

Sitting Ducks

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Deadly Chechen snipers are spreading fear among Russian troops.

"Sometimes I find myself staring down my night-sights straight at a Chechen sniper who's staring down his night-sights at me," mutters Sanka without moving his lips.

We're standing together in an observation tower, looking out over the Chechen town of Gudermes. It is night and the compound is shrouded in mist. An hour ago, the curfew snuffed out the lights in the surrounding houses. The silence is eerie.

"And then?" My whisper is impossibly loud. "Then we just look at each other in silence. After a while, he nods at me and we go our separate ways."

Sanka is the scout for a detachment of railway troops, billeted in the camp behind us. Gudermes was among the first Chechen towns to surrender to the federal army and has been rewarded for its loyalty with gas, electricity and irregular supplies.

But the atmosphere here is charged with tension. There is a sense of lurking menace, a sinister force that sleeps during the day and prowls by night.

The railway troops are feeling the strain. Sanka may put on a show of diffidence but the knowledge that the Chechen snipers are toying with him has taken a heavy toll on his nerves. He feels he is living on borrowed time. The Chechens pull the strings.

A whistle pierces the night and Sanka stiffens. "Sniper!" he says. "That's how they signal to each other. They shoot at our base almost every night. First we hear one whistle, then another. Sometimes they even howl like wolves."

Whatever they might say in Moscow, the term "occupied territory" has little meaning here. The Chechen fighters materialise from nowhere, from the mountains, from the direction of Grozny, from amongst the civilian population.

The railway compound is a favourite target. The federal army uses the trains to move supplies around the war-torn republic. Sabotage raids on the railway line can seriously handicap Russian troop movements and buy the rebel forces vital time.

Chechen hit-and-run gunmen keep up the heat. Early in February, the detachment's special train - armed with an APC, rocket systems and heavy-calibre machine guns - was attacked by rebel partisans. The railway troops beat off the attack after calling up support from Interior Ministry units.

No one feels the pressure more than the sappers. Nikolai and Victor Vagin are twins: Victor is a sapper, Nikolai an officer. Nikolai says that, when his brother defuses mines, he feels Victor's nervous strain with every muscle in his body. So far they have deactivated 500 explosive devices laid under the railway lines.

On one occasion, they tell me, a warrant officer performed a "safe detonation" by placing the charge in a bombed out tank. The explosion sent the turret flying into the air, and it fell to earth with the cannon spinning around like some huge, grotesque boomerang.

The soldiers in the watchtower smile broadly at the memory. In wartime, these moments of bizarre comedy provide fleeting relief from the tension.

Suddenly, a machine-gun starts firing, about 400 metres from the perimeter fence. One-in-five tracer stitches the night. It is completely mesmeric. Bleary-eyed soldiers drag themselves from under tarpaulin bivouacs, jerking to their feet like puppets.

But Sanka doesn't move. He knows the Chechens pull the strings. This night they choose to fire on four policemen at a nearby checkpoint. Their comrades bring the wounded in. Tomorrow night, they may choose to fire at him.

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