

Writers' Union of Lugansk People's Republic

# **The Torn Souls**

**a Prose Anthology  
of the Soviet - Afganistan War**

Lugansk  
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The book represents a unique collection of «Afghan» stories based on the events that occurred during the Afghanistan War (1979-1989). The authors of these true stories - soldiers and officers, who later were classified in Russian literature as “Afghan authors”, directly participated in the military actions in different parts of Afghanistan. Their memoirs became a stepping stone for the emergence of a new kind of Russian literature - “Afghan prose”. This book is a pilot project for the first translation into English of a collection of an anthology of Afghan prose - “The Torn Souls”.

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## EDITOR'S AND TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

If you read these words, it means that you hold the book “Torn Souls”.

Before you turn the first page, I want to warn you – this book is a rather out of the ordinary collection of stories based on memoirs of the direct participants of Soviet – Afghanistan War ( 1979-1989).

This book is not for the average person who prefers to read a detective story with “soap opera” murders during their leisure time, although you will read about more than enough murders in this book.

This book is not for lovers of horror or thrillers, although described horrors in this book, will make your blood freeze and hairs stand on end; and cannot be compatible even with the most violent fantasy.

This book is also not for lovers of the romantic genre, although the whole book is permeated with imbued feeling of the highest sense of love for human being in any form and any manifestations.

This book is for very special people. It is written for those who are not stuck in monotony; for those, who are not afraid to be honest with themselves and who can take the burden of responsibility of others and, regardless of your bleeding soul, will carry the heavy onus to the end.

This is an odd book that raises more questions than answers about the nature of human kind in critical situations.

This book is the honest revelation of those who went through the hell called “Afghanistan”, and who, with their torn souls, maintained their dignity as a man.

I also want to draw you attention, my Reader, that this book is the first attempt ever to translate “Afghani genre” which just very recently landed on the lap of Russian literature, into English.

I hope you find the book to be a thought-provoking and a powerful experience, as I did.



*Editor,  
Irina Vasilenko*

*P.S. Doctor of Philosophy Irina Vasilenko lives and works in Melbourne (Australia). She volunteered to face the challenge as Translator and Editor of pilot this project.*

## SHAYNIN ARTEM

Shaynin, Artem Grigorievich was born in 1966, in Moscow. From 1984 to 1986 he served in the 56th Airborne Assault Brigade, located in Afghanistan, Paktia Province, Gardez. After returning to civil life, he graduated from the Lomonosov Moscow State University. Since 2000, Shaynin Artem Grigorievich has worked on television. Currently he is a prominent talk show host and received the TEFI Award for “Best Prime Time Political Talk Show Host”. Shaynin Artem is also a well – known journalist, he is a member of the Writers’ Union of Russia.

### Grishin

December 8, 1984, Nara-Aliheil.

What we waited for since late November eventually happened at last. One gorgeous day – with no exaggeration! – we received our weapons, and marched to a parking lot, where the ready – to-go “darlings” APCs were waiting for us from the very early morning.

A convoy brigade began slowly stretching toward Gardez – and everything around was covered with a bluish stinking smoke. Our tents were getting smaller and smaller with every minute, and very soon they disappeared from out sight.

Goodbye, our odious home! I wish I will not see you for a long time!

After a long and dreary march on the mountain roads, we have reached the mountain named Nara that sheltered one allied garrison of the Afghan army; and I do not think that we have met any other allied Afghan garrisons during our “military” operation until we reached the border with Pakistan. The task of our operation, as being broadly explained, was to deliver food and ammunition to this garrison that was besieged by mujahidins (see “Terminology ad Glossary” – Editor); and to do so we have to endure a long march to Aligal.

Now we know that it was named “military” because the march involves not just our 56st Air Assault Brigade but also many other divisions of the 40th Army, located at different areas of Afghanistan. So, our brigade became involved in this operation because we were controlling the area of Aligal. For those who served the army, no need to explain in detail how massive and complex the tasks were.

However, we were young, and, at that time, we had not accumulated enough military knowledge to realise how hard the operation was, although our training and preparation drills this time were unusually thorough. We went through several trainings exercises across the mountains, shooting ranges, and ran so-called “equipment drills”, in which our equipment has being personally checked in detail: do we have a pair of spare footcloths in our BP ( see “Terminology ad Glossary” – Editor) or not. But more significant was the fact that all of these

drills were conducted under the special control of the super important inspectors that arrived from a very high-up level of the army, being the Command District of Tashkent.

But no matter how this well-intentioned thoroughness had been applied towards our preparation, all this training gave us nothing but troubles, bringing more problems to us, the young soldiers. Nobody had explained to us how to equip our BP. All drills were based on a formal “that is correct” tick which was an approval of your BP contents if has been packed according to some rules invented by someone with a higher military rank.

Unfortunately, this “someone” has hardly ever been in a fight in the mountain areas. This “someone” could hardly imagine the size of the prescribed BP. Otherwise, many unnecessary things, such as a toothbrush, an under-collar’s spare hemming, and similar sorts of items, would not have been compulsory items on that “correct list”. Of course, nobody took them at the time of military operation. A dental paste? What for? When you are marching across the mountains, every sip of water is as precious as gold...

Accordingly, to satisfy this “correct list”, we have to pack all sorts of things into BP and demonstrate them to a swaggering colonel-examiner. And if – God forbid!– something will be missing in our BP from the prescribed contents, then, no doubt, the company commander will reprimand you on the spot; and then all sorts of nonsense will follow with predictable consequences for a young soldier...

In brief, whilst we were preparing for this military operation, we got so much fed up with all of this nonsense that we could not wait for the real military action.

Eventually, we got what we wanted....

...Near Narai we stopped for two or three days; and every day we were waiting for when we will go into the mountains.

But which one is Narai, amongst these massive peaks that surrounded us, I had no idea. And honestly I did not care. If they told us to stay near the mountain of Narai, this Narai must be nearby.. and to tell the truth, they did not tell us about Narai. The name of Narai I accidentally picked up when I overheard a radio conversation. How could I know at that moment that this Narai would be forever imprinted in my memory? It would be like a splinter under my heart for life...

For some reason, Hindu Kush, Panjshir, Black Mountains or some other places with more onerous and impressive military actions, have not made such an impact on my life. Amongst all rich mountain areas of Afghanistan, only Narai will be vividly remembered, engraving its image in my mind forever.

Well, let’s go back to that time, when a relatively flat area between two mountains, which hosted our armoured brigade, was the main focus of my interest.

The whole surface of this flat area was covered with some things that look like large pebbles and gray sand, or gravel. Maybe it was not gray. But low hanging heavy clouds did paint the entire surface in a gray colour. It was the beginning of snow season. In the middle of this area was something that we called “a river”: it was three metres wide, with a depth of half a metre, but with a very fierce current.

The main impression from our stay at Narai was a feeling of freezing cold; we felt damp there all the time. We also felt that our worse expectations were coming. Maybe it was an influence of neighbouring mountains: so visible after the last line of “pebbles”. The mountains did cover our horizon to the endless slopes, which we saw in a distance, but after that we could see nothing. Where do we have to go? When, why? What was waiting for us there? It was unknown. We were anxious.

Meanwhile, we put up tents and almost all our time we were trying to warm them up. We collected anything that can burn on this bare stony plateau: any sticks, wooden chips and flammable rubbish. We desperately needed to get a fire going because our cold pre-packed lunches should be heated up to be edible. At night we needed a fire to make our tents a bit warmer to be able to sleep.

Of course, all of these extra responsibilities were given to us. According to the unspoken army code, we were “young soldiers” who have not yet served the army long enough; we had been soldiers just a little bit longer than six months, to be exact – eight months, and four of them we served in Afghanistan.

Apart of these extra duties to organise our everyday life, we, “the youngest”, should be involved in all “leisure activities” for the whole military company – the platoon commander Plotnikov did not allow us to relax. The next day after arriving at the area, the second platoon was chosen for “leisure activities”, as commander Plotnikov decided to conduct a “swimming” day.

Even before the march, we have not been famous for our cleanness: we must do some unclean tasks – do dishes, do laundry, collect and carry coal, or wood, heating up stoves in tents. But during the march we became dirty as coal miners. How we could not be! At every camp, we were constantly starting up a fire for heating up packed lunches in the zinc cans that were left after bombing. These cans we put on a smoky diesel fuel – we do not have firewood! No wonder why, Plotnikov was not impressed with us, military miners.

Plotnikov was a cheerful, solid, thickset man, about twenty eight years old, wearing a warm pea jacket – the safe heaven! Actually, our officers were fed well, and, no wonder, he put all his energy into actions. So, we were ordered to march to “the river”.

I cannot describe how we did not want to be separated from our warm pea jacket, regardless how short and thin these jackets were. No one was keen to

take off the warm winter vest together with a shirt over it, but Plotnikov does not allow us to hesitate. In a minute, all naked torsos were exposed and covered with soapsuds, using, in turn, a pitiful bar of a soap taken from a laundry. First, we should wash our hands, and then, feeling almost nothing with these hands, we should proceed to wash our skinny bodies. (I remember that I felt worse than others. While we were driving along the mountains in an armoured car, I did not take off my cap with flaps, my wounded ear inflamed with discharges glued my ear firmly to my cap).

Naked up to the waist, but wearing a cap, I immediately attracted the platoon commander's attention. After my explanation, he, without any hesitation, ordered me to remove the cap. I lingered for a minute, and he abruptly pulled off the cap together with a crust of dried pus and blood from my ear. At that moment it seemed to me like he pulled off my sore ear.

Realizing what he had done, Plotnikov extended the disaster: to balance damage control, he hit me in my healthy ear, then he called a medical instructor of the Company, Lenya Chmyr – as it was written on his badge, and ordered him to bandage my sore ear. Now, without even being at a “battle”, my head was bandaged up and looked wounded. This is why everybody, of course, mocked me about “a bandit bullet”. But there was another disadvantage – I became a very noticeable “white dot”, which officers and “veterans” (a military slang for soldiers after their second year army service – Editor) can pick up easily if they needed someone for their bullying exercises.

This was how my fate crossed with Grishin for the last time. Among all of the “veterans”, he had no standout particularity. He drew well, and, from time to time, he made illustrations for the company combat leaflet. When he was doing this, he locked himself up in Lenin's room and drew quickly a main part, and after that – jumped into bed. I would like to comment that before our arrival, “veterans” always feel the lack of sleep, exactly like we, the “zelenye” (see “Terminology and glossary” – Editor), felt. But even with time they cannot get rid of the bad habit.

Gene Grishin belonged to the first platoon, which together with my second platoon was located on the same floor, opposite each other, next to the Lenin room. This is why I quite often was on lookout for him. In the case of a political officer, senior lieutenant Shmygalya, a Komsomol organizer company, or “the veteran” Rinat Gabaydulin appearing, I had to warn him, so he will jump up and pretend to be drawing.

I have no idea why Gene was a calm and normal “veteran”. Maybe because of his inclination towards the arts or maybe because he was called up for the military service from Klin, a quiet small town near Moscow, were the reasons, who knows?

He never bullied us; of course, he ordered us to do some of his work remembering the “veterans” law – “if you cannot make young soldiers do it, then do it yourself”.

So, in accordance with this law, in December ‘84, I was “hooked” by Gene Grishin and his countryman Misha Sergeev.

These two were ordered to fetch some water from the river with an enormous bucket that had a volume of one hundred litres. For two people, it was possible to do, but my “white spot” was flashing and they immediately spotted me and ordered me to follow them. You see, in the army it was a matter of principle.

Of course, I made an attempt to elude them, but always gloomy Sergeev at that moment so dangerously hissed in his menacing tone that I decided to put up with them and do it. Misha compared to Gene, was tougher, he was the one who can easily give you a lesson of obedience; and because I already had one that ended up with the ringing in my ears – thanks to the platoon commander’s “educational work”–, I decided to do the job.

Filled with the water from the river, the enormous bucket was hooked by two of us with belts and we dragged it in turns (to be precise – they took turns, and I was working non-stop) towards the tents of our company.

I could not believe that on our way to the tents, Plotnikov spotted us. He immediately understood that “the young one” had been forced by the “veterans” to do their job, and after promising to give the “veterans” some problems in the near future, he “repossessed” me back.

The glances that were being cast at me by Grishin and Sergeyev were a bad omen. Now, these two have to drag this heavy and uncomfortable bucket back to the tents like “young soldiers”. In the army, any sort of defence from any officer led to a bigger problem. It was one of the soldiers’ rules.

Sadly, this is how I remembered Gene Grishin – with his angry eyes staring at me, the eyes almost colourless under the gray sky of Narai. It was less than a day before the Gene’s death – he was the very first man who died in front of me...

That evening and night, they were busy and did not have time to deal with me; but in the morning, we received an order to march into the mountains. Paradoxically, we, “young soldiers” were happy to do it because we were tired from a constant fatigue, bullying from crazy, bored “veterans”. However, the cases of aggressive behaviour towards comrades sharply reduced after spending time side-by-side in the mountains. For us “the youngest”– to receive the order to ambush the mujahidins all the way to the border of Pakistan, will be much more favourable than the humiliation that we experienced from our “own” people. Just leave us alone!

Indeed, better to say nothing about the Red Army methods of how to lift the soldiers’ moral spirit – the military operation that frightened us a couple of days ago, now was taken as a relief.

To tell the truth, mood has been slightly spoiled because the first, so-called “veteran” platoon was also marching with us. But at least we were glad to get rid of the demobs-idiots from the third platoon.

So, we moved into the mountains as a co-jointed column but with two platoon commanders and on top of the cake was a deputy political commissar.

Around my neck is an AK (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), which I have received upon arrival to Afghan. Unlike ordinary assault AKs used by our brigade, mine was with a non-folding wooden butt and a metal magazine. Usually this model has SSD – “silent shooting device”. However, my AK did not have it– who knows where this SSD disappeared to, but I can reassure you, it had happened before my conscription. But being in the army you have to carry a weapon, regardless of its condition. Is there any sense of this? Well, who cares about sense in the army, anyway?

Plus an additional disadvantage of the AK 7.62 was the size of the cartridges; they were shorter but thicker than the model 5.45 AK. This is why, as “a privilege” of being a “young soldier”, I should carry “two CKs” (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), which, as the regulation stated, has 900 cartridges of ammunition; some of them crammed into metal, not plastic magazines, and the weight is terribly heavy.

Also four grenades, a smoke-shell, flares, flare guns, a helmet, a flak jacket, a digging tool, cotton pants, felt boots, a waterproof cape tent, and camping food for three days (nine heavy cans and three huge packs of crackers) should be not forgotten...

In total, all of these weighed thirty-five kilograms – and was half of the size of me – and I had to carry this into the mountains! Tell me, how an ordinary fellow from Moscow, who had never been in the mountains higher than the Lenin Hills ((see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), can do it !? Plus, for the last seven months I have not had enough sleep and food. My ear was painful under the purulent bandages covering my head. Besides, I wear the heavy tarpaulin boots with puttees on my feet, which we were ordered to put on only a month ago. Nobody taught us how to use the puttee. In Fergana (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) we wore the boots, in Afghanistan we were given the ankle boots with laces and socks; and at that time, our supervisors, who provided a ceremonial check-up, did not care whether I can wind on the puttees or not. The main thing, as we were instructed, was to bring extra puttees with you, as “the way it should be”. Well, nothing more to say...

Also it is worth mentioning, after an hour of marching, your heart was beating so hard that you could hardly breathe, your legs, covered with blood, became incontrollable and disobedient to your commands, and you could not lift your head. But we should keep scrambling up and up on the endless slopes of foothills. The stops occur more often, and with each rest we tried desperately to catch our breath, but it leads to nothing – only to start moving after these breaks become even harder.

I remember that in such a moment, the political officer came to me – by that time, he already disliked me: he failed to convert me into a snitch – and in his usual manner he begins to “encourage” me with something like: “you are a useless fart”, “a piece of shit in this world”, and “people like you are just a waste in this world”.

Yep... he can talk– why not? He wears the light “Afghan” ankle boots. His BP (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor), as I can assess, has a packed food ration only for 2 days, and a very economical supply of ammunition. Indeed, he is definitely enjoying his weight deficiency, as I can observe.

His “political propaganda” did extend my sufferings but I did not bother to reply back. I simply could not do it, because, at this point, I was not a human, I became an exhausted mule dragging a half-dead body up to the hill. All I can think of is to have a little break at this moment, but I know, there will be no stop in the near future: our company commander Pikunov, nicknamed “Rex”, already rushed ahead with his platoon of “dembels” (See “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor), and definitely they will not be slowing down because of some emaciated soldiers. Moreover, he has a mission, he knows where he is going and why. We do not. We are not required to know about it – we should just do, and keep doing, until we will get the next order.

... And this happens at the moment when I almost gave up walking, and, it seemed to me, I will crash on the ground any minute. I did not care anymore if the political officer will go into pieces from his anger.

Climbing to a hill with a round peak, we formed a sort of semicircle, in which I was in the centre among the first platoon “veterans”. Ahead of me was Kravchenko, behind me was Grishin and someone else, from their platoon, was on the right, Vova Mordvinov was a little bit further on. He is (together with the Belyiy and Pakhomov) from our year’s conscription, but for some mysterious reason they were directed to serve with “dembels”.

In parallel to us, a chain of “young” soldiers from Afghan government troops kept climbing. Suddenly I heard that someone from the top of the hill cried out to the “dembels”. My first impulse was to take to the right- it was a short cut, even though I had to go through some low bushes, – but somehow I have got an idea that our soldiers will be gathering together somewhere ahead. So I kept walking behind Cravoy, who proceeded walking strictly step-in-step, as he was taught, behind a soldier, who, in the same manner, followed a sapper with a probing rod.” They called the dembels to have a rest!!!” – the idea flashed across my mind.

The last thing I remember (everything that followed after slipped from my memory, as I only remember fragments of sensations, sounds of this event) was that somewhere, very close to the right and a bit behind me, a powerful explosion blows the earth... I feel that something hits me in the face... I was falling...

Darkness covered my eyes together with a terrifying burst from machine guns that fire from everywhere but a heart-rending cry suppressed all sounds, it was not even a human cry, it was a heart-rending yell of a wounded animal.

I still have no idea what happened, and what was going on around me. When I opened my eyes, I spotted one of the Afghani soldiers, or “greenhorns” as we named them, who was firing frantically not far from me.

“I should open fire too” – this thought came to my mind and I pulled off the gun belt from my neck. But when, somehow, I realised that shooting was coming only from us, nobody was actually shooting towards us. I think this realisation came to the “greenhorn” as well.

And then a fallen deafening silence was cut by the cry, scream and howl, which can be heard more distinctly in the cold air. I do not know how to describe it, but it was an inhuman sound which I had not heard before and I did not hear after.

I turned around towards this cry– there was a something like an earth-gray creature lying on the ground and moving in an absolutely unnatural way. I remember, how I tried to compose my thoughts to comprehend a jerking leg with bloody scraps hanging above the place where there should be a knee.

It takes seconds. Plotnikov, and someone else, runs up to him and I understand that Gene Grishin is lying on the ground. Running towards Gene, the platoon commander briefly asked me why my face is blooded – but, I did not feel anything – and making sure that it was scratched from small stones, he rushed to Grishin. Plotnikov already was there, trying hastily to apply a bandage in order to stop the bleeding and fix a tourniquet to his leg. “Scheinin, do you have a belt?” – he shouted towards me.

But I am still in a stupor of dismay. I do not understand why he needs my belt – a narrow canvas strap for keeping cotton pants. Having no time for explanations, the platoon commander pulls up my bulletproof vest, pea jacket and takes the belt out.

All this time Grishin keeps furiously resisting helpers, trying to get up and look at his leg. Plotnikov tries to hold him but this effort is useless. Gene is screaming horrifyingly. In my head is a terrible non-stop ringing and I feel sick but through the cotton wool in my ears and my head, I realize what he is crying: “Kill me, kill me!”. This cry as well as these words can make you mad but it affected me differently – I had unexpected clearness in my mind, emotionally I did not feel better.

The groundsheet that was placed under Gene, immediately became wet with his blood. Plotnikov eventually managed to bandage the leg but to do more was not possible. The Grishin’s lower limb was covered with blood.

They turned Grishin over and then Plotnikov swore helplessly and hopelessly...the second leg of Grishin was ripped off. While Plotnikov was tightening his stump, heavy bleeding occurred, the cause of which was not

understandable; even more, at that time, Plotnikiv did not pay much attention to it, thinking that the second leg was the real problem. None of us knew that before climbing into the mountains, Grishin placed the grenade into his pocket and this inexplicable action cost him his life.

Apparently, when he heard voices of friendly troops from the pinnacle, he walked towards the right – through the bushes that I had just passed but I did not yield for the first impulse to cut my way to the top of the mountain.

Actually “walked” will not be quite the right word to use for his action. He just made only one step to the side. The step, as it often happened at war, has determined his fate. He stepped right on the mine buried by a mujahidin in the bushes. This “mine” was actually a can from our own dry ration. It was stuffed with blasting material and was a trip-wire mine. The mine exploded, and the grenade detonated in Gene’s pocket, and he lost his leg.

But Plotnikov does not know anything about all of this at that time. He tried hard to stop the second wound bleeding and he had no idea how serious it was. For the platoon commander it was more important to figure out how to send Grishin to the hospital as quickly as possible. The choppers have already been summoned. Plotnikov together with the soldiers from the first platoon picked up the groundsheet with Grishin on it, who was calmed down after a promedol injection. The groundsheet was dragged to some nearby hill, where the “Eight” (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) will soon be landing: an orange smoke appeared in the distance.

After returning from the operation, we found out that Gene was not taken to the hospital. He did not make it. He lost a lot of blood, the tourniquet proved to be useless....

In later years I realised how one step in one split second, or a tiny instinctive motion can change your entire life. But on that day it was very new to me and to Gene who went in the same direction as I was going. He stepped towards the mine a few seconds earlier. But it could have been MY mine....

However, all of these thoughts will occur later, much later, even, probably not in Afghanistan. Over there, I hardly had time to think about it, but the destiny of events will give me a lot of such occasions. And, unfortunately, it will be very soon.

Back then, after the feverish bustle, some strange silence unexpectedly covered everything. All this time I was motionless. Nobody looked at me.

I remember how I tried to move and my legs obeyed me badly. My face is aching and when touching it, it seems to be covered with some blisters. But I need to move forward– I feel that something did happen on the hill, strengthened by the despondency of the incident.

Struggling, I am making my way to the hill and see over there a pit covered with something looking like a plank. I notice what looks like a manhole was in

the dugout. In my somnambulistic state I am approaching it, I just want to sit there for a second, and then I hear the Mordvin's voice:

– Hey, Penguin! What are you doing!? Don't go here! Let the sappers examine everything around first.

I obediently sit down on the edge of the pit and wait. The sappers arrived soon, they examined the bottom of the pit, and found two more homemade antipersonnel mines hiding there...

For the last half an hour, fate saved me twice from paying a heavy price like Grishin did. Thanks to my guardian angel and to Mordvin who looked after me with his warning.

We moved less than 15 metres, when someone spotted a strange object on the road. After a closer examination, it turns out to be a half-ripped jackboot with remains of a human leg. That was all that left from Gene Grishin's leg...

Someone, who picked up the terrible thing, got himself into an awkward situation. No doubt, it was useless to carry, but to throw it away was even harder. Whilst the decision-making process was going on, the stern voice of the platoon commander switched on to the reality: "Why the hell have you stopped again, go ahead, the second company!"

A ringing in my head was still bothering me. Chmyr cleaned my wounds, pored iodine on half of them, and now the bandaging on my head does not look so foolish. However, the ringing in my head, the aching face, the heaviness of my backpack – all of these have merged into one continuous rhythm of movement. We kept walking for some time...

As it turned out, we should not have climbed to the mountain, as I overheard from a traffic platoon radio. We should go lower...

The next few days I could hardly remember: it was like one endless day, in which flashes of light outlined some actions.

This whole military operation was my "first Alihey!" (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) that was divided into two parts: before the death of Grishin and after.

Much later, when I returned home, from time to time the incident with Gene Grishin was haunting me in my dreams with the realistic screaming: "Kill, kill me!" in his inhuman voice. And only then, I understood that my life was slashed into the unmatched parts: BEFORE the death of Grishin and AFTER.

## ALEKSANDER KARTSEV

Kartsev, Alexander Ivanovich was born in 1964. He graduated from the Moscow Higher Military Command School as a military intelligence officer. He was involved in many military operations in Afghanistan, and the anti-piracy campaign of the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. He has an extended list of service in Poland, Germany, France, Austria and other countries. He is a member of the Writers' Union of Russia.

### A Great French Writer

#### A Short Story

Yes, it was a big problem to find a real goose quill. Its absence could pose a threat to a whole idea. Great French writers were known for writing their books just for using goose quills. The only question was arisen - where they got them: definitely not from a shop.

It was pure luck that in his writing desk at home, on its lower shelf, the ink had been found, the real blue ink although a little bit dry, but with his little ingenuity and some tap water, this problem can be fixed easily. As a matter of fact, all of these started with this discovery and then he was enlightened with the idea...

But as for a goose quill... Probably, any French writer could give up due to not coping with all obstacles related to his idea and would have gone to the nearest tavern for drinking wine with his musketeer-friends instead. But he was different, he was not an ORDINARY, he was GREAT! This is why he would not give up for doing anything halfway through anyway.

Walking through endless streets and squares and searching for places inhabitant by the geese, it was not easy to find the goose quill. There were no geese around in the whole city! Soon another idea has crossed his mind - to use the raven ones if the goose one could not be found. However, the raven feathers were not easy to find too. As ill luck would have it, the Ravens did not want to change their plumage in autumn. But he was lucky! Not far from a grocery store, he found what was looking for. Even more: not one - two raven feathers!

In the same evening, he began to work on his dream. As the first necessary step - to do a little practice on a normal sheet of paper. It turned out that to write with a raven feather and ink was not difficult at all, but, to tell the truth, letters were very thick and uneven. They looked almost French, except they were not beautiful.

Moreover, some blots spoiled the whole picture! Fortunately, a way how to fix this problem stroked his mind: to take a knife in the kitchen and do sharpening a tip of the feather. At once all things took a lucky turn!

However, there was another problem: he did not know a single word in French! Of course, he knew some words “Madame”, “Cherchez la femme”, like every one of us, but had no clue how to write them in French.

For any beginner writer in French, it would be an unsolvable problem too. But not for the GREAT one, who definitely knew how to write in Russian!

Now, the most difficult problem was to select a correct book. Undoubtedly, the most logical decision should be to chose “Three Musketeers”. This was a thick book with a shabby cover and yellowish pages that excited his imagination by promising a distant pilgrimage, adventures and courage. Although he had not read a single page yet from this book, he already felt a presentiment of its magic hidden under its cover.

Yes, it was exactly what he needed. This book was substantial for his plans! However, Dad could belt him for “Three Musketeers”. As sure as hell, he would!

But, to tell the truth, his father could not do it at any means- not because he never belted his son before, but mainly because he died in some mysteriously distant Afghan two years ago.

But it was pleasant to think that his Dad could punish him. This kind of thoughts was a usual for him, especially in case of doing something wrong or forbidden. It first happened when he and his friend Igoryok pulled down a cigarette from the package hidden by some boy in an empty mailbox, and then two of them smoked secretly in bushes near a railroad. At that moment, he thought that if Dad could see them, for sure a punishment would be evitable. These thoughts helped him to consider Dad to be alive, not to be just the photo hanging on the wall in their room.

Tomorrow will be his birthday. Damn luck that Igoryok had caught the flue, and he won't be able to come! With no other friends, he will have to celebrate the birthday with his mother.

In the writing desk, he has already found his birthday gift from her - a set of watercolour paints and a sketchbook, which she will present him tomorrow.

To tell the truth, he was dreaming about a new rod. It was his dream: bamboo, three-kneed one, like every adult fishermen have. But the rod costs a lot. All right, a set of paints is okay too, let leave it as it is! He is not a little one anymore; tomorrow he will be eight years old! He understands well enough that there no money at home. His mother was working all days long, Even in evenings she was washing a floor at the entrance of some official building, but she cannot even repair the cost of her winter coat. On top of it, every month she should pay for their accommodation. They live in lodgings. They do not have their own place.

But it is okay. When he will grow enough to be an adult, he will buy a rod by himself! Every day he will go fishing and will bring a catch to home. His mother loves to fish so much!

He heard how she cried at nights. She cried very often. She is old, but she cries as if she is a little girl. And why does she crying? It should be better for me to pretend that I am very glad to get her gift – the paints and a sketchbook. He knew that she will be happy.

He also knew that there is a small round melon kept in a refrigerator... and it is very tasty. Of course, it is not as tasty as that huge melon which his Daddy brought for the New Year eve three years ago. All the way from some unknown Tashkent! He still recalled how it was juicy and unusual. And it was transparent because it let the sunlight through each slice! And how it smelled!!! That melon was not the same as this one. This one was tasty because it smelled as THAT one.

... Yes, it is bad that Igoryok could not come. He could not taste this melon. Besides, it would be more cheerful to celebrate birthday with him. He is a good friend. A real one! They even go together to the same school. However, Igor is sitting in the class one level below, he is younger than him. Once or twice he had to deal with Igor's schoolmates when they bullied him. He felt as he was Igor's elder brother. He felt comfortable because of it. He wished he had such brother in real...

Well, he got distracted from his book with all these thoughts... He had to put "Three Musketeers" aside. He wished he did not, of course, but he decided to take some colouring book for children, with its motley pictures although it did not look solid at all. It was too childish. It does not matter! It will be suitable to hide idea too.

Diligently sniffing, he put his hand to the plough. Written with the raven feather, the first letters started to appear on the back cover of the book. These letters formed into words, words into a sentence - "To Sergey Smirnov, the pupil of Class 2A..."

After "Class" his hand trembled treacherously and the big ink blot jumped straight to the paper. But it was only one blot, and he continued: "...from a great French writer AIXandre Dumas". For a moment he became thoughtful. Then he accurately crossed out a letter "Y" in the word "AIXandre" and drew a letter "E" above it. Then he considered for a moment and added "Count" after "Dumas". With a comma. Certainly, was Alexandre Dumas a count? Of course, he was!

He leaned back with a great satisfaction and took a deep sigh. Yes, it is hard to be a great French writer! Blood sweat came out until you finished one autograph. Next, he began to blow very hard at the writing on the paper so the ink will dry quickly because he wanted very much to show the book to boys who were playing outside.

They will be so jealous!

For sure, none of them had a book signed by an ordinary French writer, to say nothing, by Count Dumas! Seryozha has no doubts that Dumas was a count.

Many boys sure will seek his friendship as soon as they see this book. He will be not objecting it.

But then he remembered how boys teased him because he was fatherless. But they do not have SUCH book. Does it mean that he is teasing them too? He does not want to do it. He is not a little boy!

Seryozha took a cardboard box out of the writing desk. In this box, he kept his treasures. His Diploma for finishing his first schooling year successfully. A few multi-coloured bits of glasses that he had found last summer on a street. Felt-tip pens which his Dad gave him. They were dry and writing with them was not possible, but Seryozha could not throw them away. At the very bottom of the box, there was the Medal for Bravery and the Order of Red Star. It was all that left from Daddy.

Mujahidin had killed his father. Military men told this when they had brought a big “iron” box in which, according to them, his father was. It was difficult to believe. But when his mother began to cry violently as never before, he believed. He believed that something bad had happened. But also he believed that in few days Daddy definitely will return home. And then he would tell to doctors how confused they were because he is, his father is actually alive.

After the third day this “iron” box was buried at a cemetery by accompanying men. All people were in black and cried. His mother was in black too. And she had a black face. But she did not cry; although everyone asked her to do it. Daddy never came back...

That day Seryozhka decided that he would kill all mujahidin. But then a new thought came into his mind – these mujahidin’s could be someone’s fathers too. He did not want those boys from some far-away country were brought up without their fathers. It was too bad to live without Dady. So after having serious thoughts, he decided that when he will be an adult, he would never kill anybody.

Seryozhka put this book above all other things. It was the dearest gift for his birthday. Because it was a gift from his Daddy to him. His father was not only a good man but also a very brave. Certainly, if he would be alive, he could be on friendly terms with Count Alexandre Dumas. Surely, the Count would sign one of his books to his best friend’s son. If only Daddy was alive...

*P.S. Sergeya Smirnov (aka Seryozhka) died during the Second Chechen War. He kept his word. He killed nobody.*

## PAVEL ANDREYEV

Andreev, Pavel (a pen name Andrei Vasilyevich Pavlyukov) is the author of a well known collection of short stories “Rassypukha” ( See “ Terminology and Glossary – Editor). Andreev was born in 1962 in Kazakhstan. He was studying in the Mining Institute of Sverdlovsk, when in the autumn of 1981, he was drafted into the national military service. He was directed to serve the army in the 70th brigade that was located in Afghanistan. In 1982, near Kandahar, he was severely wounded and lost both his legs. He was awarded the Order of the Red Star. The author lives in Novosibirsk.

### **Yesterday Was the Easiest Day!**

There was a white dome-shaped ceiling over him. His head was buzzing, creating some obscure vibrations in his body. First, the pulsations were felt in his legs and then unbearable pain engulfed his entire body. Convulsively, he pushed himself up on his elbows. Another spasm threw his head back onto the pillow but even the softness of the pillow could not ease the horror which swept over him when he saw what was in front of him.

He was struck not so much by the absence of his legs as by the shapes of the soldier’s blanket which had been folded carefully to make an illusion of legs. The blanket was tucked in his bed and it was pulled back partially, to cover only what was left of the body of the wounded man after having been torn apart by the mine splinters. Below his thighs the blanket was untouched, with its folding having been shaped by helpful soldier’s hands. It was the integrity of the blanket that defiantly showed its indifference to the event which had happened. Now he occupied only half the space he was supposed to. The boundary of this reality took place at his bleeding stumps.

He did not completely realize the position he was in and he continued to perceive the world in the light of his old feelings, which had not been destroyed by a new reality. His non-existent, amputated legs ached. He was not concerned about the holes in his arm and stomach. The only thought that periodically came into his confused head was “I am alive. What for?” Having tried to objectively evaluate everything that had happened to him, he attempted to find a way out of the situation he was in.

His life was divided into two parts – before and after. In his head these two parts of his life, like the pieces of a broken mosaic, collided and created the chaos of a coloured kaleidoscope, picturing events and people. There was nothing like this before, nothing that could help him to determine a new understanding of his

life. He felt intuitively that all necessary knowledge and skills were inside him, but the blast of a damned mine had turned everything upside down.

Time was the only resource available to him from which he could derive all his tenacity. He felt that he was in the very centre of the crater formed by the explosion and that a swift stream of time was dragging him into it. Swirling life was piercing his body and brain, but without dragging him along. It was clearly evident to him, that life, like a swift mountain stream, was flowing around the barrier of unshakable solidity, and not able to destroy it. That solidity of his consciousness had become a thing of the past.

He felt like a grain of sand which had already fallen in the sandglass of his fate. The intensity of recent months meant that the inevitable event had to happen and it had indeed happened.

At this stage he belonged to the past completely, like that fallen grain. He was waiting for fate to turn his sandglass again. Not having developed new reasoning, he used the old one. It was based on the invaluable soldier's experience of survival, which had prompted common truth, and he could not abandon its practicality. He slowly extracted facts from the past and built a foundation from them; it was the pyramid base of his new consciousness.

Self-reliant and tough-minded as he was, seeing what happened to him as inevitable, was the way he faced his fate. He understood that any event was a matter of fortune, unforeseeable and unpredictable. But, continuing to analyze what had happened, he recognized that the course and spirit of the future were accidental, neither for the individual nor for the whole group. He came to the conclusion that, due to the free choices of individuals, such a course of events might, to tell the truth, either finish with a magnificent ending or create a risk of growing danger or death, but it could not be changed in meaning or direction.

A fact is something singular, something that was or will be in reality. The truth is something that does not need actual implementation in order to exist as a possibility. Fate is relevant to the facts. The truth is the connection between cause and action. Certainly, he knew it. That is why our life is connected with the facts, consists of the facts and is directed by the facts.

To learn something one needs time.

To become somebody one needs exactly this time.

...“If you follow the rules and the regulations, you will conquer and you will achieve honour and glory!” That was the message on the poster hanging on the wall opposite his bed. He fell asleep and woke up reading that slogan every day.

It was regular night drill. First, push-up and press-swing, then, gladiator fights and, finally, lights-out, like pipe dreams. Having gone mad because of fatigue and having dreamt about the possibility of sleeping no longer, he would stand and stare at the damned poster with the slogan in front of him.

“What are you thinking about, pal?” The sergeant’s question brought him back to the barracks at the present. “If you follow the rules and the regulations, you will conquer and you will achieve honour and glory!” – he shouted in response. The sergeant was looking into his eyes, rocking from heel to toe. “It is the easiest thing to do exactly what you are forced to do. It is more difficult to do the things you want to do, regardless of circumstances. That is why you should remember a simple rule, pal: ‘TO KNOW AND NOT TO ACT’ IS SIMILAR TO ‘NOT KNOW’! YOU CANNOT KNOW BUT YOU MUST LEARN FAST!!! SO DO NOT THINK ABOUT IT, JUST DO IT!!!” Obviously, the sergeant was pleased with such an ending. And then there was a long-awaited command “Lights out, pals!”.

It was evident that they would not be able to get sergeant’s such knowledge without rising from the ranks, from cadet to sergeant. That process made it possible to educate soldiers in a grand style, so they could assess their inner abilities, set targets, be trained consciously as individuals, and who therefore were ready for critical challenges which were set on the basis of the facts of the sergeants’ past life and not on the basis of some “ideal” abstractions of the regulations.

However, in order to do so well, it was necessary for them to have time and opportunity to learn new things. Moreover, these qualities were needed to acquire the strength necessary for the role. As soon as that strength had been acquired, the possibilities to use it appeared...

There were three months left until the end of the beginning...

If you see that the fight is useless you should fight with a doubled force.

...In any way, when they broke through to what was under the surface in life, he remembered what he had seen.

With tears all over their faces, covered with a thick layer of dust, two soldiers were not shy about their emotions. Taking turn, eight people were digging the foundation for a fence. It separated them from their friend who was wounded in the thigh and had fallen on the other side. Dukhs (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) were cutting them off with their fire, not giving any chance for the fence to be climbed over. The two who had tried to do it were injured. They threw the grenades. Using AGS (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), they tried to support their wounded friend who was returning fire to the approaching ghosts. Men were following the fence with all that was in their hands.

He was amazed to see the kind of work they had managed to do; almost with bare hands, they had managed literally to gnaw through the fence.

When the hole in the fence base had exposed them, their friend was wounded in the right shoulder. Bleeding, losing consciousness, suffering an unbearable pain, the wounded man blew himself up with a grenade, the intensity too great. Having seen the futility of their attempts to take him alive, the ghosts retreated.

Even though they did not know if he was still alive, they were digging this hole. Their friend's survival had lasted eight minutes. Five minutes after the grenade explosion the ghosts brought back the encirclement. Eight minutes after the grenade explosion the soldiers punched another hole in the fence base. Five minutes later another group joined them.

Now the two soldiers who had punched that hole were crying like children, unable to hide their emotions. Nevertheless, they dragged the unresponsive body of their friend into the damned hole, not recognizing the senselessness of it...

Lying in the hospital bed, he began to understand that the time of death entirely depended on how and when the vital force of a person was struck down. He saw that severe trauma could kill a person instantly, while others wounds, with less impact on a human, could cause dementia, loss of self-control, or disorganization of the will.

"To live, to live and TO LIVE must be the only inflexible decision." In this sense he understood what had happened back then.

However, before equilibrium can be restored, it will initially be broken. And there will always be someone who will be the first.

