wages [the bonuses troops are paid for time in battle]. Yet we keep carrying out these stupid orders, and keep coming back for more tours of duty. Each of us has his own reasons.

Two FSB officers [equivalent of MI5] and two from Spetsnaz's Alpha anti-terrorism unit have been killed. It's a big deal. Our unit has been sent to the village where they were gunned down, for two days of tough house-to-house mopping-up operations. At night, we brought several Chechens to a detention camp where the guys from the justice ministry worked them hard to extract intel.

The bodies of the FSB officers were found two days later. They had been mutilated, probably under torture. Back at base, they told us that a bridge we'd just crossed had been heavily mined but the timer had failed. ➤➤➤

It's my little girl's birthday today. I'd like to be with her but I'm far away. I promised her a parrot but it will have to wait until I get back home. I miss her terribly. I know she's waiting for daddy to come home. Once, I saw how she was praying for me. It moved me deeply.

The war is starting to baffle me. At times it seems absurd and pointless, a real mess. In the evening I looked at my medal. It's rewarding of course. And nice when they give you credit. Slept badly. The artillery pounded the mountains all night.

On a mopping-up raid. Swiftly detained two at the first house we were sent to. Their women made a big scene and a crowd gathered in the street, but we were gone in no time and handed over the two at a nearby detention camp. We set off to raid another house and took two Chechens, one young, the other elderly. Not far from the detention camp, we put sacks on their heads and chucked them out of the APC. The lads beat the hell out of them and later handed them over to intelligence.

I'm thinking of my family. I want to go home and hug them all, fool around, especially with my wife. But for now it's all in my dreams. Recently I'm craving more and more to do DIY and carry out ordinary household chores, to take my mind off all this shit.

We have been sent off to a base where a soldier has lost it, shot dead two officers and a policeman and fled. We stopped to wash up in a river. Went looking for the soldier but another unit got to him before us. He'd been gunned down. Arsehole. What was he thinking?

On the road, the lad driving our APC rammed all Chechen cars in our path. At least on the road we laid down the law and made everyone fear us.

My child once asked me to bring back a donkey as a present. At first I laughed but then thought, why not? As our deployment neared its end I got a Chechen to find me a small one, for a little money. We pumped it with heavy painkillers to keep it calm and loaded it onto our train, in the ammo carriage.

At a checkpoint on the way home a general was checking our column's paperwork when the donkey started braying like crazy.

"What the f***'s going on?" he said.

At first his jaw dropped when we opened up, but then he was in hysterics. After a few hundred miles, we were home. I barely managed to cram the animal into a car, and delivered it to my child. Everyone was astonished. Mission accomplished.



Russian soldiers at a barracks in Grozny in 2003, when Vladimir Putin was president

I had a bad feeling about this raid from the very start. The night before, there was a violent thunderstorm, our tent was flooded and crawling with rats. It was as if nature was saying: lads, sit tight, stay in tonight.

We set off by APC in the pitch dark on a mopping-up raid. We quickly surrounded our target — a house in a village — but as we readied to storm it we were fired at from behind. We'd been set up. One of the lads was hit. He was in a bad way, with a big exit wound next to his heart. We rushed him back on the APC.

Our commander had deceived us. A Chechen who'd promised him several AK-47s had talked him into helping him settle a blood feud. There were no rebels in the house he'd sent us to raid.

We found another of our men, dead, next to the house. When the firing had started he'd

just used them to pursue his career. He later even tried to blame me for the bungled raid. F***er. Sooner or later, he'll pay for his sins.

We were sent to retrieve a heavy machine gun a detained Chechen had left behind during a firefight. We couldn't find it. Enraged, I beat him up. He fell to his knees and cried, saying he couldn't remember where he'd thrown the weapon. We tied him to the APC with a rope and dragged him around.

I often think of the future. How much more suffering awaits us? How long can we go on for? What for? Maybe I should think of my own life, start living for my family, my children, my wife, who deserves a memorial for all the pain I've put her through. I'm 31. Maybe it's time to unwind. I want some peace and quiet, a little domestic warmth and comfort. I'll get there.

Another year has passed. A tough one. I lost four of my closest brothers in arms. People who were by my side. Now they're gone for good.

Our unit has a new commander. We don't get on. I've learnt that, often, it's easier to fight with the enemy shooting at you than with the enemy within your own ranks. I gave 14 years of my life to the Spetsnaz, lost much and many close comrades; for what? Deep down I'm left with pain and a sense that I was wronged.

My many good memories are only of the lads who really put their life on the line for the unit. It's a shame you can't go back and put some things right. All I can do is try to avoid the

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pushed me aside and lunged ahead. That's when he was hit, in the head and spine. He'd saved my life. On the radio we heard that our wounded friend had also died. I went numb inside. My sixth sense had not failed me.

When we got back to base the dead lads lay in body bags on the landing strip. I opened one, grabbed my friend's hand and said "sorry". Our commander didn't even bother to say farewell to the boys. He was blind drunk. I hated him in that moment. He never gave a damn about the boys,

same mistakes and do my best to live normally.

My service in the Spetsnaz is over. The unit gave me a lot and took much away.

These days I think a lot about my life, about my actions. The older you get the more you think about such things. I leave these pages behind. My life is in them. I regret one thing — that maybe, had I acted differently during a firefight, some of the lads would still be alive today ■

Translated by Mark Franchetti 33