

# Russian Air Power over Chechnya: Lessons Learned Applied



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'The Chechens disturbed the interface between Russian air and ground operations, by waging information-electronic warfare against the Russian FAC system'



Level of Strategy in the  
Second Chechen Conflict

In his second of two articles on the current Russian-Chechen conflict, Major Marcel de Haas describes today's air power and air defence and compares their use with those in the first Chechen conflict between 1994 and 1996.

In my first article, in *The Officer*, on the present Russian-Chechen war, I explained the historical background as well as the strategies and operations of both sides. As in my previous article, I again use the levels of strategy as the leading threads (see Figure). This time my focus is on the use of Russian air power and on the Chechen response to this type of military force.

Having discussed the grand strategy of both parties, I describe the use of air power at the military-strategic, operational and tactical levels of Russia (RF) and then explain the Chechen response. I end with an assessment and evaluation, together with a comparison of the use of air power between the present conflict and the first Chechen conflict (1994–96).

## Military strategy: command and control

At the outset of the second invasion into Chechnya, in October 1999, the estimated number of the Russian forces, the majority being MoD troops, was 100,000. In August 2000 the Joint Grouping of Forces consisted of 80,000 men, of whom 50,000 were MoD troops. In January 2001 it was announced that the total personnel strength of the forces in Chechnya, MoD (Ministry of Defence) and MVD (Ministry for Internal Affairs) troops and militia (military organised police), was to be reduced to 50,000–60,000 men, but in November 2002, they still numbered 80,000.

Initially the Joint Grouping of Forces, under Colonel-General Kazantsev, Commander of the North Caucasus Military District (NCMD), conducted the military operation in Chechnya, on behalf of the General Staff of the MoD. The Grouping was divided into five parts: the western, northern, eastern, southern and Grozny (later Argun) groups. Each group consisted of MoD troops (ground, air, naval infantry

and airborne forces) and troops of the power ministries (MVD, FSB [Federal Security Service], Emergency Ministry and border guard forces). The main headquarters of the Grouping was originally in Mozdok, and then moved to Khankala, near Grozny.

When the FSB took command of the operations in Chechnya, a Main Staff of Operations was formed, consisting of the Director of FSB, the heads of the ministries which had troops employed in Chechnya, and members of the Joint (military) Staff. The Joint Staff had until then been in command of the Chechen campaign. Furthermore a Regional Staff of Operations was formed, led by a Deputy Director of the FSB, and made up of representatives of the power ministries and of the local authorities in the southern district of the RF. For the command and control of military units the Joint Staff was continued.

## Operational level: organisation of air power

### Command and control structure

All air assets, both MoD and those of the power ministries, were under unified command of Lieutenant-General Valery Gorbenko of the Joint Staff. The air component of the Joint Grouping was made up of fixed-wing aircraft of VVS (*Voyenno-Vozdushnyye Sily, Russian Air Forces*) and rotary wing aircraft belonging to army aviation. The VVS component comprised air regiments assigned to the 4th Air Army and some separate units from the Moscow Air and Air Defence District. Roughly half of the helicopters of army aviation ASV (*Aviatsiya Sukhoputnykh Voysk or Armeyskaya Aviatsiya*) were divided among the different groups of the Joint Grouping of Forces; the remaining half was a reserve of the Joint Grouping.

The former bomber base of Mozdok, North Osetia, some 90km northwest of Grozny, was the primary staging base for



the fixed-wing part of the air component, as well as the main airhead for supplies from elsewhere in Russia. Clearly, military operations in this region had been planned in advance. The airbase had received an order that within two months, June and July, the runway had to be prepared for operational use. Other bases used by the air component were Budennovsk and locations in the republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia.

### **Force build-up**

Rotary wing aircraft employed by ASV were the Mi-24 Hind combat helicopter, the Mi-8 Hip transport helicopter and the Mi-26 Halo heavy lift helicopter. The latter was extensively used for the forward movement of troops. In September 1999 the contribution of ASV to the operation was 68 helicopters, consisting of 32 Hinds, 28 Hips and 8 Halos.

Three years later, in September 2002, the number of helicopters was down to 40 – 22 Hinds, 17 Hips and 1 Halo. VVS' fixed-wing aircraft were the Su-25 Frogfoot Close Air Support (CAS) aircraft, Su-27 and Su-30 Flanker fighters and Su-24M Fencer-D fighter-bomber aircraft. For air recce Su-24 MR Fencer-E and MiG-25RBK Foxbat-D aircraft were utilised. From Mozdok operated at least a squadron each of Fencers and Frogfoots. Intelligence gathering was conducted by AN-30B Clanks (photo surveillance), A-50 Mainstays (AWACS) and by Il-20 Coots (signals intelligence).