"Now the most important thing is for you to learn to live without legs," – said the surgeon, patting his shoulder encouragingly, when the bandages had been removed and his lungs had been exhausted from screaming. He understood that he had been the first.

The vast country was able to allocate very few resources for social rehabilitation. The reason was not lack of the resources, but lack of purpose. That is why it was not a priority.

It was the amputation (through the war) of opportunities for the wounded which transformed a human into his direct opposite. "Limiting manipulations" are cost-economical and very effective. The government knew it very well. What was the result of this amputation of opportunities? It gave the government the antithesis of a man, who had been sent to war.

Shortchanging the men in such a way, the state was able to manipulate them by means of benefits, after having deprived them of their own capabilities and goals. The goal is always inseparable from the instruments which are used to achieve it: each goal corresponds to the instrument and each instrument corresponds to the achieved goal. Now he had only one goal and the only instrument to achieve it – his prostheses as a symbol of human pain and patience. He understood that his life was just many, many days in which the pain would turn into infinity. When so much has been lost, try harder. If you do not know what to do, take a step forward. The war will show the plan; the main thing is to get into a fight, and then we will see!

“Fish wins tactically when it feels the taste of the worm, but loses strategically having been hooked”. (Haiku). “Never enter into the struggle that is imposed on you by your enemy; it is better to retreat in time rather than to step over your own dead body later.” (The prose of life).

The easiest day...

White walls, white sheets. Peace and quiet. He was dreaming about it during all his military service. Now he perceived these things quite differently.

The battalion commander sat nearby. The deputy commander in charge of policy, who had come with the battalion commander, brought a new parade uniform along with a vest, beret, insignia, two rucksacks filled with Kandahar pomegranates, figs, apples, and “CC” lemonade. “There are 500 cheques in the package. This is a gift from the battalion for you when you will be discharged from the hospital”, – the battalion commander said, putting a simple soldier’s envelope on the pillow. “What are you going to do in civil life, son?” the battalion commander asked. Trying to look confident, he could think of nothing, but answered: “I will make stools and sell them in the market.” Burning pain in his legs went to his confused head. The battalion commander abruptly raised the sheet which was wrapped around his foreshortened body and said: “If I learn that you are good-for-nothing in civil life, sergeant, I will come and kill you myself. Do you see? Remember my son, yesterday was the easiest day! Now is the beginning of a real war in your life...”

A plane was to arrive in the morning. The company personnel have already stocked him up and covered his stomach and arm with bandages. The battalion commander and the deputy commander in charge of policy have just left him.

He did not realize completely the current situation, continuing to perceive the world in a light of old sensations before having been destroyed by new realities. Non-existent amputated legs hurt. The holes in his arm and stomach did not trouble him. In his contused head one single thought periodically surfaced: “Yesterday was the easiest day, indeed!”

## Soul

To be honest, I don’t know how to put the whole story across to you. It started seventeen years ago. “Soul” was his nickname and I found it a good “moniker”. This story will make you sure of it – though it is hard for me to relate the story by strictly keeping to its chronology, I will try to tell you what really happened.

The list of various wounds and severe injuries which one could easily get, without leaving the brigade’s position, could cover many more pages than my story. It was possible to get into the most unbelievable situation if you were not a sissy boy; it was quite possible to live through it and to cope with it.

Soul always landed on his feet. One of his funniest qualities he had, was an amazing pantophagy (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) : he could eat literally everything that grew on the land, and it was very difficult to define the basis of his rations. There was one more quality which distinguished Soul from the rest – his unusual flexibility, the ability to adjust to any conditions, any difficulties.

I clearly remember that operation.

It was a good warm night for ambushes – with moonlight and gentle contours, dark enough to be concealed and bright enough to differentiate all the shadows, pits and bumps on the ground, which still retained the warmth of a July day. That night had a lesson in store for us. A dream embraces a tired person at night, so that he does not even notice it. With wide open eyes, we slipped into oblivion for a while, during which time we continued walking mechanically, but with our attention switched off. Such fatigue is a usual phenomenon for drivers, so there is nothing attractive in night driving, especially along impassable roads. Driven by some power, we thought that we were flying between heaven and earth, now and then almost running into APCs (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor).

Everything happened at lightning speed, before I knew where I was. Spotting with a night vision device a huge hole about fifty meters ahead on the route, which was filled with moonlight shadow, our driver slammed on the brakes. At a speed of forty kilometers per hour, we almost fell into it. Soul fell from the APC at the moment of that sudden stop. Like a soccer ball, he easily flew over the hood of the carrier. One could say he was lucky; he escaped with bruises and scratches. But you should have seen the face of our sergeant, Beck. To tell the truth, we knew full well what Beck was about to say at that moment. “To kill you now or to give you another chance?”. His eyes were gleaming with a mixture of pretend violence and crafty goodness. It was Beck’s catchphrase. In fact, he remained indifferent to the successful landing of Soul. The APC was jammed with ammunition. The boys on board froze at his every word – all these belonged to him, he was like an owner of this boundless sandy beach without any sea.

Being slightly disoriented from the two hour drive in a completely unfamiliar area, we were staring at Soul – indeed, he seemed to be the reason we stopped. Tattered, covered with dust, he was nervously adjusting his famous sun-hat, where the well known to everybody in the company Russian word “DUSHA” was written with a bleaching powder referring to a diminutive derivative of “Dusha” from his name. A round head with a face similar to young Lenin from the October badge was looking up from under this sun-hat.

Apart from the sun-hat, another distinguishing feature of Soul was his eyes, always wide-open, emitting a sincere child’s interest in everything happening around. His ingeniousness just killed us now and then. He could do almost

everything without having a clue how something should be done. He could live quietly with minimum knowledge about the laws of the surrounding world.

To survive in Afghan, a person has to arm himself with the patience of an angel. I had been trained already in this regard, but sometimes anxiety gripped me. Soul is another matter; he treated everything that was happening to him as if it were not his life, but a rehearsal. It seemed that he was just storing the received skills in order to use them one day, when it was time for real life.

The fall from the APC was not the most terrible ordeal for him. During those nine months which he had spent with the division, he had lived through almost everything. Three factors always helped him: luck, occasion and flair. Now for sure this flair was whispering: “Calm down, do not hurry”.

I was sitting on the bonnet of the truck; all the others were standing in a semicircle at some distance from Beck, representing a living decoration for the action that was about to happen, or perhaps shielding this ridiculous scene from any casual viewer. Beck examined Soul from top to toe with that weird look of his which I hated so much. What was to follow was a regular scenario with a rare innovation. I felt sick. “Just do not say...”the helmet” “, – I was begging Beck in my mind.

“Put on the helmet”,– said Beck, almost whispering. Nothing could force Soul to not blindly obey the order. He was so spoiled by his luck that he could not understand why he was given that order. More than once he had to stand like this in front of the sergeant. In his understanding, he had no reason to hurry, and in general, he just carried out his duty. But I am sure that from gradual awareness of what was happening, he felt much worse after the fall. Beck returned to the carrier and took the grenade thrower’s cartridge. Soul did not watch his step: his eyes filled with alarm; he was riveted to the RPG (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) in Beck’s hands.

It was like a shot. With all his might Beck hit the helmet on Soul’s head with the cartridge. Soul managed to keep his balance although his face was twisted with pain. But in a second he fell to the ground, without making a sound. Those who surrounded him kept silent. Soul quickly came to himself and with a thoughtful look, which conveyed his agony, followed our reaction.

The dembels (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) were climbing on the armored vehicle one by one – the punishment was over.

“So, what now?”– I asked Beck, after we pulled Soul inside the troop-carrier. He made no reply; having pushed me away with his shoulder, he threw his body on the weaponry with a powerful jerk. I noticed that he was sullen, as before. Why was he like that, while all the others were filled with fear and disapproval of his deed? Sometimes it was hard to understand Beck, and now was a time when it was better to leave him alone. “Well, you never can tell. The night is not over

yet”, he noted dryly, when I took my place next to him. At that moment each of us was lost in our own thoughts.

Many boarding houses make preparations beforehand for the “Afghans” who are arriving. Before their arrival, the administration puts the place in order: the new cushioned furniture is hidden in the storerooms; its place is taken by old sofas, battered chairs and tables. All carpets and table lamps are removed. The staff is instructed in case of emergencies. And then comes the long-awaited day of arrival of the “Afghans”, who, accompanied by an easily recognizable sound of the clinking of glasses, arrive in a dignified manner, sedately carrying the weight of state awards and benefits. Unlucky old-aged veterans, not knowing what to expect, find themselves in the situation of hiding in their rooms as the only way to get through this horror invasion.

By the evening a boarding house turns into an arena of military operations, the base of crash courses in survival. Along the corridors, with a wild noise and a sound of prostheses and crutches, the troops are rushing to and fro: people unite in groups according to their divisions, regiments, and brigades, and provinces where they had served, according to their participation in joint operations, according to hospitals, according to the nature of their wounds, and finally, according to groups of disability. If you go through the floors, you can see people hugging and kissing in lobbies and bars. The meetings are celebrated in every room: you can open any door without knocking, and everyone will be pleased to pour you a glass or two, sincerely offering to share the joy of meeting with a brother-soldier.

The next morning, before you can open your eyes, you are horrified to think of a long and painful return to the interrupted conversation with new and old friends you were socializing with the day before; and having being buried in a pillow, you begin to listen to steps in the corridor. Sometimes you just have to say to yourself: “Enough of that! Go to hell!” You want to shut yourself in the room and do something enjoyable, for instance – to read, listen to music and at last to dream. It is quite possible that in an hour you will be lucky enough to fall asleep, and in a few days you will escape from this hell and forget your friends of the nights. However, the lucky ones are few. In most cases, the struggle is prolonged, because it is not so easy to get rid of awakened memories. Insomnia itself is not as terrible as the memories associated with it and as a result, “war cartoons”: nightmares. You are calmed down by only one thing: you are not alone in your torments.

If you come here and concentrate only on this, you can lose your good health in a short time. Let us say, the question for me is not idleness. One day as part of one of those “landings” I happened to be in a boarding house not far from Moscow. Having dived head first into the above-described atmosphere that reigned in a decent society of serious people for those who came here to be treated for injuries and to be returned to a normal condition, I found myself not ready to face my past.

The main responsibility of the administration was to make patients feel relaxed and rested, so that life became a bed of roses starting from the very first day. Well, we came here because we wanted to be well. The sharing of “war cartoons” was an unspoken taboo. It was important to not stand out from the normal rhythm of life and to not avoid one’s familiar circle of friends. I had already known that those people who recovered faster helped others who were struggling in a similar situation. Therefore, there was one fellow I chose for my own course of treatment.

He looked so skinny. He was dressed in a plain tracksuit, which together with his jeans made up his entire wardrobe. The impression of gauntness was enhanced by his seemingly external inaccessibility. This fellow obviously had not managed to objectively assess his budget for the rest of period, having brought here just what was left from his monthly salary or pension. A couple of times I tried to approach him, taking a seat next to him, but he showed a demonstrable independence. It is quite common behavior of those who have been faced with mockery and undeserved reproaches from relatives and loved ones. Most likely he had his own reasons for becoming an “iron man”, and one day he had made a decision about living as courageously as possible.

But still, it was not difficult for me to draw him out. As soon as it became clear that we had been in the same brigade for the same years, I asked him umpteen questions about things that were hard not know if he was really there at that time. His sluggish, vague answers disappointed me and settled doubts in me as to their veracity. He remembered the location of the military unit, knew some details from brigade life, but he absolutely did not remember the people with whom he had said he had shared the difficulties of service. Apparently, hoping somehow to justify his strange forgetfulness, he started to tell something about his life. His speech was incoherent, and his diction left much to be desired.

Having armed myself with patience, I listened to his story. He used to be a soldier, but he was wounded and a couple of years after that he developed a strange disease. He began to lose weight; his memory, hearing and sight began to worsen. And then it got even worse: there were problems with his right foot. Strange bouts of pain in his back began to bother him, after which his foot completely failed. He married a woman with a child. The boy did not consider him as a father, he despised him for his weakness. The problems with his head prevented him from staying on a well-paid job and he started repairing TVs at home, but the number of orders was constantly decreasing. He had to now come here for his health.

Understanding the problem and trying to be an attentive listener, I asked politely about his wound. His answer disappointed me completely. “Grenade struck my head”, he said. If I had not known people with similar wounds, I might have believed him. But he did not know where to draw the line. Continuing

to listen to his story, I involuntarily began to overhear a conversation the next table, where the helicopter pilots were sitting. The familiar word “Kalat” in their conversation made me strain my ears.

“When we had flown there, they were already being pelted with launchers. The tank and the APC were already burning. We just made a couple of sorties, and there was already a commander with a launcher-wound in his head. They all were screaming on the “Romashka”, demanding evacuation. I looked down: they were under fire, the “box” was burning, and they were like mice thrashing about in a ditch!” For the first time I heard the impressions of a man who had taken a detached view of a battle in which I had also taken part: the comparison with mice shocked me; you could have knocked me down with a feather.

By noon the next day we were trapped.

After receiving an order, our team, consisting of two incomplete platoons, left the zone of ambush actions in three cars and went down to a concrete road. We had to go as a patrol accompanied by a column that was carrying cotton from India. Outpacing the column, we moved close to a Afghan tank, which had been given to us for support. The Afghan commando unit was reinforced by the fourth company of our battalion.

The commander said: “Halt!”. We stopped. At the head of the patrol there was a tank and after it you could see our three “boxes”.

A small village was divided into two parts by the concrete road 500 meters away. There was an irrigation ditch on the left, with two dryers on the left, and on the right there was a garden, surrounded by a heavy adobe wall. The concrete road led to a blown-up bridge. The silence was alarming.

The patrol team was on the dirt road. The steep slope of the hill met the blade of the concrete road and limited our maneuvering to the left. A deep ditch was at our right, and behind it, there were deep ravines that went down to the river valley. Our position was not the best. The commander had already decided to send one carrier ahead to gain a dominant position at the top of the hill.

But as soon as our APC had moved to the tank that gave way to us, a launcher hit from the nearest ravine on the right. The fire stream pierced the armour of the tank between its wheels. The stored ammunition exploded immediately. The multi-ton bulky machine jumped on the spot. The turret jerked and slowly rode up. The pillar of flame broke away from the open-top hatch and the gunner, who was sitting behind the machine-gun, was thrown out on the burning concrete road.

It seemed to me that the gunner’s flight lasted endlessly and in absolute silence. The world and time itself gave way to the triumph of death. Perhaps due to the effect of dopamine, which rushed into my blood, everything that was going on around suddenly was filled with its own rhythm and started to live

its own life. In fact, the world broke down into many event-fragments, each of which consisted of a pause, in order to give the body an opportunity to react, and for the brain to become aware of what was happening...

... A bearded man in a waistcoat is slowly emerging from the ditch and then, in cold blood, he fired a short round at the writhing, burning Afghan man. On the right, a hundred meters from us, profiting from our confusion, four mujahedeen ( see “ Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) ran across the road to the ravines carrying guns. On my left Soul was trying to untie the knapsack full of grenades and their fuses. His hands were shaking, his lips were firmly set, and his eyes were fixed on the mujahedeen running across the road. He did not notice the loud pings of bullets striking the concrete road which ricocheted in his direction. Completely at a loss, I was hiding behind the armour of our APC. The tank exploded five meters away from it. I was on the armour, when the blast wave shook the machine frame, and it was strong enough to blow me off instantly.

Only when I felt a violent stream of air whistling out of a tire punctured by a bullet, did my wits came back to me and I woke up, conscious of the familiar sounds of chaos; and events began to turn at an immense speed.

Our carrier received two grenade hits within fifteen minutes. The first shot hit the spare wheel on the turret, wounding the gunner and the driver. The gunner fell out of the carrier through the side hatch. The driver, trying to direct the carrier away from the destroyed tank, began to zigzag to the narrow traffic lane of the concrete road, wisely keeping away from the mined track. The mujahedeen had come so close that we were throwing grenades like stones at each other. Tension in this battle was so high that fairly often from both sides un-cocked grenades flew: they were gathered up, the pins were pulled out and all of them were returned to the owners.

The only protection from bullets and bullet splinters were immovable APCs on the road which were abandoned by us. The close proximity of the enemy made their large-caliber machine-guns useless. In this cocktail of screams, shots and grenade explosions, the commander made an attempt to get into the carrier to help the shell-shocked driver, whose position inside prevented us from being able to hide behind its armour. All our attempts to stop the convulsive movement of the heavy eight-wheeled frame with the butts of rifles on the armour and our shouting yielded no results. Hardly had the commander put his hands over the hatch’s clamp, when the second fatal grenade shot resounded.

I was there; I just heard a loud clap. Then the five-meter APC’s trunk jerked and almost simultaneously the armour cracked like an eggshell and hit the company commander head. His powerful, well-muscled body was tossed into the ditch, straight to Soul’s feet. By this time Soul’s face became so inflated, that his head seemed twice as large.

The commander was thrashing about the ground, shaking his head so that the ingot had turned into a solid blood clot with hair clumps and only one miraculously saved eye with a furiously rotating pupil. That was horrible! At such moments a man is guided by his instincts rather than by his mind. Soul rushed at the commander, pressing him down with his body, while the others were frozen as if turned into stone. The commander, trying to get rid of Soul, was shaking his smashed head from side to side. We finally managed to bandage his head, but I do not know how. Somebody was vomiting nearby. The battle continued.

The carrier took fire – the red-hot fragments set aflame the barricade we had made out of mattresses on the zinc ammunition load. There was a wounded driver enveloped in pungent smoke in the vehicle’s interior. In a couple of minutes the ammunition load would detonate. While we, being busy with the commander and regrouping, were running between cars and creeping over the ditch, Soul had pulled out the driver who was riddled with splinters and, ignoring the shelling, covered the fire in the carrier with sand.

After the commander and the driver had been evacuated, Beck took command. We got to know on the jabbering walkie-talkie that the commander died aboard the helicopter.

The back-up arrived astonishingly fast. Our battalion, consisting of two platoons and the fourth company that joined us, with the support of Afghan commandos and two undamaged tanks, made the mujahedeens retreat to alternate positions prepared beforehand. Having organized the all-round defense, we decided to take the initiative in the battle.

The garden surrounded by the heavy adobe wall, the concrete bridge blown up at the end of the kishlak (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), the narrow concrete road with the disabled, burned tank, – all of these came together in the bright and smooth color of a sunset. We decided to dislodge the enemy from his positions with a bold attack. The commandos went in the center of the attacking line, and two of our platoons were on the flanks. The fourth company was preparing for the attack at the garden. The sun went down rapidly, leaving us no time to adjust our strategy.

The attack misfired. The commandos fell back, taking with them two dead and three wounded fighters. We retreated too, not having managed to make it to the right flank of the enemy. Our flimsy advantage was destroyed by the enemy’s heavy-caliber machine gun, which came from the left flank.

During the roll call after the failed attack, we learned that Beck and Soul, who with their group had attacked the left flank from where the mujahedeen’s machine-gun had rained us with fire, had gone.

We had to report that to the battalion commander.

– “Hectare-4, Hectare-4. This is Mars. Do you copy? Over”

– “Mars, Mars, This is Hectare-4, read you. I’m in the last position on the enemy’s left flank. We are ready to attack. Over”,– Beck reported the situation calmly.

– “Hectare-4. This is Mars. You are ready to support the attack. Roger that. How many of you are there, son? Over”. The commander was definitely trying to make sense of the current situation.

– “Mars, This is Hectare-4. There are two of us here, just two; we grabbed our “samovar” ( see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor). Ready to support the attack with fire”, it was obvious that Beck was flying into a rage.

The commander made a decision.

– “Calm down, son. ‘Elephants’ (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) are going to strike from two barrels. Try to adjust the fire. Over”. We passed “Get ready to attack” down the line.

It was beautiful. In gathering dusk two tanks at great speed, simultaneously turning around, lept out into the position for the straight shot. Just the look of their maneuver made our hearts beat faster, the dose of adrenalin made our knees tremble and our heads spin. The tanks stopped sharply, and at the same time, seemingly without preparation, fired a volley towards the left flank. A cloud of dense dust, almost black in the coming dusk, covered the enemy. At this moment the walkie-talkie began to speak with Soul’s stammering voice: “M-a-a-r-s, M-a-a-a-r-s, th-i-s i-s S-o-u-l.. Shots landed 15 meters from us. Sergeant is wounded. Th-i-s-i-s S-o-u-l, over!” Everybody froze, waiting for the command. “Calm down, son, no shots anymore. Support the attack, over!” we could sense in the commander’s voice a note of suppressed laughter. Then there was a command “Forward!”. Almost in full darkness, torn by our tracing fire, we rushed in silence upon the mujahedeen’s positions. The machine gun opened from the left flank, but Soul covered us. The mujahedeen abandoned their position and retreated with no resistance.

“That’s the place!”. At the next table, breaking the taboo, helicopter pilots bent over the map which had been taken by someone. Without ceremony I interrupted the man I was talking with, and approached their table. Now, so many years after the company commander’s death, I felt tears welling up in my eyes, but I was not ashamed of them. “That’s the place,”– I said to myself after twelve years – “look, here’s the place where I was shot in my head by a grenade launcher”. Suddenly, my companion stabbed his finger right at the point our group had passed just twenty-four hours before the mujahedeen’s ambush!

“Hey, man, give me more details about the grenade launcher’s attack on your head. ” I finally began to grasp the meaning of what was going on. “That was the sergeant who gave me a punch with the grenade launcher,” – he said, looking at me with the eyes of an old sick and tired man.

“Soul, is this you? That’s impossible!” I realized I had repeated these words already a few times, feeling utter disbelief. Some onlookers formed a group around us.

“Yes, I’m Soul. I am Soul!” This thin, exhausted man wept like a child.

We dislodged the mujahedeen with an impetuous push, grabbed their position and combed the garden in the complete dark. Nearly without losses – two men from the fourth company were wounded and one was killed. We bumped into Soul when he was carrying Beck to our position. Beck shook his head, covered with flour-like dust, and moaned. It was dark and we were blinded because of flashes from our guns; but it was impossible not to notice a mad glint in Soul’s eyes and a shiny white smile on his swollen and heavily bruised face. He stammered and shivered from head to foot, but his enviable health had let him hold out till the end of the battle.

Later on, the grenade launcher’s hit on our carrier was officially seen as the cause of Souls’ trauma. His report to the commander became a joke and turned him into a brigade legend. He was awarded the rank of sergeant and was recognized as an equal among experienced soldiers. With the natural chronometer in his head turned off by Beck’s blow, his world had become frozen, giving him his own particular rhythm in life.

Beck was transferred to the reserve in the Soviet Union, and he never came back to us.

The commander was posthumously awarded the “Order of Wartime Red Banner”, although he was recommended for the “Gold Star of the Hero of the Soviet Union”.

Five men in the company were awarded the “Red Star” for that battle: Soul, the wounded driver and Beck among them. Seven others were awarded the “Medal for Bravery”.

The day before my departure I prepared presents for Soul, having shown great diligence and care in their choice. He had become a kind of special person to me. I had become attached to him, spending all my free time with him, describing, at his request, different events of our friendship. I wanted to say goodbye to Soul before the departure, and I was going to invite him for dinner. I felt sad – I was short of parting words.

The receptionist, who always knew everything in the boarding house, stopped me:

- Sorry, but he left. He checked out of his room, packed and left.
- I saw him an hour ago, and we arranged the meeting.
- Are you from Room 301? He asked me to hand over an envelope to you.

Taking the envelope, I went back to my room. I found a photo inside. It was a picture of our company, all together in our smoking-room. There was a

little question mark above almost everyone's head, put by Soul's hand. But the marks above my head, the heads of the commander, Beck and Soul himself were crossed out. On the back side there was a recent inscription: "If I forget you – forget me".

And finally I got it. He said no good-byes, while expressing so much at the same time. For Soul the picture was a symbol of his lost past, and the search for it made sense of his life. Slowly, piece by piece, he collected a mosaic of fragmentary memories, patching the flaws created in his mind by war. Memory about the past was disappearing, but my stories about it helped him to clarify the present.

His life was arranged as a game, in which the war set terms for several figures on the playing board. A figure continued to live, to participate in the game, if there were at least two or three other ones next to it. If there were fewer of them, the figure would die because of solitude. If there were more, it would die because of the overcrowded board. And another move, which could give some sense to the present figure's state, was possible only for a few, limited to three sides of the square. Before time stopped for Soul, the figures of Beck and the commander were swept off the board, although they were the ones that marked his position on it.

Soul was slowly dying until I filled empty squares around him, giving us a chance to continue his violent game. And, in reward for this, having sensed my pre-farewell embarrassment and all I suffered at that moment, he left my life in the same manner he came into it: occasionally, and all of a sudden.

All of this going back in time tired me. I suddenly woke up with the feeling that there was someone next to me. I quickly turned on the light, but there was no one in the room. I was not able to fall asleep again: the fever of memories held me captive again.

### **The Unfinished Letter**

"Hello, my dear brother,

As I promised, I am writing this letter to you to let you know that I am okay. I do not work but receive my pension. My health is not failing me so far..."

The page with squared lines from a student's notebook was covered with child-like letters: some letters were big, some were uneven and roundish, but it seemed all of them accumulated energy and diligence in each stroke of the author's pen. I wanted to see who was the author, but forgot where I placed the envelope; and the sender's name was also absent in the end of the letter. The author of this letter was definitely relying on my memory, but... after some

guesses as to his identity, I decided that the author eventually might turn up in my life some day; this is why the letter was placed in a drawer of my desk.

A week later, my life had a rapid turn. Then every 3-4 months, I had several unexpected transformations in my life resulting in changes to addresses and places to live. This letter followed me in all the changes that occurred in my life, moving from one notebook to another until it found its rest in a folder with my personal documents, adding another puzzle for my memory.

Now, five years later, flipping through the pages of my diaries and looking at documents, I unexpectedly remembered the sender. My memory had played a cruel joke with me– I should have immediately guessed who was the author of this letter.

Feverishly scanning the page written in unsettled childish looking handwriting, I scold myself for the impassiveness with which this little message from the past was treated. I was still hoping to find an address...

...It is Sunday, November 20, 1983, Leningrad, 442nd District Clinical Military Hospital. Our ward has only a window from which we see a trolleybus stop and some part of the street's intersection.

Looking at us through the window, the peaceful bustle of Suvorovsky Prospekt, with its 3 colored traffic lights and the hissing doors of trolley buses, drives us mad with its inaccessibility for us.

Our ward looks like a pencil case with six people in it. We all ended up here after flying from one district hospital to another, we arrived in the same airplane – it was the flight from Tashkent.

Between us – six people in the ward– we have only one set of legs: Sanych– the ensign of the 345th separate parachute Bagram regiment – has the right leg, and Boris– a young lieutenant from Kunduz – has the left one.

The four other patients are not mobile. Two of us – Serega and myself from 177th regiment – have no legs. The third one – Lesha from the 180th regiment – can move only his head because everything else is encased in a plaster cast. The fourth one –Vitya from Anava – has no problems with his legs, but has big troubles with his hands and head – this is why we do not consider him as a walking man. So, this is a valuation of the “healthy” people in our ward...

Sanych and Boris, both have crutches and their hands are constantly occupied. How much can you carry in your teeth? Not much, I guess. For them it is difficult enough to hold themselves on these crutches; on top of this difficulty, Sanych's left leg is shrouded with the Ilizarov's apparatus which is also tied to his neck – this is why he hops forward with an awkwardly, and I would say, a kind of indecently protruding leg.

For us, recumbent patients, the internal news has been delivered by the passing patients. Usually, we ask the same question “How are things?” and we always get the same answer – “As usual”. As for the sources of the news from

outside of the world, we have newspapers and grumblings of baba Poly ( baba refers to an old age of women– Editor) who comes twice a day to do cleaning in our ward.

Vitya is always cooking something in his “birdhouse” (a head – Editor). He has a real hole in his head that has been fixed with a metal plate together with a piece of his own scalp. He has a weird habit – he likes to pronounce, suddenly and loudly, some shocking thoughts cooked up in his head. This is a result of his concussion. It is better to support him at such moments by asking questions on the topic, otherwise he starts to get nervous and will be running around the hospital in search for any communication until he will be caught and brought back to the ward. To be honest, Vitya, should be placed in another, more suitable for him, special place, but the reason for not signing him into a psychiatric hospital is related to the problem with his hands, or to be exact, stumps of his hands.

His wounds have already healed, but after amputation of the hands, the postoperative swelling has not yet come down. Little can be done to help this situation – only waiting and continuing all medical procedures in order to get ready for his prosthetic preparation.

Unfortunately, Vitya’s contused head does not give a break to himself and also to the whole ward.

Vitya did not dodge a grenade explosion. Ambushed somewhere in Panjshir together with his unit, he courageously covered the rest of his group by focusing the enemy’s fire to himself. This happened suddenly; and thanks to his immediate reaction, Vitya saved many lives as well as took the lives from others.

The explosion from the grenade interrupted Vitya’s solo performance. But the doukh ( a military slang for identifying enemies during the war in Afghanistan– Editor) did not kill him. Not reaching its target, the reactive grenade fell into a stone mound next to Vitay. The blast destroyed everything: Vitya’s submachine gun, his right shoulder and head; his right eye broken open from a splinter. His hands were torn off, his elbows were also gone. This flash from the explosion together with a pile of rubble stood up like a wall in front of Vitya’s eyes, and sure enough mixed all thoughts in his head that affected him for the rest of his life.

We understand him. To express or splash our emotions can be a huge relief, and each of us has the right to do so, in your own individual way. I found my way. This way is old enough, simple and cheap. It costs as much as the price of a ball pen together with a pupil’s notebook. What you have to do is to remember how to write the letters. Seems to me, this way is more effective for describing any unpleasant experiences and relieving your emotion compared to crying on somebody’s shoulder in the ward. Also by writing down events, you have a chance to interconnect and analyze these events again; this is why for me,

writing a diary became more effective. However, I can guess, that my colleagues in the ward, may have a different opinion on this matter.

My notes reflect a horror of my nightmares, my life's thoughts, and it describes events that have occurred in our ward. My notes help me. I was writing these notes at night. In the morning I re-read them and get horrified: if this is happening in my head, then what is going on in the head of Vitya?

Friday, November 25, 1983, the 442nd OKVG.

Today Sanych got a visit from his wife. I did not think that this "Rambo" of Airborne Forces can be such a clown.

Oleg Timofeevich, a deputy head of the hospital's third department, entered our ward together with the nice young woman who had tearful eyes. As soon as Sanych saw these guests, he jumped out of the bed and rushed around, searching for a chair, overturning everything in his path.

He has the Elizarov's apparatus that was fastened to him due to a complex fracture of his leg – it was the consequences of a fragmentation wound. This wound Sanych received whilst he was going to have a cigarette; he stood behind the armor of the ALV ( Amphibious Landing Vehicle – Editor) in the bush somewhere in Charikarskaya. As soon as he made the first puff, the grenade launcher fired a shot behind him. The reactive grenade rammed the cannon of the ALV and ricocheted towards his leg– it is a usual sequences in this war. But, can you imagine, wishing to save his wife's heartbreak, Sanych, whilst he was at the hospital in Bagram, wrote to her saying that he fell ill with cholera!? He warned her that his treatment would take a couple of months, and then he would be at home for a well-deserved sick leave. His poor wife became confused from a combination of her own feelings – a sadness regarding the serious illness and the joy to see her husband on his sick leave. So, this faithful woman began to make inquiries about the severity of her husband's illness; and when the picture of all consequences of her husband's disease was clearly defined, she sent a letter-instruction to the hospital in Bagram.

We can give a credit to the efficiency and sensitivity of the medical staff from the hospital in Bagram, who informed the agitated wife that her husband admitted in the Clinical Military Hospital, building number 442, on Suvorov Avenue at Leningrad.

The experienced officer's wives, who were the members of a women's committee of the division from where Sanych was sent to the "special mission", learned that he was transferred on a plane from Tashkent to Leningrad together with a group of seriously wounded soldiers. Nobody made any enquiries about the diagnosis – they believed Sanych.

In accordance with the code of faithfulness for a woman whose husband at war, his wife left her children at home and rushed to Leningrad (nowadays is St Petersburg– Editor) to save her husband from cholera. At the hospital, the

unfortunate woman was informed that her husband was placed into the third department of the hospital, which has purulent surgery patients. Now, can you imagine what she was feeling during these terrible minutes after learning where her husband was? Instead of a dying husband, she was on the way to meet a healthy looking fellow who was rushing around the ward with some kind of vulgar fracture in his leg?

It was a strange scene: two of us, legless, are in the beds, Leshya as a one huge plaster doll with a talkative head on the top; a gaunt Boris, with his transparent skin, holding the crutches, sits on a bed; an emotionally waiving Vitya with his circumcised hands; a stern face of Oleg Timofeyevich is somewhere in the background with a tearful wife of Sanych, and Sanych himself runs towards her crashing everything on the way.

The scene was so emotionally heavy, that the dearest guest suddenly fired off the most famous word which will be not allowed in books, but will be written on fences. No doubt, it is better to give free rein for your emotions with no witnesses around; otherwise your reputation will be damaged forever. But there is some time when you simply could not do in any other way.

Saturday, 7th of January, 1984, Military hospital N442.

The first week after the celebration of New Year has passed. Sanych was discharged to the hospital closest to his residence with a parole of honour to return the Ilizarov's apparatus later. He went home with his wife before the holidays. His bed was given to another guy from the local construction battalion. He is from Uzbekistani, and his name is Shiraz.

What had happen to him was unreal. During the break, Shiraz sat on the non-working sawmill and freely swung his feet until one of them accidentally touched the switch and turned the machine on. I can hardly comprehend how it occurred (perhaps somebody helped him with this machine), but the fact is – his Muslim ass got unlucky, and his rotten fate put a tremendous cross below his waist, outlining the lower part of his body. In the hospital, this veteran from a building battalion – let's to be honest – did not improve his luck: the graduate from the Baku Combined Arms Command School, Lieutenant Boris, personally got interested in Shiraz and initiated the voluntary training for him to obey commands.

The transparency of Boris' skin has already gone, leaving the yellowness and the unhealthy sparkling of his large black eyes for the most difficult days. Boris painfully goes through all that has happened to him; and Shiraz became just the lightning rod, through which the young officer's self-esteem can be released due to a lack of time to train his own personnel. But as we say, diamonds cut diamonds.

The demeanour "I do not understand Russian" of the first year of service, has changed to "I'm not doing the job, because I have been around " during

the second year of service in the construction battalion. This is why, Boris included in his educational program, tailored for Shiraz, almost everything, with a field training exception, of course; for some reasons, absence of this important component in crafting a real soldier was very upsetting for Boris. Unfortunately, after many futile drills that were applied to Shiraz, our lieutenant eventually concluded that his failure in a military service was a logic consequence.

Already on the third week of his military service in Afghanistan, Boris had a chance to rise himself in the eyes of the battalion commander. During an ambush on his BMP (Armored infantry vehicle – Editor), he “cornered” the enemies’ car “Semurg” and destroyed it with his DShK (a large-calibre machine gun Degtyarev/Shpagin– Editor). Boris honestly reported to a battalion commander on such godsend booty and fiercely defended the catch from attacks of the marauding attempts of his soldiers. He was very proud that their “suasion” to conduct a “shuravy control” (the slang originated by Afghani people with a reference to marauding extractions of all valuables from the dead bodies conducted by the Soviet soldiers) before the arrival of the battalion commander got zero result. Well, the battalion commander arrived soon.

He looked with an undisguised disgust at the Boris’ DShK, the disfigured car and the dead bodies of enemies, and with a cynical calmness ordered his bodyguards to collect all valuables: money, watches, valued personal belonging and weapons. The harvest collection was conducted in front of the angry soldiers from the Boris’ unit. Having collected rich baksheesh ( here is something extra obtained free – Editor), the battalion commander flew away and left Boris alone to face his soldiers enraged with such injustice and they completely lost faith in the young lieutenant.

But fate gave Boris a new chance. Next time, when he was escorting the column, he managed to regain a respect from the soldiers as well as from the battalion commander. Being not yet tired from a devastation and desperation and not fully fed up from what was happening around him, Boris closely followed the instructions and attentively observed the surroundings from the optics of his gun,. He was the first one who spotted a girl standing up between rocks – she was throwing back her hair with an elegant movement of her head. Boris was fascinated by her beauty, but deeply shocked when he saw a grenade launcher in her hands. Who could guess that this elegant girl is actually an Italian shooting instructor, about who, and her professional skills, he learned about a few months ago from a radio interception?

The Boris’ cry –“ What are you doing, bitch?!!” heard by everyone in the area – was not only a comment to her throwing a grenade into the column’s head machine, but also was taken as a coded command to repel an enemy’s attack. The column returned a sea of fire.

Still looking at the Italian beauty through the crosshairs of the optical sight, Boris coldly knocked her down on the first try and collected the prize that was authorised by the KGB counterintelligence unit for her capture –“Order of the Red Star”.

Unfortunately, this did not save the column from a total disaster and Boris from troubles. His IFV (an infantry fighting vehicle – Editor) ran into a land mine. How Boris managed to fly out from the hatch, I still cannot comprehend. But the fact is – out of a whole crew of his IFV, he was the only survivor, maybe to tell us about a beautiful girl from Italy who once upon a time instructed how to shoot a grenade launcher.

Saturday, 25th of February, 1984, Military hospital N442.

Last week, Boris as a convalescent patient was transformed to another department – the traumatology that was located in a different building. His bed was removed and only five people were left in our ward. Although a number of wounded soldiers from Afghanistan keep coming, nobody was placed in our ward.

Imbued with the meaning of international duty, Shiraz conscientiously performs the responsible task of bridging Vitya with the bottle shop located on the other side of the hospital’s fence. Doctors have long forgotten how he got here and how he got wounded. One day, when he returned from his routine bandaging with a mountain landscape painted with iodine on his mutilated ass, then we understood that the medical staff of our department completely lost interest in him.

It is easy to say “Love thy neighbour as thyself”. As for us, this meaning is a bit different – “Leave us alone”. Unfortunately, for Vitya, this is absolutely inconceivable. Any normal person will be tired being for a while in the crowd, but not Vitya. Vitya cannot live without people. Demonstrating an astonishing searching activity as well as aggressiveness, he constantly looks for troubles. At war, this kind of behaviour gave him opportunity to do a high-quality “hunting” of enemies. Here, at the hospital, he already got us with his weirdness, and quite often he took his interest for communication outside of the hospital, to the local drunkards, sometimes forgetting who he is and where he is. His brain flames like a fire and finding the answer to the question “why he lives”, no longer bothered him.

In such situations, Vitya can do any sort of stupidity driven by a conflict between his protesting inner consciousness and raging like a storm his armless body’s energy. When he disappears for a long time, we send Shiraz to find him.

Sergei and I were taken a couple times to the Bestuzhevskaya street, where a prosthetic plant is located, to try out artificial legs. We have already outlived the first shock after looking at our skin-denture prostheses. When you see the ugly design of twisted metal bands, rough leather and strapped laces, then you realize what you really lost. The hope that somebody can help you is dying; and, whilst it sounds cynical, the main person whose interests must be a main priority, now is

myself. This is why in such days I love to take trips to the city, this is the only way for me to get distracted. The view of the city from the bus window is very soothing.

Like all ill people, we think that the secret to solve our problems is contained in our recovery. This illusion is like a window glass: through the glass we can see the world, but this glass is also a prison wall that separates us from this world...

Lesha decided to learn how to play the guitar. The guitar was brought to him by the boys from his childhood street – Ligovka Court. Before the Soviet Army Day celebration, as a kind of honouring of this day, his left leg and right arm received a freedom from the plaster; only the rigid fix was left on the right leg; the left arm, as well as the whole chest, again was dressed in a plaster shirt. Now Lesha can sit.