### **Tactical level: application of air power**

#### **Counter-air operations**

At the outset of the conflict, the Chechens were reported to use two helicopters for flying in supplies. In order to prevent this, VVS carried out offensive counter-air (OCA) missions, by keeping two Flankers and two Frogfoots on constant alert for conducting CAPs (combat air patrols). In these missions Mainstay AWACS aircraft provided aerial radar cover. To secure RF airfields and cities against possible air attacks, defensive counter-air (DCA) missions were conducted.

#### **Anti-surface force air operations**

Fencers and Frogfoots took a large share of the strike sorties. Initially, the missions were conducted in support of the ground campaign and were targeted against bridges, major roads and buildings. Another task was to mine mountain roads and areas, in order to cut off supply routes and diminish freedom of movement. Hinds carried out missions of tactical suppression of suspected rebel positions.



**Above:** The Russian General Staff in Moscow: heart of the military strategy towards Chechnya.

As of March 2000, after occupying the larger part of Chechnya, missions were directed against camps and hardened shelters in the mountains and to cut Chechen supply routes from Georgia. Pairs of Frogfoots conducted 'free-hunt' missions, to suppress new strongholds in conquered territory.

#### **Strategic air operations**

Although initially VVS authorities suggested that the strategic bomber force (strategicheskaya aviatsiya) might be employed, VVS commander Kornukov repeatedly insisted that there was no necessity to do so. There is no evidence that the Russian strategic bomber force was ever used in the conflict. However, in addition to offensive air support (OAS) missions, ASV and VVS conducted offensive missions to destroy strategic targets. Thus the air component carried out missions against targets such as telecommunications (telephone, radio and TV) installations, command, control and communications networks, as well as against the oil refinery and the airport at Grozny.

#### **Supporting air operations**

Hips were extensively used to transport ground forces (for instance spetnaz units of MoD and MVD), to interdict communications and supply lines, to react to guerrilla raids, combat search and rescue (CSAR) missions, as well as to transport supplies and ammunition into the mountains. In these missions Hinds or Frogfoots provided cover for the Hips.

In the second Chechen conflict more than in the first one, emphasis was placed on effective recce and intelligence collection. Clanks, Mainstays and Coots were used to gather (electronic) intelligence and Fencer-Es, Frogfoots and Foxbat-Ds conducted air recce missions. However, entering phase

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**Above:** A Su-24 MR Fencer-E recon aircraft of the 11 Guards Recon Aviation Regiment, stationed at Marinovka airbase, near Volgograd. This unit carried out recon missions in both Chechen conflicts.

‘Due to the introduction of the aviation tactical group, helicopters were back in business for combat missions, which broadened the scope of air power’

four of the conflict, intelligence gathering became complicated, because enemy bases in the mountains, without meaningful signals to intercept, were hard to detect.

#### **Tactics**

ASV operated in groups of two to four Hinds and one or two Hips. These formations were described as Aviation Tactical Groups (ATGs). In an ATG Hips would direct Hinds to their targets. Another task of the Hips in the ATGs was CSAR, in support of downed Hinds. ATGs were assigned to regiments, together with a Forward Air Controller (FAC) in the regimental HQ. FACs were also posted at lower levels, at battalion and sometimes even at company level. Two-thirds of the CAS missions of ASV were organised in this way.

In addition to this tactic, without support of Hips, pairs of Hinds also carried out ‘free-hunt’ missions, which comprised the remaining third of the total number of missions. Targets of these missions were similar to those of the ‘free-hunt’ missions of Frogfoots. Helicopter strikes involved energetic manoeuvring, simultaneous attacks from opposing directions and dives from a formation outside anti-aircraft defence range.

#### **Tasks and lessons learnt**

In July 2000, reviewing the operations in Dagestan and Chechnya, VVS commander Kornukov gave an explanation of the tasks and lessons learned so far. He defined the tasks of the air component as follows:

- air support for ground forces (anti-surface force air operations)

- security against air attacks (counter-air operations)
- psychological warfare: harassing the enemy (strategic air operations)
- air recon of assigned areas (supporting air operations)
- relay of command and control (supporting air operations)
- transportation of troops and supplies (supporting air operations).

According to Kornukov, the effectiveness of air power had to be increased by improvements in the field of maintenance of aircraft and equipment, training and number of pilots and troops, upgrading of aircraft with state-of-the-art avionics, procurement of newly developed aircraft, combat readiness of units and airbases, command and control structure of air power as well as manuals on the application of air power. However, this ‘shopping list’ would not prove very realistic given structural cuts in the Defence Budget.

#### **Failures, problems and losses**

A number of failures arose in using air power. Although fewer than in the earlier conflicts, friendly fire now and then still occurred. For instance in March 2000 an OMON (special police unit) detachment was wiped out by friendly fire from VVS. Although improvements had been made since the first Chechen conflict, coordination between forces/troops was still not optimal.

Air power was mostly used as air support for ground troops operations. However, using aircraft as ‘flying artillery’, instead of platforms for precision weapons, caused



collateral damage in the form of numerous civilian casualties, which subsequently left a negative impression with the public.

The lack of sophisticated equipment thwarted effective application of air power against the Chechen mountain hideouts. Dispersed troops were hard-to-find targets and therefore difficult to detect and to destroy. Air power was not an effective weapon against guerrilla warfare and urban terrorism.

Problems in the areas of finance, arms as well as personnel, owing to constant cuts in the Defence Budget, had affected the operational capabilities of the forces. The air campaign in Chechnya influenced the combat readiness of the VVS as a whole; in February 2000 it had usurped up to 60% of the VVS' annual budget.

Another aspect was that VVS had not received any new aircraft since 1992. The air component was not capable of operating either in bad weather or during the night. The shortage or absence of expensive precision guided munitions (PGMs), high-tech communications, navigation and targeting systems, as well as all-weather and day/night capabilities, made air power less effective than it could have been.

Another negative development influencing combat readiness was the lack of fuel, spare parts and maintenance. In official as well as independent newspapers, VVS commander Kornukov openly admitted and discussed a number of these problems. Air component commander Gorbenko confirmed them.

As a result of the low funding levels, pilot training and combat experience were insufficient. In 1999, the average annual flying hours for attack aviation were around 23 and for bombers around 25, whereas during the Cold War average Soviet flying hours were 150. By Western (NATO) air force standards the minimum flying hours for a skilled pilot are 180. The lack of flying hours resulted not only in a higher rate of aircraft losses but also in less effective fulfilment of missions, for instance by dropping bombs too early.

The losses of the air component were as follows. Before March 2000 the air component lost two Frogfoots, one Fencer-E and 18 helicopters. In addition to this 24 aircraft suffered combat damage. Only half of the helicopters were lost as a result of enemy fire. By June 2000, the number of helicopters lost was up to 22, including 10 Hinds. In the three years from September 1999 to 2002, ASV lost no fewer than 36 helicopters, which was an average of one per month. This large number of rotary

wing losses was only partly caused by enemy fire; other causes could be found in insufficient pilot training and lack of maintenance, due to reduced funding.

### Successes

Air power (CAS) took care of a large share of the bombardments prior to employing ground forces. VVS and ASV conducted 70–80% of the fire missions, as opposed to 15–17% by artillery. Between October 1999 and February 2000 air power was used in more than 4000 combat sorties, of which the majority were strike sorties. The air strikes caused the destruction of a huge number of armoured vehicles, anti-aircraft guns, armament-production facilities, weapon storage bunkers, oil refining factories, fuel warehouses, as well as radar and relay stations. Conclusively, air power, above all by providing air support to the operations of ground forces, formed a vital contribution to the successful Russian campaign during the first three phases of the conflict.

### Chechen air defence response

At the beginning of the conflict, the Chechen air component reportedly possessed two transport helicopters and one utility aircraft, an An-2 Colt, which was supposedly used for transport of arms and ammunition. At the end of September 1999, during the attack on the airport at Groznyy, the aircraft was destroyed. No further mention has been made of the two helicopters. So again, the Russians had air supremacy in this conflict. The air defence capability of the Chechens was limited and primitive. An organised air-defence system with radar and missiles was absent. Man-portable surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), heavy machine-guns and ZSU 23/2 twin barrel anti-aircraft guns on trucks were the arms available for air defence.