Lesha celebrated the Soviet Army Day in his new milky-white armor, which we instantly painted and decorated with wishes, signatures and different army awards. The “Order of Survival” was presented personally by Vitya. He was trying so hard to embed a jubilee ruble cut in half into the wet plaster that we became seriously concerned that he could harm the weak breast of Lesha.

Lesha has three bullets in his chest in the collarbone wounds. He broke his legs when he fell into a mountain stream. His story is very sad..

Actually, like each of us have a sad story.

Being the senior in the group, Sergeant Lesha decided to take his subordinates to the village to do the New Year’s baksheesh hunting. They expropriated a lot, but before leaving this village the “people’s avengers” fiercely attacked them. Lesha was defending himself to the last bullet, but eventually lost his consciousness and fell down into a fast stream of the mountain river. Downstream, he was found by our soldiers, who were smart enough to figure out, if the New Year’s presents – condoms, blocks of cigarettes – were floating in the river, then soon Father Christmas should appear...and he did. The temperature of cold water helped him not to bleed to death, and therefore a tiny bit of his life was left in this metal-stuffed body. His parents very often visit him and with each new day a taste for life is getting stronger in his body with every movement.

My next bunk neighbour is Serega who has very bad habits: he smokes and keeps silence a lot. His lazy disdain and melancholic displeasure is manifested in a loosely concealed desire to muck up.. In short, his stubbornness and ambition won over, a senior nurse from our department who relaxed the smoking ban and, herself, brought him a personal ashtray. Serega was born in Alma-Ata. He lost two legs from a mine explosion. After heavy rains, a part of minefields, – already forgotten and not marked on any map, – together with landslide, slipped down from the hill. When Serega received the order to change the position of his post, he bravely walked on a slope- he was confident that there are no mines and never was – but his bravery left him after 15 steps. His partner was blown up into pieces

when he was trying to drag Serega away from the mine, and himself accidentally stepped on another mine. The pieces of his partner's body were thrown at Serega and covered him completely. Now, Serega is covered from the top to the toes with bandages and plaster; he looks like a battered smoking four-engine plane that has one engine left with a mission to get somewhere.

A lack of opportunity to move independently invites boredom and the atmosphere of hopelessness that bring an ignorance and limited interest about our tomorrow. We wake up in the same room, the same window looms in our eyes, irritating us like the cloak of a matador. We are trapped in the cage of the present. There is no need to hurry – we have enough time: we have today and tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow...

Everydayness is the curtain that hides us from the reality of our situation. We became slaves of our own weaknesses.

We quickly accumulate weariness from each other. We are impregnated with the passivity that has long become our usual state of mind; and this is more dangerous compared to the damage from Serega's cigarettes or Vitya's craziness. All of this looks like a terrible, unpleasant and insidious sickness. Resulting from our current situation, the causes of this disease are easy to determine. We ourselves understand very well: this disease is nothing but a consequence of our uncertainty and a fear of what will be tomorrow.

Friday, July 27, 1984, the military hospital N442.

Tomorrow I will go home. Demobee !!! I tried to write about today, but I could not put down a single word. Only after a few painful hours the stream of something rude poured out from me. The details of our relationship in recent times are too nasty and humiliating.

We got tired of each other. It started before we were transferred to the fourth department of traumatology.

I am sick of Vitya's conversations and his attempts to share each of his "little happiness" with everyone. I have changed my perception of life and now every day for me is only a day with a set of tasks. I do not take into my life anything superfluous, so in the future, I do not have to free myself from it.

Vitya is openly reposed to himself whilst we, Serega and I, knocked down our stumps to the blood, trying to overcome the first obstacle – the eighteen steps that separate the first floor of the hospital from the sidewalk. New boys from Afghan are constantly arriving at the hospital. From our ward, only Vitya and Lesha remain in the hospital.

After the treatment, Borya was cured and recognized as fit for drill. He got a vacation and went to his mum to gain strength. Due to skin problems, Serega was admitted to the day care hospital at the prosthetic plant. He had constant and persistent rubbing and irritation of his skin.

Lesha already moves independently in the hospital. I think, only his plaster shirt that still covers his arm and chest, keeps him from jumping over the fence. Our inscriptions on his plaster shirt have almost worn off. Only the chopped ruble from Vitya that was pasted with a super-glue taken from “Elektrosila” (a well-established heavy machinery plant during the Soviet era – Editor), shines as before. This piece of iron cannot be torn off from the Lesha’s plaster dress– it is forever there.

Shiraz left for the demobilization, leaving Vitya on his own with his problems. The circumstances forced Vitya to take the initiative and do something by himself; but we do not have enough patience to correct what he tries to do on his own. All they do is to point out his own mistakes to him, forgetting about Vitya’s victories and merits in the past. Vitya expects from us what he used to receive from Shiraz, who looked after him. But we know all Vitya’s wicked tricks, and try to reproduce them by ourselves, according to the saying “fight fire with fire”. He put on weight, almost every day got drunk before a night time; and constantly loses his artificial eye. Everyone got tired from his crazy snaps: the hospital’s deputy, the chief surgeon and ourselves. Vitya, shamelessly, ignores the challenges dealing with the fitting of a new prostheses. I understand him: indeed, two plastic hooks in black gloves are not a proper replacement for hands, as well as a set of hooks for carrying bags and holding a shovel is not a reason to be prided even for an ordinary man, not to mention a man like Vitya.

We are saying good bye to each other. Tomorrow, early in the morning, I have a flight. We exchanged addresses with Lesha and Serega. When I was writing my address into Vitya’s notebook, I said to him:” I do not take your address on purpose – you will write to me first, then I will reply to your letter. No letter to me - do not expect a letter from me”. We embraced each other. Vitya patted me on the back with his stumps, pressing his body against me. I shook his already shredded right stump.

I looked at the last page of my diary, and having read only a part of the daily records, it seems to me, that the filth accumulated in me over the years I had now lost. Why was I writing then in such a way? Was this presumptuous attempt of squeezing the most disgusting thoughts and feelings from oneself, an attempt to get rid of them forever? The endeavour of keeping up dairy records was, definitely, a desire to hide from depression.

I deceived myself, I wasted my energy. The diary pulled the most unpleasant thoughts and feelings from the depths of my soul. The diary is a mirror in which I saw myself. But, unlike a real mirror, it reflected my past and it was painful. I closed the diary...

I took the letter to check the address, which, I knew, could not be there. Covered with large round letters, the letter made me think and I realized that in

thirty years I had repeated the same mistakes as done by myself in my twenties - I involuntarily acted in similar manner when life impressed me and when I faced any physical danger.

And yet, when I received this letter, I was not able to deal with the situation on time. I could not answer the letter. But I had no right not to do so. As for the new values in my life, well, where did I get them?

I imagined how Vitya, holding the handle in his mouth, displays neat, childlike round letters. How he waits for my answer and, finds any excuse for my silence. Now, my guilty conscience is a tax that I have to pay for trying to live free from the unfulfilled promises. But I want to be free and clean before my conscience. Compared to making mistakes and reiterate them, doing nothing and having remorse is much easier.

## **VLADIMIR OSIPENKO**

Osipenko, Vladimir Vasilievich was born on May 4, 1956 in Zhitomir. He graduated from the Suvorov Military School in Kiev, the Ryazan Airborne School, and the Military Academy named after Frunze. During 25 years of service in the Airborne Forces, he made his way from a commander of the reconnaissance platoon to the Deputy commander of the division. He fought in Afghanistan; participated in peacekeeping operations in the Trans-Caucasia and Trans-Dniester areas, and the republics of the former Yugoslavia. For his military service, he was awarded many distinguished military orders and medals from the government of the USSR, (later – the Russian government) as well as from the UN. Currently, being the Colonel of the reserve, Osipenko Vladimir Vasilievich lives and works in Moscow. He is a member of the Writers' Union of Russia.

### **Samy**

*All of us are fatalists when it comes to others.*

*Natalie Clifford Barney*

For many years, I have been carrying a heavy stone weighing upon my heart. Nobody reproaches me, but self-judgment is often merciless compared to a civic court. It is a common mistake to think that we have a power over our fate, or over someone else's destiny particularly...

At the central outpost in Rustam Kalay, where our battalion was located, a soldier Sergeant Samenenko carried out his military service. He was a responsible, conscientious, neat chap from Eastern Ukraine. For his neatness, officers from headquarter appointed him to bring our food from a kitchen, to slice our bread, to open canned goods, and to make some tea. He was doing this job for several months. He could enter our headquarters at any time, and we were openly talking in his presence without hiding anything. He even was in charge of our personal goods that we got from a small military-run shop. Of course, he was regularly checked for cleanliness and also his secrecy. For several times, he gave us not only food, but finger food to accompany our vodka, and he proved his trustworthiness to us. So, he was a trusted person.

He was excused from guard duties, but he knew his combat responsibilities and attended classes and training in the mountains. He was not looking for a bravery medal nor was he playing chicken. An absolutely normal and reliable soldier named Semyon, or Samy, as his fellow soldiers and officers from the Communication battalion called him. We thought that it was his real mane. Newcomers also assumed the same. Anyway, Samy had a cheerful personality : when he entered a room, he cheered up everyone. The battalion commander often met him with one humoristic line citing the famous Rosenbaum's: "Semyon, lets put it under her..." I do not remember that Samy had ever been scolded.

However, one day something incredible happened – Semyon got drunk! He was staggering through our outpost answering "Fuck you all" to any question or comment. It was a real scene!

Occasionally, from time to time, we had some soldiers who got drunk and tough rules were applied on the spot. Those who were caught for heavy drinking, received a hard but easily understanding treatment to make sure that this misbehavior will be wiped out not only in a soldier-in trouble, but also in others who considered to do it. The inventive pack of treatment included a heavy rack-sack packed up with stones, marching up and down in the mountains and icy spring water. All of this activity would definitely ruin the appetite to misbehave again. Knowing consequences, every soldier accepted the punishment without complains. Perhaps, also Samy has prepared himself for the hard treatment. I cannot recall to whom this idea came first, but officers decided to punish him according to the army statute: arrest – sending him to the headquarter 's army prison, and detained him in guba (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor).

– He is a good chap, he will get his treatment tomorrow and everything will be back to normal, – Viktor Lazarenko, Chief Technical Assistant, said.

– There is no sense to take him to Kabul, will arrest him here, let him sit for a week – he will get wiser, – Company Commander suggested.

– This is a not good decision, what other soldiers will say? He was trusted more than others, so his punishment should be more severe. And forget about cages, it will not happen under my rule, – Battalion Political Officer gave his point of view.

– You are correct. A whole battalion is watching what we are going to do, including officers, who want to know how we will deal with the soldier-confidante. By the way, comrade Captain, you also should deal with the sergeant who brewed this alcohol. Tell him, If he wants to put a home brew on our table, he should hide it better from soldiers.

– He hides from others, but this is our Samy...

– To get rid of this home brew, let Samy sleep it off. Tomorrow, in front of the battalion, I will arrest him and with a “yellow ticket” will send him to a headquarters’ Glasshouse.

This is how Battalion Commander summed up decisions and thus ended our discussion.

The next day I saw Samy was stitching the authorized tag of imprisonment to his uniform, without which he might not be accepted to the headquarter prison located in Kabul. He was guiltily hiding his eyes, avoiding looking at anyone. His drooping shoulders, depressing posture – all was saying: “I am guilty, it is better to punish me here. Let me do marching through the mountains, but do not disgrace me – I am no worse than others!” My heart sank. I had never seen such deep and sincere repentant soldier.

– Are you getting ready?

– Yes, Sir!

He looked up and I saw in his eyes, a fear as if he was sentenced to death. I wanted to crack a meaningful joke about cleaning in the headquarter prison, but restrained myself, turned and walked away. After all, he should talk to Battalion Commander, who can turn back his fate, because Battalion Commander knew – Samy might be an idiot, but not a scoundrel. Yes, Battalion Commander, Gennady Ocheretyany, knew it as well, but some small military-bureaucratic machine began to twirl, and no one could stop it.

Who took Samy to the headquarter prison, I do not remember. A week later I was again talking to him. He looked like a beaten dog, an emaciated and haggard soldier who stood next to his dear APC (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) and did not want to leave it for a single moment, although there was a lot of time before signing off from the army...no need to show off ...

I do not know what kind of slip up happened among officers-in-charge, but a regimental ceremony that nominated awards for our officers and soldiers, has been postponed. Senior Lieutenant S., whose name was on the list of the ceremony, suggested:

– Comrade Major, due to the spare time in this moment, allow me to proceed with the urgent submission of two soldiers’ characteristics to the Communist Party Committee that is located at the nearest outpost. (Before to be considered for Communist Party membership, the candidates have to submit their characteristics. – Editor).

– Why you did submit them before?

– Nobody told me to do so. Since the ceremony has been postponed for two hours, I will be back in thirty minutes! With your permission, lunch could be taken then too..

– Okay, proceed. But do not be late...

– Could I go too? – Samy asked.

I noticed how unbearably it was for him to be here, not far from the place of his punishment, and the civilian “could “ in his question also unpleasantly scratched my ear. All of this was evident that the guy was not himself. Instead of answering, I simply waved him off with my hand. This outpost was within the suburbia line of a town, with a bitumen road of ten minutes driving each way. Although the road is very old, the day is clear. What could happen? Let him blow the cobwebs...

But a war is a war and anything could happen... and the next thing that did happen was an ambush... Classic and contemporary themes of the unexpected.

In the beginning of our trip we drove impressively in style. We had the mood of celebration because it was not every day that Orders-for-Bravery were handed out! Our hands were off the weapons. The radio communication was not on. A gun fired suddenly from some cliffs overhanging above the road. Everyone who was sitting on the APC, or “the armor “, dropped down into the hatches, frantically grabbing their weapons and checking themselves for wounds. Speeding fast, the APC missed a turn, behind which a man with a grenade launcher was kneeling. But nobody could fire at him – everyone was inside of the APC!

The bloodcurdling yells simultaneously came out from both mouths – the driver and the commander, as soon as they caught a figure of dushara (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), an Afghan’s fighter, targeting at them at a close range. Seemingly moving in a slow motion, everything looked unreal. In the oncoming direction, local vehicles known as burbahayki (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) with natives, were approaching the APC, on both sides of the road heavily loaded donkeys were being dragged by their owners.

The gunner operator slowly turned the turret around. Samy, who did not even have a weapon, finally understood what his commander had yelled, turned the radio on. The dushara’s ’ shot came exactly in the back of winch hatch. Cumulative jet pierces went through the entire APC, including its right engine. On the way, it cut off both hands of Samy. The driver, shell-shocked by a grenade explosion, has lost the ACP control. The machine rolled into a roadside ditch and stopped.

Whilst a wounded dushara was twisting on the road, another two men popped out from behind green bushes. Both of them have the launchers and grenades in barrels! Now they definitely will try for a direct fire to burn the staggered ACP! Samy spotted them from his side and compressing his own pain, screamed:

– Dusharas!... you have dusharas on the right!!! – and pointed with remains of his hands from which blood unstopably gushed.

His gesture was understood by the commander and the gabber, thanks to the re-activated radio communication. The gunner turned the turret and with a very long salvo of coaxial machine gun, both dusharas were literally split apart. After that, he began firing from a heavy machine gun, towards the green bushes from which dusharas popped out. Blanked by this fire, the commander stuck out his head and assessed the situation.

– Get ready for the fight!!! Let's fire at everything that moves on the hill!!! Do-o-o-o it!!!

From this shouted voice, a mechanic came to his own senses. He switched off the right engine and started the left. Roaring with only one engine, the machine jumped and reversing, crawled backwards on the road.

– Turn backwards, god damn... To the regiment !!! – the commander shouted to the mechanic and only then he understood that Samy had pointed at the mujahedeen, not with his hands but what was hanging on to his stumps in a jacket.

He jumped over the turret, and without stopping he grabbed a tourniquet hooked to a butt of his gun. White-faced, with eyes filled with superhuman pain, Samy was sitting in a puddle of his own blood.

– Samy, how can it be?! Let me twist it... Hold on, comrade... Give me more torniquet! Faster, god damn!!! But look around too, for god's sake! I need promidol (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor)... who has it?! Go, mechanic, run them over, mother-fuckers!

How the driver managed to start the ACP with one engine, it was a mystery, but carts of natives were running away from our wheels.

At last we reached our regiment, our medical unit... At the checkpoint we came face-to-face with our hurriedly departing on alert subdivision – on-duty. Samy was losing consciousness. During the way back he didn't make any noise. Carried to the medical unit, he was handed to the doctors. They already were running to him from everywhere with a sound of jingling medals on their chests. The driver was the last one who came to the medical unit. He awkwardly held close to his uniform the rest of Samy's hands. He, like everyone at war, entirely trusted doctors. Although doctors were close to God, they could not perform miracles every day. The boy's life was rescued, he had surgery, the blood was transfused in time. Doctors did their best: he was

stitched, but not his hands, unfortunately! After this, Samy was at a military hospital for some time, then he was evacuated back home to the Soviet Union where he finally discharged from the army.

I remember how for a long time we had been washing off his blood from APC (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor). In that evening, sitting in our headquarters, we were overwhelmed by what had happened. With no apparent reason we shouted at a new soldier, who brought us dinner, as if he was the one to blame. Everyone wanted to see Sam’s funny face, and the Battalion Commander would sing his usual line from a Rosenbaum’ song, and all of us, rubbing our hands, could gather together for a dinner.. Why everything is different?!

I have not seen Semenenko again. He had been writing to the Battalion Commander from his hospital, and then his wife has sent his regards... After his first letter, we got blatantly drunk with Gennady Vasilyevich, but it didn’t help...

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At the beginning of the 90s, the Battalion Commander sent me a letter: “Sam feels very bad, help if you can”. At that time of total depression, I was in-charge of a regiment located in Belarus. I was able to organize and send several parcels with a uniform, buckwheat and cans of preserved stew to the Donbas, until one of these returned with the inscription “not residing”...

Often I catch myself thinking, what if... When I am sober, I understand that nobody knows what could happen if we would do things differently but this “if” keeps coming back again and again... bitch.

### **International assistance**

*Nothing comes so easy for us and, at the same time,  
so expensive as our own... stupidity.*

*NN*

The idea about international assistance in Afghanistan was seriously embedded in our brains.

I have been there for six months already. I had seen various scenes and had done different things, but I would not call it “assistance”, when urgently I was ordered to come to the regiment for some meeting.

Having no guilt, I went there with an easy heart, even peaceful, I would say, and took notice of all things along the way.

For a short break we stopped in a kishlak (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor). A little girl, around eight years old, in a dress and colorful panties was

forming a kind of pancake from a mixture of cow shit and straw, and stacking them on the sunny side of a duval (see “ Terminology and Glossary”– Editor). A toddler, next to her, was crawling towards a small spring that was, in fact, sewerage collected from a human waste in the yard. The girl fetched some water with her hand from this ditch and gave it to the kid for drinking from her palms. I almost puked.

I turned my back. In this direction, I spotted a Russian truck ZIL-130 that was firmly stuck in the green fields. If “Ford” was there, I could not care less, but in this situation, it was like meeting a relative. The truck was full of stones and its owner – a native Afghani of uncertain age – was running around the truck, clapping on his butt in desperation. In my mind I even felt sorry for this poor fellow, but the road was open, and two armored troop carriers-70 began moving forward.

After spending four hours in the regiment, I was coming back the same way. Near the same kishlak, I saw that this ZIL-130 was still in the same place, only stones were unloaded. I do not know what had possessed me, perhaps, an opportunity to provide international assistance, but I decided to get involved and rescue this ZIL.

The first of the ATAs (see “ Terminology and Glossary”– Editor), moved into the field and unexpectedly drowned into dense mud to its belly. All eight wheels scattered black swills, but it was pointless – the vehicle was being sucked into the mud more deeply. This was the situation that we apparently called “to be in deep shit”.

A crowd started gathering together around us. Mainly it was the little ones who came from all nearby places. Of course, this was a free entertainment! Trying to keep a cool face, I quietly ordered to my driver to unwind the winch, and we easily pulled out the ZIL from the mud. The ”native” with his constantly repeated “tashakur” (see “ Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) was very happy, but, seems to me, wanted to disappear without payment to us. I said to him something like “you won’t get away with only tashakur”, and stopped him.

Although we had rescued the ZIL, our ATA is now bogged. I was frantically trying to estimate our odds of escaping from this trap. Strengthened with the second ATA on solid soil, and the help of two winches, I attempted to release my first ATA from the mud. The engines roared, the winches tried in vain, but... the second ATA also slipped into the swamp slowly!

There was nothing to tie up to, not a tree, neither a building! The first ATA apparently sat down deeply in the muddy field. For a half an hour we were trying to pull this ATA with a help of the second ATA but only got the second ATA sucked into the muddy field as well and have torn apart both winches and two cables.

Covered with the dirt and boiling with anger, we noted that our entertainment crowd has gradually changed. A lot of bearded men were there giving us not really friendly looks. Guns were noticeable under loose Afghani's tunics. There was only an hour left before the twilight. If we will stay here – they will shoot us down. If we will leave without the ATAs – they will plunder them first and then burn them. A bloody international help, damn it!

Ordering everyone to be alert, I jumped into the ZIL and I directed the Afghani where to drive. Coming to the nearest outpost, I collected cables and another two ATAs and returned to the scene.

It was getting dark. The Afghani's ring around us was getting smaller and denser. Our dear ATAs are powerful, passable, but... too light. They went into a skid. We decided to pull them again but the cable burst into pieces again. The soldiers' faces became gloomy and I became so angry that I decided to take it out on "natives":

– Why are you looking for? We got into this mess because of your idiot. Let's all pull the wire!

I was telling them this just to blow off steam, with no hope. But what do you think? One of them dragged over a hank of wire which was so solid, with its thickness of a little finger! Five times I twisted around the hook of our second-in-trouble ATA and we all pulled. The poor ATA rose out of the mud. Thank God! Soldiers were so happy! Quickly we fastened the rest of the wire to three

ATAs, and in one attempt pulled together. With a loud sound "sh-sh-viak!", the swamp spat out its prey.

After disconnecting our equipment, we looked at each other and began to laugh. When we finally stopped laughing, we noticed that "the natives" disappeared into the twilight. There was only one white-bearded "native" left, the one who had brought the wire. He was a teacher at the local school and he decently spoke Russian. So I grabbed a few boxes with lunches and came to him to say "thanks". He refused to accept my baksheesh (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor), but shook my hands with a great pleasure. He was talking something about an international help. And I, who had already thousands of times damned this international help, unexpectedly concluded for myself that I had done the right thing.

## NIKOLAY RUBAN

Ruban, Nikolai Yurievich was born in 1961, in Uzbekistan. After the graduation from the Ryazan Airborne School and the Military Academy of Frunze, he was ordered to serve in Afghanistan. Currently, he is Lieutenant Colonel in the army reserve and lives in Moscow.

### The Soldier's Grey Hair

Tashkent, the year of 1985. The cargo compartment hatch of a military aircraft IL-76 is wide open. The ex-sergeant, dembel (see "Terminology and Glossary – Editor") Dimon Zamyatin was marching on the concrete of the Tuzel airfield runway; his boots play a metallic sound like clattering against a duralumin frame. He is very popular, a kind of hero for mates to follow, about whom can be said "the cock of the walk", especially if you noticed the Medal for Bravery on his uniform. Wearing a blue beret and rusty tan, he holds a little suitcase packed with cheap souvenirs for the family. There is also his dembel photo album (a compulsory attribute for a soldier after army service–Editor). His well-kept fancy forelock of grey hair stuck out from his beret and told us as much about the owner as the medal and the stripe for being wounded on his chest.

When his mother spotted this grey hair, she began shaking with a silent cry. Trying to comfort her, Dimon was softly stroking his mother's shuddering back: "Come on, do not cry, I am here! I am back home, alive and healthy."

This evening, in the village, Dimon transformed himself into a vivid image of the famous Tyorkin (a fictional hero – the soldier of the Great Patriotic War from the famous poem "The Book about the Fighter" by Alexander Tvardovsky – Editor).

But nowadays, unlike Tyorkin, Dimon did not smoke "Kazbek", he preferred Bulgarian "BT". Otherwise, it was almost the identical conversation that you can find in the Tvardovskiy's "Tyorkin": "– How was it? – On day-to-day. – Were you scared? – Sometimes I was. – Did you often rush to attack? – Sometimes I did..." When the conversation led to his grey hair, he frowned and spoke through clenched teeth: "There was just one event..." And the listeners respectfully sighed; nobody dared to stir his wounded soul.

This is how it happened...

When Dimon finished his military training, he was assigned to Afghan, to a landing-assault force that was located in Jalabad. Carrying a transmitter on his shoulders, he was running up and down to the mountains for half a year. He had a tough life, but got used to the heat and frost. His guardian angel kept him away from bullets, but did not save him from hepatitis. Nobody was surprised: in the

past, hepatitis in Afghan had knocked down two armies: the army of Alexander the Great and the English one.

From the hospital, Dimon returned skinny and barely alive; to fully recover he needed occupational therapy. No need to say that around the hospital there was enough work, such as digging countless trenches, for instance. The battalion commander looked at this goner and sent him to the radio retransmission station in a hope that Dimon, who was not able to carry any equipment after occupational therapy, will get a good chance to accumulate some fat under his belly and shape himself back to a human appearance. The retransmission station was situated on top of the mountain, at the foot of which the transmission brigade was stationed.

For a good half a day, Dimon was walking to the station on a snake-like road alongside the rocky walls. He stopped for a break more than one hundred times, gasping and clearly understanding that to reach this damn station is beyond his strength, and the damn battalion commander send him there just to get rid of him. But eventually he got there, and he found a real paradise for himself.

The station personnel of seven people was led by the sergeant Lyoha Kedrov, a solid and thrifty Siberian man. He was strict in discipline, but he did not use his fists and did not allow anybody to do it. There was plenty of food and they ate as much as they wished. The food was prepared by soldiers, or to be exact, it was the one – Uzbekistani-born Ravshan Mirzoyev who did the cooking, while the others only peeled potatoes and washed the dishes. There was no drill. Nobody marched. After the duty at the station or outpost, you could sleep or do whatever you wanted. Ravshan has a great talent for cooking. From ordinary standard supply, he managed to create such delicacies and yummy dishes. On top of this, assiduous Lyoha made the tasty home-brewed beer for holidays, not too much, but enough for everyone. Once a week, the first sergeant delivered supplies on a donkey, called Vaska. The first sergeant was the only superior who soldiers see. So, everything was as supposed to be in a soldier's paradise.

Does a soldier need more than mentioned above, if he wants to be happy in a soldier's paradise? Maybe, just a touch of a sincere devotion or personal affection. And they were given all of these by the shaggy dog named Padzhak, the common pet who lived with them. Padzhak loved all soldiers with no exceptions.

Being sincerely generous, he always hid bones after lunch under their pillows. Soldiers scolded Padzhak for it, but not seriously, as they knew that he wanted to please them.

Padzhak served not because of fear, but according to his conscience. That is why the sentries often slept on their duty: they knew well that Padzhak will not miss any stranger. And when Sanya Bashylov received a letter from his fiancée, well, you know what kind of letter it was... So Padzhak came up to petrified

Sanya, put his head on Sanya's knees and was sitting there all evening long, not moving a step from Sanya. And he had not let Sanya step anywhere. When he tried to move a little, Padzhak put his paw on him: "Sit!" Eventually Sanya started to beg: "I want just to piss, I swear!" Padzhak accompanied him to the toilet back and forth and spent all night under his bed. Clearly, this dog was the best friend for soldiers; and there was a paradise not only for soldiers, but also for him among these mountains.

As for the toilet, the soldiers had to do "bombing" from the edge of the rock, because it was impossible to dig a hole there. They placed themselves on a narrow path, crouching and moving their asses out towards the precipice, and start their bombing. Meantime, they held a climbing carbine, which was hammered into a rock fissure, to prevent them falling down from the cliff.

It was all right as they became used to it, although at first it was weird to hear the wail of night wind blowing from the rocks into their asses. Sergeant Lyoha demanded that soldiers should go to a poop only as a pair: while the first one did "bombing", the second one should be on guard, because anything might happen.

One night Dimon went off duty and wanted to do "bombing" before going to bed. Who could he ask to be on the watch? Sanya was on his post at the station, Gogy was on his guard duty. To wake someone? This was out of question.

Well hoping for the best, Dimon put his submachine gun together with the pyramid of others, and went to do business on his own. Not a big deal! As the saying says "If God helps, nobody can harm". He placed himself over the precipice as usual, and holding on to the climbing carbine, he started his business. Icy wind was blowing as hard as if it wanted to blow off all the stars from the sky. And it was wailing in the rocks as if a witch was giving the birth, even neighboring jackals were answering to her.

Having been woken up by Dimon's horrified screams, soldiers jumped out of their beds as if they were tossed up by an unknown force. Indeed, there was not simple fear in that scream, but the chilling horror and unbearable anguish. The soldiers snatched their submachine guns and barefoot rushed outside, wearing only underpants. Suddenly they spotted rushing headlong towards them Padzhak with his tail between his legs. He whisked into the house and hid under a bed. In a second after him, Dimon emerged in their view. The rage distorted features on his face, his hand was holding a cobble; and Dimon himself was running towards them with lowered pants and he was shouting without stopping:

– Bitch, bitch, bitch!!! I'll kill you, fuuck!!!

It turned out that clever Padzhak decided to guard Dimon just to be sure of safety. He was used to seeing the soldiers going there in pairs, and made up his mind to take the initiative incognito. He followed Dimon, stepping on a stony path with no noise. Then he sat in the darkness not disclosing his presence,

protecting Dimon from any misfortune. When in the most responsible moment of Dimon's "bombing", Padzhak decided to cheer up Dimon as if he was tried to say: "Don't be afraid, my friend, I'm here, next to you!" and under the light of the moon licked Dimon's shiny ass!

Next morning, shaving his whiskers in front of the mirror, Dimon noticed that his cossack forelock had gone grey. Was it dirty with the lime from rocks? Dimon ruffled his forelock with the wet palm, however, this grey colour could not be shaken off.

## **RAVIL BIKBAEV**

Bikbaev, Ravil Nagimovich was born in 1961 in Astrakhan. During 1980-1982, he served in the 56th Airborne Assault Brigade, located in Afghanistan, Paktia Province, Gardez. Bikbaev Ravil Nagimovich was awarded the medal "For Battle Merit". Currently he works as a lawyer. He is a member of the Writers' Union of Russia.

### **My Dear!**

Who has not heard one of those tearful army stories about soldiers who, after receiving news about betrayal of their loved ones, shoot themselves, unlawfully left the army or fell into depression? In the Soviet army, there was a sacred tradition of sending a letter with an enclosed picture of an imprinted soldier's boot with the pathetic patriotic text: "If not for this boot, you would have been raped by the foreign soldier" to the girls who betrayed loyalties and expectations.

As for me, I do not blame the girls. A well known Russian saying stated: "Do not judge and you will be not judged". I know a number of situations when a girl who waited for years for her beloved soldier, in the end got the proposition "to just be friends". Sometimes she was even introduced to a wife of her ex- boyfriend. I think, there is no need to blame one side because both parties can be equally responsible for the breakdown of a relationship. But the story I want to tell you, will not be a classical unhappy scenario of a separation, a fatal betrayal, a broken heart or an inevitable retribution... It will be a kind of different love story...

...Sitting at a clay pit, we keep counting the bricks over and over again without any hope. You see, our daily task was to make five hundred bricks, but so far we managed only a hundred, and the day was half gone, already after noon.

– I wish, I could go sooner to hospital for my surgery. I am so fed up of making these bricks! – Vitek lit his cigarette, – It is a joke! Back home, if you will say that paratroopers were making bricks for building houses, nobody will believe you. Everyone will think that you served in an engineering battalion, not paratroopers.

– “Two soldiers from engineering will replace any excavator’s digging”, – I rhymed one of the self-made army slogans and sat down on a molding box. – I bet, at home we will tell that all day long we were fighting in close range, and when we had breaks, we were piling hundreds of mujahedeens’ bodies on top of each other.

– Do not jump in front of horses! Wait till you will get home, – tanned by clay dust, Forelock (the Ukrainian) sarcastically commented and climbed out from the pit with a heavily sweaty face, – hold on to the time, when you will be at home and you will figure out what to lie.

... January 1980. Our brigade has been brought into Afghanistan and left at this bare clay plateau, so-called airdrome, the closest one to Kunduz. In this place we are supposed to serve the army, not how we wanted, but how we were told. We were not only paratroopers during combat operations, but also the soldiers for the Building Construction Army Forces between these combat operations. How we managed to survive in such bare and empty conditions and, at the same time, to fight, is a special topic for another story.

All textbooks underline the reputation of paratroopers as a strong military force, namely: if paratroopers got involved into a military situation, it does not matter how hopeless this situation will be, eventually, they became winners. This quality has been tested in our current situation. Being completely surrounded, without any drop of help, we learned how to make bricks from dirt, how to build houses with these bricks, how to steal wood necessary for a construction, and how to create the cozy clay town from literally a bare space of nothing.

The construction was such a tedious, dirty and monotonous job that we deeply and passionately hated. We were eager for any combat operations not because we wanted to show off our courage or bravery, but simply to break up this monotonous boredom of laboring works from which we, anyway, often slacked off.

Besides, during combat operations it was always possible to get, or more precisely to grab from civilians, fresh food or something nice and tasty. The taste of the daily portion of porridge given to us, was stuck in our throat.

– Well! F... this building! – Vitek spitted out his half-smoked cigarette and unenthusiastically suggested, – How about we make at least fifty bricks more before lunch?

There was no desire to continue to do the work and plus the F-word immediately directed us to a new theme of our conversation.

– Well, Vitek, whilst your army superiors put you in different poses of slavery here, someone at home put your wife in the right position, – we started a favorite topic of soldiers’ entertainment and began to tease our mate.

I want to tell you that soldiers’ talk about women, in particular, and love, in general, were rather shallow. But to call them dirty-mouthed will also not be correct. Perhaps, a use of medical terms will be more appropriate, but I do not know which ones. You see, in the army, as in no other place, males do lie so much about women in their stories. (Well, maybe a similar sort of fantasy you can listen to on fishing and hunting tours). So, if to take into a consideration that many of us had not lost virginity in a sexual sense yet, then it will be understandable, why we lied. We dreamt up and clumsily fantasized about women and love. It was a paradox of war: we could kill a life, but we did not know how to create a new one.

– Here we go again! – Vitek weakly waved his hand.

Married soldiers amongst the conscripts were the minority and they were constantly teased by their fellow soldiers. No single day could pass without teasing these mates, in one form or another, on a subject of marital fidelity of their second half. Even a helmet of a married soldier could be drilled for the horns, because according to the Russian proverb, they will grow after a wife committed adultery.

But Vitek was the real paratrooper: he never gave into any difficulties. Very quickly he learn a peculiar way how to defeat the teasers. Taking out from his pocket the photo of his wife, dressed in a bathing suit, he usually was saying:” If you, my dear friend, cannot do without a woman, you can jerk yourself. This photo will help you”.

Immediately, the dirty mouths did shut up... until the next time.

Vitek received regularly letters from his wife, but what was written in them he did not share with us.

At the time of my story, I remember well, Vitek’s famous counter attack for halting teasers did not occur on this occasion, because a brigade headquarter messenger rushed to us and interrupted with news.

– Vitek! You are summoned up to the quarters, – after delivering this order, the messenger ran away.

Being called to the brigade headquarters meant only one thing – a soldier was in trouble. Immediately Vitek recalled how recently a staff officer caught him with a bottle of vodka and demanded he surrender the bottle. Vitek vividly recalled how he sent this officer very far and deep in the area of a female reproductive organ driven by an unstoppable desire to get more vodka. Of

course, after this swearing, Vitek took off without identifying himself, but who knows... maybe his name was identified?

– So he found me, bastard, – Vitek started swearing, – now he will eat my brains alive....

We deeply sympathized with him; no funny comments were dropped from our tongues. So, heavy-heartedly Vitek dragged his feet down to the headquarters.

In no time, Vitek returned from the headquarters, smiling and radiating with joy.

– Guess what ? –Vitek was glowing as a litre of vodka had been presented to him, – if you guess, I will shout you booze.

– A medal for the last combat operation was awarded to you! – I started the guessing game.

– You missed!

– Instead of the medal, they promoted you to a higher rank! – Forelock (the Ukrainian) picked up the game.

– You missed!

– Your son or daughter was born! – I assumed.

– What are you talking about? I already have been in the army for a year and did not see my wife, – Vitek victoriously looked over us.

– I give up, – I put hands up, Forelock (the Ukrainian) silently repeated my gesture.

– I'M GOING ON VACATION! I AM GOING HOME! – Vitek shouted.

We were speechless from this happiness which had fallen on him.

In the Soviet army, a vacation for a regular soldier was an extremely rare occasion: it was given only as a promotion, or (heaven forbid!) if a bad accident occurred back at home. And this vacation should be certified by a telegram signed by a Conscription Office. In Afghanistan, our brigade was not awarded with any vacations as well as with any promotion at all. It was easier to get a medal for bravery rather than a vacation.

Vitek took his wife's photo and began to kiss the photo repeating:

– My dear! I love you so much!

– I think, the Minister of Defense or the army's commander must have received a big favor from your wife, if you have got the vacation, – commented maliciously Forelock (the Ukrainian).

– She did better! Much better! – Vitek exclaimed, – She is divorcing me! This telegram was certified by the court and they called me for my case hearing! The Conscription office had no choice as to sign!

In confusion we did not know what to say.

– Are you do not care? – I asked timidly, – don't you love her anymore?

– I love her, – Vitek said confidently, – I do love her very much, and after this telegram I just adore her!

In that time, such oddities in the relationships that occurred between men and women were a novelty for us. We fell silent.

– She is a great woman, beautiful and clever, she is great in bed, – Vitek was calculating pro and cons loudly, – but I have no doubt that I will find another woman at home, but the vacation I could have only in a case of divorce, – Vitek kissed his wife’s photo and added, – you are such a good girl!

Many years later, after getting a law degree, I realized that it was compulsory to call a defendant to the Civil court, if the court knew where a defendant was. Of course, a consideration of the marriage dissolution procedure was also possible without a defendant’s participation. To do so, it was enough to just send a telegram, certified by a brigade commander, in which it should be stated that a defendant agreed with this claims for divorce and the case would be proceeded without the presence of Vitek in a courtroom. But lets be honest, have you ever seen any paratrooper officer who knew the Civil Laws of Russian Federation?

Driven by personal sympathy to Vitek, our brigade commander issued a vacation certificate and all necessary travel documents for him. The commander of our battalion received a strict order to look after this distressed soldier, to prevent him he doing any stupid things due to not coping with the distress. To make sure that Vitek will cope with this “distressful situation”, the company commander, a married man, shared his personal vodka with him and did a good deal of bad mouthing towards the unfaithful wife of Vitek. To say the truth, Vitek received more attention and care from the commander before his departure, then any of us ever did.

For Vitek’s farewell, we all gathered together. He looked shiny as a new cent in his best ceremonial uniform and new chrome boots given to him by the commander. A blue beret, a new white-blue striped marine singlet, a full set of awards (the Guard, the Excellence of the Soviet army, First Class Specialist, the Excellent Parachutist, the Best soldier-athlete), an aiguillette, and with his waist tied by a white ceremonial leather belt – all of these demonstrated his bravery. A medal “For Bravery”, borrowed from a soldier nicknamed Fly (what can you do, if, at that time, only Fly was awarded with a such precious medal?) only enhanced this impression.

We scrapped up money for his vacation... and Vitek, such a handsome brave Soviet soldier, took off to home, representing an eagle-paratrooper, hero-internationalist, well, no less as an iconic reprint of the Soviet army.

In a month-or-something Vitek returned back. According to military traditions, he brought us samogon (homemade brew), hidden inside of quite a few hot-water rubber bottles. Coming from his town, bordering Ukraine, Vitek presented to us homemade salo (a traditional Ukrainian type of bacon). Vodka,

together with homemade sausages, was also presented to “father”-commanders. How he brought it across all borders – he kept silent. Despite being late from his vacation by two weeks, Vitek did not get any penalty.

– Okay, – Vitek started telling us his story – I am standing in my parade uniform in the court, the medal shines on my chest, and my wife came to the Court together with her new big-nosed Caucasian boyfriend whose entire body was covered with gold. I did good job to press my lips together to stop laughing and to keep my stone-face with no emotion. With my honest red eyes – red from non-stop celebration because a day prior the court we drank a lot,– I answered all questions. The judge was an elderly woman, who knew Second World War disasters; she looked at me and pitifully sighed. She announced the court decision in the name of the Soviet Union, to divorce us to hell, and then she asked us to hold on for a moment. We waited...and then the judge began swearing to my now ex-wife, telling her, in foul language: how bad a wife she was, and while I was defending the Motherland, she was turning hanky-panky here, and she should not have any respect from our society of Soviet people. I was sadly nodding with my head. It was a circus for free! And then in order not to spoil this performance, I ran out having no strength to control my laughing.

At the exit of the court, my mates were already waiting for me with more vodka. Our town is small and everyone knows each other. All ex-paratroopers gathered together as we all do on the 2nd of August (A National Day of Army Special Forces celebration – Editor). We drank first and then we went to our local market where we had great fun bashing Caucasians. How we beat them! How their goods from shops flew away in all directions! The Police turned blind eyes, see nothing, hear nothing. Yep, it was a great time! But then my mates decided to punish my wife, the traitor, and to dirty her with a tar and to carry around the town, I disagreed. I said to my fighting brothers: “What for? God will judge her. As for me, I forgave her”. The mates were surprised with my Christian attitude, but obeyed.

Vitek stopped telling the story, propped up his violent head with his hand and became thoughtful. Such a pose vividly reminded me of Gerzen’s novel “The past and thoughts” (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor).

Although, I was sure that, due to an unsettling type of personality, Vitek did not read this book written by Gerzen, neither have heard of this name.

– So what was happening next?

– Next! You could believe or not, mates, but on the 10th day after the divorce I got married (Author’s comment: any decision of the Civil court, including divorce, comes into force after ten days). We registered our marriage at the Civic office of marriage registration with no waiting time. The whole town was celebrating our wedding. Have a look the picture.

I took the photo. From the colored photo a young girl in her white wedding dress looked at me with a very nice smile. The happiness, hope and something else in her smile were so special, that it made my heart race.

– I hope, you do really love her! – I said.

– Of course! – Vitek answered without any hesitation. He took the photo and began to admire his darling. After a minute of silence, he added with a strong affection, – My dear! Maybe you will file for our divorce too? I wish to go home...for a vacation.

I became speechless. What else could I say?

In a fall of 1981, Vitek was killed during combat operation in Faizabat. We did not leave his body there.

### **The Voice of America**

Today to listen to any “enemy’s” radio is not a crime neither an ideologically immature act. However, in the early eighties of the twentieth century, the “ enemy’s voices” had been oppressed as much as possible, so the amateurs must listen to them in complete secrecy and conspiracy. I like listening to these “enemy’s” voices, not because of their music or the high political consciousness and ideology, but simply due to my indifference to them. Once upon time, the Russian section of the radio station “Voice of America”, spoke about me, incognito, of course. My name, as well as the names of my comrades serving in the same brigade, were not vocalized, so we were simply named “Russian commandos”.

The tactic of our battalion was very simple at that time: directed by the army intelligence, we were “combing” villages, lying in ambush. Quite often jumping from helicopters, we had to block entrances and exits of the mountain gorges, while motorized infantry or units of the Afghan army caught mujahedeens (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) in the lowlands. Sometimes we were successful, sometimes not. As the saying stated – “it cannot be perfect every time”. Well, I am not going to reveal all tactics of the Soviet paratroops. My story is about the radio station “Voice of America”, the Second Company, and army jokes.

As usual we landed from helicopters into the mountains, it was a habitual routine. We quickly blocked the exit and entrance of a gorge and equipped our positions for firing from a prone position by digging trenches. We camouflaged the trenches and reinforced our cover with stones. The commanders estimated the outcomes of the enemy’s possible actions, and in the case of an attack, divided soldiers accordingly into firing sector groups, and the paratroops were ready for a battle. Nothing special, everything was in line with so-called “military

routines”. After arranging these temporary firing points, four volunteers went on a scouting mission.

Just do not get the wrong idea that we were eager to demonstrate our bravery by searching for mujahedeens. No! We simply were looking for anything or something to eat.

Our provisions were disgusting. At our military unit, the battalion’s kitchen offered the following daily menu: a watery soup with dried potatoes and chunks of boiled fat; a porridge with vegetable oil; and compote from dried worm-eaten fruits, which we named “a meat broth”, as it was full of boiled worms. When we were “in action”, a travel ration of food includes canned fish with an expired date; a package of crackers, and that was it. Canned food rations were calculated at 200 grams per day per head. When we very modestly tried to tell the deputy brigade commander that we wanted to eat, he opened his arms and replied with the saying: “A paratrooper, like a hungry wolf should be hunting all day long: your feet are your supply”. So, you will not be surprised to learn that in the military operation, we were like a pack of hungry wolves. Our combat force officers, who ate a little better than we did, turned a blind eye on food looting and in return, they received their share. You certainly can condemn us, but you cannot blame us. We just wanted to eat!

So, we – four secret service agents-looters – are coming to the mountains and valleys, for hunting. Eventually, we found a large field, full of melons – gorgeous, juicy, sweet, savory melons. But as experienced soldiers, at first, we observed the area for any potential military action, to be sure not to be running into the real enemy and get a good portion of lead instead of melons. There had been, you know, some precedents before and, we learnt our lessons. We did not find any insidious mujahedeens, except an old man who was guarding this field. We did not consider him to be an enemy. We waved hello to the grandpa and began our first round of eating, then started gathering the melons into a ground sheet. The grandpa expressed his presence in a voice and we waved back to him. After this, we did not pay any attention to him. We picked up all melons in the ground sheet and we were ready to depart back home, when in the climax of our operation, we heard an unexpected gun shot.. We didn’t hear the rumble of the gunfire, but the shot whizzed dangerously close.

Together we formed a chain and grabbed our weapons to repel the attack. We looked at the grandpa, who was trying to recharge his old smooth-bore, single-trigger gun. We rushed to this bogeyman, expropriated his gun, but what to do next with him, we had no idea.

No matter what kind of gossip is going about us, no matter who are telling this gossip, I can assure – we never touched women, children or the elderly.

So, we were standing and looking at the grandpa and did not know whether to laugh or to cry, we could not shoot him, or to punish the old man. The man was ashamed, he was not able to understand our words. But, on the other hand, he was able to kill us with that gun. We took his gun, and showed a fist to him. He did not get scared and shook his two fists back to us.

For a whole week, whilst blocking the gorge, soldiers were continuously consuming melons growing on this field. At night paratroopers-eagles descended to the village to steal hens as well.

Although mujahedeens were not detected, villagers came to our commander with a complaint regarding our actions ; the familiar grandpa was a member of that delegation. By pointing at me with his dirty finger, he confidently identified me – here is the criminal! Of course, the commander promised to follow up with a decent punishment, forgetting that he himself enjoyed these melons and roasted chicken.

We apologized to the civilians (such things did happen), the grandpa's ancient antique gun was returned, and our travel ration was presented to Afghans as compensation for their inconvenience and moral damage. They accepted it with gratitude.

I would forget about this ordinary case, but, in a day after our return, my buddy from a signal support company ran into our tent.

– Hey, you! Russian commandos! “Occupant”! Come to our tent at 8 PM. – he invited me through laughter.

– What for?

– You will listen to the news. It will be repeated at 8. Come and you will not regret it.

The subdivision's signal company had powerful radio transmission facilities, which were used by our signal operators for entertainment in any possible way. Good music was transmitted by “Voice of America”, for the “corrupted” Soviet young souls before and after the news. This is why guys were sometimes listening to this station.

At 8 pm I was in the van of the signal company. The radio transmitter was on and after the music, the news started. In his Russian with a tiny hint of an English-speaking accent, the announcer vividly described the amenities and pleasures of the “free world”, the human rights abuse in USSR (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), and, in the end, commented on a current situation in Afghanistan. Further, I present the message below, as I recalled, with little notes and comments in the course of the text.

“Self-Defense units in the village of the province of \*\*\*\* \* Afghanistan \*\*\*\* ...” – Hm, it is definitely about us : the name of the place and time coincided.

– “put up a fierce resistance to Russian Army’s force”. – Ha! The announcer is telling of the incident with an old grandpa and his shot from his ancient gun. – “Despite the overwhelming superiority in numbers and weapons, the Soviet occupants were unable to defeat the brave patriots of Afghanistan. In such a situation..” – and here some dramatic tones were added by the news reader to his voice – “...Russian commandos used a bacteriological weapon against the civilian population”. – You bet! The canned “Pollock-in-oil” with an expired date could easily be passed as a bacteriological weapon. – “Residents of the village \*\*\* suffered a terrible disease.” – Do not worry! After eating this canned fish, we also suffered from diarrhea; in three days the civilians will be all right. – “Volunteers from the Red Cross...” – During my entire military service I never saw any volunteer – “... provided necessary medical care to the people. This can prove again that...”

Rolling thunder of laughter did not give us a chance to listen to the end of the news, so I never found out what it proves...

– They are something! – said my mate after finishing his laughing. They can cook up such outstanding lies, but somebody will bite at it as the truth.

– It is a pity that our superiors did not hear this news. – I sadly said, – Apparently our food nutrition is considered to be a biological weapon to other people.

It was unclear, whether our officers have heard this program or it was just a coincidence, but we were given canned buckwheat porridge with meat after this program – quite decent food – and we no longer shared our travel rations with the Afghans.

Thank you, “Voice of America”! Thank you for improving food nutrition for the Soviet “invaders”!

Thank you, “Voice of America”! Nowadays, as soon as I heard the beginning of your program, I start laughing and recall the melon field, the old grandpa, “the fatal shot”, and tins of “Pollock-in-oil”.

Thank you, “Voice of America”! Thank you for helping me to understand at my young age that your “free world” lied just brazenly and shamelessly, as the Soviet Union did.

## IGOR FROLOV

Frolov, Igor Alexandrovich, was born in Aldan (Yakutia). He graduated from the Ufa Aviation Institute in 1987 and served in the Soviet Army as officer (Mi-8 flight engineer) at Far East and Afghanistan. After he left army, he worked as a guard, janitor, mechanic, massage therapist, journalist and coordinator of the literary festival “Burning Mountain”. His book “Logbook 57-22-10” was published by Exmo Publishing House in 2007, by Vagant Publishing House in 2010, and Tsentpoligraf Publishing House in 2015. He is also actively publishing in various journals his works. He is a member of the Union of Writers and the Union of Journalists of Russian Federation. Currently he lives in Ufa. He is married, and has a son.

### **Logbook № 57-22-10**

(The novel in chapters)

This is a story of the life and incredible adventures of Senior Lieutenant F., a flight engineer-gunner of the helicopter MI-8, who together with his friends completed ten months of his air force military service in Afghanistan during 1985-87, written by himself.

As an epigraph to this story, a description of several aerial photos were downloaded from the Internet and will be provided below.

In front of me, there are two photos taken by Americans in 2001 during the operation of American troops in Afghanistan. The first photo is titled “Shindand airfield: prior the strike” and the second one – “Shindand airfield: after the strike”. White arrows indicate numerous holes that are visible in runways and taxiways. The Shindand airfield was heavily bombed in order to destroy one of the many bases of Taliban.

Also a few other photos on the same topic were offered by virtual space, which provided a picture of an American “Hercules”. Now they stand on the ground where Russian ILs and ANs (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) were once parked. You can see Americans pilots with bespectacled helmets, are dragging boxes, definitely containing toilet papers, along concrete slabs of my runway. The dust raised by these American “Apaches” is the very same dust which was ingrained forever in a collar of my jacket...

I can see no flies – portable bio toilets are erected everywhere...

It cannot be right. I think it is the wrong time – sorry, gentleman!

... Looking at the photo “Prior the strike”, I can recognize my airfield. It is a surprising and, at the same time, strange feeling to observe the past from

a present image. The photo gives overview from the above and it makes an impression that nothing changed there.

I see the runway from where we took off and landed hundreds of times. I remember hot waves of an unbearable heat with a floating mirage of Eastern mountains.

I see a TECH platform, two hangars, and a narrow path, directing you to a parking lot, and a ground in-printed square mark that used to be our squadron house.

I see the parking lot and all others helicopter pads – among them is mine as well, but there is no board №10 on it. It means that the board now is on duty in the air. And I am inside of it. And we are landing. A vivid infinity of my memory enhanced by a low quality picture.

Otherwise, how can I explain why I see every detail on these photos much more clearly.

The alley of residential mobile houses and pedestrian pathways are covered by broken bricks. I can see the central square with a Lenin bust in the middle, the courtyard of our headquarters with a small fountain, the diner hangar, the banya, (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), and our swimming pool under the ragged camouflage net...

I see it all – figures of pilots and technicians, departing and landing helicopters, dust-busting oil tracks, landing fighter-bombers with a rainbow of colored parachutes at their tails, and above all of these I can see rusty-color mountains, blue sky, and white sun...

Nothing there has changed over these years, everything there is the same.

It means that I am at home again.

### **Under the Mercury’s sun**

It was a day of the winter’s solstice of 1986. They arrived from Chirchik (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) at the Tuzel airport in Tashkent on Mi-26. This model of aircraft was just recently adopted for military service. They routinely filled out custom declarations – “Do you have gold, guns, drugs?”, and proceeded for boarding to a “humpbacked” IL-76, which in one in an hour or so will fall from a stranger’s sky, coming down almost vertically with uncertainty to its passengers: whether it was just a rattling in their ears, or it was a noise from a huge aircraft fuselage, unable to withstand such compression and therefore was almost ready to fall apart.

Stretching out his neck, the flight engineer F. looked in the tiny window and saw how sugary sparkling pinnacles were floating under the sun. Nevertheless, the IL-76 did manage to land, and after turning engines off, and at an unbelievably

slow speed, the ramp has opened. The daylight was so dazzlingly bright that new arrivals, standing with their suitcases and bags, must raise their hands to cover their squinted eyes.

They were met by a crowd of men tanned nearly to a black color, who were looking at the newly arrived rotation, with a mixture of delight and tender feelings. I think, even beloved women could not see so much love as was poured from the men's eyes. The newcomers stepped down onto a sunny concrete, adding their milky-whites faces to the coffee-black colored crowd.

Above the stationary Ill-76, in the sky, two scampering MI-24s kept falling down and lifting up again and again with a howling roar, trying to protect this multicolored crowd; and the sound of iron "crocodiles," frolicking over the stationary Ill, was a song of happiness.

The flight engineer F. looked around. He was standing in the middle of a huge endless crater-looking field. Its flat bottom was surrounded by rocky mountains with some breaking points at the north and south of this valley. The runaway was stretching in both these directions too. The scenery was colored in red and yellow, however, it was not a Martian one. Being an amateur astronomer, the flight engineer F. knew that such sceneries could be found under the Mercury sun only.

### **The first battle**

Newly arrived pilots were placed in tents; while a squadron of old pilots were occupied in so-called "modules"-prefabricated shield barracks: before returning to the Union (the short version of the U.S.S.R- Editor), they should wait for a couple of days till "Hunchback" (IL-76) will arrive.

At night, everything was rumbling and trembling in the direction where the mountains were bombed by heavy artillery. Every night shells and cartridges, with rustling sounds, were flying above the tents. Howling and chattering flocks of the BM-21 "Grad" were flying over our heads with a sound that closely can be described as flushing water in a gigantic toilet. In the beginning, nobody could sleep. But a week later, nobody woke up, even, when their plywood walls were attacked by acoustic sledgehammers of artillery so hard, that all alarm clocks and shaving kits kept falling down from the shelves.

On December 23, in the morning, Lieutenant F. and Lieutenant Mukhametshin received Board №10 (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor). The previous pilot of Board №10 was constantly smiling, kept opening and closing hoods, running in circles, kicking pneumatics and slapping his hand on the glazing. Eventually he shook hands with two lieutenants, and with words "Do not worry, this machine is good and strong as a bull", he rushed off from the parking lot without looking back.

After lunch, the flight engineer F. ( who got his first turn to fly and went for an inspection of the newly received board) was approached by two pilots in bleached jumpsuits. It was obvious that due to celebration of their replacement, these two had a big hangover, more likely they did not even get sleep at all.

– Where is Andryusha? –the older aviator asked the flight engineer. – Has he already been replaced?

The flight engineer nodded, hoping that without Andryuha, these two will go away.

– Well, bro, then we will fly with you – the older aviator sighed, and both pilots, with a great effort, proceeded climbing towards the pilot’s seats.

Being the first day on duty and understanding nothing ( are there warning signs here ?!), the flight engineer F. followed them; still he could not comprehend what was going on. In his understanding, the newcomers should have received training before any military actions, or, at least, have some familiarization with a map of the area and local habitants. It was expected that training flights with an instructor over the airfield should be completed first, then the distances of flights should gradually increase, and only after a month, once mastering their flights and overcome any fear, they can be given a military task...However, the engine started up, and in the impenetrable yellow dust, the airplane drove to the field, revved the engine and lifted off.

– Get the machine gun ready, my friend, – the commander said. – Let us climb to the maximum height, and then you can sit back. We need the maximum, then “Stinger” cannot get us. Thank God, this is our last flight and it will be the end of my duty. After this trip, the fun will be all yours.

We reached the maximum height with enormous difficulties.

– Rotten machine... –the commander grimaced.

Wearing a parachute and getting ready his machine gun, the flight engineer observes gray-yellow fields on the ground below. At this place, the horizon was not wearing a blue color like at home, rather it was hazy yellowish.

– If you see a sparkle at the bottom –you report immediately, see a flash – report, a trail of smoke – it means shooting, you do report at once. If you have spotted a blink of sunlight–it means an airplane’s window reflection of light, you report – the commander kept muttering endless surviving instructions.

We reached 3,500 meters.

– “Dust”, I am 314, – the commander reported. – we are coming out of the protected area, and seeking your permission to proceed with the task. Roger!

– Go-ahead, 314! – “Dust” replied.

The flight engineer switched the trigger on his firearm. Now they were flying to the north, climbing almost in a straight line.

– There is no need for a machine gun here, – the commander said. – Return to your seat.

The flight engineer F. tried to move away from the machine gun but it was so difficult to turn around because, his pectoral parachute clung to the machine gun. The flight engineer knew if a parachute ring will hook onto his machine gun, the parachute will open in the cabin and it will not be a pleasant situation for anyone. He sat back and lifted his right leg but instead of putting his leg on the floor... he accidentally stepped on the “step-gas” pedal. The handle jerked down, an angle of blades dropped, and the helicopter suddenly began falling.

Although the commander kept pressing his step-gas, he was not able to quickly enough react to this surprise attack from the blind leg of his flight engineer. Indeed, his hangover played its role.

– Fuck... –the commander said motionlessly. – Take off the leg, brother, it is hard enough...

A sudden lightness in their bodies indicated that they were falling.

The flight engineer F., whose whole body was twisted from fear, flopped down on his folding seat. The commander pressed the gas and the shaking helicopter began climbing up.

For a while we were silent, lighting up cigarettes.

– Anyway, I do envy a flight engineer –the right pilot broke the silence and looked at the commander. – He has two seats. If he wishes he could sit here where he is now, or there, near a machinegun.

– But on other hand, – the commander picked up a line of the conversation – if a flight engineer sits in the place where he is now, in a situation of rapid descending, he will be pinned to the helicopter ceiling with the gear, located just under his seat. If he is sitting behind a machine gun –like on the balcony – he is an open target for enemy’s bullets.

– That is right – readily agreed the right pilot. – And if a stupid eagle will fly directly into a windshield, a flight engineer will end up with fractured ribs in the cargo cabin. In case of evacuation from the helicopter, we will be ejected through the exit but a flight engineer should wait his turn or be looking for the door.

– In any case, he does not have time – the commander nodded. – Maybe that is why casualties among flight engineering staff are much higher than in any other categories of aircraft crew...

– That’s all, it is enough, commander – the flight engineer F. said. – Lets stop, I am off here.

## **My gun is my comrade or everything is under control**

It is very early in the morning. Our hope to halt the fire from both sides have melted like lime and eventually disappeared in smoke. We ended up in the same damning military situation as it was before.

This is why when the sun just became visible over the tops of eastern mountains, the crew of the Board №10 ( see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) is already at their workplace. Being awoken as early as at half past three and eaten a solid breakfast, when the sun rays directly struck his face, it became even more inconvenient. Pilots lowered optical filters and exposed to full sun, the flight engineer F. was left alone with the dazzling light... It is so hot! He closes his eyes and sees his jumpsuit, which he washed in a thermos last night. Hot steam eats away his eyes...

Awakened by his own machine gun, the flight engineer F. pulled up his hands. He realized whilst he felt asleep, his elbow accidentally pressed the trigger of the machine gun directed ahead of him. Just straight in front of him, only few inches to the left, was sitting his comrade, the leading pilot. The flight engineer anxiously looked for any consequences of such accidental shooting but it seems there was none.

– What are you firing for? – the commander asked, not realizing that the engineer has simply fallen asleep. –Have you seen someone?

– No, just checking my machine gun, – the flight engineer replied immediately.

– Be careful, do not kill the leading pilot...

– Everything is under control, the commander!

## **Plain air**

Two people walk on an elevated bank of the river that obediently follows her riverbed curves. On the right side of the bank, there is a road, which is very close to the river. The flight engineer F. sees it from his position inside of a helicopter behind a machine gun. From time to time, he is looking at the water that seems to be flying under his feet. Suddenly, an idea came to his head. Bending over the seat, he picked up his camera FED from the parachutes that were piled on the lower glass as a protection against bullets. Having an inclination for conducting a natural experiment, the flight engineer has come up with the idea to capture the image of fire from his machine gun over the water.

With his right hand he raises the camera to his eyes, and, at the same time, he held by his left hand the left knob of the machine gun with a large finger on the trigger. This trick is very complex. Whilst he looks through the FED viewfinder, with his right hand he also needs to control a barrel of his machine gun: his left

hand should hold the barrel in such a way that bullets should rip the water in a long line a distance from the nose of the machine. Whilst this will be happening, his right hand should click the camera to capture a series of fountains below.

The flight engineer F. for some time tried to coordinate both hands, the camera and his machine gun, attempting to adjust to vibration of the flight. When the moment was right, he pressed the trigger of machine gun, led the barrel from bottom to top and to the right (remembering that he should leading to the left) – and clicked the trigger on his camera.

When he stopped shooting and lowered the camera, he spotted a herd of sheep running in panic in all directions, and among them a shepherd with his hands up kneeling on the road.

“Damn! – the flight engineer mumbled –. Now I will be in trouble!”

– Well done, kid, you did well!! – the commander praised him. – You should be first. Keep them in fear, otherwise they will launch a grenade into your tail...

### **The Fox and the Sparrow**

The Yalanis steppe near Herat... The pair of ”Eights”( see “ Terminology and Glossary) is back from the job, finishing the blocking of several entrances to karez (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), which goes to the Herat airfield. Dragging a heavy load, the military cars slowly crawled alongside of the karez, looking to the place where they can send their mortal massages.

Suddenly, the fox, not the usual red color, but pale with black patches, crossed the road.

– Wow! Look, look, – the commander yells, pointing with his finger towards the wild animal. – Silver Fox! Get him! Get this chaw-bacon! What a great fur it will be!

The flight engineer F. fired from the machine gun towards the running fox. The deadly weapon of the helicopter chases the fox tail which was winding like a snake. The engineer pitied this fox. He understands that nothing will be left when bullets of the caliber 7.62 will reach the fox. There will be no animal, nor a useful skin because it will be full of numerous holes. This is why he is hammering bullets a little bit long or little bit short, avoiding a direct contact with the animal.

– What is wrong with, you?! Why you cannot get it! – Commander angrily roared.

Pushing away a blister, the flight engineer F. aimed to shoot at the animal, but the fox suddenly disappeared – it simply dissolves into the rocks.

– Damn! – the commander says. – I placed this fox on a silver platter plate and served it to you.. your business was to end it. And you... muffed it..

– I pitied the fox, – the engineer confesses.

– Come on! Just admit that you are just a shitty shooter.

The flight engineer F engineer was resentfully silent. He takes a cigarette and lights it up. The helicopter started to speed up. Holding the cigarette with his left hand, he rested his elbow on the left knee. The flight engineer F. keeps smoking, His right hand fingers kept irritably knocking on the top of the machine gun. With no warning, a little sparrow zigzagged in the air right ahead of him.

“Watch it!” – the flight engineer F. angrily muttered and effortlessly pressed a trigger, without moving any muscles. A doubled sound of one shot – and... a feather bloody splatter glued to the windshield!

Surprised by his own result, the flight engineer F. keeps smoking in the same position. “There is a God!” – he admits. Two stunned pilots have been keeping silent for some time. After this long pause, the commander unzipped his lips:

– I got it... Please, accept my apologies!

### **The tiredness of the flight engineer F.**

February 12, 1987. At midday, the letters were delivered by two soldiers, who brought the mail on the way from Turagundey.

A flight engineer F. tidied his bed and was ready go to get lunch. But whilst he was closing a door, he spotted a fast approaching cloud of dust far away that moved towards his quarters from a compact duty house. In a second, the cloud took the shape of squadron engineer – major Ivanov. Waving his hand, major Ivanov was shouting something. Swearing to himself, the flight engineer F. walked towards the unexpected guest.

– The Head of Air squadron has been sacked! – heavily catching his breath, the major cracked the news.

– For what? – the flight engineer F. asked trying to guess the cause of this news.

– Do not be stupid – the major exploded. – “What do you mean what for ? or why!/? Because it is all bullshit, that is why! He was knocked down! In the area of Dilarama the column got involved in an ambush and the commander flew to the rescue of them. He did well with mujahedeens (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor). But when he started landing to pick up the wounded ones, his helicopter’s bottom was sliced up. The fuel tap and tail rotor thrust were also severely damaged. He crashed somewhere near the enemy camp. As usual, the second helicopter, “the leader”, landed to collect them all, but mujaheens attacked both of them from the hill. Regardless of the severity of the attacks, the commander had a chance to fly away, with only one supplying tank, to Farahrudskoy Point. Over there, he is now coordinating the fire and, I bet, he will be awarded no less than the “Banner swung”, and may receive the “Hero” title ( see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor). Of course, if he will not be shot

down beforehand (God forbid!). Now he is asking for help, just give him a few more guys to collect the wounded ones. Listen, – the major directed the question to me, – is your board ready?

In five minutes, a tandem of two №10 and № 92 were flying towards the southeast, in the direction of Dilaramu. We reached the pinnacle in no time, and without descending, flew over Daulatabad.

– “What, the hell, the riot police division sits there doing nothing, why are they not helping? It is only two minutes of flying from them...” – the commander said without hiding his anger.

We passed the ridge and approached a road-crossing with bridges over the Farah River. Between the bridges, our column got jammed and kept firing back at the pursuing enemy. We spotted the battlefield by the black smoke of a burning helicopter. We reduced our altitude to three hundred, established a radio-contact with the column, and the situation became clear: our guys and their enemy were located across from each other, on the opposite sides of the road.

– While I will target the left, you do work on the right! Do it hard: we should not see their muzzles! – the commander ordered.

The flight engineer F. opened fire on the right side of the road, blurred by smoke, the enemies, swarmed into the thick dust and became almost invisible. Curved trails of a shower of bullets went down and were lost in fumes. It was not possible to see whether or not they reached their targets.

– “Air”, you have been targeted! –a warning came from the column.

– I confirm! – the commander’s voice dropped down. – Let’s do manoeuvrings!

– The right one is in full gear! – the commander order directed the helicopter into the sky, towards the sun.

From both helicopters, the bullets went down like water from cracked barrels, then both of them turned around, simultaneously working out mujahidin positions. The explosions, like a blanket of black tulips, have covered an entire right side of the road. The flight engineer kept firing into the smoke until his bullets finished.

– What the hell? – the commander suddenly asked, fidgeting knees. – Pedals are stuck! Eventually, they got us – the machine is damaged. What a death trap we caught!

The flight engineer F., who was trying to fix the receiver for a new bullet line, looked down on the helicopters’ floor. There were at least two hundred bullets that had slipped from the output socket. Most of them were hiding behind the parachutes, but a couple of them fell under the commander’s legs, and a very special one ended up under the right pedal and, therefore, jammed it.

– Give me a sec, commander – the flight engineer F.said. He bends over, stretched out his hand trying to reach this bullet and release the pedal, but the bullet was stuck to the pedal like glue.

– Move your leg! – the flight engineer F pushed with his fist the commander’s leg. The commander pulled out his leg from the right boot. The flight engineer F pulled out the trouble causing bullet, swept away a few more bullets with his sleeve from the floor and ordered. – Push on the gas pedal!

– Well done, thank you, God! – the commander sighed. – Lets fly, darling!

We started descending and landed on the left side near a hill. Over the hill the noise of thunder and bombing continued. We loaded the dead and wounded ones. When the loading was finished, the soldier, who was helping to carry the bodies into the helicopter, sat on the bench, and grabbed his hair with his fingers covered by blood and dirt.

– Have you been wounded, brother? – the flight engineer F. looked at the face of the soldier. But the soldier said nothing, looking straight ahead with empty eyes. A sweaty sergeant popped in and shook the soldier:

– What has happened, Serge?

He lightly slapped the soldier’s face.

– Hey, run to your comrades, – he said.

The soldier, coming to his senses, jumped and ran away.

– Thank you very much! – the sergeant shook hands with the flight engineer.

From the cockpit, the commander commented:

– God bless you, guys, but the “whistles” will be here in a minute and they do have a bad habit of wiping out everything around. Let’s hit the road, so we do not get in their way. We will be back later.

We took off at a low altitude and headed north, hiding behind the hill. Jumped over the ridge, and we landed on the point near Daulatabad where GRU (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) was based. We took two more wounded and returned home.

The “whistles” were striking from the top like lightning.

– Hello, “vertical!” (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor).

– Keep yourself busy, doves of the peace! – the commander kindly replied. In a few minutes, the air was heavily filled with the sprawling congestion of roaring:

– Reset-r-ro-os.. !

And the squadron commander with his calming voice from above:

– Not a bad job...

And the voice of the column echoed:

– Could not be done better.

We were almost exhausted. We reached the hospital, unloaded, and flew towards our parking lot.

The flight engineer F. stepped out of the helicopter and noted that it is evening. Everything around – the parking lot and the helicopters –were in red from the setting sun that send down these mysterious, almost endless, shadows...

He met Lieutenant Mukhametshin who was holding a gun together with a protective helmet in his hand and was curious why the flight engineer F. is still here so late because he was told to replace him. Now he is waiting for the another crew to fly back.

– No need, – the flight engineer F. said – I am in good shape. I feel great, more than ever...

Strangely, he felt a strong excitement; after all of this, he wanted to go back!

He nervously lit up the cigarette and, pacing back and forward on the parking lot, was telling all details of his flight to Lieutenant Mukhametshin.

– This time it is better to go much lower to see if anyone is left there. But firing with machine gun will be risky- it is too far and no damn clear thing to see. Also we can strike our guys.

The engineer-mechanic came to check the machine:

– Have you any holes? Good. Few more trips with this machine will do. Fill the petrol to the maximum, cover this machine and then you can go for dinner.

And he ran away.

What a relief! We filled to full capacity including two additional tanks. But before flight engineer F. was able to take off his gun, the commander, the Major Bozhko, with Senior Lieutenant Shevchenko, approached the helicopter.

– How much petrol did you put in?

– Up to the maximum, as the engineer- mechanic ordered. He said - another crew will fly.

– He is an asshole, – Bozhko spat. – We have no other crew! It is getting dark and we need to fly at high altitude. How we will do it with a full load of petrol plus wounded on the way back? Let's hope that this machine is powerful enough to accomplish this flight. Start the engine!

And in this moment, flight engineer F., who had just relaxed a bit after the engineer-mechanic order, suddenly felt that his legs could not hold him anymore. The weakness spread over his body. The scenario of events from the previous flight quickly passed through his mind and the flight engineer F. understood that the second flight will be unbearable for him.

– You know, Felix, – he said-it turns out, I am really tired. It is your turn as you said.

– What a hell! – Lieutenant Mukhametshin (who also was hoping to get a rest) started to swear but turned back and went to start the helicopter.

The sun quickly disappeared and suddenly became dark. The tandem of helicopters took off with the safest altitude of 3500. The flight engineer F. finished his dinner, drank a prescribed half glass of vodka, came to his unit and shortly reported to comrades what has been done on the job, and then fell into bed like a log with last words “Wake me up, when they return.”

## The hairdo for a stupid

The military tandem of two helicopters are taken on a flight to Loshkarevka. On the leading board number 10 there is Division commander, the Colonel General. He is in a hurry and nervous. He periodically orders:

– Add the speed.

But the pair of helicopters are already flying up to their limit with a maximum speed. In order to get to Loshkarevka quickly, the decision was made to take a shortcut and fly away from all roads. Now there is nothing around us – harsh desert with not a single reference point. But we don't need it – the commander goes in a straight line, strictly maintaining the course. The right pilot is absently looking forward, the flight engineer is tapping his fingers on the machine gun.

The Colonel General, who sits behind the flight engineer, pushed his shoulder and asked:

– How much longer?

“I guess, – the flight engineer F. thought – the General thinks that I am the most competent person among all of us “. He nods at the direction of the right pilot:

– Colonel General, ask the navigator.

The Colonel General pushes the shoulder of the right pilot-navigator :

– Where are we?

The navigator, caught off guard, grabbed the map and began studying it for a while, but there is nothing you can see there – it is only a desert. He looks at the map, then at the window, again back to the map. After moving his finger over the map for some time, he questionably looks at the commander.

The enraged Colonel stretched out his hand to the head of navigator and fiercely removed his headset.

– I knew it! – he says, looking at the untied navigator's hair. – Do you think you can do combat missions with such a hairdo?

The service of heroes

This is just another day. The same people in this chapter. The Division commander, Colonel General, has arrived to Gerat. The military YAZ and BTR approached the landed aircraft. ”I will be back in an hour...”– the Division commander said and took off on a military YAZ. BTR was left to guard the helicopters.

– Listen, commander, – the right pilot suggested, – I do have some friendly connections in a bread making factory here. Can I have your permission to get yeast for brewing samogon (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor?

– Will a half an hour be enough for you? – the commander looked at his watch.

– I will be back in 10 minutes! – and the right pilot-navigator left together with BTR.

.. A half an hour passed, then forty minutes, then forty five..

The commander is nervously pacing back and forward near the helicopter, constantly looking at the direction of disappeared BTR with his pilot-navigator.

– If he will be back, I will kill this brat!– the commander promised to himself.

.. A whole hour is gone. Fortunately, the Colonel also has been late.

Finally, the APC ( see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) arrived and a pilot-navigator’s dead drunk body was unloaded by soldiers.

– Maybe it will be easier to shoot myself before the Colonel arrives? – the commander asked himself,– or better to shoot this animal and report it as a casualty? What can we do with this dead body if we cannot arrange him in the sitting position?

The commander together with the flight engineer F. managed to wrap up the senseless body with tape and placed in a tiny cargo section, tying up the drunken pilot to a spare blade to make sure that this undisciplined body will be not leaving the helicopter until the end of the flight.

Only for a second, the body became the pilot-navigator and mumbled:

– O, commander! I report, their samogon (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) is really yuk! But I must test it to save you from poisoning. I feel sooo baaad!

The military car together with the Colonel came back. The commander saluted to the Colonel and reported:

– The General Colonel! Allow me to report that our pilot-navigator from the leading helicopter got sunstroke!

– This is the one without a proper hair style? I knew it! This why he got it!– with a sort of satisfaction the Colonel commented,– well, where he is? I want to look at him.

Whilst the Colonel is proceeding to the place where the body was peacefully fixed and waiting for the flight, the commander who was following him, makes all sorts of angry grimaces to his crew with the one message – to save the situation. The crew have circled the body of the undisciplined pilot and pretended to be applying First Aid.

– Well, well, what do we have here? – the Colonel said, leaning towards the unfavourable pilot... and in this very moment the right pilot-navigator vomited all his consumed brew on the floor. The shocked Colonel took a back step and was ready to release his anger, when the commander shouted:

– All of us immediately back! He contained krasnuha (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor).

The smell of alcohol was very distinctive, but the General, with no doubt, run towards the second helicopter and ordered:

– Start engines immediately! Your comrade needs help!

The pilot-navigator was delivered to Shindand without any troubles in his own machine. Close to the time of landing, the “leader” (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) has heard that the Colonel ordered an ambulance to the airfield landing site.

– What a warm hearted Colonel we have!– the commander commented and edited the order- Listen guys, we will wait for the ambulance in the very end of the 3rd line.

All helicopters landed. The ambulance N10 was waiting on the very end of line 3 as they were told. Waving to the second pilot to direct their machine with the Colonel on board to the parking lot, the commander approached the doctor from the ambulance. He explained the situation. The doctor smiled and said:

– I got it. We will drive him to the medical module and then kick him out.

The commander taxied his machine to the parking lot, and went to meet the Colonel who was waiting for him to ask about the poor guy’s health:

– Has he received instant help in the hospital?

– Yes, sir.

– Your service is very important for the country. Also it is very dangerous. I would say, it is the service of heroes.

### **“A Golden route”**

Flights to Chaghcharan, for supporting MI-6, were a complete torture for “Eights”. We had to crawl at the highest altitude, just above rocky pinnacles that were covered with snow, on which we could see not only wild goats, but also groups of armed people. A little below, in the glens, our death – the anti-aircraft DShK’s large-calibre machine-guns – were sheltered. This is why our helicopters had to drag along at the very top.

The most offensive thing was that we had no chance to take any action, even if we do noticed that we have been a target of attention from some jihad’s (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) enthusiasts. Every minute of delay consumed precious litres of fuel. The full refuelling including two additional fuel tanks allowed us to reach Chaghcharan (about 400 km) and return back without extra curriculum activity.

Now, the headwind and a non-stop fuel eating heater forced us to consider refuelling in Chaghcharan to avoid falling down into snowy mountains on the way back. The refuelling means milking the most fuel efficient helicopter. It is a manual procedure, when necessary (300-400 litres) barrels of kerosene will be carried together with pals from MI-6 by hand.

Our sufferings were compensated by pristine mountain snow. We staffed all army thermoses with this snow. So, when we return, making a Ceylon tea

or “Bergamot Lipton” with this natural, non-chlorinated, water was a special treat for us.

And, of course, do not forget about huge bags of Yugoslav biscuits and sweets which were dragged into Chagcharan’ little shops and sold there at a high price as a result of peculiarities of the mountain’s market, mainly related to its inaccessibility. As a rule, these goods were not properties of pilots– all goods belong to landsmen (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor, who had more opportunity to extract some army supplies for private use. Usually before a trip, landsmen approached pilots and asked them to sell the extracted leftovers at the highest price. There was even a special term for this market activity – “shmekerit” meaning by flying slang “to trade” – a complicated process, which strategies have been understood by the flight engineer F.

After his first flight of two and a half hours of shaking above the frosty rocky peaks, a constant attention to spot DShS and avoid them (last time we spotted them, turned around, but could not find them. It turned out, as we established during the next flights, that DShS points had the rolling back roof ); running back and forward with kerosene buckets. And after all of this, when you got to Duckan, where was a little boy who cheated the flight engineer F. on converting five hundred packets of sweets into currencies. A final piece of strategy was a silence during a return flight when the deep-in -thought flight engineer F. calculated the profit from this trading, holding a piece of a paper with pencil in his hands.