The Chechens were successful in disturbing the interface between Russian air and ground operations, by waging information-electronic warfare against the Russian FAC system. Chechens, as former RF conscripts, used their experience, by monitoring FAC radio transmissions and impersonating Russian FACs, to misdirect CAS missions conducted by ATGs and other formations of the Russian air component. Furthermore, FACs were prime targets of Chechen snipers.

### Comparing air power in the two wars

The purpose of this article was to describe Russian air power in the second (present)

'The 35th loss of a helicopter caused a watershed in air power command and control. Army aviation was to be resubordinated to the air forces'





**Above:** Monument for perished aircrews at Marinovka airbase. Until summer of 2002 11 Guards Recce Aviation Regiment had lost two Fencer-E aircrews during missions in the second Chechen war.

Chechen conflict and therefore it does not elaborate on the first conflict (1994–96). However, it is worthwhile to make an assessment of the use of air power based upon a comparison of both conflicts.

### *Structural problems*

First, annual cuts in the Defence Budget resulted in limitations of materiel (aircraft) and personnel in the conflict. The consequences were a low level of combat readiness, limited use of air power during the night and in bad weather conditions, as well as many losses of aircraft for other reasons than enemy fire.

Second, coordination and cooperation among MoD forces and between defence forces and troops of the power ministries were improved but were still far from optimal. For instance, friendly fire also occurred in the second conflict.

Third, in both conflicts civilian casualties and collateral damage due to air power left a negative impression with the public. However, civilian casualties were not only caused by pilot shortcomings and lack of PGMs. The fact that Chechen fighters would often hide in and use air defence from urban areas also caused innocent victims, for which the Russians were blamed.

Finally, air power was effective as long as ground forces were advancing. Air power was not an answer to a protracted guerrilla war.

### *Improvements*

First of all, the establishment in autumn 1999 of a unified air component of VVS, ASV and MVD air assets, as part of a Joint Group of Forces, improved coordination and cooperation and thus the effectiveness of air power.

Second, air support for ground forces

operations was more successful in the second conflict. I would perceive the following grounds for this improvement. By conducting air barrages prior to the advance of troops, air power created favourable conditions for ground forces and diminished the possibility of friendly fire. FACs proved to be more effective than in the first conflict. It seemed that more FACs were available this time. Because of their greater number, FACs could be deployed in more units and at lower tactical levels, sometimes even at company level.

Another reason for improved air support for ground forces operations was the formation of Aviation Tactical Groups (ATGs). By combining target-designation and attack helicopters, they proved to be highly effective tactical formations.

A third improvement in the use of air power was the comeback of rotary wing aircraft as part of the combat force of air power. In the first Chechen conflict helicopters were mainly used for supporting tasks and were excluded from urban areas for fear of enemy air defence. It was then thought that for combat tasks fixed wing aircraft, such as the Frogfoot, would replace rotary wing. However, in the second Chechen conflict, most likely due to the introduction of the successful ATG concept, helicopters were back in business for combat missions, which broadened the scope of air power.

Fourth, the resubordination ASV from ground forces to VVS. The 35th loss of a helicopter, a Halo, which was destroyed near Khankala airbase on 19 August 2002, caused a watershed in air power command and control. A week later MoD sources announced that ASV was to be resubordinated from ground forces to VVS by the end of 2002. The reason for this decision was probably the 'misuse' of helicopters by ground forces commanders. For instance by overloading them, as was the case with this Halo. This decision strengthened the position of the VVS in command and control of MoD air power, at the expense of the ground forces. This resubordination decision will enforce central guidance of air power, which in turn reinforces its effectiveness.

In conclusion, it is evident that the most important structural problem for Russia air power was funding. Irregular warfare in Chechnya showed that the lack or absence of sophisticated weaponry and avionic instruments limited the effectiveness of air power. But in spite of the financial problems, Russian air power demonstrated that it was capable of enhancing its effectiveness without additional financial support, especially by innovations in command and control and by tactical improvements.

### **About Author**

Marcel de Haas is officer in the Royal Netherlands Air Force and a Russian Studies specialist. From 1996-2003 he was posted as lecturer in International Relations and International Law at the Royal Netherlands Military Academy in Breda. Since September his posting is Course Director at the NATO School in Oberammergau, Germany. This article is based on part of his PhD thesis on 'Security policy and airpower under Yeltsin and Putin: The development of Russian security thinking and its consequences for the air forces (1992-2002)'. An abridged version of this thesis is expected to be published by Frank Cass Publishers in autumn 2004.