The flight technician was trying to estimate a percent of his earning from that dangerous flight. If one packet of sweets sold for 26 afgashek (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), there would be nothing shameful to say that he sold it for 25. But within half an hour of that flight it became obvious that 24 afgashek is a normal price too. In one hour, after they turned around from the place where they had been shot at – 20 afgashek seemed to be an acceptable price. After their landing with a residual fuel of only 50 litres left an owner of these goods came to collect his money, the flight technician F., stinking of snow and kerosene, gave him a roll, tied up with a pink elastic band, and said:

– Sold it for 17.

And, looking at the trader’s stretched face, added:

– What did you expect? You said to get a maximum, but Mi-6 had already overstocked the whole market and spoiled our market trade opportunity, you know. This is a maximum for today. I wanted to take one afoshka (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor)), for my job, but I will not, as I will be embarrassed to rob you.

## April Fool's Day

1st of April, 1987. The MI-8 helicopter, accompanied by MI-24, is coming to the Iranian border, towards an area of salt lakes. Two of them, in the usual military tandem, are flying to a so-called "friendly gang" (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor), carrying on board one of them a peculiar evidence of the established "friendship" – a big "Sony" TV. The leader of this group via this "friendship" had already received a diesel generator, a videotape recorder, and a set of video cassettes with Indian movies. The TV set should crown this pyramid of his prosperity. In exchange, the leader obliged by informing us about other hostile gangs, their planning and movements.

The pair of helicopters have passed Herat and turned away from a mountain ridge to the west. "Twenty-fourths" (MI-24), with a lack of fuel, as usual, which did not allow them to fly for long distances, returned back to the Herat airport, wishing us to have a good trip, and promised to meet us on the way back. "Eighths" (MI-8) have lowered the altitude to their minimum – 3 metres—and amused themselves by frightening their land-walking "colleagues" by flying over the road, passing lonely tanks and APCs (see "Terminology and Glossary"– Editor). Those who were sticking out of the hatches or sitting on the APCs", firstly were hearing only roaring, when suddenly over their heads, a heavy monster, for a moment, covered the sun with kerosene wind, and displaying its brown flashing bottom, and then suddenly disappeared, kindly shaking wings with missile blocks to say good-by.

The tandem of MI-6 and MI-24 turned off the road and was flying along a dusty steppe. Eventually they arrived. The pair of helicopters has been met by a black-bearded crowd of men with guns and rifles on their shoulders. Waiting for the flight engineer F. to go down from the blades, one pilot made a remark:

– Why do they need this useless "Sony", if they can repossess these two helicopters with six pilots? This commodity will be enough for them to their dying day.

Holding the guns, pilots stepped down on the unknown land. A long distance away, near the Iranian border, there was a lake or just a mirage, which glittered and trembled the white riverside like a white stripe. The commander saluted to the gangs' representatives, who were standing at some distance, and then he pointed out at his board, shaping with his hands a square figure. Three Afghans came closer with an empty TV box. The leader stepped forward – a gloomy and overweight giant in his black cape – and gestured to follow him. Accompanied by armed men, all pilots proceeded. The flight technician F. already finished his cigarette and wanted to throw the cigarette away, but he hesitated – maybe it will be offensive towards the land in the presence of its natives? – You never know how they may react. So, he put out the cigarette with his fingers and put the butt into his pocket.

The clay house with a hemispherical ceiling was cold. The pilots have been asked to sit down on the pillows, which were arranged along the bare walls. The TV set was placed in the middle of the room,. Guests and hosts took their seats. The flight engineer F. noticed a window behind his head and he thought that through this window his head could be a good target. A tough looking man was sitting on his right, and the flight engineer F. unnoticeably tightened his gun belt to his foot – just in case the “neighbour” would try to grab it. The flight engineer F. was heavily armed as all of pilots: everyone knew – here there is no chance to survive against this crowd, and, before leaving the helicopter, all pilots took a hand grenade in their pockets. Of course, being guests here was a sacred thing, but anything could happen... especially on the day of the 1st of April...

The natives brought the tea – a small metallic teapot designed to share with everybody; and special glasses – a little bit similar to our beer glasses; white and beige cubes of Turkish delights; candied nuts in the ajar shell that looked like oysters. The leader, with a stinging smile, pointed at the treat. The pilots were waiting for a while, looking around and displaying a honest interest in what was at the ceiling. They did not want to drink or eat first, because of uncertainty what could be poured in this pot. They started to sip the tea only after the leader brought the glass to his beard.

The visit was not for a long time, but quite tense. After drinking a cup of tea, pilots stood up, awkwardly pressed their hands to their chests, then bowed, and made it clear with the gesture, that there no need to show them an exit. Finally, they shook hands in turn, one after another one, and after collecting their shoes at a doorstep, slowly and deliberately walked to the helicopters. Defencelessness of their backs was palpable more than ever. Because of tea or a fear, all six of them were sweating. A few men with guns were walking slowly behind them and their gazes indeed pressured the backs of the ones who were leaving.

We got to the helicopters, trying not to be obvious, examined it, looked quietly at the bottom searching for suspended grenades, on the same subject we also examined the chassis – a comfortable place to place a grenade, so while a helicopter was taking off, the ring pulls out the pin and the machine is torn apart...

We started the engines, waved to the leader from the cabins, who anyway came out to see us leaving. He raised his hand, shielding his eyes from the sandy wind of propellers. We took off, turned around, still waiting for the shot, and flew, and flew – further, calmer, hiding behind the veil of dust... Finally we gone.

Go-o-o-ood! – The commander sighed. – One more tea-drinking ceremony like that, and my hair will be turning gray.

In a half an hour we got to the road, and asked for “MI-24” to meet us – we are coming back...

What a supporter! – the commander commented. – Do I really need them?! Where were they while we were having that awful tea-drinking?

After the MI-24 met them on the way to Herat, and took the front and the rear positions in our line, the question whether the leader presented a lamb was addressed to the commander.

– O, yep! Sure! One lamb for each of us, – the commander said. – He asked us to return the bones!– and throwing his head back, the commander laughed loudly.

At this time, from the stunted bushes, frightened by one of “MI-24”, a small flock of large – the size of a duck – birds rose in the air. That flock began to rise and reach the following “MI-8”. The flight engineer F. saw how the birds were separating in the way of fan, and managed to move away from the helicopter, flying at a speed of 230, away – but one bird did not- and flew directly under the glass cover...

The commander was still laughing, when the helicopter shook a thud. A hot wind, with splashes of grey fuzz and dust, poured onto the flight technician’s face from the bottom and filled in the cabin like someone ripped up a pillow. He looked down and saw that a bottom glass disappeared, and two parachutes were barely holding ready to jump to the flying ground.

– Damn it! –shouting, the commander straightened the gliding helicopter. – Well what are you going to do, huh?! Eventually, we met troubles! And all of these because of the “Messers”! ” (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor). What was that? Not a sparrow, right?

Sparrows were not only leaving the red blots of feathers on the glass after impact, but also were a cause for a seriously damaging helicopters’ foreheads. After some flights, the flight engineer F. got used to taking off the dried sparrows’ heads from the outboard motor and tanks.

– Possibly, it is a duck, – the flight engineer F. said, spitting out the feather and started re-arranging parachutes, which almost were sinking into the hole.

– Look, Frol, – the commander pleadingly looked at him,– would you make up a good story if the engineer asks what happened, huh? If they find out that I was caught by the ducks, they would accuse me of losing my flying skills. Would you make something up? You are a master of story-telling!

– I will try, – the flight engineer F., promised hesitantly thinking of what he could make up. Nothing comes to his head. Absolutely nothing! Maybe he should say that we got damaged while visited the gang? But how? Well, maybe like this: we were playing football – 302 squadron against the gang, Yep, it was a match of friendship, and a heavy self-made ball was kicked and broke the bottom glass... Maybe no, not like that – what kind the ball should it be? You can break a leg on it...

Not reaching the Herat road, the leading “MI-24” began to cut off a corner through the ruins of Herat. Everyone followed it. The duvals (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) destroyed by bombing, were flying fast under the bottoms of helicopters.

The flight engineer n F. saw a donkey tied in one yard, and became alerted. He was right – he immediately spotted two dukhs (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), who lifted their guns into his direction. A sound of shooting was left behind the helicopter’s tail.

– They are shooting, commander! Two in the ruins on the right!–the flight technician reported.

– They are hiding under a roof! –the co-pilot added, looking back.

– Hey, escort! “MI-24”, what are you looking for? For a shelter? –the commander said angrily. – We just got attacked from the duvals’ fellows, at least two of them.

– Next to a donkey, –the flight t engineer added the details.

– Next to a donkey, – and the commander echoed.

“MI-24” turned around, returned back, shooting at the ruins from the outboard guns but did not see anybody, and proceeded to catch up with the pair.

We landed at the Herat airport to examine the helicopters on the subject of holes. When the flight engineer F. was rocking slightly a brake handle, he saw the flight technician Losenkov who, standing on a step-ladder, examined their board. The flight technician F. lit a cigarette and went outside. The technician Losenkov followed him:

– Are you wounded? – Losenkov looked into his face.

– Why do you think so?

– Well, you have been attacked, the glass over there has been broken; and when you landed, I saw the bag of shells hanging almost to the ground, well, and I guessed that they got you. Now I see that your face is covered with blood! Whose blood is that?

The flight engineer F. touched his face, smeared sticky drops of bird’s blood, and looked at his palm. Is it worth to confess? – he thought, – A good concatenation of circumstances! If I say that the glass had been broken by a bullet, then whose blood is that?...

–..And who knows, – he answered aloud to himself, – but not mine. Probably, it is from the enemy, whom I busted. He splashed on me, bastard! – and the flight engineer F. started laughing.

– Yeah, yeah, stop bullshitting! – Losenkov distrustfully said, looking for a hole. He stuck his head in the helicopter’s bottom and mumbled:

–Was it in or out? Where did the bullet go?

Everybody had already gathered around the helicopter. They were examining the hole, getting into the cabin, searching for a bullet on the walls. Nobody paid attention to the feathers, which was not blown to the blisters. The crew of №10 has also been actively participating in this collective search for the bullets together with the rest of personnel, but mysteriously kept silent.

– Yeah, tell me, where’s the bullet? – Eventually the question has been directed to the commanders of the second helicopter and the leading one.

– Who knows! – the leading commander shrugged his shoulders. He also figured out that the mysterious bullet could be blamed for the broken glass. – Maybe it flew out through my blister?

The cabin was examined by voluntary ballistics specialists again and again. It was found that in this case, the bullet had a unique and complex curve: it passed via each commander’s leg and then it went up almost vertically into his blister.

– To hell with all of you! – the commander could not stand this circus any longer. – You do not get jokes or what! We kissed a flock of ducks! Today is the April First ! But I ask you all to say nothing! Better examine our boards on the subject of holes rather than huddle there, looking for some unfortunate bullet...

– And what about the fire – is it not a joke?

– What is a damn joke?! They shot at us from two guns, but our valiant shelter found nobody. Or maybe you have already spoken with them? – his eyes suspiciously screwed up at “MI-24”.

– Comrade Major! – Suddenly the technician Losenkov shouted from his helicopter. – We have a hole!

They came closer. In the self-sealing rubber of the left outboard tank was a little ragged hole with a flabby dark spot around it. The technician Losenkov put a finger in it:

– Here we go, please! Now how will you get home? If pumps will work, then fuel will leak. This rubber holds nothing...

– Yes, but... – major wiped his freckled bald patch with his sleeve. We need a patch. Who will put it on? Will you call a technical team for that?

While the major was muttering, and lieutenant Losenkov, resting his hands on his hips, was proudly standing near by, the flight technician F. came to the left side. “Why is it on the left side? – he asked, examining the hole. – The right one had been fired”. He stuck his finger in the hole, the rubber was dry, rough and old. He touched the metal of the tank with his finger, probed it and made a circle under the rubber. There was no hole in the metal! This rubber hole was clearly a long-standing one, and the kerosene mark, most likely, was caused by refilling the helicopter.

– There is no hole! –the flight technician F. said.

– How come? – everybody was surprised.

– I am sure. Look here, the old rubber was broken, but the tank is undamaged. Check it yourselves.

The flight technician Losenkov stuck in his finger, felt it and blushed to the top of his ears.

– Well, – the commander sternly scolded him, – can you distinguish the hole from the “no hole” or not? You have mislead four crews and drove us mad.

...We were on the way to home. We were racing along the Herat’s highway embraced with pine trees. We were flying low, lower than some heads of pines. The co-pilot was in a low spirit because of missing two dukhs (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor). This is why he had put a submachine gun in his blister and attentively controlled the situation, although in this area such diligent attention was not necessary as it already was a zone of control of the 101st regiment.

– You know, – the flight engineer F. said, – we have missed a good opportunity. The bullet could have broken the glass barely – they were shooting us almost sideward. Slid, cracked and left. And no holes!

– And why was I not thinking about it earlier?! – the commander sighed.- We already told everyone about these ducks...

..Ahead they saw a lonely clay farm. There was a boy, running around the yard. When he spotted flying helicopters, he rushed towards them. The boy stood on the way, took a stick and, pretending to aim at us, began to “shoot”.

– Oh, you are a little brat! – The co-pilot shook his gun at him.

The boy dropped the stick, picked up a rock, swung, and waited until the helicopter would fly closely... he threw the rock at us!

Three of us in the cabin instinctively dashed aside, the commander pulled the handle, the helicopter lifted up his nose, and the rock hit the bottom with a sound like a tin can. Then the co-pilot briefly took his gun and pulled the trigger.

– Are you ... at kid? –the commander shouted. – Are you insane?

– No, no, no, – the frightened co-pilot murmured. – It is happened accidentally, my finger twitched... We have already passed the boy.

– An accident! ... If you will be responsible for this, the whole city will rebell.

– And what if he put us down? – the co-pilot said angrily. – You would now be rolled up in the forehead with that stone – there would be no time for fun if we would be smashed in their fields! But it would be laughable – the boy brought down the fighting helicopter with a little stone! After that, our army should retreat this country with shame. And you would be forever commemorated in historical annals of the war, as the most unlucky pilot ever, who was shot down with a stone on the Fool’s day!

– Shut up! – the gloomy commander ordered. – Gmm.. historical annals... Watch the road!

We arrived at Shindand, taxied to the parking area, and the pilots went away with no desire to give any explanations of what had happened but gave this opportunity to the flight technician F. Now it was only the engineer-on-duty, who approached the plane, looked at the hole, and asked:

– What has happened?

– Year, the boy threw the stone, in some settlement near Herat with velocity, huh, like from the gun...

– Do not tell me such fool stories! Surely your commander, Kozhedubov, was shooting the goats, landed on the sand and crashed the glass. Look, how high-density polyethylene moved in different directions!

– Yes, I wish, we were shooting some goats, but where are they? And high-density polyethylene is okay. You look better, comrade major!

The engineer-on-duty took off his dark glasses, put his head in the hole, then he stretched his arm inside of the carbine and took something out. I was a gray rock in a size of an egg, which the flight technician placed there upon their arrival.

– You did not lie! Look at this! – holding the stone, the engineer Ivanov shook his head. This is indeed a weapon of the proletariat! Well, I will order patching from a tin – there is no glass at this moment.

He turned to leave, and the flight engineer F. spotted a tiny grey feather stuck in the engineer’s head. He reached up his hand and removed it unnoticeably with two fingers...

*P.S*

From time to time, the flight technician F. was keeping a diary. In the evening, he took out from his bedside-table a black oilcloth notebook and briefly recorded this flight. The next day, after dinner he walked into the room, the lieutenant Mukhametshin met him spitefully, and, lying on the bed, sarcastically asked:

– So, after all, the bullet broke the glass?

– Reading somebody’s diary is not good manners! – The flight engineer F. was outraged. – And why are you worried about it? Everyone knows what happened, and I wrote about the bullet to myself! Maybe it’s a sort of stylistic device, like a hyperbole! Finally, may I fool myself on the day of April First?

### **Taking out the wisdom tooth**

The flight engineer F. had a severe pain caused by his “wisdom” tooth. The poor guy was suffering during a whole day and a whole night. He was tossing in his bed, standing up, sitting down, and jumping; he even performed push-ups to be distracted from this pain, but nothing helped.

–You drive me nuts! – annoyed lieutenant Losenkov turned to him.– I cannot sleep. Have a mug of brew and you will feel better.

Suffering from the unbearable pain, the flight engineer F. obeyed and drank it in full. The pain stopped immediately, and he fell asleep. But in twenty minutes the pain returned again and woke him up. He drank another mug. The identical chain of events occurred again and again... For the rest of the night, he drank a three-litre jar of this precious alcoholic beverage, and in the morning, he was the subject of unfavourable critical comments from his pals who shared the same room with him. But it did not matter to him. He barely could wait for the beginning of the working hours to be able to get help, and as soon as the working day officially started, he rushed to the first-aid post in hope that it was a day for a visit of a dentist. But a dentist was not there.

For God's sake!— lieutenant Losenkov said —I visited this dentist once, a female, and she stuck a drill into my mouth and then threw cement in my mouth and asked me to chew it — that was the treatment. You would be better going to a hospital.

So, the flight engineer F. waited for a car and went to the hospital. Used to the helicopters' speed, the distance between his quarters and the hospital seemed very far; he was surprised how long the car was dodging in lanes and alleys, passing the check-points. At one of them, the board technician was strictly asked why he left the regiment without his gun, but after they saw his face, distorted by a pain, they let him go.

In the hospital, a sleepy black-bearded doctor put a pain killer tablet on top of his tooth, switched on the music and went to the nurse. When numbness began to fade, the merry doctor came back, said OK, took the pliers and together with a crackle sound and the pain, pulled out his tooth. Holding the tooth, he looked at it with his rolling eyes and threw the tooth into a rubbish bin, then he pushed a cotton wedge into the patient's mouth, said "this is it", and made himself disappear again.

Drooped in the chair, the flight engineer F. then rose and crawled out. Outside he learnt that a car will be going towards his regiment only in the evening. The wound was aching and he simply could not wait by doing nothing. He needed actions to distract himself from this pain!

Navigated by the Sun, he decided to hit the road towards his regiment. Leaving the hospital behind, he was heading through dry fields. The sounds of landing and getting off planes and helicopters, gave him reassurance that he chose the right direction.

In no time, the flight engineer F. reached and was passing through several kishlaks (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) quite big ones, judging by numbers of mosques and lots of dukhans (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor). The people in the dukhans looked with a big surprise at the lonely strolling pilot in his distinctive army suit without any ammunition.

– Hey, pal! – one of them shouted towards him – What do you want? Buy or sell? Are you alone? – and looked cautiously around.

– Fat chance! – the board technician answered without slowing his stroll.– My people are marching behind me! Do not celebrate yet! – and spat out the blood.

However, just in case, he changed streets and walked along on another, followed by a flock of little kids with their outstretched hands: “Give us a present, Russian!”, who were annoyingly shouting, jumping and making ugly faces. Behind kids, a bit in the distance, several men with beards were walking towards him. The flight engineer F. started getting nervous. The pain immediately disappeared. The sweat covered his body. Why on Earth he did not take his weapon? And why he did go this way? Why did he not want to stay in the welcoming hospital! And the airdrome was in such visible distance ...

At this moment he heard a row of engine and a military KamAZ, with metallic plates instead of windscreens, turns out from the nearest corner. The board technician F. waved, and the monster stopped. The door opened, a barrel of AK-74M appeared first, and then an unshaved face came out.

– Were you knocked down? – this face asked the blood spitting man wearing a jumpsuit.

– If you do not help me, I will definitely be knocked down in a minute. – the flight engineer F. answered. – I am returning from hospital to my aerodrome. Will you give me a lift to the airdrome?

He climbed up to the cab. When the monster started his engine, the captain shook his head:

– Alone and unarmed! What a stupid thing to do! Just yesterday one warrant officer and one soldier disappeared. You, pilots, are so strange! You must have completely lost the reality of this land! Here we are completely shielded but you were promenading like on the Arbat Street ! (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor).

The captain kept grumbling, the flight engineer F. kept silent, smoking and smiling. He even laughed from time to time...

### **After “Stinger”**

April 17, 1987, Gerat. The last 5 days, the “cleaning up” operation ( an anti-terrorist operation – Editor) is in full steam. Everything should be clean and tidy before the Chief Secretary Nadgibulla will arrive.

The Gerat airdrome is located on bare ground and the military aircrafts are lined up on the right, protected from the east by the field squadron regiment– the tents, AVVs.

It is an unbearable heat. Metallic surfaces are boiling and you can touch them only with thick leather gloves. A water cart goes from helicopter to helicopter and the personnel are pouring water on their bodies and watering the helicopters' inside and out; they lie down on wet floors wearing only underpants and enjoying the coolness. Any movement of helicopters creates a dust-storm and the dirt covers the wet metal and wet bodies. Water evaporates in five minutes, leaving only the dust and heat again.

The flight engineer F. had a lucky morning – his team has been ordered to deliver weapons to Gerat. They got to Shindant, and waited there for shipping up until noon; then had lunch, swam in a pool and after that they came back, loaded with the vaults of rockets and bombs.

From the distance it was easy to see yellow smoke clouds above the Gerat valley – meaning that it was bombed. The “screamers” (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) were slashing the sky with a threatening row. On the ground, there were no helicopters left: everyone was on duty carrying out various tasks – landing operations, bombing, hammering the enemies following the tips received from a military intelligence agency.

The landed pair of helicopters got unloaded, re-fuelled. The board technicians were about to lock their planes and to go to a command tent for listening to the radio, when the Squadron Major commander Umrihin with his co-pilot, together with the commander Bozhko and the second co-pilot Kolya Shevchenko (nicknamed “Rambo” for having a special bra stuffed with grenades) approached the plane.

– Are horses ready? –Major Umrihin asked. – Let's ride!

Bozhko, climbing to the cabin, said to the flight engineer F.:

– We are going to shoot down the “Stinger”. The Squadron commander wants to receive a Hero. A secret agent and NKVD arrived. Let's start the engine.

– It is cool, huh ?! – “Rambo” said, comfortably accommodating his armed body in a chair. –We are doing the real thing! Let's fight!

The flight engineer F. sceptically commented on his bravery:

– Well, it will be better if we will chase the “Stinger”, instead of the “Stinger” chasing us.

– No worries!– “Rambo” pulled out a gun with double bullets capacity from his briefcase.

We immediately took off towards the south-west trying not to burn kerosene for nothing. We were flying just above the roofs of villages. The dust was slurring a visibility, making the sky almost to merge with the yellow-gray ground. The leading helicopter was barely visible – and from time to time the background of the earth swallowed him.

– He is disappearing like a flounder.– Bozhko said angrily, steering into this blurred horizon.

The flight engineer F. got ready his machinegun and slightly lowered its barrel, holding his finger on the trigger and trying to control the panorama, which was flying away under his feet. Black squares were full of doors, an endless number of nesting boxes were scattered under his feet, and the game was to guess where the cuckoo-enemy will pop out. The co-pilot with his machinegun also looked for them on his right.

Suddenly, on the right, a hundred metres away from the helicopter, a black wall silently erected up to the sky. The flight engineer F. saw the shapeless clay fragments, split logs, and a slowly flying tree with its roots outspread like a chicken claw.

A moment later, compressed air hit the helicopter – something banged, dusty wind gusted on the right, a map was thrown from the co-pilot’s knees to the commander’s feet – the machine was shaken up like a feather, tilting to the left – but the commander responded quickly- and flight was stabilised.

– A bit of a surprise, – he said, – the “Whistles” (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) are bombing, but they do not see us. They will crush us like cockroaches if we do not tell them we are here.

– “Speed”, roger! – he asked – Who is working in the north-west from the centre – wait guys! Two “verticals” (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) are here !

Crackling of an empty radio was the only answer.

–What is their frequency?! – the commander asked the right co-pilot. – Find and command them to hold.

One more explosion burst from the left... Bozhko, without waiting for shockwaves, turned left and right, but the helicopter was shaken. The co-pilot turned the radio switch, requested contact, but no one answered him.

–That bombing is a coded one, but we do not know the code! – he said at last.

– Well, – the commander responded,– soon we will cross the river, over there nobody is bombing. Our guys are working there now.

There was busy work in the air. On the radio, through the crackling we heard a fast speech:

– “Brigantine”, I – “Peregrine”! I hold my position on the bank and now going forward slowly...

– “Peregrine”, what are you doing ?! Fly away from there, helicopters are about to arrive, they will work there...

..The rustling, crackling, clicking:

– All right, be quiet, they will work out a little more to the right...

The rustling again...

– “Air”, I – “Peregrine”! Do not go there, there is the ANC, the ANC works there, do you copy?..

An unemotional voice:

– Roger, understand you, “Peregrine“, we will clean... Right now, brothers... And, here, watch in the courtyard... w-working!

– This is our second unit, – Bozhko explained. – I wonder where they are working? I guess, we will see as soon as we will jump into the middle of this hell...

But they passed the Herat area safely. After passing a ridge, kishlaks (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) of Guldan and Sherband, the leading pilot suggested:

– Let’s land at our headquarters and take an Afghan gunner – he will also show us the way.

We landed on a bumpy road that looked like a ploughed garden, the area was fenced by barbed wire. While landing, the soldiers jumped and waved their arms to us and fired into the air from automatic weapons.

– Ha! They do look happy to see us, – Bozhko said, – it is obvious that they have not seen friends for a while...

When the wheels almost touched the ground, the commander asked flight engineer F.:

– Jump out, go around, look at the terrain, where it sits. Something is not right here...

The flight engineer F. was nearly on the ground, when the voice of the leading pilot from the right helicopter cracked in the headphones:

– Hey, 851, you are on a minefield!

At the word “minefield”, the helicopter jumped twenty feet above the ground – the commander did it so abruptly, that the machine jumped vertically.

– So this is why the soldiers were so excited, – “Rambo” said, – they gave us a warning.

We kept flying towards the Iranian border.

– Today we had two warnings already – the commander said grimly. –Our guys almost shoot us down, then our own landmines nearly tore the tailpiece apart. Luckily, we are flying in a lucky number. This number should be considered to be lucky...

– Why? – “Rambo” asked.

– Because all laws of nature and army are not applied to this number. This machine cannot be knocked down, even at a close range. If someone can do it, it should be an alien. Am I right, Frol? – and the commander laughed.

“Rambo” checked the map – now they were flying along the Soviet border, only five hundred kilometres away from it, but on the Iranian side. A landscape of rocky plateaus was endless, where ever you can see.

– We will not go to the right because to buy vodka there, you need special coupons – Umrihin joked ( at the time of events, vodka consumption was rationed by the state via special coupons – Editor).

So, we went straight. Spreading out the map on his knees, “Rambo”, with a pencil in his hand, was dealing with the tracking and guiding of the route. The plateau was gradually decreasing. The flight engineer F. looked back and noticed that the pencil was crawling to the Hari Rud river.

– Commander, we are getting closer to the river.. – “Rambo” warned.

The commander kept silent.

– We are in I-ra-n! – co-pilot shouted bulging his eyes. – On the right is the village of Hatay and it is coming towards us!

– Will you shut up, for God’s sake! I cannot stand your screaming. It’s not our business. If the village is coming to us, it should be so, – and the leading pilot suddenly went into a left turn and muttered– We got a little bit lost...

–Wow! – “Rambo” said enthusiastically. – What would be happening if their border patrol did not sleep? An international scandal!

We turned back, jumped over the river, flew over a wide beach between the harsh river and a steep cliff.

– 851, do you observe- on top of the cliff is the “swallow’s nest”? – the leading helicopter enquired. – Seems to me, we have arrived... Now to the left, go up through the gorge...

A few seconds of silence.. and the leading helicopter suddenly said:

– You shoot too closely, 851! It was right next to me.

– I did not shoot – with a look of astonishment, the commander of 851 replied.

All of us looked up and forward. At the top of the cliff that was falling into a valley at a peculiar angle, a gleamed blaze fire was coming up with white smoke balls.

– Shoot, commander! – “Rambo” said pointing excitedly.

– They are marking the land, – the commander replied and, at the same moment, almost immediately between the leading helicopter and us, just to the left a little bit, a pair of explosions flashed. The “leading” flew through the smoke hearing how the sands were rubbing, against windows; then “the leading” has turned to the left and started descending down into the gorge.

– I told you – they are working on us! – “Rambo” shouted and his eyes sparkled; his moustache also stood up.

– “The second”, be careful, we have been targeted! – Bozhko reported. But the chopper silently disappeared behind the corner.

– From where are they shooting at us? – the commander asked, turning his head around. – Maybe, the Iranian border patrol finally woke up and came to their senses.

– Yes, over there! – the flight engineer F. and co-pilot shouted in one voice, pointing their fingers at the direction of “a swallow’s nest”.

– Yes, they flagged the target and here we are, – the commander said, directing the machine into the gorge.

The helicopter climbed up, zigzagging around the steep cliff. At the top, there was a woman with a bucket of water, who quickly covered her face with her elbow. There was also a lonely bald man with a beard in his black toe-length robe, who was watching how the Soviet helicopter was emerging from the gorge.

– The eagle! – Bozhko pointed out at him, when the helicopter levelled up with the bearded man, and gave a friendly wave from his opened blister. – Salam-hello, dear!

The flight engineer F. turned his head and looked at the bearded man. He noticed the shining sun on the shaved bald head. He saw how the man threw away his cloak and rested on his shoulder a green pipe with a heavy conical tip and directed it straight into the flight engineer’s forehead...

Time has stopped...

Slowly, the small spurts around the tip have formed smoky rings, which were curving like mushroom’s caps around the tube. The flight engineer F. heard the distinct hissing – he watched with interest how a white spray with a green pipe is slowly approaching one side of the helicopter, he saw how the tip – with two kilograms of death – is slowly rotating, screwing into the air...

The grenade was launched – the flight engineer F. thought slowly. – How to report to the commander, how to formulate it? Work or shoot? Bazooka or our RPG (see “Terminology and Glossary – Editor) ? But maybe it is not a grenade after all? And why do I feel so calm, why is everyone so quiet?

The helicopter almost stood unmoved. Then the board technician estimated the distance – no more than twenty metres to the bearded man (he saw the shabby part of the grenades), and, considering the speed of the grenade, calculated that it took no more than a quarter of a second from the moment of the shot to his warning.

– He is shooting, commander! – the flight engineer F. yelled, pointing on the right.

And from this moment the time went fast. The commander turned his head to the left, threw a pitch, moved the handle forward – the helicopter boomed down. The grenade passed over the tail, hit the opposite wall of the gorge, the air burst out with flapping and stretching sounds that pressed down the helicopter.

The commander rearranged the machine for a horizontal flight, and then started drifting up.

– “Second”, these friends worked on us once again, holly-molly!

– 851, we do not need it, let’s go to another place, do not overstay, you will run out of fuel.

– Turn back! – “Rambo” screamed – They must be punished!

– I know that, – the commander growled.

The roaring machine flew out of the gorge, hanging for a moment, and then turned back to the spot with a deep heel, heading straight into the “swallow’s nest”. “Rambo” was having fun and kept shooting non-stop from his seat. The flight engineer F. opened fire with his machinegun – and could see his tracers in the shadow of Duval. Two shadowy figures were running across the yard... The commander pulled the trigger, and rockets went forward fluffing plumage steel. Their smoky tails closed visibility, but the flight engineer F. noted how the “swallow’s nest” was covered with black and red flame. Something was cracking, exploding like a handful of caps thrown into the fire. Yet he could see, how the rockets tore apart the Iranian border...

– You wanted – you got it! – Bozhko said with a deep satisfaction, and, without looking back, they followed the leading helicopter.

– Yes, – the commander said. – this man lured us to this country, so we will be killed here. He got what he deserved. I just do not understand why they have not got us? After all, we were thrown on the plate, in a direct vision of this suicidal killer. Frol, let’s confess, is your machine bewitched?

– No, – flight engineer F. said. – This is not me... Before I enlisted the army, my Mom put spell on me to protect against evil. Back then I laughed...

– What a fool of you if you were laughing. I believe in this – the commander said. – Pass our thanks to your mother.

– “Second”, – he returned to business, – deal with the gunner. He framed us again. Check him out, or he will do it again.

– I copied that, 851. He will be punished. And now we will be landing in the same place to collect a weapon – we need to bring home something.

... We were going down into some huge funnel, spirally descending to a depth of thirty metres. It was like a blue ground pipe – it could be a gigantic azurite shaft or could be an entrance to the Dante’s hell. Crowded on each level, people were greeting us by the lifting their weapons. At the bottom we found all kinds of historical weapons and barrels that could be taken: English, Spanish, Chinese, even – from the American gangster era of Prohibition. Slowly, we climbed out of this crater, dragged behind a tail of dust, and left. The flight technician F. was confused who were these subterranean inhabitants;

most likely they were one of the friendly gangs, whose friendship could be exchanged for numerous gifts.

Now we were flying without calculating out route. We were short of fuel. We jumped over the mountain, slid down the hill, and accelerating to 250, we were leaving behind the noise of our own engines and the whistling of blades.

Then the leading helicopter suddenly voiced:

– Guys, we have to stop in one place...

– I have no fuel left, my engines are going to stop soon! – Bozhko exclaimed.

– Okay, then you go home, but I will detour for a while ! – and the “leading” turned right.

The second helicopter kept flying straight. We crossed the road, ran into a lonely ridge but we had no fuel left to do manoeuvring around this ridge and we simply started climbing.

– I do not recognise the area, – suddenly the commander said. –Did we follow the map? What if we jump over the pinnacle ridge and there will be no Herat!

– Oh, no! – and the co-pilot nervously began looking at the map.

We jumped over the pinnacle; it was smoky Herat. We flew over villages of Herat. Underneath, a red “Toyota”, with three unfriendly bearded men with a machinegun on a tripod, jumped from nowhere in front of us. They sat down and covered their heads with hands, but the board technician F. pressed the trigger– and we headed to the airport.

The fuel indicator showed the critical level of 50 litres – it was just unprocessed residue that was left. Our blood was pumping throughout our hearts: if the engine stopped, there is no autorotation at this speed, and the altitude is no help either – the helicopter will be crashed instantly.

We passed over the Herat airfield, over the strip. Wheels touched the ground, when taxied across the strip, finally all engines choked and shifted to a dying sound of a vacuum cleaner...

– This is a perfect job... – the commander said. –Ten out of ten!

Later on, during his nightly rest in Shindand, after his routine eight hours of flight, flight engineer F. was splashing in the pool for many hours. His body was overexcited and overheated.

He stretched himself on the tiled floor, lying down in this position for a while; then he popped-up, rolled over on his back and stared at the bright stars. Again and again, he was diving, then surfacing, coming out of water, lying on the wet floor, smoking, and listening how a chained common Indian monitor made a noise in his little house...

## The fifth bullet

This was an operation on the cleaning of the western kishlaks (see “Terminology and Glossary”) of Herat. Returning from the action, the board No 33 contained five holes from bullets on the right side and the bottom. Normally, before imposing any patches, technicians, like as surgeons, provided a thorough check: they should remove all bullets stuck in the body of a helicopter and trace the bullet trajectories and fix all damaged units and pipelines. This job should be carried out until the last bullet will be found.

The fifth bullet on board No. 33 was a mystery one, and all staff have been looking for it for several days. Four bullets were found, but the fifth one just evaporated, despite her obvious mark of ricocheting from shutters and heading towards the hatch of a fodder machine gun. The hatch has no damage.

– Be honest, – the engineer Ivanov tried to find out the truth from the flight mechanic Tarabrin, –tell me that the hatch was opened and the bullet fell into it, am I right?

– I opened nothing! – the lieutenant Tarabrin lazily replied. – My machine gun was not even loaded, why would I need to stick the gun out?

– You should take it out; maybe then, you would not have the holes at the tail! – the engineer was getting angry. – Our fathers and grandfathers did it with Il-2, and you are too lazy to pull out your own real machine gun!

– The shooting was on the left, and my machine gun is on the right, they would not see it anyway, –the flight mechanic answered with an imperceptible yawning.

– Find this bullet then! – the engineer ordered, – I am allowed to hold the helicopter on the ground for a day but no longer!

The flight engineer F. was present during the conversation. He came to try on a denim suit which the flight mechanic Tarabrin had bought in Herat, but later on, he found out that it was a little bit too small for him.

– What is your problem?! – the flight engineer F. asked him as soon as the engineer walked away. – Shoot a hole somewhere – and you will have the fifth bullet’s entrance, that is all! Even better – to screw a hole somewhere so it will look like a trace of this bullet.

– You know, we looked for this bullet everywhere; – the lieutenant Tarabrin waved desperately with his hands, – and found nothing, but what will be if the bullet got stuck inside of some vital parts of a helicopter?

The flight engineer F. lowered his head and saw a mercury brilliant trace of a ricochet on the pulling lock; he looked towards the fodder hatch. A black

Kalashnikov, strapped to a wall over the closed hatch, was looking directly at his face.

– You know, Alexey, –the flight engineer F. said with a tinge of doubt in his voice,– in physics, a movement of antiparticles can be described through an equation of the movement of the particle turned back in time?

– What are you talking about? – Tarabrin asked melancholically.

The flight engineer F. did not answer. He approached the machine gun, lifted it with handles and shook. The armor-piercing bullet of caliber 7.62 rolled out on his palm, or to be exact, it was a core of the bullet, not rumbled at all, just scratched a little bit.

– What a smart bullet, – said Tarabrin validly. – It is smarter than we are!

– Yes, indeed, –the flight engineer F. snapped, –Definitely, it is smarter than you... And because of it, you will give me a good discount for a denim suite I want to buy from you.

### **The fight with the sun**

The Divisional Commander has been brought to Gerishk. We were sitting in the country near the road and saw how he arrived.

The sun is still high in the sky. It is an unbearable heat. The pilots are walking to a small river, leaving their helicopters under the APCs' (see "Terminology and Glossary") protection. The soft white dust rises to their knees like cement, sticking to the army pants. The river bank is steep; the huge gray stone seems to be curved with a fancy decor. A bit closer to the river, old stone slabs with numerous holes are looking like old gigantic trees with mini pools in their holes. The peacefulness and silence have been interrupted only by a light sound of reeds growing on the opposite bank of the river. We do not want to think that there can be someone except the egrets. Nevertheless, our weapons and military uniforms are placed in a close proximity, and one of us is taking turn to guard the place with a gun in his hands. First, what the pilots do – is bathe in this small hot river with its stony and slightly rough bottom; then they are washing their uniforms; after that – they dry it for several minutes on the heated stones. Plunging into the river one more time, they imprisoned their bodies into these hot uniforms and drag their feet to a dining room to have lunch.

The Divisional commander together with the local infantry major waited for them near the helicopters.

– Listen here, guys, –the commander said. – Here is someone who is asking you for help. The enemy hidden in the mountain, fired at our column a hundred kilometers to the north from here. Our guys cannot get them. If we do not remove

them before darkness – they will leave. Rise your machines in the air and destroy them from above.

We took the major aboard and departed. In a few minutes of the fight, we saw an enormous mass of gigantic rocks sticking out in the middle of the desert. When we came closer, we spotted two of our cars burning at the bottom of the mountain, and next to them a tank and two APCs that were standing with trunks lifted up.

– This is what I called an afternoon erection, – the commander cracked the joke. – What stupidity! Leave the APCs for interception, drive the tank far away and shoot.

– The enemy is on a northern slope! – the major shouted. – Do not come closer, hit on that terrace, they are in caves, you aim at them directly! Eh, it is a pity, our tanks do not fly!

The pair of the crocodiles (see “Terminology and Glossary”) passed the rock, drove for two kilometres more and turned back getting ready to release a volley of bombs. But being in a hurry there was one problem that we did not consider.

– Damn it! – the commander swore. – The sun is on the enemies’ side!

The crown of the sun spread its rays over a half-sky and was shining over the top of the mountains. The brightness of the sun shot us directly with its full-steam heat and attacked us with its hot yellow fog, filling our cabins with unbearable temperature and light.

The flight engineer F. regretted that he had not put on his helmet with the light filter. But it was too late to be sorry for that.

– “Air”, quickly, they are shooting at your forehead! – a warning comes from the “land”.

The flight engineer F. aimed slightly below the sun and pressed the trigger. He moved his trunk in all directions trying to cover the sector of rocks as wide as possible. The foreign land and its roads jumped into his eyes but the horror was that we could not see either the tracks, nor those who were on them, everything was filled with this endless sun.

The flight engineer F. kept pressing his trigger, and by bending down to the machine gun, he tries to avoid this incredible glare. Of course, it will be very sad, even, let’s say, it will not be fair to have a meeting with the bullets coming from this solar fog. One bullet – and everything is in silence. And you are not here anymore... The end.

The helicopter shuddered, the smoke, with a hissing sound, rushed into the cabin, but bombs missed on the left, moving towards the sun. The leading helicopter took off to the left, giving the opportunity to the second one to do the final stroke of their work.

– “Air”, I am “Earth”! A little bit higher one more time, guys! Drop these freaks, and we will finish them “, –the commander said.

– The 945, take the opposite to my direction! –the commander ordered. – I will go to the left, you – to the right. This sun will ruin us. Take altitude to four hundred and stop at forty five, do it!

– I got it ...

The helicopters diverged in different directions; they turned at the same time and took the mountain under full control. Lowering their noses and lifting tails, they could see everything on this mountain with good visibility.

The flight engineer F. found a terrace, where he distinguished the figures of enemies who were fidgeting with machine guns. Divided into two groups, they had placed into two stocky tripods the machine guns. “How did they get them here?” –the flight engineer F. asked himself.

In a second, he understood what they had – it was the packed antiaircraft mountain-pack machine-gun installation unit. The second chopper was already stretching their bullets to the mountain. The flight engineer F. slightly adjusted his gun and pulled the trigger and saw how his slightly curved fiery arc connected his chopper with the edge of the terrace. He raised the gun again, moved a trunk, and fired to the left, spraying dust and stone on the terrace. The tracing bullets fell down into the abyss. The dukhi (see “Terminology and Glossary”) crouched down.

– Good job! –the commander commented: – The 945, it is your work..Get ready ... Fire!

Both choppers fired almost synchronously. The link of smoky streams from two sides hit into the rock – and the terrace was crossed out by this slanting cross.

The wind pulled away the fumes and we could see that there was no terrace any more – it was razed to the slope. Big fragments and small stones still flew down, hitting against ledges and jumping up, they fell directly near the tank and the APCs (see “Terminology and Glossary”).

The pale gray clouds were carried away. The helicopters completed their last turn; the second helicopter caught up with the leading, they formed the correct flight figure and went home.

– Well done, thank you, guys! – the “land” said goodbye – That was great! Top notch! Thank you!

The commander inquired about wounded, killed soldiers, and asked should he collect the dead ones. But all of us were alright, and the pair of the helicopters went back to Gerishk

– Kandahar men should give us a bottle of booze, –the commander said, – because we worked in their zone. What a good resting day we had today! At the beginning, we bathed, and then had deafened small fish ...

He looked at the watch and was very surprised:

– Do you know – we bathed only fifteen minutes ago! No wonder that our suits are still wet!

Then he was silent.

– Or have I just sweated?

In a minute:

– And why have they not fired at us from the mobile surface-to-air missile system? We could have been burn down by now ... Perhaps, they did not have it...

He lit up a cigarette, turned to the major who was sitting slightly behind the place of the flight mechanic, and asked:

– Well, did you like it?

– I'm speechless! – said the major. – “Mother, I love the pilot!” – he sang the line from a famous song.

### **Chakcharan's dogs**

The place of Chakcharan was famous for its kennel with a large amount of dogs. If pilots had an idea to have a stroll and enjoy the bright snow under the mountain's sun, they could observe two types of living beings. The first are the soldiers of the “green” army wrapped up in some tatters and looking like fascists after the Stalingrad ( a reference to a famous victory battle of the Soviet Army during WW2– Editor), who were shoveling snow to clear a strip for the landing of distinguished guests.

The second were amazing dogs – huge, shaggy; they cheerfully jumped on the deep snow, falling up to their breast and coming out from this sparkling snow under the sun dust– they were not like dogs, but rather woolly dolphins that played in a sea of snow under the dark blue sky of Chakcharan.

Despite seeming docile, the dogs (the cross-breed between the Caucasian shepherd - dogs and an unknown local breed) were well trained for protecting the Soviet garrison. Many Chakcharan guests were fascinated by their beauty, size and cleverness, and all of them wanted to have a puppy from them (really, why not?!). But only one case of leakage of this Chakcharan gene pool was known to the author authentically.

When the flight mechanic F. was going to visit Chakcharan one more time, the commander of the 2nd target acquisition unit approached him and gave five thousand afoshkas (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) to the flight mechanic F. and told him:

– Find the ensign there and buy a puppy. Be modest and do not ask everyone – these sinologists can kick your ass and deport violently. Last time I tried to make a deal with the ensign because I promised to my son to buy a puppy.

Having arrived in Chakcharan, the flight engineer F. was not in a hurry to look for the ensign. He waited for the crews to go to dukhan (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), closed his helicopter, and then he decided to have a walk. He headed for a cloud of smoke, rising on the edge of the field. Coming closer to it, he confirmed to himself that the army is still predictable – this was the army’s kitchen. There were three red fluffy puppies near the kitchen; they were turning and wagging their tails on the dirty trampled-down snow with ice-covered thawed patches, around the crumpled aluminum basin with already cooled down fat at the bottom. The flight engineer – having once again been surprised how smart he was – looked round, picked up the closest puppy and put him under a warm jacket bosom, zipped, and left, looking a bit pregnant.

The flight engineer F. casually walked to his helicopter, opened a door, put the silent puppy in the salon, and locked the door.

He was smoking when he saw how the ensign was looking for something around near the kitchen – he obviously was looking for his loss. The flight engineer F. met him by a question:

– Can I get something to eat here? Our men left and closed the helicopter’s door – he lied. (“Please, a little fellow, do not begin to whimper”, – he mentally pleaded to the puppy ).

– You can go to the kitchen, and grab hot tea over there, – the ensign mechanically answered, not even turning his head towards the flight engineer F. – Have you seen a puppy here? May be it came this way?

– Well, I have been here only for few minutes, but I will I ask our guys, when they return. You better ask the heavy multi-purpose helicopter 6 (MPH-6) over there, they were uploading for some time.

The ensign asked for a cigarette and light, and was almost ready to go to other side of the field where two silhouettes of gray elephant hulks of MPH6 stood up, surrounded by loading machines, when, suddenly, he heard a weak murmur, and the light yellow stream began to flow on the snow from a slit. The ensign pricked up his ears, bent, looking under the bottom.

– Damn it! The fuel beats out through the drainage! –the flight engineer worriedly exclaimed, bending too. – The pressure is rather low here, in the mountains ...

The ensign sighed:

– I will go to these big helicopters ... And, maybe, the little fellow has already been returned?

Thus, the puppy from the region of Chakcharan was transported to the Far East of the Soviet Union via Shindand.

## The Fokker Scourge

Since dawn a pair of choppers were engaged in free hunting by searching the desert to the west of Shindand, near the Iranian border. Two helicopters have already been flying for two hours and landed whenever a senior officer from the Special Forces group requested. However, the hunting had no success – no cars, no camels, no enemy. There were only black tents of Pashtuns (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) that from above looked like karakurt (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor).

When we did land again and our soldiers were searching the tents for the enemy, an on-board technician looked at the fuel indicator and noticed that there was just enough kerosene to get back to the “point”.

– Commander, it is time to return, – he said, pointing to the fuel gauge.

The commander popped out from his blister, called to a soldier standing nearby and shouted:

– Notify everyone – our fuel is running low!

The soldier nodded calmly, turned his face to the tents, and made the ordered notification to his comrades. He did it a very simple way- raised his gun and pulled the trigger. The string of bullets – almost a third of cartridges from his loaded gun! – went straight up into the sky. But because he was standing right under the rotating blades, all bullets went straight into the blades!

The chopper’s crew became speechless. The commander together with the board engineer F. pulled their hair in desperation, swearing something unreadable. They were punching the air towards the soldier; pointed at the head and twirling a finger at the temple (this gesture indicates craziness – Editor). The soldier looked at these strange actions of pilots, shrugged his shoulders and, with a confused look on his face, decided to move a few steps away from the chopper, just in case.

On the way home, everyone in the crew was listening to the whistling blades, looking closely at the edges of the screws – but everything seemed to be normal.

When they arrived and turned off the engines, two pilots together with the flight technician F. climbed up to the blades and searched for the damage but their careful examination showed that they do not have any holes!

– This soldier probably has a Fokker Scourge (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) installed on his Kalashnikov!– the board engineer F. joked with a happy heart because it mean no need to change the blades.

– If this is the scenario, then it is okay – the commander grinned, – but what if (God forbid!) our Special Forces are using blank cartridges?

## The Armored Barrel

The Chagcharansk's flights continued to be harassingly dangerous, mainly because of a lack of adequate responses to cover the fuel overuse due to the alpine landscape.

One day the board N10 took the wounded ones from Chaghcharan town. When the chopper took off and climbed to the top of the ridge, heading towards Shindand, the flight engineer F. began assisting the doctor to set the drips – he tightened the tourniquets- or held the soldiers' arms, trying to minimize vibration, so the doctor could inject the veins – and at this altitude the vibration was so hard that it resembles being in a racing cart. Soon the air loss at this high altitude started to affect two soldiers, who were wounded in the chest, and began turning blue, constantly choking, and blowing up pink bubbles.

But there was nothing that we could do at this height, and the commander decided to land his pair of helicopters to make sure that the wounded ones could survive until we reached a hospital... but at the landing spot, at the valleys near a river, the jihadist (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) were already waiting for us. Spitting liquid fire to jihadist, we somehow got away. To avoid a risky landing again, it was decided to do landing one more time near the mountain range of Safed Koh, so the wounded will be breathing the air with their bloody mouths. And again, after descending from the pinnacle, after searching through the gully for a safe landing, they were shot at by Afghans from their "Boers" (see "Termonology and Glossary"– Editor).

When they got to a hospital, the wounded ones were alive, but this flight finally made the onboard technician F. very angry. For the next flight to the mountains, he prepared well: put on board two ordinary barrels and filled them with kerosene. The onboard technician of the main one 27, Lieutenant Mukhametshin, did the same thing. They both charged machine gun belts with more bullets and scored six rocket units each.

Now they were ready.

...The flight was a very slow one. They were roaming the valleys, looking behind every tree, teasing shepherds and farmers by faking their helplessness... and the bite was swallowed.

– We are being shot – the main helicopter suddenly reported. – It seems that they hit our tail. But we are still going...

The commander immediately directed the pair of choppers to fly along the river bed on the left, hiding behind the mountain. Enemies knew about our problems with the fuel, this is why they fired at the tail all the time. Usually, in such situations, helicopters flew away without looking back and the crews helplessly grind their teeth. But this time it was different.

– Now, I will show you, assholes! – and the commander turned the chopper for the attack.

They saw that a truck with the heavy machine gun stopped on the river bank, and three bearded men were stretching on the grass and laughing at cowardly shuravis (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor).

The clouds go sullen on the border of my country..– the commander whispered a line from a well- known patriotic song and directed his helicopter higher, to the top of the mountain, and from there the two choppers, simultaneously, flew down on the heads of the bearded men- who did not expect such meanness,- they jumped up: one rushed to the cockpit, the other two climbed into their truck as soon as they have spotted two dragons falling from the sky. The flight engenner F. pressed a trigger with his fingers – nothing left after his gesture! – and a string of bullets ripped off the car door with tracers waving on the truck like snakes...

– And the samurai were falling down..– now the commander was shouting his favorite song, and, at the same time, pressing the trigger, – ...under the pressure of steel and fire!– and he finished his song.

The truck flew up and fell back to the ground in the form of unrecognized metal and rubber precipitations that were burning. The smoke was rising up – a piercing black bubble against the background of the sugary white peaks.

– Even if someone survived- the commander said– we will not finish them. I am sure, they crapped in their pants and they will be remember the fear for the rest of their life. From now on they are just ordinary shit-asses...

For the rest of their way back, the crew was singing “On the border the clouds go sullen, silence enveloped the edge of the stern”, which they finished with the line “The crew of a battle machine!!!” with a special feeling and tears in their eyes from pride.

Despite the merry signing, the flight engenner F. kept sending long strings of bullets to the sloppy hills in all directions. To make sure, to make them heard and to be feared.

On arrival, it turned out that the leading helicopter was hit by the heavy machine gun with a mortal shell of 12.7 mm. The bullet pierced the back flap, ricocheted off to the opposite side, went through the empty kerosene barrels and lodged there, sticking out its smashed nose.

This kind of bullet (including those that were made in China) had a very powerful demolishing force. One such bullet went through the bottom of a helicopter, and passed all layers of parachutes, stopped at the bottom of a stool, where a navigator Senior lieutenant B. used to sit, touching his bum with its hot pointy nose. During the heat of battle he did not realize what had taken place, but on the ground, after discovering a sharp bump, Senior lieutenant realized what could of happened and he collapsed. Only a glass of vodka helped him to return

to his senses. After suffering from such stress the repeat doses of a glass of vodka could never knock pilots down – but only alleviate them.

When the bullet was removed from the barrel, flight technician F. narrowed his eyes:

– You know, Felix, – they were aiming at your bum. If not for my barrel, this bullet would have drilled a hole under your seat.

– If it was not for your barrel – Lieutenant Mukhametshin shivered – we would not have this bravado trip in the first place, damn you!

– But now they are scared. They know who is in-charge!  
And, indeed, the Chagcharan route became much safer.

### **The Fondant Chocolate**

At the very beginning of his war, the flight engineer F. was transporting three officers with their cargo, which included a bunch of jackets, packed lunch boxes, canned meat, canned butter and potatoes. Among the usual stuff there were some personal items: a “Sanyo” portable tape recorder and several boxes of chocolate with an inscription on their labels in Slavonic, but not in Russian: “Litoyi chokolat”. This chocolate inexplicably excited the imagination of the flight technician F.

He imagined that there, in the boxes, wrapped in colorful foil, are figurines cast in dark chocolate. It reminded him of a hygienic set “Moidodyr” for children, in which a molded soap in the shape of squirrels were placed next to a round box of tooth powder; he imagined the same squirrel, and other small animals, but made of chocolate.

Later, when he had some money, he had learned that those boxes had no chocolate, but contained ordinary Yugoslavian made lollypops “Bonko”. They had very pretty packaging, they were themselves pretty as semiprecious stones – the rocks shaped by the sea, – they were delicious, more delicious than the berries they were named after – but... it was a disappointment. Well, anyway, the image of chocolate - warm, heavy, glossy figurines stuck in the head of flight engineer F.

One day, the pair of choppers were bringing cargo to the advisors’ village somewhere in the south. Upon arriving, the pilots did everything that should be done, then started the ignition and took off. To save time and fuel, they decided to cut corners, and, without flying around the villages, take a direct flight.

The choppers took the safest route –above the villa of the advisors. They were flying neither high, nor low – something around fifteen metres – just to be sure not to touch the trees, but also diminish the risk of attack. So, when the first one flew over the villa, and the second one was just approaching it, major Bozhko transmitted:

– Oh, myyyyyy God!. do not look down, young people!

After these words both crews, from the leading and the second helicopter, looked down with an extreme curiousness. Beneath them they saw a line of widely ramified Himalayan cedars; and there was also a blue rectangle pool, confined by a high fence, next to a substantial building. However, it was not the beauty of this “Taj Mahal” composition, but a reflection of the white villa in the calm water with a background of the blue sky, that made the entire crew lose their breathe.

On the pink sand near the pool, on identical towels with a pattern of slashing red and blue stripes, two young women were lying like candies wrapped in this surrealistic reality. One was lying on her stomach, the other one – on her back. Their bodies were naked and tanned. Shining sun reflected on their wet bodies. Two chocolate figures lying on the wrappers – they are a chocolate dream, those squirrels!

– The Fondant chocolate! – the flight engineer F. whispered and felt a taste of dark chocolate and cognac in his mouth. Yes, these figurines must have cognac in them...

It was like the helicopters had came across, and been stricken by an invisible force, which cause them to shiver slightly. The left and right pilots, sticking out their heads into the open blisters, were looking down; the right one even waved with his hand. The flight engineer F. also was looking down at his feet, through the lower glass under the bed gun. The water started to ripple, the bathers’ beach towels began hurriedly slapping their mistresses as they try to cover from the looks above. But the women were not embarrassed at all; they lent on their elbows, and waved to the dragons that were crawling over them.

– Hey, where are you? – Said Bozhko. – Have you got lost between their tits, or what? Catch up quickly!

And the second helicopter with a guilty bowing of its head followed the leader.

## **The Duel**

Sveta was beautiful; she was the waitress in a diner. To be exact, she was gorgeous, or, perhaps, she was rather absolutely stunning. However, not everyone shared this opinion of flight engineer F.

Her green eyes, big lips, a careless “ponytail”, slim, flexible, tanned body, small breasts, which were covered with a tight-fitting T-shirt, but revealing a dark flat stomach – all of these, of course, could excite those who were having breakfast, lunch or dinner. But not everyone openly admired her. Many people grimaced when her name was mentioned.

Maybe her provocative small breasts were a stumbling block for lovers, but there was another reason for such attitude of the majority of the summer crew. The beautiful woman was not responding to signs of the attention that she was receiving. Once, when a major extended his affectionate hand to Sveta's tanned thigh while she was pouring him tea, she calmly said:

– Hands off, or I will rinse your bald head with this boiling water. – And she shook a large kettle slightly in the direction of the major's face.

The flight engineer F. was fearful of her. Rather, he was scared that she might be rude to him, so he tried communicating with her politely and using a minimal set of words. Entering the diner in the morning, he would say “Good morning” – and she could kindly respond. His “Thank you” will be following by a very friendly “You're welcome” or “That's OK”. And this was enough for the lieutenant to hope that she could treat him differently compared to others.

Some guys explained her weary contempt by a rumor that Sveta came here from Odessa city. According to the rumor, over there she was in charge of a large department store, but the financial troubles allegedly forced her to flee to the “wild south”. Someone also suggested that the waitress was suffering from dissatisfaction with her personal life.

– That bitch! – Some would say when she left swinging her hips after throwing the plates on the table with a loud bang. The senior lieutenant Sklyarenko was the one who raged about her the most.

– What the hell is that! – he fumed. – Again, there are no knives on the tables, and this chick does not even care! By the way, we have to go into battle with a quiet mind. And here in the diner... – I cannot stand it!

One day, when Sveta, proudly holding her head and carrying a tray in her hands, was passing lieutenant Sklyarenko's table, he said loudly:

– Excuse me, waitress, bring me the kettle, please!

Without turning her head, Sveta replied:

– Take it from the table next to you.

– I want you to bring it to me! – Senior lieutenant raised his voice.

The waitress took a full kettle and put it down on the table with force. Hot tea poured from the spout onto the lieutenant's knees.

– A-ah-ah! – He cried and jumped up, knocking over a chair. – What have you done, you bitch! You did it on purpose!

Sveta, leaning across the table and looking into the eyes of senior lieutenant, quietly but clearly said:

– Fuck you, asshole!

– What did you say? – the senior lieutenant was cross. – Comrade Commander! Comrade Commander!

And Squadron Commander, who was sitting at a table together with a chief of staff and the deputy commander for political work, sighed wearily:

– Lieutenant, why are you always squealing? What happened this time?

– She swore at me, Comrade Colonel!

– And what do you want me to do? Do you want me to defend your honor? I cannot do that, – the commander spread his hands to the sides. – Well, take it as a duel...

### **Tenderness incompatible with life**

It happened near Farah. We had a scheduled hunt for Pashtu' s( see' Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) rebellions. A tandem of helicopters, which was led by board № 10, circled over the Pashtu's' camps.

We explored the area with an eye on the neighborhood, and if we spotted a camp, which looked just like a line of several black tents, we landed. Captain Kezikov was in charge of the leading board. He landed the helicopter with its doors on the opposite side from the tents, covering the SWAT team that unstoppably ran out from the helicopter 's belly. Whilst soldiers led by the first lieutenant were searching these tents, the helicopters were waiting. The first chopper without stopping, was banging everything around with its machine gun. The second one was circling above, ready to cover the SWAT team with his fire from the air.

So, now the pilot of the covering helicopter, was watching how the inspection was going on the ground and making his comments:

– They entered the houses, began scattering things around...Oh, from outside baba (in Russian a disrespected word for women – Editor) run into the tents ...Hah, the goats are getting in their way, being underfoot...The old men went out...talking...arguing about something...And here is the catch, now we pull him out right away...

The Pashtu guy who was arrested, had a short haircut, a little beard, long black shirt with a purple tinge, loose trousers; he has no shoes rather gray dusty feet in his flip-flops. Being huge, he was taller than the soldiers, who guarded him.

The soldier, who was walking behind this captive giant, every three steps pushed the Pashtu guy with his machine gun with such force that the captive threw his head back and ran a few steps forward. When he was loaded into the helicopter, the troop commander pushed the captive's head on the cockpit:

– Found with him a bag of the ammunition and a "drill"!

– So what? –Kezikov surprised. – He had to protect his tribe somehow...

But the commander shrugged in astonishment and disappeared. As a planned action, they have to hunt and bring someone, to show the result of operations, so they do not care much whom they catch.

After the next turn of searching over the foothills, we found another camp and we landed. The same chain of action happened again: the troop ran out of the helicopter's belly, lined up in a thin chain and trotted idly to the tents. The first lieutenant, was the last to leave the helicopter, and he said to the flight engineer F.

– We will come back soon, you keep watch on this rookie, all right? – he forcefully put into the flight engineer's hands the confiscated gun. – Do not be a coward, if you see any movement, just hit him with this rifle's butt right in the mug!

The flight engineer wanted to open his mouth to reject his present, but the commander had already jumped out from the helicopter and rushed to his soldiers.

– Holy shit, did you hear that? – the first engineer asked, addressing his perturbation to the captive guy, and only when he finished saying this, the first engineer understood his role in such a situation.

The flight engineer F. was sitting in the folding chair, in the aisle of the cockpit, facing the cargo compartment and holding the rifle butt. The butt of this rifle had dark, deeply polished wood, and looked like it was about 40 years old. From his position, the flight engineer F. was directly observing the man in the black shirt, who was sitting down in the aisle near the extra tank and watching the flight engineer. His hands, placed on his knees, were black and big, with bulging veins. The flight engineer suddenly noticed that the guy, with his aquiline nose and a wide jaw, looked exactly like Abdullah from the movie "White Sun of the Desert". It also came to his mind, if this Abdullah reached out with his long hand, he easily could grab the rifle and tear it away from the weak hands of the flight engineer F.

Abdullah seemed to understand what this white man was thinking, and looking at the rifle, he raises his eyes directly into the eyes of the flight engineer F. slowly lifting his hands. The flight engineer strained himself, and slightly raised his leg in front of him, just in case the captive might attack him. Abdullah slowly pointed at himself, then at the door, and with his beckoning smile, pointed at the exit as he was saying: "It would be not bad to leave this place, Commander". The flight engineer disapprovingly shook his head and wagged his finger at him, then put that finger on the intercom and said:

–These freaks left me with this peasant and the peasant looks suspicious!

– Just point your gun or rifle at him, – Kezikov advised.

– I had no time to go the guns' store today! –the flight engineer said.– I have nothing!

Abdullah, seeing his confusion, rose slightly on his knees.

– Give me something, he is standing up! –the flight engineer hissed.

Here you are, twit! – Kezikov poked him in the back with the butt of his rifle. – Just in case, be careful not to send your bullet through the tank, ...

Without taking his eyes from the captive, the flight engineer put over his shoulder a Kalashnikov rifle. Then in a hurry removed its' safety catch and reloaded the weapon.

Abdullah stood up abruptly on his knees, reaching out his hands and showing his palms, with a pleasing look.

– Sit down! – the flight engineer shouted, pointing his rifle to Abdullah's chest. Abdullah fell down on the floor again, bowed his head and hunched over, trying to diminish his size and not to scare this man with the rifle.

When the troop came back, the flight engineer rushed to the commander.

– Are you insane or what? – he angrily exclaimed. – I am not your guard, you know! Seemed to me the guy thought I was going to kill him!

– So what? – the lieutenant gave a puzzled look to the flight engineer and said. – Oh, how tender you are!

### **The portrait with a pomegranate**

There were three creatures, which Lieutenant F. liked in his enclosed world of war. They were: a disdainful waitress Sveta, a dog Gloomy, and his helicopter number 10. All of them were beautiful and independent.

Gloomy was a dog with a big muscular body like a lion, who always followed Sveta. He liked laying at her feet, when she sat on a porch at her dormitory. Maybe he was attached to her because she fed him, although to the lieutenant F. this strange couple appeared as an ancient mythical heroic pair. She represented a goddess of war with her mighty faithful servant. A helicopter was a dragon (because of the round body and big eyes), who faithfully served to the flight engineer F. And definitely it was a female dragon.

“My machine is very beautiful,– wrote the flight engineer F. in one of his letters. –When she is in flight, she is so gentle and I see her curves, the insides of me freeze from admiration. All harmony of the world has been collected in a sound of her engines, it is a music that needs to be heard. Her paraffin is light-yellow and transparent as ... (the line was crossed out)... And her hydraulic fluid had the color and smell of cranberry juice. This machine with its convex rear doors, with smoky, splattered grease bonnets, flexible blades with a narrow long tail, with its roaring speed and heavy fire – all of these represent to me Eros and Thanatos ( see “ Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) of my war.

As for Sveta, the flight engineer F. had made no attempt to get closer to Sveta, although every morning he would ask Gloomy "Say hello to your hostess". Gloomy sleeps in the corridor of a dormitory because they did not allow him to sleep inside of their room. Maybe the flight engineer F did not want to destroy the mystery created by his imagination, or maybe he was just afraid that she would refuse him as she refused all the other men. Although, the flight engineer F was a fatalist, who believes in fate.

It should be said that the flight engineer F. could not impatiently look at any flawless forms of life. If he saw something beautiful, he must grab a piece of paper and a pencil in his hand; and he began to draw a picture.

Mostly, naked women and bareback horses were the theme of his drawings. Sometimes he combined these themes and drew a naked woman on a horseback. In his opinion, these two kinds of living beings were the most perfect that the Creator sculpted.

When the flight engineer F., for the first time entered the dining room of the Shindad's air base, he saw how a waitress Sveta was proudly carrying her tray, how her fringe and tail were moving in time with her steps, how she was looking and snorting with her nostrils flared with discontent. He could not resist it.

In his room, on a shelf was a rolled up poster. On one side of the poster was a picture of a caravan inspection; it displayed how a landed leading chopper was on the right behind the caravan ( picturing three camels who were directed by two cameleers in trousers and turbans) ; there was also a second helicopter pictured in the upper left corner. Sketching with a brown pencil, the poster also demonstrated all distances and shelling sectors towards the mountains pictured somewhere on the horizon.

But the other side of this poster was clear, and after wiping with a loaf of white bread, the surface of this side became pristine. Flight engineer F. borrowed from everyone all pencil stubs and began his work.

In the evening he pinned the sheet to the plywood wall in his tiny kitchen, moved a bench under the table to have more free space, took a step back, squinted, stretched out his hand with a pencil, swinging in the air like a sword, and with a few light touches he started his drawing of a feminine silhouette..

– My beautiful has arrived... – he was whispering, stepping back.

She was standing, looked up to the sky and covered her eyes from the sun with her palm. She was naked, with the barely outlined collarbones, nipples-eyelets, a navel, and knees...

After admiring her transparent nudity for a few minutes, he wrapped her thighs with the thin piece of a white cloth.

Wow! – the flight engineer Losenkov had exclaimed peering over his shoulder. – I wonder how good the picture will be, when you will finish it ...

The artist did not answer, he covered the picture with a clean rag. He knew that he should stop painting her, that any further drawing would kill the magic of unspoken things, but he wanted to transfer to the paper not only her lines and figure, but the entire mosaic of her flesh, her tanned and delicate skin, which was like something powdered with a sweet pollen, which he would not be tired of licking, if only...

So, he continued the creation of the picture in his mind. During breakfast, lunch and dinner, he looked delicately at the waitress, mentally drawing her head, torso, legs, the location of her bumps and dimples; and then he repeated the sketch on his thigh with his finger. Her skirt was short and legs were long and her opened shirt showed her soft elastic belly and ribs, which he wanted to take with both hands and open her like a pomegranate full of seeds...

Then after a dinner, returning to his unit, he usually takes out his notebook, and a pencil; then he will be drawing a sketch of her body, how he had memorized by drawing on his thigh that was still burning from the imaginative sketches of her.

During the nights, he would transform these daily imaginative sketches to paper. The shades, stitched to her body by blinks of the sun, were placed onto her shoulders, chest, lilac bones, the thighs, and her matte skin, as he wanted it to be. The resemblance of her face was too close to the original, and he gave her a baseball cap to shadow most of her face. Instead of a heavy kettle, he put into her hands a belt of his rifle, which was posing right there in a corner. Now the imaginative canvass of his picture ( in which she was holding his gun as a full blood horse, full of fire and an unstoppable energy) has been completed.

She was appearing from the white light, as a goddess of the sun. It seemed to him, that when the last stroke would be placed on the paper, she could have stepped down from this rolled paper; and with her bare feet, she will touch the floor in front of the artist. Kneeling, he spent a bit of time on her leg; even a throbbing vein on her ankle was pictured.

When the perfect embodiment of her had been achieved, and it became obvious that any slight change will only worsen the picture, he framed her with an inscription in English. Immediately this picture transformed into a poster that invites viewers to Shindand, to 302 flying squadron; and this strong willed woman, sunbathing and holding a AKS-7, seems to invite whoever you are – a boy, a man or an old man – to come here, and you will have no regrets!

Followed the admiring sighs and exclamations which filled the room, the artist hung the poster on the wall, over the old pictures from newspapers and magazines, pictures of trophy- weapons, mountain roads with steep curbs, helicopters on the ground and in the sky.

– She is an icon! – The first lieutenant Torgashov exhaled, raising his hands. – She will be our guardian angel...

– I think, she is too thin. – The first lieutenant Losenkov pointed at her breasts.

– It is you, Losenkov, who is the bald-headed one! – Torgashov disagreed. – She is gorgeous!

And everyone became involved into the hot dispute, and everyone expressed different opinions.

The artist took a cigarette and went outside. Whilst walking, he inhaled and exhaled the cigarette smoke. He was thinking about something; and after the artist reached the bathhouse, and he swam in the pool, he already knew what to do.

This poster he will present to her! Yes, it would be an unexpected move – he thought excitedly, quickly walking. It would be a surprise for her. The detailed options of how he will do it, he left for his bedtime, when he will be alone behind his closed eyelids.

A few days later, pilots visited the room, as they had heard about the beauty hanging on the wall. Each of them asked him to draw the same beauty for them, or may be even a smaller version of her. They promised to bring the new papers for drawings and new pencils, candies, soda, alcohol, and money. Even the Police Commissioner had been visiting the artist. The Police Commissioner stood silently for a moment, looking at the picture and when he was ready to leave the room, he asked to pull the picture down or at least cover it because tomorrow an inspection team from Kabul was expected. After him, the first lieutenant Taran came and standing on a stool, he commenced a real photo session of the poster with and without a flash.

Observing the growth of fame, the artist realized that the problem of presenting the gift will be resolved. Indeed, she would hear the spreading rumors and would visit his room, alone or with friends. A few women already had visited the room and asked to give the picture to them. Of course, the artist had refused. But if she will ask, he will remove the poster from the wall, and, turning gently, will give it to her silently. No, he should not do it in silence. He will say that it is still not completed and it will be best for him to finish it. Of course, he would not have a fixing spray, but she might. “What is it?” – She would ask, surprised. “Just hairspray” – he would answer. And then the relationship would develop unstoppable, otherwise there was no sense to start it.

Days passed. Although the flight engineer did not notice any signs of her acknowledgement about his picture, or in the behavior of his model, he was not worried. He was waiting as an experienced hunter.

But fate delivered a curve that the first lieutenant F. did not expect.

One afternoon, during the siesta, major Bozhko walked in into the room of the flight engineer F.

– Listen,– he said, stopping in front of the poster, – in the evening we will be visited by my pals from Bagram; one of them is a from my commander’s school, but he graduated one year after me. They are going to spend a night here. We will meet, chat, and so on... I want this picture to be hanging in my room just for a day. Anyway, she is the face, chest, abdomen and knees of our squadron, so we should show it to them!

– Just do not spill the vodka on it –the flight engineer F. said, taking the poster off.

– Do not be silly! – Bozhko answered, holding the shaky bedside table. – We have got too little vodka for wasting it on the walls.

In the evening, the flight engineer F., heard from Bozhko’s room laughter, and a muffled guitar song, which only one line – “Look at the radiometer, asshole!” – was clear.

The next day the flight engineer flew away early and came back late. Before his dinner, he went to collect his creation. However, the poster had disappeared from the commander’s room.

– And where is the picture? – turning his head, the flight engineer asked.

– You see, my dear, – the major, confusedly scratched his head – our girl flew away...

– What do you mean? Where did she fly and how?

– Well, how do people usually fly away? In the helicopter, of course, to Bagram. They saw the picture and began begging for it! Of course, I refused, as it was our squadron’s face! Then these bastards decided to get me drunk, and you know how mellow I am when I am drunk. To be honest, I do not even remember how I gave it to them...But now she will represent us in another country!

Clenching his teeth, the flight engineer turned and left without saying a single word.

– You should not worry like that! – Major shouted at his back. – You can draw a hundreds of such pictures!

– I am not upset – the flight engineer said, closing the door. – I just do not understand one thing...

Then for a long time he was swearing.

Outside, on the bench near the door, he had his cigarette, inhaling deeply and often, then he got up and walked slowly toward the dining hall. But after few steps, he stopped and turned back. Entering his room, he opened the three-legged bedside table and took out a treasure that he had brought yesterday from the south-eastern mountains.

Earlier, not far from Kandahar, in the village that was hiding between the shades of pomegranate groves, the flight engineer stopped at a small roadside shop.

The tanned, thin old man who looked like a thousand years older than a genie from a famous children story, raised his watery eyes. Carrying a gun over his shoulder, he took a large pomegranate and handed it to the flight engineer.

This pomegranate was of a size of a small watermelon – the flight engineer had not seen fruit of this size at the Caucasian markets neither at the markets of Central Asia, with which he was familiar from his childhood.

But for the artist, this old man held in his hand (his palm was like stained lacquered wood) not a fruit – it was a round vessel, which once had been decorated with morocco, dyed with cochineal, and ironed to a shiny gloss. The vessel has lost its color after many centuries. But the shabby antiquity of its leather ensured that up to the neck of the vessel- pomegranate, its seeds were packed inside like large faceted rubies.

And the flight engineer bought from the old genie this leather vessel, with the blood of Dionysus, paying only five or ten Afghani. Then he was flying over mountains, he thought that soon he would draw her real portrait, with this unique pomegranate.

After getting the fruit from the shop, he unbuttoned the jacket of his jumpsuit, and placed the pomegranate inside his jacket right near his heart; put his hand on it, and buttoned his jacket. He went to the dining room, carrying the pomegranate, near his bare stomach, like mine, and muttered:

– What a miracle it is? and for whom this miracle is?... Of course, it is for you!... Do you want me to draw you?...

The dining room was almost empty, only a couple of fighter-bombers had been finishing their tea. Two waitresses were cleaning the tables. Bending down, caved in and stretched like a cat, she was wiping a long table, touching the table with her breasts. She turned her head, blew her hair off her face and said amiably, without changing her position:

– Sit down at a clear table, and I will get your order...

And then she has gone. He sat down at a clear table and waited, holding a pomegranate in his lap. His heart was beating stronger.

*P.S.*

There are some photos that have been saved, but certainly they do not reflect the whole picture: <http://kuch.ru/pictures/frolov/22.jpg>

At Customs, vigilant customs officers tore off the upper part of the picture containing secret squadron numbers. The flight engineer has managed to hide his picture in a jar of Indian tea.

## Abduction of the fire

Senior lieutenants were preparing for their inevitable demobilization. For this event they decided to brew home-made vodka in a welded 40 litre tank (the subject of an open envy from others!), in which the fermentation process was excellent. This technology has been tested many times – water, a few cans of cherry jam, one spoon of yeast, a rubber hose, and discharge gases in a jar with water. The result was magnificent – home-made vodka, which will knock you down after a few pints.

The 3rd of July– the day of their discharge from the army–was approaching fast. And the home-made vodka was almost ready, quietly emitting gases and spreading a smell of sour cherries around the room. And something unexpected did happen: it was an inspection of each room searching for alcohol and medicines, because even to keep headache painkillers in a bedside table was somehow punishable.

... So, the inspectors were walking in a corridor.

– In which corridor are they walking? –Senior Lieutenant Losenkov frantically asked.

–In our corridor! –Senior Lieutenant F. hissed, closing the door. – Act according to the instructions...

They rushed to the window, carefully opened the wooden shutters, pulled out the tank with home-made vodka under the table, placed it on the window sill, jumped into the street, removed the tank, put it under the window, climbed back into the room and closed the shutters.

Chief of Staff, Political Officer and a doctor knocked at the door and then entered the room.

– Here, I guess, we can definitely find something! –the Political Officer sniffed the air. –It stinks here!

– A jam soured – the board technician F. explained – In this heat even the brain tends to sour. By the way, we have been demanding the replacement of an air-conditioner for a long time. Doctor, how can you let us fly knowing that we don't have proper conditions for a good rest – check yourself what temperature it is in this room...

– Okay, okay, –the Chief of Staff winced, – we do not need to speculate on the temporal difficulties. Tell me instead, where is your home-made alcohol?

– You can search, – with this suggestion the senior lieutenant F. sat on the bed.

The thorough search has been conducted with peeping under the beds and probing the pillows, but all of these gave a zero result. The superiors went away with nothing but promised to confiscate all illegal alcohol next time if it will be found. As soon as their steps in the hallway were no longer heard, the senior

lieutenants F. rushed to the window. He opened the shutters and looked outside... The tank with the home-made vodka was not there.

– I do not get it ! – the board technical F said and looked around.

– Look! Over there they are!– and the board technician Losenkov pointed at two running figures. – They are getting away, bastards!

A board technical F. looked in the pointed direction and saw two soldiers dragging a heavy tank. They ran towards the different battalion.

The two angry board technicians easily caught the heavy loaded soldiers.

– Stop or I will shoot! –the board technician F. commanded and the soldiers immediately stopped, put the tank on the ground, and, wiping their sweaty faces with their sleeves, turned to the board technician F.

– Hey, you, two brats! – and the board technical F. ordered – Now you will both go back with the same speed. What kind of people you are, huh? Just no respect for somebody’s property, just grab everything that is not attended.

– Sorry but we had no idea that it is yours, the comrade Senior Lieutenant! – with guilty intonation one of the soldiers explained. – We were passing by and suddenly – Wow!– we saw this tank; and we took and carried it, honestly, comrade Senior Lieutenant, purely automatic!

### **The demobilization night**

On July 3, 1987, after two years, army service for the board-technician senior lieutenant has ended. The order for his two years army service ( fall of 1985) was issued in the mainland of the Soviet Union. But this order works only if replacements arrive. Nevertheless, in the evening of this significant day, three officers decided to celebrate a formal ending of their service. The fried potatoes, opened tinned meat, expropriated alcohol from 24 brigade together with their own home-made beer, were placed on a table in their room. They ate, drank and had fun.

In an hour after midnight the door opened and the commander, wearing a protective helmet and holding a machine gun in his hands, entered the room.

– So, are we celebrating? – he asked. – Of course, it is a first priority now, but, in five minutes you two – the senior lieutenant F. and senior lieutenant Mukhametshin – should run to the choppers for hanging up “chandeliers”!

It means that our troops need light during a night battle. So, we had to fly to the place of battle and to set up LAB ( light air bombs on parachutes– Editor).

– It is a bit surprising! –the senior lieutenant F perplexedly said. – This is absurd. I am a civilian now, even to say more – I am a drunk civilian! But for some reasons I have to fly to somewhere in a middle of the night to hang out the “chandeliers”! I hope it will be not a final point in my demobilization neither in

my life. Felix, do you remember what the fortune teller told us in Chirchik about a late trip?

– If we will be back, – the only sober board technical Mukhametshin, (who is currently flying the chopper of Tarabrin who was on a vacation), answered with a stress on “if”.– I announce the strike from tomorrow! It is illegal!

And they walked out, asking to leave for them something to eat and drink when they will return.

They immediately became alerted that the pair of choppers had mixed crew: the leading board 33 was directed by the Squadron Commander, and the unit Commander was in charge of board 10. For sure, it was out of question about training to synchronize crew actions. Whispering, both commanders agreed about the altitude, speed distance, then went to their machines, and making spiral trajectories above the aerodrome, they took off.

Compared to night flights conducted in the Soviet Union, flights in Afghanistan were different: there was no on board lights, neither navigation lights, end lights, or flashing beacons. There was only one light that was invisible from the ground: a yellow droplet on the tail boom, that helped the wingman to see who are going right and above and where the leading chopper is.

So, the helicopters were spiraling above the aerodrome. Machines climbed up into the total darkness. Usually during spiraling, the commander of the leading helicopter should be observing the second one, but in this case it was total darkness and dangerous disorientations.

When altitude of two thousand metres was reached, the leading helicopter said:

– 532, I do not see you. Report the height.

– Two thousand metres, 851th.

– It is odd. Let’s blink our headlights to each other and define our positions. Let’s do it on the count of three. One, two, three... and both machines momentarily turned their flashing lights on – and each of the crew saw a red light straight ahead!

The helicopters were moving towards each other face-to-face in a direct line. An unavoidable collision with each other was a matter of few seconds away; and then both commanders with a perfect synchronization simultaneously swore and moved the choppers apart.

– Let’s go to work, –the commander of the leading chopper said. –Let’s hit the road. And climb a bit higher...

And they started working.

Thinking of how close they were to a collision, the board technician, felt, how his little shrunk heart has been lost in a black space of his chest. His feet were wet and cold. “If we will get back, –the board technician said to God, –

then I will believe in you. I understand that you sent me here on the day when my discharge order arrived, for a very special reason. I do admire your sense of humor. Okay, I believe in you now. Now please take us back, before we lose any neophyte...”.

They reached the battle location, connected with the land, adjusted their course, height, and went into the battle by sending light-bombs down one by one. Below, hanging on parachutes, two blue suns flared up and filled the earth with their lifeless light.

Waiting for the bombs to go off, the pair of choppers made another circle, and released the remaining light-bombs.

– Now we have to wait until it will burn to the end, –the crew commander said. – We will be in a light zone and they will shoot us – we will be on display like under the brightness of the moon! Hey, look where we are now – maybe we should go another way?

– Wait, I will grab a flashlight, –the navigator-operator replied, looking for the flashlight in his bag.

– Are you mad or what, what is the hell with you and the flashlight?

The navigator-operator looked on the pale ground, bent over a map spread out on his knees and struck a match. The light of his match flashed in the dark cabin like a torch.

– What are you doing, idiot!/? – the commander shouted. – You blinded me! I now have red bunnies in my eyes!

– How do you think I can check the map? –the navigator-operator got furious. –Am I a cat or something?

And in this stressful time the commander ...farted.

A wave of stinky smells was coming from the chair of the commander and reached the board technician. The offended navigator-operator demonstratively waved the air with the folded map.

Suddenly the voice of the leading helicopter thrilled in the headphones:

– Hey, 532, did you sense a smell?

– What smell? – the commander asked, petrified.

Both, the board technician and navigator-operator, started laughing.

They laughed as hard as they ever did. They choked and coughed.

– What? What? Someone fired! –the leader said. – Watch! they are shooting at us from the slope. And we even didn’t have unguided missiles. Stay away from the mountains.

– Got it, –the commander of the second chopper said and then unashamedly re-addressed his farting incident to his crew via the intercom. – Why are you farting like horses?

– It was not us! – the board technician and navigator-operator rejected his claim forcing themselves to stop laughing.

– And who it was, was it me? – the commander demanded the answer.

– Maybe it was someone from the leading choppy! –the board technician suggested and now all three farted together.

Thus, laughing, they went through the battle. They released the remaining two bombs, turned around and returned home.

### **Super-cartridge belt.**

One day, the pilots requested that the squadron commander arranges for a polygon, for them to do exercises for firing from a front-side machine gun. In the condition of real battle, a board technician is in charge of the machine gun, while the pilots are in-charge of pressing the UAM's button (unguided aircraft missile – Editor). Of course, all board technicians became a bit worried, but there was nothing they could do - just comply with the order. However, there was one particular reason to be alarmed and it was related to the process of loading cartridge belts. This job was a prerogative and primary responsibility of board technicians, and it was not an easy task: put the bullets into the “mouth”, turn the handle, make sure the cartridge is not twisted – if you do not notice and push the handle, you may be knocked down. After a few re-loadings, the calluses on your hands were secured – especially after loading the cartridge belt after each flight. At least, four boxes with cartridge belts for 250 rounds were kept on board.

The flight engineer F. liked having eight zinc boxes on board – he placed them in a row under the bench. They warmed his soul.

The prospect of the pilots' activities on the polygon, in the beginning, upset him. He even boldly objected to it and said to the captain Trudov:

– Do not even dream! My barrel is hot, overused, and already began to spit, showing a lack of accuracy. You will be the first who will be killed in a battle due to this overused weapon. And my hands are not made from metal – to load the cartridge belts each time whilst you are having fun on the polygon.

But Trudov promised him to do a loading by himself as much as required. The flight engineer F. agreed to it with one condition – the re-loading will be doubled– for an amortization of the machine-gun, as he explained. They shook their hands on that.

– Maybe I need to wash your board? –the captain sarcastically asked, offended by this deal.

On the polygon the flight engineer F. placed his machine-gun at close range, switched to the electric trigger on the control stick. The captain Trudov with the right pilot, indeed, had fun shooting 500 rounds. They would like to have more,

but the flight engineer F. already tired of this stupid machine. He explained to the commander that his machine-gun overheated, and, in generally, there is no need to harass and annoy the weapon with this senseless shooting. Therefore, the commander was disconnected from the firing.

In the parking lot the captain Trudov ordered to the right pilot, called Cute:

– Now you will re-load 1000 rounds. I gave my word of the officer and promised to do a double loading.

– What is my business in such shooting? – Cute got upset. – He promised, and I should to do re-loading now!

The flight engineer F. opened three zinc cartridges – simple, armor-piercing, tracer. Then he got an empty cartridge belt for 1000 rounds, which he collected from four standard ones. These standard cartridge belts always ended unexpectedly in the most inopportune moment, this is why the board technician decided to do double re-loading and create a super-cartridge belt.

Turning the handle, Cute concentrated. The flight engineer F. was controlling misalignment of cartridges and straightened a twisted black snake. The process of re-loading went smoothly. Cute, whose navigating hands were good for keeping only a pencil and making a line, groaned, looking at his fresh calluses:

– Shooting from my gun is a sweet deal that I prefer to do.

Admiring the miracle cartridge belt, the board technician, first, had a smoke, and then started to place it in the normal box, but it was not possible. Only a zinc box was big enough to swallow this newly-created snake.

It was too risky for his health to lift this zinc box, so in order not to overstrain himself, he dragged it to his cabin. After much effort, using his knee as a jack, he tried to put it under the seat frame. But the enormous zinc box was too big for this place. Frustrated, the sweating flight engineer, dragged the zinc box again to the stern machine-gun. There was a relatively big space, so he somehow fitted the zinc box, in a way that the cartridge belt was free to go in the locking part of the machine-gun.

“Somehow, I could shoot from here”, – he thought, very pleased with the fact that now his tail is more secure.

In the morning they flew to Turgundi. On the platform 101 they took on board a drunken captain.

– Take me, guys! – the captain humbly asked. – It should be the end of my war – I’m replaced! – but because there was not any transport to Turgunda, I am in my third day of binge-drinking – and stuck like a shit in a hole – even thought to return to fight again! And take this bottle to smooth my replacement... – and he handed to the commander a bottle of vodka.

Of course, it was taken.

We arrived and sat down on the ground near the road, which is behind the hill from the right, and could see the border towers of the Soviet Union. We turned off the engine, and the silence was relaxing.

– Smells like gunpowder, – the captain sniffed.

The flight engineer F. opened a door to the cargo compartment and gasped. The grey layers of smoke completely filled the cabin. The smoke was corroding his eyes, cutting his throat, there was no air to breathe. Looking closer, the flight engineer saw a passenger who was laying on the floor among the black rings of gun-cartridges. He made an unsuccessful attempt to stand up, but fell down again on the carpet of the thousands of empty shells and cartridges.

– What have you done, asshole?! – the flight engineer F. terrifyingly asked, not yet aware of the scale of what just happened.

The drunken captain – he was even more drunk than before – turned to one side, raised his head, and said:

– Hey, guys! Well, thank you, such a cool machine-gun! All the way out of this war, I was shooting! Don't look at me – I was saying good-bye, do you not get it?! Good-by to this fucking country, to this war! I am sure the way how I said goodbye – these bitches will remember!

The flight engineer F. grabbed him by the collar and kicked out from the board. Then the drunken captain's suitcase was followed. The captain grabbed his stuff and ran, not looking back.

He fled to his homeland.

The crew looked at his back with unfriendly eyes. Now on the route between Herat-Turgunda the board №10 officially established itself as a screwball.

– I hope this moron was aimlessly shooting without damage, – the commander sighed.

On the way back, the pair of choppers were flying with a large radius from the route that had been gunned by the captain.

...And flight engineer F. no longer loaded his super cartridge belt. There was no such excitement.

### **As wrote Zarathustra.**

In July 1987, in the sky of Afghanistan a plane has been lost. It belonged to an advisory squadron An-26 that was on the route from Kabul to Zaranj. It made a short refueling stopover in Sindande, and then took off; It was seen somewhere near Kandahar and then there was no communication after that.

To find this aircraft, a pair of MI-8 were given an order to conduct a searching expedition. These two were flying toward the Iranian border at a distance of several kilometers from each other, in a way like an invisible line was stretched between them.

There were many speculations on what had happened with the lost aircraft: a betrayal, a capture of the crew, a navigational error, but the real reason was unknown.

However, when the choppers were close to Zaranj, unsupported information was released that the plane crossed over the Iranian border and landed near some village. Immediately the order to search for a plane along the border to the west and to the east was issued. A pair of choppers, which were led by board 10 one, were flying on the west, and after 20 minutes of flying in this direction, they spotted a small settlement of natives with maybe no more than ten kishlaks ( see “ Terminology and Glossary” – Editor)

The leading helicopter was the one that landed, whilst the second chopper was circulating above. The counterintelligence agents – theirs and ours- together with a machine gunners platoon, went to meet the locals, who all went out to watch the helicopters and asked for some kerosene. The flight engineer F, saw how the children were running with buckets towards the helicopter, and closing the door, he waved them off. He could not give them a drop of fuel – the fuel was a precious commodity – it was just enough to fly back to Farahrud.

– Commander, kerosene, commander, kerosene! – the boys shouted in unison surrounding the flight engineer.

He tried to push away their clinging hands from his pants and their rattling buckets away from him. He looked around in a hope that his guys had returned, but they were talking to the elders of this village.

Then suddenly, a single narrow figure appeared on the canvass, like in Ivanov’s painting (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor).

It was a girl in violet trousers, green spacious dress, with protruded braids under a red hat-skull cap. She was slowly moving with her bowed head, and her black eyes behind thick lashes that were staring at the flight engineer. Her lips covered by lipstick glowed in the dark, and her face was like a rose in the twilight garden. She carried a white enamel can with a picture of a goat; and she looked like she came for some milk.

Looking at her, the flight engineer forgot that they are now on the border of Iran and Afghanistan, but understood that she needed kerosene for a lamp, because there is not and never was electricity in her village. Surrealistically, behind the flight engineer was a time machine, and this girl, with a necklace on her thin neck, was older than him by several centuries. He regretfully pressed his hands to his chest and parted them, gesturing that he would like to give her kerosene, but... Then he pushed the boys away, jumped into the cabin, took three packs of “Bonko” candy out of his bag with grenades, and handed the candies to her. She took it with one hand, looking down and, at the same time, to the side.

– Do not pay attention to their girls! –the captain shouted from the cabin.– We will be beaten by stones! Let’s start the engine, our guys are coming...

And they went off.

On the way home a secret agent shared the information about the lost plane: locals saw the plane that flew in the direction of the Iranian city of Zabol – thirty kilometres from the border. Clearly it was about to land, it was not burnt, not smoking, and both engines were working...

When they arrived home, they found out that this plane crossed the Iranian border as a result of a navigational error (unfortunately the navigator and one of the crew, were killed by the Iranian special forces during the storming of the aircraft); and now negotiations are going on to return the plane and crew.

Late at night, first lieutenant F. wrote a letter to his distant friend who lived an unreal peaceful life and who went to the library, the philharmonic, theatres, exhibitions, who can read Hesse and Mann, Borgen and Borges, and who can sing in a shower. This friend hated the army – never learned in the Military Department how to march–, and he wrote to the flight engineer F. about a rock group who sang a bold song about America and Casanova.

“Here everything is changing rapidly, – he wrote, – While you are doing who knows what, Ryazanov wants to make a film “ Master and Margarita”. When I read Freud and Nietzsche in the library, I do not hear footsteps, wearing boots!”.

In response, to prove that he does not waste time in vain, the flight engineer F. wrote back about what did happen to him as the traveler of the exotic country. He told him about local customs – for example, about the amazing friendship between men, when one leads another by a little finger, and answering to some peculiar questions, he answered that local women are thin and flat, but the boys have their things to be proud of. He wrote about the strange insects that have become huge in the absence of the birds. Yes, there is no chirping of birds and leaf rustling– they are replaced by the rustle of the sand, carried by the wind, and at night, when he whips on the plywood walls half asleep, it feels like a dry snow...

The flight engineer also wrote about the war to his friend, whose world was eagerly absorbed with the knowledge of Zarathustra from the yellowed pages with yat letter ( see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor). However, he tried to do it delicately so that the pacifist soul of his mate will be not hurt.

His mate sent to flight engineer F. the pages extracted from Zarathustra (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor).

The flight engineer F. read them, comprehended and, reincarnated, wrote back. He talked about the white sky and the red mountains of this country, the birthplace of the prophet, about the hellish heat that prevails here. “ The heat here is unbearably–the flight engineer wrote. But we have got used to it, and it does

not bother us – on the contrary, we want it more, like in our veins there’s already flowing fire, not moisture. And our rotary-wing animals, in the beginning, were hard to lift off from the ground, but then I learned how to rush into the sky these ridiculous predators, with its benches, with orange-yellow tanks, with ragged blue corrugated floor, with unwashed brown spots on the floor under the tanks.

Every early cool morning, we were out hunting, at the time when the eastern mountains were still black on a background of purple silk, and the wind has not yet passed through the cabins.

We flew over the fields so low that the wheels were knocking the flaming poppies. And then at the parking lot, a dog Gloomy together with his two girlfriends came, and Gloomy was licking these wheels covered by poppy juice until he become like a good- natured puppy.”

This is how the flight engineer F. wrote to his friend. Maybe it was written not to him but rather to himself whom he wants to be in the future.

So this evening he wrote in the letter about how they were looking for the missing plane. He described the girl with her milk can, which she handed to the white God landed from Heaven in an iron dragonfly...

Ten years have passed. Former flight engineer F. wrote a story about the sun, trembling in the lake, and serpents creeping about the snake swallowing. After reading it, his friend asked:

– Is it about an Afghan girl that you fucked on the border with Iran?

– I fucked her? – the former flight engineer sincerely was shocked. – God be with you, why do you think this way?

– Why do I think? You wrote me in the letter that she was the daughter of a cloth merchant, and while her dad was talking to officers about a missing plane, she gave you to drink of goat milk, then invited you into her father’s shop, where you smoked kalian (an oriental tobacco pipe with a long, flexible tube which draws the smoke through water contained in a bowl – Editor), and then the blue Iranian tulips were a love bed for both of you, and how she presented seven metres of this material freshly painted by her virgin blood.

I remember it by heart, because I read it so many times! I remember, you also were afraid that she gave birth to a boy with ginger color hair, and was scared that she and the child would be beaten to death by stones by her tribe. You also wrote that her skin smelled like wool, and called her Kteis, which in translation from Hazara means “cat”. After reading the letter, I was wondering could you remember her – or would you think ever about this incident, I was sure that it is a real story, even if a bit incredible... But you do not remember, bastard...

– What a mess! – the former flight engineer laughed. – My memory is not enough to be a true liar. I remember only one thing – that I gave her three packs of candy. And Kteis, actually, is not a cat...

## **War**

(a lyrical sketch)

...If it is possible to choose one sketch from a library of his memory, the senior lieutenant F. will be pick this one.

It is night time. They have just landed. The flight engineer F. switched off both engines, and closed the door. On the floor of the cargo compartment a lot of blood has been left, but he didn't want to wash it in the dark. Tomorrow, in the morning, when the door will be opened, myriads of black buzzing flies will break free from the helicopter. Then he will properly brush the floor with water.

And now he goes home. The large sky is covered with great stars, the earth is still breathing warm air, but already you can feel the coolness of the night is coming. The flight engineer F. unzips his uniform jumpsuit welcoming this breeze to his hot chest. He is very tired, and the ground is still swaying under his feet after a long flight. Holding the gun with an instinctively lowered hand, he almost drags it along the ground. He smokes, cupping the cigarette in the mouth.

Somewhere nearby, on the corner of the hangar, an invisible guard sighed like a horse.

The flight engineer F. turns from the parking lot and walks through the gate to the alley. There is a large railway container to the right. The breeze brings the smell of carbolic acid from a female toilet, in which a yellow light and laughter were streaming out from the slightly opened door. The flight engineer stopped, listened and smiled.

After this short stop, he keeps walking, swinging his gun together with the belt. He raises his head towards the shaggy stars that look like those in the famous painting of Vincent van Gogh, and sees how between them a red dashed line of the tracer volley has appeared, following with the distant sound TA-TA, TA-TA-TA.

Suddenly, something blasted behind the runway, and the earth convulsed under his feet. An invisible dragon in the night sky hits the chest of the western mountains – and then again silence.

The creaking sound of the iron door behind him, a rustle of his light feet, again the laughter, – and a silence...The night, the stars, the light of a cigarette – and the big body of this war are tossing restlessly from side to side, breathing in its sleep.

The war will always be with you...

## ALEXANDER TUMAHA

Tumakha, Alexander Stepanovich was born in 1960 in Chisinau, Moldova. He graduated from the Kiev VOUC. From 1981 to 1983, he served in Afghanistan, as a platoon commander with the 56th Airborne Assault Brigade (Paktia Province, Gardez). He was awarded three Orders of the Red Star. He is retired as a Colonel and lives in Odessa.

### **My Replacement.**

After so many years, when your shoulders will be heavy with the knowledge of military reality, acquired not from the press or hearsay stories, but from your own life experience which will never be forgotten, only then you can understand the life of young officers who served during the Afghan war. You will understand these people, who fell from the school bench into the very centre of the flame of the war.

They helplessly went from one senior officer to another, like small kittens “from tits to tits”, looking in desperation, after two “trench-fighting” years, to find better place for army service. They all tried hard but as it turns out not everyone found the way to do so. For these unlucky ones, life of a young officer kept a fault card in their sleeve.

Returning from the war, the beloved homeland joyfully opened its arms for these gray-haired youngsters, whose understanding of the meaning of honour, conscience and duty were much deeper and substantiated compared to those who did not serve the army. Their souls were distorted by the war. This is why their souls cannot be fooled with empty words about the truth of the war or the complexity of life.. For them, life itself was already a gift. Everything apart from life was a nothing.

These commanders of a company and a platoon were draft horses during any war, and took on their shoulders the main burden of not only this Afghan war, but apparently all wars during the past.

Let the senior commanders and military personnel of various ranks shout loudly about their own importance and indispensability during the war – no one is going to argue as all professions are needed, all professions are important –, but during the actual battle none of them can receive the higher rank without us, the young, devoted officers, who look after our soldiers, and who, in fact, delivered the task.

The flame of the Afghan war affected everyone: some of us were burnt without a trace, some of us just burnt the tips of fingers and for the rest of life have to wear gloves; some of us just got scared. Whether we like it or not, the

flame left indelible dirt in our souls, which we cannot wash away for the rest of our life.

Were you sitting by the fire at night? Remember the feeling when a damp night passed, on the horizon a new day brings coolness, and only smouldering fire warmed us with its bare heat. The smoke, which you had to breathe all night and which penetrated into the lungs to the very bottom, this smell with its invisible threads of memory, will warm your soul during the dull routine of everyday life.

Difficult? – Yes.

Heavy? – Yes.

Pleasant? – Yes.

Contradiction? – Yes.

But only from all of these contradictions that are embedded in our memory, can we recall a full list of what we know as the soldier's duty!

However, there is another way to live in this life. This is an obliteration of everything you had previously. To forget everything as a terrible dream, to cut off everything that was burnt. However, this will be another life, and this life will not be yours. This, however, would make you a vegetable! You do not breathe so deeply, and there is not enough air in the lungs, and, finally, who likes to be disabled by having a completely missing memory?

To remember or not, these are our only two options.

Without any hesitation, I chose to keep my memory.

Looking back to the past and assessing all actions, you understand that, from the position of the present day, you could have acted differently; but at that time, due to the beauty of your youth, you can only act according to your conscience; and back then, your conscience was clean, blank, ready for lines of hope, and without any life vicissitudes; and, of course, there were no signs that you will be thrown away at the end of army service like a used and therefore no more needed waste.

\* \* \*

The airport of Tashkent... Day is breaking. There are three hours left before I will take the plane which will forever take me away from the war. I sit in a restaurant with no visitors. There is only me and also the waiter, a young Uzbekistani. He smokes at the bar. His work finished a long time ago, but in the East, respect for the elders is law number one..

“It is necessary to celebrate your returning home!” – the restaurant administrator said, he was also burnt by the Afghan war. Being a former fighter,

he understood me and stayed with me all night. This kind of understanding we got in the army.

The music stopped and visitors left. Now I am meeting the new day; the first peaceful day in my life as an officer. A cherished dream of a stupid shuravi (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) to have a bottle of vodka, a plate with a triple portion of tobacco-chickens placed on the table in front of me. I did not even touch them, although I dreamed about them for twenty-six months. Dreams, unfortunately, very rarely reflect reality.

I have emptiness in my soul.

There is still no joy, there is no bitterness. These feelings will come later, not now.

Whilst I have time, I need to draw a line.

I hold my international passport; my fingers involuntarily stroked the red-burgundy cover of it. Thanks to you, my dear red coloured friend, now I perceive the world around me with completely different eyes. No, my romantic side has not vanished but it has acquired more tangible forms and now reflects life with its shades and coloured variations, not only in black and white as it used to be.

I close the last page of the passport with the stamp “Afghanistan: Departure before October 9, 1983”. It is no longer needed..

What was left behind? What lies ahead?

I dreamed about this day so much and how many plans were born!

All friends are there; here are no new ones. Now I know exactly the meaning of friendship. I know who is a friend and who is just a comrade. Here, in the Soviet Union, I will have only comrades and co-workers. My friends-brothers, including native Afghans, were left back there.

It is no longer necessary for me to get a “sword from its scabbard” (to get angry – Editor) or any reason for “cutting off heads”. Thanks to my “Afghani teachers”, starting with the first company commander and finishing with the Extreme Battalion commander, I took their wisdom. My teachers were older than me only 3-5 years, but taking into consideration their “military” years, I am like a first-grader compared to them.

The military school, which I finished, turned out to be only a kindergarten considering the depth of profiling subjects. In two years, we speedily completed this school; in one month we did what normally would take three months. It was impossible to cheat. Immediately after the final exams, the combat work began. There was no time for relaxing in the training programs.

Afghan is my life’s “exam” where I learned “something and somehow” (a citation from the Russian classic comedy-in-verse “The Woes of Wit” by Alexander Griboyedov – Editor)

Assessments for this “exam” could be given not by the senior commanders or inspectors from the Union ( see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor), but mothers and fathers of the soldiers who performed combat missions together with me. I think, in this “exam” I could receive a good mark; all the jingling rewards on my chest is not the way to judge me.

I will be the one who have to judge myself.

Looking at the soul, which was not burnt by the stresses and the Afghan heat, I could estimate a level of damage to my soul which I have to live with now and cherish the memory of those guys who will never be with me.....

Later there will be holidays and disappointments, my wedding and the birth of children, joys and adversities. But all of these will be later, in my peaceful life. But when I sum up my own “exam” results in that pre-dawning morning, I understood that I will not pass.

My life was divided into “before Afghan “ and “after Afghan “ with a bloody trait between two parts. Afghan! How scary this word is!

But how to forget it, not to remember.

When it is already today

To live with war on the earth,

It threatens to tear to shreds.

To ashes, fire and blood,

And to the widow’s tears,

And to the weeping mothers.

How many scars and deaths

Will be left in this beautiful world?

No need to repeat it.

...Leaning against the edge of the table and propping my head against my fists, I met my first peaceful dawn..

A replacement... Do you know what kind of meaning it had for us? For us, this word does not refer to the process of changing batteries in the radio or an oil filter in the engine. The replacement for us is the hope in our souls, the euphoria, it is the best feeling in the world. It was a time when everything around was singing, the heart was popping out of our chests, the birds were cheerfully tweeting. The replacement arrived, the most darling legs of the substitute emerges from the helicopter, and his boots touch the metal of the corrugated surface. In this moment everything is thrown aside by this person and even the images of the most loved ones became secondary.

Here he is, my darling replacement!..Oh, a speck of dust is on his shoulder! Oh, the wind from working jets tore off his officer’s cap and carried it away to the minefield! Oh-oh-oh!

Damn this officer’s cap!

Get used to it. “If you want to eat jam, put up with the flies!” – as we said..

Pf-ff, ff-ff, – you blow off, accurately and gently, an invisible speck from his shoulder., God forbid to hurt or to scratch!. Give me your suitcase, I will carry it for you.. do not worry, you will have time to carry it for a year, at least,..Shit, it is heavy: did you put bricks in it? Or maybe you have some vodyara ( see “Terminology and Glossary– Editor) in the suitcase. Be careful! put your foot here, please, step only there, do not look there... you do not need to see it now... you will see everything later and understand where you are...

Now tell me how is everything back there, in the Union? We were so eager to see you here! The table will be served with food for a dear guest. And your anger and hatred, that five minutes ago boiled your soul, suddenly will disappear and, you felt the nirvana state with only one thought ticking in your head: “You finally got it! This is the substitution !”.

Oh, my God! What eyes he had! There was no pain or fear in them. There was no emptiness either. These eyes were full of life, and, by the way, they reflected the most professional faithfulness and correctness.

Everything written above is a classic. It is how it should be.

But now how it happened in reality..

\* \* \*

The main backbone, the officers, from our battalion are also preparing for a planned substitution because each of them had at least a year of military service. During July-September 1983, our battalion almost every day had a sort of celebration because the planned replacement of officers finally started. Substitutes were arriving, one after another, every day. During these days we have to celebrate the arriving substitute as well as to celebrate the freedom of the replaced one and his departure to the Union. Of course, between these celebrations we have some intervals to fulfil our combat tasks.

One day, we received a call from Kabul: the document had been signed for awards that would be issued to three-quarters of our battalion! The surnames of those receiving awards were told by phone to the battalion commander, who became the owner of this secret. The battalion commander thinks that only he knows about it and plays with us by squeezing out only several names per day. He forgot the army rule: if one name will be mentioned, tomorrow a whole battalion will know about it.

But get real, asshole! Communication is under our control, and everything that we need to know, we knew. This is why the flocks of half-drunk officers smoothly flew from one unit to another, from one barracks to the next, transferring their celebrating mood together with bottles of vodka.

You do need to think negatively about it. This is a long standing army tradition around the world. You saluted to your friends or to whom you are obliged to: “Comrades officers, such-and-such, I introduce myself on this occasion!” – and after this, the celebration drinks will follow and conversation flows: who is up for a position, who is up for the title, who is up for the award, who is up for departure from army, or, on the contrary, arriving.

Traditions are the most important things in the army.

\* \* \*

I remember my first medal, I celebrated with a flask of surgical spirit which I got from someone in the communication unit, in exchange for an “Astra” gun. This Spanish-made pistol was given to me (and I want to stress this) absolutely voluntarily by a captured doukh (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) when I stepped on his wrist.

This flask was waiting for the sacred appointed time of my first celebration.

The celebration took place in a modest officer’s unit. Tables moved together in a T-shape were covered with newspapers and on top of them is everything that is possible to find in the officer’s supply menu: cherry tomatoes, a pot of fried potato, condensed milk, fresh buns, cheese, “Si-Si” lemonade, a couple of army dry rations, chopped cold meat from the army shop, fried pies, fresh onions and some other greens, and, of course, oranges. Under the table, it is compulsory to have 56-.litres of alcohol. Now the decorations for the celebration are complete.

The first “visitors” sit on the bunks shoulder to shoulder and, smoothing the awkwardness of their early arrival, they read the newspapers which covered the tables. In the centre of the table there is a mug with alcohol, in which I placed my medal.

To all who came, a “beginning shot” from the mug was the first compulsory act, just to get the feeling of the celebration started.

Being the main reason for this occasion, I cough and stand up. With the elbow a bit to the side, I “officially” announce the reason for this gathering, which is the awarding ceremony. In my right hand is a mug with my medal, in my left hand is a bottle with home brewed alcohol. I gulped in one mouthful the contents of the mug hoping to catch my medal with my lips, but the medal – against all laws of physic – stuck to the bottom. I poured more home brewed alcohol into my mug and made another attempt to catch the medal. No, it still stuck to the bottom. Embarrassing, I tried to shake this stupid medal off the bottom of the mug. But against all forces of gravity, this medal seemed like it had been glued. The third filling of home brew hit me in my head like a bullet– and finally –BOOM– the heavy gold medal hit and sliced open my lips.

What a f..ck! Blood together with the disinfectant are running on my festive face. But some cherished words still need to be pronounced. I also need to listen to the speeches of the senior officers about how they are immensely happy to have in their cohort such a brave officer like I am. After the speeches with a glass of vodka and compulsory pickled cucumbers, the official part of ceremony is finished. After 15 minutes the celebration continued without me. The home brewed alcohol did its deal and I am with the most happy smile on my bleeding lips sleeping in an unnoticeable corner. Now my present is no longer needed.

This is a clear example of “the tear-stained air mattress in the back of the van”.

Usually, the beginning of these celebrations is ceremonious and noble. But close to the end, the chorus of friendly drunk voices, with a compulsory falsetto in it, the wrestling, the shooting competition made the atmosphere, indeed, more relaxed. But with such easy access to a weapon – the weapon is hanging on the backs of our beds – you have to be alert ( of course, if you are in condition to do so!) and keep your eyes open.

Then the next stage of celebrations is when the attempt of a pale-faced battalion deputy to stop a “disgrace”, is met with laughter; he usually is sent far away with swearing words applicable to the current situation. The unstoppable wild laughter reached its culmination after the announcement of the awardees by the battalion commander, whose surname was also included on this list. This was especially funny because he did not have a single military expedition into the enemy camp. Maybe his heroic act was the act of a senior soldier-internationalist to remain constantly “on base”. But we were too young to understand these nuances, or in our youth, we did not want to understand this..

Youth is not only fervor and daring, and hot blooded overconfidence. It is also a snotty stupidity, ridiculous actions with no self-control, anger without brakes, bordering sometimes close to crimes. It is a feeling of embarrassment that will embrace you tomorrow.

My dear reader, I re-read everything that was written above, and realised that you can get a false impression that we were “half-drunk” when in battle with the enemy. No, no and no!

During our military service we had strict discipline. In two years I have never seen any officer from our platoon-company, or even battalion, who was drunk during military action.

Although I do have plenty of examples of looseness and neglect that were treated without courtesy. Which examples, you ask?

Let them stay in my memory.

I do not know why, but for the second week, the Deputy commissar, Captain Kostenko Y. is in charge of our battalion.

To consider the time of my service in the army, I am “the oldest” in the battalion because of my army service of two years and two months. Everyone, who was served with me already left, but I am still here, with uncertainty whether my personal replacement will arrive or not.

I CANNOT STAND IT ANYMORE! I HAVE HAD ENOUGH! My chest already has three large bruises from my rifle belt and when I try to take a deep breath it is painful. Thanks to the bulletproof vest, I have no holes in my chest.

It is still a vivid memory when (just before the announcement of my replacement), I, together with my colleague – Nikolayvich, were wounded during the march of our column. For many months we enjoyed the silence of the hospital room. Eventually Nikolayvich was transported to another hospital in Russia because his wound was not healing properly. I recovered, but for a long time I learn how to read again with “Bukvar” (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor).

I think whilst I was in the hospital, someone offered a better deal for my replacement by giving him a tasty bait, and he was hooked.... now I have to wait for him or maybe for another one to resurface.

My commander keeps nagging me about training the soldiers but he knows something as he asked for a bottle of vodka as a reward for the news.

No problem! Just tell me when!

In desperation, I decided to visit the Deputy commissar with only one purpose: to find out the destiny of my replacement and how long I should wait? It is already too much for me to wait another month or two. I know that my replacement is somewhere, but he is definitely lost in the bureaucratic tunnels of the army machine. Luckily, I was able to get a flight with another commander to the headquarters and I decided to take a ride with him on the chopper, which, as I was told, will be here to pick us up in an hour or so.

Of course, this trip will cost me a great deal of my home brewed vodka. The “cooking vodka” process has been going on under my bed for 10 days and the longer you keep it under your bed, the stronger the vodka will be.

I rush to my barracks and grab my documents and Communist Party membership card from the metal box. My friend runs towards me, holding in his hands a new uniform. I dressed up, fix the laces on my bertzy (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor).– hallelujah! – I am ready.

With the deepest feeling of satisfaction from my brand new outfit, I walk out to the porch, where Dimych sits there having a smoke. Knowing Dimych through shoulder-to-shoulder actions on numerous battlefields, I started the conversation on what had happened during the last two years.

– Listen, Dimych, do you know that other guys already received their replacement but not me. Maybe I need to take a few expropriated guns for bribery? It seemed to be working well for Misha, remember him? One week ago we went to find his replacement and took all his wooden crafts and he got his replacement.

Misha, indeed, was gifted. He has a talent for woodcarving. We used to laugh when we saw him bringing wood from anywhere and carve something out of boards, roots and logs. I think he would not be ashamed to present his works at any art exhibitions.

– You know, commander, it is a good idea! I know a few people who bring something to the top admin and they got positive results. I do not think that these people remember the surnames of those who were awarded with medals for bravery. We always were as a team, brigade number 55, but not a particular person. Now it is imperative for you to be a particular person.

I agree with you. Go and bring me something attractive and interesting, something irresistible..Dimych left...

The commander of the first platoon came to me. He has the same first name as me, and blond curly-hair like I have. People very often confused us from behind. Today he is on duty, although he should have a rest until one o'clock, but he also does not sleep this afternoon. Our life is strictly scheduled: from day to night, from one action to another. So he is un-rested knowing that any minute his substitute will come, and maybe this chopper, that I am waiting for, accidentally brings his replacement? And besides, we drank chifir last night – no way to get sleep!

Dimych– a capable guy!– returned with a bakshih (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) suitable for my occasion. I place the gun, “present-to-be”, into my bag and I fill up the empty “Astra” holster pistol with cigarettes.

The noise of flying choppers from the southeast became distinctively louder. Starting in Gardez, they fly at maximum heights, and after they pass Tera-Pass, they usually descend and fly for twenty kilometres across the desert. Before Barakinsky Hills the choppers sharply soared up and one by one come to us to land.

At this moment a whole battalion came out and looked upwards. If our looks would be bullets, then the helicopter would land riddled with holes, like a sieve, I'm not talking only about the intensity erupting from the eyes of the ones who wait for their replacement...

Each arriving chopper for us is a break from the monotonous routine; it brings to us a “weekend spirit” with its news and mails. It is a special day of talking to the arriving vacationers and convalescents, and seeing the commissions and inspectors. Unfortunately, by air is the only way to reach us. No one can reach us by road, this is why cars never paid us a visit. Well, just for curiosity, the “smart-asses” should try, I am sure, then there will be no further need for an explanation as to why it is not a realistic approach.

The wall encircling the battalion has two special passages: one is for officers who have the right to pass through, and another one much closer to the landed chopper, is strictly for the senior battalion commanders. Brownian motion ((see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) of soldiers begins from the arrival of the board to the battalion’s location and back.

– Come on, jump-in! Good luck! – Sanka waved to me, and then responsibly adjusted a “duty” armband on his arm.

Throwing my AK ( see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) on my back, I jump aboard and the ladder is removed and machine immediately took off from the ground. A gesture was given to me to indicate that my weapon must be put in a box. It is an awkward feeling to sit without my gun, it was always with me giving me a feeling of a warming protection, Now, without it, I feel naked like in banya (traditional Russian style of steam-water bath – Editor). I sit down on the bench. Whilst we were gaining necessary altitude, the second chopper landed. After a couple of minutes, a tandem of choppers took the direction towards Kabul, trying to avoid the green strips below on the land.

Under a monotonous rumbling of engines, I relaxed and indulged myself by planning: what I will do in headquarters? where to go? whom to contact first?

I knew how to get to the personnel department of army headquarters because one of my classmates used to be a guard there, but he was replaced in July. No hope of help from him. Should I go to the department overseeing “special forces”? This is a new department. It is unlikely my name will mean something to them. Maybe my girlfriend knows someone and can help on this matter? But she is an assistant in different matters. Should I be visiting the regiment of communication? There is Vovka – my acquaintance whom I met through my neighbour’s friend – who works there. Why not? I will find him, he has already been in this department for a year, he should be experienced enough to help me solve my problem.

Hey! I remember how I celebrated my vacation with him at home, oh! And when I returned to the army, he even connected me with my Mum when I was located at isolated army barracks during some army operations. Can you imagine? I am sitting on the hill with my troops thousands of kilometres away from my

home and talking with my mother! This was an unforgettable experience! That's it! Decided! I should firstly go to the regiment of communication!

But here my thoughts were interrupted by a dashing pirouette of my chopper when they tried to avoid the whistling tracers being shot from the ground by doukhs ( see "Terminology" – Editor). The doukhs are even shooting this close to the capital of Afghanistan!

The pair of choppers lowered their noses to the ground – and NURSOV ( see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) covered the ground below with gunfire, violently shaking the people sitting inside. From the windows, I spotted barely noticeable flashes on the ground. This is too much! This is the last thing I need! I have had everything but not this: at the end of my international duty to be burned alive inside of this metallic can! I still want to run across the green fields, to smell the scent of chamomile with cornflowers in the bouquet of my bride. Oh, I do not like this chopper! Those who were born to crawl should not fly!

After sending to the ground an avalanche of lead and metal, the tandem of choppers managed to fly away from the dangerous zone and after a few more hiccups eventually we started landing. I noticed that serious "crocodiles" were sent to that bad place.

That's all, we have landed. The blades, by inertia, still continue their rotation, and only then I felt a cold sweat trickling on my back. No this is not my game, guys! It is much better and calmer to walk on the mother earth. As the saying says: "Every ram has its own fat tail." I agree with this.

I look out the window. On the sun-scorched earth, at the edge of the helicopter pad, five or seven people were sitting and squatting. Among them, Mishka with a bottle of vodka in one hand is hugging some officer. My heart popped: "Is he my replacement?"

I jumped to the ground:

– Mishka, what are you doing here?

– Ha! He is asking! Dance, dear: he is your RE-PLA-CE-MENT! – and he nodded at the officer.– I'm taking him from the army headquarters to your post! All documents for conducting the substitution is sealed in this envelope! – and he shows me a large white bag sealed with wax.

No-no-no! It must be mistake! This is not the way how it should happen! I pictured this epochal moment very differently: more exalted, more intelligent. And here – right in your face: "Change"!

My substitute is a senior lieutenant, puny compared to me. He stands up and with a foolish smile of a newcomer and reports:

– Senior Lieutenant Yunusov, 11th Brigade.

I stood up like a statue and just looked at him, hardly believing that this day has actually arrived. Now, I am just like him, smiling silly:

– Sorry, what brigade?

– Eleventh. Mogochinskaya, Transbaikalian Military District.

–What? – I gave Mishka a puzzled look.

– Sanya, this is all a mess and bullshit, but it does not matter, the main thing here is your replacement, and you will get transferred to the Odessa district next time...– Mishka replied to my unspoken question.

He knew that I wrote a report addressed to the Commander of TurkVO, in which I expressed my desire to continue my international duty in Afghanistan until I will be returned to Odessa, the place where I was signed up. Transbaikalian Military District is the place that we translated as “Forgot to return to civilisation”. It is my worst nightmare!

– In an hour we will be heading back, to Gardez.– the voice of the chopper’s commander returned me to reality.

Returning means returning.

Vodka should not be wasted. Give me a sip, for the joy of this sudden happiness.

Hiding from the severe heat of the sun, we went under the shade of the helicopter and placed the jacket of the newly-baked-international officer on the ground.

– Here you do not need a parade uniform for official presentation to the senior officer, there is no parade here. You can present yourself even wearing a singlet, – Mishka with a laughed invited us to drink with him –Let’s have a look for snacks we can have with vodka!

Some food was stored in my bag, Mishka found some, and my replacement Yunusov took out his food ration.

– Hey, pal ! –I said to the pilot resting under the tent.– Come on, joint us, but bring the glass with you together with a bottle. I will pay for this bottle with my cheque.

The pilot was experienced, he understood everything immediately and disappeared without a word inside his helicopter, and after a minute he joined us on an improvised table on which was a bottle of vodka accompanied by a “gentleman’s set” – three onions, a can of stew, and half a loaf of bread.

– Guys! – he says, – I will not take your money for the bottle.. This bottle is my present to you because you were waiting for this day for so long! We are alive and healthy. Let’s drink to it and for returning home! Cheers!

Following the tradition to have a small break between the first and the second drinks, we speedily rose our mugs for the third time.. And at this time

the choppers' crew commander loomed on the horizon. We also invited him for a quick symbolic drink, – it was too hot.

Our flight back seemed shorter and took less than half an hour.

After landing I went directly to the headquarters to register the newcomer, and after that I will organise my documents for the replacement. The first thing is to inform my team, then to report to the battalion commander.

I reported to major K. that everything is in order. I said that tomorrow our group is scheduled for a planned march that includes three APC (armoured personnel carriers – Editor) with their crews. Dimych will be the leader of this column. That is all. If we will be alert and quick, we will reach Barak Station in no time... and all together. By the way, during this march we can see how good my new replacement is.

And then I began organising my replacement documents. I do not know anyone at the administration, they are all new officers but they are all diligently sitting at their chairs. It is a positive sight, because the old ones I could chase for days. These new ones are still unspoiled.

When I was transferring my document, the deputy head of the party committee looks at me so closely.

– You are from Barak Station – and have no punishments? – he addressed the question to me.

– How is it possible to have no penalty on file? In my service record, I have a “Severe Punishment” that was issued to me by the battalion commander for harsh treatment of the captured prisoners. – I answered.

– I am not referring to your service. I am talking about the discipline in your battalion. Internal affairs of your battalion is disgusting, They engage in binge drinking for weeks. We got reports that some commanders of the battalion this month committed some disgusting actions. Reports reached me on unethical behaviour of drunken officers. What do you do as a Communist to stop this kind of nonsense?

Well, – I answered, – we do drink hard and do fight hard. You cannot deny the heroism of my guys. Even the snitch, who apparently reports everything to you, has already received a medal on his chest..

– He is informing us, not snitching – raising his voice, the Lieutenant Colonel began to educate me on army ethics.

What kind of rights, you cranky man, have you to educate me, sitting here far away from the tracers and bullets? You do not even know where my battalion is located.

– I just finished a talk with Major K.... He is aware of your problem.

Ha! What problem? This is something new. Now I turn all my attention to the deputy PO ( see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor).

– If it’s not a secret, what kind of problem? In the morning I did not have any problem, I did not have it at lunch, but for some reason my problem was cooked by now. What is it? For your information, I spoke with my battalion and there, in Barak, everything is in order. They are getting ready for tomorrow’s march.

– You can be dismissed!– and he pointed at the door with his finger.

After that conversation I had a bad taste in my mouth. This guy definitely does not like me. Where is my old pal Lt. Col. Platsynda Nikolai Kondratievich?

With a heavy feeling in my heart, I went to see my friends from another department Trying to be secretive, so no one can see, I opened my bag:

– Choose your taste!

– Oh! You do have here a good collection of weapons! What do you want from us?

– Change the first letters from Transbaikal Military District to Far Eastern Military District and send me to the direct service of the District Commander. Somehow make a misspelling, or make a mistake. I will pretend I never saw the original order.

– No problem!

I feel like a heavy burden was lifted from my shoulders. Well, all I want to do is to forget about this Transbaikal Military District

Walking further along the corridor, I reached the room of Deputy Brigade Commander.

– Come in! – he invited me and straight to business – Where are your documents? Let me put my autograph on them. By the way, you do not need to return to your Barak Station, go from here directly to the Union ( see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor). Tomorrow afternoon will be the board to Kabul, and from Kabul you will take a plane to Tashkent. You, in fact, already have a replacement. Let the new guy take over your company. This decision is coming from someone in the political department. No need to piss against the wind.

– Yes, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel! I will follow your advice, but it is not right not to say goodbye to my people at Barak Station.

– It is up to you, I warned you. The guys who are overseeing the moral standard of the army, have a very inquisitive attitude towards your company. They look forward to checking your people on this matter. With a newly arrived replacement it would be problematic to do so. You are a smart guy, and the army is executing the orders, not discussing them..

– Yeah, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel.– I was dumbfounded by this news – Enemies, as turns out, are not only in the mountains.

– The internal enemies, Senior Lieutenant, are worse. With those at the mountains, you are in battle, face to face. But these ones will harm you from behind.– the Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel said.

This is my fate! And why did you, my fate, do this to me? What kind of replacement is this? Two feelings are fighting inside of me. Which one is stronger, I cannot identify.

The first impulse is throw everything to hell and do as my heart is telling me. But walking under a sword hoisted overhead for the last two years, gives me the reason not to risk my replacement. This is how my mind works. The rational decision prevailed over the emotional attachment. I decided to leave.

In these pre-departure worries, I did not notice that the day is finished.

Where to go now? Maybe to the Eleventh company to my friends to smooth my uneasy decision.

On return back to my bunk, I am tossing sleeplessly. “How is it possible?”– the thought drills my brains all night.

In the morning, I can see clouds of dust on the horizon. This is a column with a military escort. They started marching very early, at dawn, from the Barracks, and now they managed to get to headquarters exactly for breakfast. We run towards them to meet the whole brigade.

Dimych is fully covered by dust, Komarik as usual is merry and happy. The march went without incident. It is a good road along the desert with very little “green” on the way. This is why enemies practically do not attack. Although last year, some stoned dukhs (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) tried. But one place is particularly cursed. This is close to a damaged bridge near Altamur, but we know about it and always “comb” it before marching.

– Sanka, – Dymych turns towards me. – I do not understand what is going on. K.... is screaming. He ordered to collect all your stuff and bring it with the column. I collected everything I could find.. What is this nonsense?

– Dymych, I received the order not to return to the battalion.

– Now I got it. Do not worry, Sanka, “justice will prevail!”.. The main thing is that we are alive. Who is this? – and he pointed by a finger at my replacement.

– He is my replacement, – I answered, – and this is our new company commander, – and I introduced Dimych to Yunusov.

I decided to leave my AK (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) with Yunusov and told Dimych to officially transfer my gun to Yunusov.

– Savin! – I shouted to the deputy commander of the machine-gunners, – here is Senior Lieutenant Yunusov – the third platoon commander. You will give

him my safe vest, a radio station, a radio-helmet and explain to him what is what. You know... code of calls, frequencies. And now line up the soldiers.

Ten people lined up.

I looked at them and a spasm squeezed my throat.

– Lads! My last order to you is to return home safely! Is it clear?

– Yes, sir! – There were dissonant voices in response.

They all feel that I am no longer a part of their life. I am already in a different dimension but they have to stay. Who will return home, only God knows, but I tried my best to keep you all alive. I did not want them to see my tears, and in a broken voice, choking, I commanded:

– Dismiss!

Together with the officers I sat down on the spare wheels that were laying near the APC. There was no need for farewell words. We kept silent. We finished our cigarettes and..

All get ready! The 371-st, 375-th, 378-th started the movement at the maximum speed. Follow me! March! – the words, which my regular teams learned as a song, were clearly heard in the air. Mishka and Komarik waved goodbye to me.

They were moving towards a battalion location. I was going forward to a new life.

Forgive for everything and do not remember bad things.

That was all.

Afghanistan got rid of me. However did I get rid of Afghanistan? This was unknown.

\* \* \*

– This is my story, Dima! – I finished telling my short story.

– Well, now everything is clear! –Dima Shesternin said, – This K.. is an asshole and I am going to tell you about K...

– Dima, today is our meeting, Let's not talk about bad things. God will judge him.

## ANATOLY VORONIN

Voronin, Anatoly Yakoblivich was born in 1951 in Astrakhan. He worked in the KGB system as an intelligent service agent. From 1986 to 1988 was a consultant for Internal Affairs of People's Police of Afghanistan at the Kandagar Province. He retired as a Colonel and lives in Astrakhan.

### THE WEDDING PRESENT

Hadji Latif was not just an ordinary military commander, he was a leader of an Islamic movement at the Daman county he was the most respected mujahidin (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) in this, the most rebellion area out of a whole province of Kandagar (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor). However, the inhabitants of Kandagar and settlements near by respected him not because he was well-positioned in the Islamic organisation. This old men, in his well past 80s, was famous for the hadzh (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) in his youth, when he walked to the sacred land of the Prophet Muhammad. During his long journey across the mountains and deserts, he smashed his foot to bloody blisters, under the merciless southern sun his body conditioned to the stage that it had no muscles at all, only stinging, crunchy veins, thoroughly saturated with bitter, smelly salt from the evaporated sweat.

In those early years, a very young Latif achieved what he wanted – he touched the sacred Kaaba (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) with his hand.

Woy, what a miracle! Allah has noticed the submissiveness, devotion and suffering of Latif, or nowadays is Hadji Latif, and has extolled him above all other tribesmen and descendants of the Kukuzai, the Pashtun tribe. Latif received his primary education in a madras (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) during the time when his father – a petty shopkeeper- was alive and was selling the basic necessities and goods from his little shop. By the age of twelve, Latif learned by heart all suras (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) and verses from the Koran. Without any difficulties, he also mastered arithmetic and geometry, and learned how freely operate with the large numbers. There, in the madrasa, secretly from mualems (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor), the young Latif has read the books of Oriental sages, comprehending the truth of life extracted from the book of Eastern wise men. He learned a lot about the history of the East, about the life of peoples who inhabited it. Science and wisdom in all disciplines – philosophy, astronomy and medicine- had been penned to him.

Unfortunately, the typhoid epidemic that swept throughout Afghanistan, did not pass Kandagar. The first one, whom the merciless disease brought down, was

his father, who, at that time, was not even forty years old; and second one was his mother, who looked after her sick husband. They died with a difference of one day. The death did not give her mercy to youngest four children in the family. She collected all of them with her bony cruel hands.

After burying close relatives, Latif was left alone with the harsh reality of life. His father's shop, for allegedly having debts, was taken by a wealthy shopkeeper, called Kazi. Whether these debts existed or not, is no one knew, but for Latif it was useless to appeal to Kazi, because no one even will not consider of listening the beardless orphan. Even more, for this greedy shopkeeper, who already coveted someone else's property to himself, seems to be not enough what he got, so he fabricated a deed, according to which the Latif family's house was sold during the time when his father was alive; and the house also fell into the ownership of this scoundrel.

Left without housing and means of subsistence, Latif wandered where his eyes were looking. This is how he found himself in the village of Loy-Karezak.

Glory to Allah, who did not abandoned Latif in his devastation and struggling, who did not allowed him to die from starvation. One day, a local rich man was riding the donkey, when he noticed a lonely, wandering on the road teenager. After asking the boy who is he and where he is going, the rich men immediately saw an opportunity to have an extra pair of hands and offered to work for him. Since Latif had no other alternative, he agreed without hesitation.

From dawn to dusk, under the blazing ruthless of the Afghan sun, Latif mastered the wisdom of the slave labouring. Working hard on his master's land, he sincerely hoped that his laborious effort would not be wasted, and sooner or later, the Supreme will spotted him, and will help him to rise about a crowd.

And this miracle did happen.

One day, may be in the year of 1925, a some bai (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor) from Kabul visited the city of Kandagar. It is happen, that the bai stayed at the place of the Latif's master. One day a dispute arose between them on the question: is any sincere devotee left who could fulfil the most unfulfilling desire of his master. And again, it just happening that that young Latif was walking by during this hot dispute. Deciding to prove his point, his master summoned Latif and gave him the order: during the holy months of Ramadan, Latif should reach the city of Mecca by foot. If he did it, then the guest from Kabul – who was not believed in a devotion of servants – will added up a half of his neighbouring to the master's land. If Latif will fail to reach Mecca than his master will gave up his land to the guest from Kabul. Nobody asked what Latif thinks regarding such dangerous trip.

Many years passed since that day, but Hadji Latif still remember his first hadzh in details. Later, he was travelling to Mecca and Medina many times on

camels or by cars but these trips were different. Last visit to these sacred places, Latif conducted by “Boing” from the newly built airport in Kandagar “Ariana”...

Indeed, many things have happen for the last sixty years. During this years, Hadji Latif himself reached the wealth and became one of the richest land owner in the province. How he manages to do so – this is a different story, in which will be a place for everything: a love and hate, a friendship and betrayal. Usually, he was the one who was a victim of betrayal. And from whom? From the people of the Afshar tribe, whom he helped to establish themself, gave them chance to receive education. Shaitan (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) messed with the heads of these people by giving them all sort of indecent thoughts. Few years ago, one of them came to Loy-Karezak village, to the home of Lafar. This shaitan-driven man tried to take his land! Of course, Latif pointed out at the door for him and his helpers. But few days later the shaitan-peopled returned with the armed soldiers and the first blood was spelt. And them was a big invasion of shuravi (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) that brought to the land of Afghanistan a bid war that took the lives of his two wives and four children. Very recently, his third wife died not even conceived his son.

Before this bloody war, Latif knew on which side he will be holding the weapon. His people, whom he for many years gave his land for a rent, supported him. These people exchanged their agricultural tool to the weapon. The gazavat (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) is begun.

His people were good soldiers too. Very soon everyone in their province knew about a vicious bravery of their attacks and his enemies from the military organisations, somewhere in Kandagar, usually turned pale when the name of Hadji Latif has been mentioned. However, the time arrived when the most warrior’s souls demand to have a peace and a little human happiness.

Something similar did happen to Latif. He was in his seventy five years old when he decided to have a rest from his military activities. By the way, he had the reason to do so.

His best friend – Haji Yusuf – lived in the neighbouring province of Pandzhvain. He was also a well recognised military commander as well as a wealthy man. He had a granddaughter, Guzel, who just turned fifteen years old. Her parents died during the first years of the war; and she was living in the house of her grandfather.

“Well, she cannot live all her life behind my back.” – Her grandfather decided one day, and the idea how to arrange the happy life for his granddaughter in such turbulent time, came to his mind. Learned about the death of the Latif’s third wife, the loving grandfather offered his granddaughter to be the next wife of Latif.

Muslims do not grieve for a long time due to their belief that the death is a beginning of eternity. So, Latif, after a month or two of his grieving, realized that in his house should be a woman who, with her gentle caresses and attention, could distract him from the hardships of the war. This is why he accepted Haji Yusuf's proposal as a gift from Allah.

Matchmaking was conducted with a strict compliance to stern customs of Sharia (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor). For a kalym (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor), the old groom gave to Yusuf a brand-new car – "Semurg", a herd of fifty sheep, and a small land in the Daman county. The wedding was decided to be done without special festivities, just to avoid the trouble on their heads in a form of bombs or rockets from shuravi (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor)..

It will be a modest wedding. Not attracting much attention, about a hundred bearded men will gather together for eating, smoking, and firing in the air from their automatic rifles, and later each of them will go to their own paths.

But on the day of the wedding, there was another event, which had the most direct influence on the wedding...

Approximately at 14.00 hours, an alarming message from the 70th Brigade, reached the Officer-on-duty at Administration of the Tsarandoi province, informing that the refilling car together with two Soviet soldiers and pressured gasoline complete disappeared. It was known that the car passed the block post near the fuel station, drove into the city and...gone without a trace.

The ginja (a criminal investigation department) staff immediately realized that the car could only be disappeared at the Sixth district, on the road between the "Black Square" and the technical college. In this particular place, some hungry-for-easy money shuravi, detouring from the prescribed main roads, stopped to do funny private business, by offering everything what they can steal from the army to the customers of the back streets. Fuel, spare wheels, empty canisters and even ammunition – everything possible and impossible could be finding here on sale.

These careless Soviet servicemen often were arrested by the gingja staff for unlawful activities, but they did not learn. They were also not afraid at all that at any moment they could become an easy prey for the enemies who wandered as well around the city in the crowds, searching for an adventure.

So, this is how it all happened.

As soon as so-called businessmen left the main road, they were immediately seized by people of the Haji Askar gang. In one hour the gingja department received the information about this seizure. A couple of hours later, a the missing car's skeleton was discovered behind the tall clay fence of the courtyard of the ruined house. The car has no fuel, wheels, electric appliance, and other more or less valuable details. Anything that people of the Haji Askar gang could not

take with them, were swiped by the local “locusts”. Now all these details can be seen in the local shops and garages, but to repossess these lost items was a dead business.

The driver and accompanying him ensign vanished in the thin air.

Next day about the accident not only Soviet side, but also the government of Afghanistan had a great concern because the Soviet General Varennikov shared his concerns with all appropriate military departments of the Government of Afghanistan and asked to establish, via their intelligence agents, the exact location of these two missing persons. What he was going to do next, the Soviet General Varennikov had not shared his plan and the Government of Afghanistan could only guessed.

In one week or so, one of the agents, imbedded into one of the rebellion gang, returned to the city the terrifying story of the last days of missing shuravies.

The wedding was full on, when the ‘Toyota’ stopped next to a house with merry guests. In the back of this car, there was a pair of shuravies with all signs of mercilessly tortures. Their faces were covered in blood and swollen to the stage that their eyes cannot be seen. Their lips were smash in blood. One of the captured man even did not has his lower lip because it was turned off and like a bloody sausage was hanging on his chin, widely opening his teeth less mouth.

Sitting in the back with captives, the goliath size of mujahedeens (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) with his full strength hit with foot a head of one of the captured man. The captives started to move towards the edge of the ute. With two-three kicks and the giant kicked them out of the car to the ground.

Other mujahedeens circled the captives and laughed at the, covered in blood helplessly moving bodies that tried to sit on the ground. The “goliath” with no hurry, took his knife and demonstratively punctured the shoulder one of the captives, at the place where the dusted shoulder strap hold two dirty-green coloured stars.

– These one is the leader. – He pronounced.

The kept silence to this moment captive, looked askew at the tip of the knife pocking his shoulder and overcoming the pain, whispered through his toothless mouth:

– Eight years as the war is going on and you did not learn how to read the ranks? Modj...

But the last phrase the captive could not finish as the standing next to him mujahedeens kicked into his already broken face. The body of the captured has fallen back to the driver, who from this unexpected impact made some unrecognisably sound – was it a sound of pain or just surprise? – but the ensign silently lowered his head and stared at the foot of the mujahedeens, expecting the next kick.

– The leaders or not – it has no difference how you will die. – “The goliath” spat into the face of the captured one with the shoulder straps

The captive has made a poor attempt to kick his abuser back, but screamed from the pain and fallen on his back.

Watching the foot of “the goliath”, he has not noticed how teenagers next to his right, hit his head with a rifle butt. Losing the conscious, the ensign felt on the ground together with the driver tighten to him.

He regained consciousness only after few buckets of cold icy water were poured into his face. He opened his eyes and saw that a new group of mujahedeens joined the standing group around them. Among the newly arrived mujahedeens, he spotted an old man with a tidy beard and a turban with a bright white top on his head. The old man looked different compared to all who was standing around. On top of the traditional outfit – shirt and pants of safari colour – he was wearing the dark -brown coloured vest, embroidered with multi-coloured beads. But not all of these have drawn the ensign’s attention. A few wreaths woven made from artificial flowers hung on the old neck of this man. And the man, himself, was looking like a decorated Christmas tree and this look was ridiculously unnatural among these wild armoured people.

A young man in his 30th, from the “Toyota” group, stepped closer to the old man. Stretching his arms towards the eldest, he kept repeating some glorifying words to Allah and to the old man, who apparently was getting married on this day. Approaching him, the young fellow touched by his cheeks the cheeks of the old groom, incessantly muttering the same words.

Finishing with the ritual greetings, the guest stepped to the side of the elder. Pointing at the captured shuravi, he explained, that these two captured are the gift from him, the field commander who came to pay respect and to present the lives of these two infidels to Allah as a little present for the wedding of the most respected man on the Earth.

Disgusting looking at the captured, Hadji Latif ordered to cut the robes tided their hands and legs. The goliath in one motion followed the order. Popping out from the crowd, the mujahedeens forced the captives to kneel. Pointing their weapons to the heads of kneeling people, they demonstrated the respect in such original manner to the most respected person.

Hadji Latif slowly walked around the prisoners like he usually did when he wanted to buy sheep on the market place, even kicked each of them by his foot with the beautifully embroidered with shiny beads shouse. The prisoners were fallen into an indecent four-legs-position the made the crowd around them to humiliatingly laugh and hooting at them.

Whilst the crowd had her entertainment, Hadji Latif summoned his bodyguard and whispered to him something. The bodyguard despaired in the house and in one second returned to his master with the Kalashnikov rifle. Only a slight movement from the hand of Hadji Latif was enough to put the prisoners on their feet.

The elder has made a short speech with his very couched and harsh tone. He asked “the goliath” to translate his words into Russian, so the captives could understand what he was saying.

When the crowd quieted down a bit, “the goliath” produced seemingly recognized translation with a strong accent the message of the old man to the prisoners.

– You are cowardly jackals who learned to kill our innocent people and children, but afraid to fight with free spirited mujahideens. Yes, two of you will die, but may be one of you wants to die voluntary?

“The goliath” wanted to add something else, but both captives simultaneously stepped forward to meet their fate. Hadji Latif only grinned at such unanimous wish of these shuravies to die in a foreign land. He took the machinegun from the hands of his bodyguard, and gave it to the captive driver. Having no clue what the old man wanted from him, the driver took the gun.

Pointing with his finger at the second captive – the ensign – Hadji Latif commanded: “Kill him”. “The goliath” translated these words. But the soldier shook his head and threw the submachine gun on the ground.

“The goliath”, with no hurry, picked up the gun from the ground, and, brushing the road dust off, offered the weapon to the ensign.

– Now it is your turn to shoot. If you do not want to kill him – kill yourself.

The ensign looked sullenly at the man and the surrounded him mujahideens. It was clear that he reached the last and most crucial moment of his life, and depending how he will act now he would answering to his own conscience, and to the God.

And he made his choice.

Sharply twitching the switch and pointing the barrel towards the giant man, he shouted in a wild voice “Get it, bitches! “, and pulled the trigger. But the dry click of the trigger witnessed a misfire. Instantly reacting to this misfire, the ensign recharged the machinegun, and pressed the trigger again. There were no shot as in the previous time..

Please with such good entertainment, Latif was watching how the ensign in full desperation and anger threw the submachine gun at the crowd that hit somebody in a chest.

Several mujahideens jumped out of the crowd and began to maul him with the butts of their rifles and feet. They beat him up until scarlet blood rushed from

his throat. Only after that, Latif with only one gesture stopped the massacre and said in Russian:

– For dog is dog's death.

“The goliath” understood it like an instruction to actions. He approached the ensign and raised the sharp blade of his dagger to the prisoner's throat, and with one sharp movement cut it from ear to ear. The body of the ensign became hammered in convulsions, and foaming blood, gurgling, rushed from this terrifying sword-cut to the ground.

Having done his dirty deed, “the goliath” turned toward the second prisoner, and still holding the bloody dagger in his hand, took a one step into his direction but

– “Bass!” Bass halas! “ – Latif yelled..

“The goliath” froze, obviously not understanding why this master does not allow him to finish off the second prisoner.

After slowly approaching the shaking-to-core soldier, who already had said good-bye to his life, Latif with one finger lifted his chin and looked in the eye of captive. What he saw in the depth of the prisoner's eyes is greatly satisfied him: it was a rudimental animal fear that occupied the soul of this young man. The enlarged pupils of the prisoner's eyes eloquently evidenced about it. Latif stepped away from the prisoner and theatrically raise his hands to the sky, uttered a sacramental phrase:

– Let's be the will of Allah, almighty and all-merciful! His will together with my desire is to give life today to one of my enemies. I act this way, not out of pity, but only because I do not want to shed the blood of another person on this memorable day for me. I let him go in peace, and tell his shuravi, that Latif is the one who do not want to fight. The man who is now dead in the dust, was not invited to my land, he came here with a weapon in his hands to kill innocent people. This sarbose (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) – and Latif pointed to the soldier's side – does not know what he is going because his unreasonable commanders sent him to us, and this is not his fault of being here. Let's be this decision fair. Allah Akbar!

The bearded crowd repeated three time “Allahu Akbar” after Latif. It was the end of the entertainment.

“The goliath” came to the soldier who was in utter prostration. Wiping the blade of his bloody dagger against his cheek, he almost literally translated everything that was said by Hadji Latif.

The soldier did not immediately get the sense of what he had said after the horrifying scene that had just happened in front of him. But when he eventually realized that the life was given back to him, he fell down on the ground, bursting into tears.

He did not yet know that the order giving by one field commander, is not necessary an order for strict implementation by another field commander. If this poor young fellow knew what kind of twisted test had been prepared for him by another ruler of his life, Haji Askar....

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– Lesha, Lesha, look, there the doukh (a unofficial disparaging name for mujahedeens used in the Soviet army) runs!

Sleeping in his remote post, half-awaken Lesha hit his head on the protruding stone, trying to look through his SVDashki (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) at the direction where his friend Petruha pointed.

Indeed! It was a figure, sure enough, wearing the black Afghan traditional male dress but with only the sleeves which was fluttering in the wind like a wing of a raven that unsuccessfully trying to take off from the ground. This loomed figure was running on a rocky-sandy surface in all visibility of the flat, like a table, earth, towards the Soviet post.

– What an asshole! – Lesha was amazed - He is running directly to the minefield. Is he stoned?

– Maybe he is a defector? – suggested Petruha.

– Ha!, you are stupid salabon (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor), where did you see the defectors in Afghanistan? Only brutal doukh (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) here.

After this short conversation, fully awaken Lesha together with Petrukha began to watch how the doukh was getting closer to the minefields, which for the security reason was placed around the Kandagar airport zone. They even placed a bit on exact time when the runner will step on the first. mine. The experienced Lesha gave him two mitutes; and less experienced Petrukha a bit more – three minutes.

The body of running man was blown in exactly 1 minutes and 25 seconds. Unfortunately nobody won.

Through his SVDashki, Lesha had a good look how the body was fragmented from the mine explosion: flames flashed beneath his feet, and black smoke rose. Turning high in the air, the body landed on the ground and crawled forward with its blooded stumps of what used to be legs and arms.

Watching all this through binoculars, Lesha and Petrukha placed a new bet on how long it will take for the doukh to died from losing blood. Lesha placed on ten minutes, Petrukha predicted five minutes. And again no one was a winner.

The mutilated body died in half an hour. During this time, an idea to finish him off, came to the head of Petrukha, but after estimation of his rifle possibilities and the distance to the target, he withdraw this option from his head.

While they were watching the death of the wounded doukh, they received the telephone call from the outpost to report on the explosion in their direction. So, Lesha reported exactly what he saw: that some stoned doukh apparently lost his way and jumped on the minefield, where he blew himself into pieces. The caller at the opposite end of the wire just spat and with a great satisfaction commented that with less shit, the earth will be better.

In a couple of days, hungry jackals will pull the corpse all over the “green”, and nothing could be left to testify the existence of this body. This incident would have gone unnoticed by anyone, except for Lyesha and Petruha... but the agent occurred who reported details of the bloody history of Soviet soldiers’ disappearance...

Haji Askar did not obey the order given by Haji Latif and failed to fulfil the goodwill wishes.

Promising his boss, Haji Latif, that the captive men will be taken closer to the location of the Soviet troops, and released, Haji Askar did it all differently. It was not in his rules of freeing an enemy in peace. None of those shuravi, who fell into his hands, stayed alive until the evening namaz (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor).

In the beginning, the doukh forced the prisoner to take off his uniform and washed it himself in the irrigation ditches. An extra set of Soviet uniforms could be handy for the gang while doing provocative actions in the city. After this, the doukh stripped him naked and several bandits raped him with the butts of their rifles. The young fellow cried, screamed in pain, tried at least somehow to resist, but several blows from the rapists with rifles, forced to face the unenviable fate of being raped.

After a full humiliation of the captive, he was forced to dress in Afghan clothing and put in a car, from where he was dragged out late at night in the area closed to the Kandagar airport. The prisoner was accompanied by the giant man and one teenager, both from the Haji Askar gang.

In the east was getting slightly lighter, then three of them stopped about four kilometres from the security zone of the airport. The giant man pointed to the direction of the airport indicating by his hand that captured one should keep walking. He also warned that the standing next to him teenager can kill at a distance of not less than two kilometres.

Keeping this warning in mind, the soldier drugged his feet towards the northeast for two kilometres, but after that he gave in to the nerves, and he broke into running. At that moment, Petrukha, the soldier from the remote outpost, spotted him.

Nobody knows how this story ended.

The story is silent, whether the names of ensign and the driver remained on the list of missing persons, or the “craftsmen” from the funeral team of the Kandagar Brigade were able to retreat these two names into a mournful “cargo of 200”, giving them a chance to be buried somewhere in the ground, on the vast territory of the former Soviet Union.

The story is silent about whether Hadji Latif has a legitimate heir and whether the elder himself is still alive. After all, according to the modest estimates, he now is over ninety years old.

But one thing is certain that the young wife of Hadji Latif was six months pregnancy when the shuravies left Kandahar forever, and if she really gave birth to a son, then it is likely that this seventeen-year-old boy is now fighting in Kandagar with the Americans.

## ALEXANDER GERGEL

Gergel, Alexander Nikolayevich was born in 1961, in Moscow. He studied at the Moscow Institute of Transport Engineers, but after the 4th year of his study, he left tertiary education for the army. From 1983 to 1985 he served in a separate motorized rifle regiment at the “860 hot point” located at the fortress of Baharak (Afghanistan, Badakhshan Province, Faizabad). He was awarded the medal “For Courage”. Currently, he lives in Moscow.

## GO WEST!

“Let;s go”, – Alyosha said.

Without any word Vitka got up from his bed and went outside, following Alyosha. They were intently marching along the wall towards the division of supply quarters.

Dzhuma<sup>1</sup>, the driver of the supply division, was already waiting for them, leaning up against a cherry-plum tree. Dzhuma – a skinny fellow- was about to be demobilised. In accordance with an unwritten dress code of the dembel (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) his uniform had been washed and ironed so many times that it had almost become white.

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<sup>1</sup> The Soviet Army was drafted from the conscripts which came from different parts of the vast Soviet Union and had various ethnic backgrounds and religions. Some soldiers in this story are Russians, like Aleksei (Alyosha), Viktor (Vitka), Oleg and Nikolai (Kolya). Some solders are Muslims from Central Asia, like Dzhuma, Sultan, Yakub (Babay). When the Soviet Union broke up into different independent states, soldiers who had fought together became citizens of different and sometimes hostile states.

His bleached shirt was slimmer than permitted by army regulations. His leather belt was loosely buckled with its lower end hung at the exact level of his jacket. His badge was also bent in accordance with this dembel fashion. This dembel fashion look was crowned with a Russian military panama hat, aka “Afghanka”, that was bent at a precise angle giving him a rakish look.

Alyosha and Vitka were wearing the standard winter uniform, obligatory for those who were waiting to be demobbed in the spring. Vitka rather liked this look: it set him sharply apart from the rest of their intake. Alyosha felt the same, so neither had put in for the summer uniform, preferring instead to wear out the uniform they had been issued with in the autumn. Why bother to seek favours from the quartermaster, or relieve the junior soldiers of the summer uniforms and boots? Why go through all that useless effort, when they were so close to going home?

The friends shook hands with Dzhuma, who without any words pulled the keys out of his pocket, unlocked the door and welcomed them into the small storeroom. They entered, went for the heavy paper bag as usual, opened it, pocketed a handful of dried fruit, and left the storeroom. While Dzhuma was locking the storeroom, Alyosha and Vitka were marching towards the opening in the fortress wall, which led to the automotive machinery yard. Passing this opening in the wall, they took the stairs to the yard and went along the row of vehicles which were lined up along the wall.

– Which car shall we take? – asked Alyosha, – The Zil or the Tabletko? ( See “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor).

– The Zil. –Vitka answered and added quickly.– I’m driving today, it is my turn!

Dzhuma caught up with them near his own vehicle – the Zil 131. Dzhuma was assigned as a driver to Zil 131, but this car had not moved from the Bakharak valley for five years, since the regiment had left one of its battalions in Badakhshan after a long march over the mountains from the Soviet Union<sup>2</sup>. Most of the other vehicles, such as water tankers, tank transporters, and others Zil 131s belonged to the supply division, and were equally immobile. There was also a green Uaz-452 van, shaped like a loaf of bread, with a red cross on it: it was the ambulance car, which the soldiers called a “tabletko” (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor). In order to prevent the deterioration of the vehicles, some measures had been taken: wooden beams a metre high had been put under their axles to take the load off their shock absorbers. Written notices were placed on their windscreens to inform that the radiators had been drained. Having decided that the safety of vehicle was ensured, the cars were left alone. The

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<sup>2</sup> In the winter of 1979-1980 the 860th Independent Motor Rifle Regiment completed an arduous march from its base in Central Asia to the province of Badakhshan in North East Afghanistan. Most of the regiment was stationed in Faisabad. But one battalion was left in Bakharak, where this story is set.

only vehicles still in use were a Zil 131 model, which was used for delivery of ammunition supplies from the helicopter pad to the storehouse. There was also a model ZIL 130 for use as a dump truck that looked unbelievably civilian with its blue - white colour.

This dump truck was normally parked next to the break in the wall, so the canteen

orderlies could throw directly into the truck empty cans, which had contained meat and condensed milk. When the truck was full, one of the orderlies would drive the truck a kilometre away from the fort to the Saripulsky Bridge and dump the garbage near the road. Polished by wind and sand, the huge pile of cans glistened like gold on the roadside. This is why the First Company preferred to do their firing practice there, using the cans as targets. Of course, it is difficult to hit a can from a distance between a hundred fifty and two hundred metres. But the reflection of the bright Afghan sun was so glistening on the metallic cans that in this light you can spot a rabbit a kilometre away. From his first shot an experienced sharpshooter could make a can fly up into the sky; and the young soldiers were happy, looking at the can's trajectory that was spinning like a furious cheerful little shooting star. For the younger soldiers it was a great incentive to get them to improve their shooting.

The journey over the mountains with their pinnacles four thousand metres high had left Dzhuma's Zil 131 pretty battered. Despite its helpless look, it was the favourite place for the boys' ritual evening gathering,

Vitka jumped straight on the footboard of the car, opened the door and flopped down into the seat. Alyosha and Dzhuma got into the cabin from the other side. Whilst Dzhuma crumbled up some ganja (see 'Terminology and Glossary') with his finger nails, Alyosha took from his pocket the "Donskie" cigarette paper and tore a strip. After that he rolled it into a filter, blew some tobacco onto his hand and joined the filter to the cigarette. Dzhuma carefully poured the ganja onto Alyosha's palm. Alyosha quickly got rid of the excess tobacco, mixed what was left with the ganja and started to roll the joint. Vitka lay back comfortably in the driver's seat and observed his friends' actions out of the corner of his eye.

They had been repeating this daily ritual for the last two months. They worked in silence, neither larking about nor cracking jokes: so that there would be more to talk about after the second joint.

Alyosha carefully tied the end of the joint with a piece of string so that nothing would fall out, and handed it to Vitka.

– Let's get going, – he said carelessly, to hide his impatience.

Dzhuma struck a match, shaded the flame with his hands, and brought it up to Vitka's face. Vitka quickly lit the joint, inhaled, drew the aromatic smoke into

his lungs, held his breath for several seconds, and slowly breathed out. He inhaled again, then passed the cigarette to Dzhuma. Frowning, Alyosha patiently waited his turn. As he watched Dzhuma's face relax and melt into a blissful smile, Vitka felt that those first puffs were beginning to hit him as well. The slight pressure on his temples was beginning to grow, to squeeze his forehead, and to press down upon his eyelids: as if the visor of a knight's helmet had fallen over his eyes. They closed for a second of their own accord, and when he opened them again, the world seemed to be quite different. It was as if, long ago in his childhood, his mother had delicately removed the translucent wet backing paper from a decal, so that instead of a colourless, barely visible shape, the little Vitka could see part of a fantastically bright picture on the warped page of the album, with sharp lines and remarkably bright colours. Every little leaf on the poplars facing the windscreen swelled up, and the play of the shadows transformed the intimately familiar shapes of the treetops into a miraculous green country of a mysterious fairytale beast. The mountain slopes you could see through the trees began to quiver in rich shades of brown and violet. But the most beautiful thing of all was the setting sun, its red changing to crimson as it sank through the soft blue sky towards the western mountain range.

Alyosha took his two puffs, passed the cigarette to Vitka, laid back and closed his eyes. Vitka followed suit, and passed the cigarette to Dzhuma. He felt that the time had come to hit the road. He turned the imaginary key in the ignition, and imitated first the noise of the starter turning over, and then the smooth sound of an idling engine.

– Let's go! – Alyosha shouted cheerfully.

Dzhuma smiled and nodded. Vitka let out the clutch, confidently shifted into first gear and turned the wheel to drive out into the road. All three lurched from side to side in their seats, as if they were on the bumpy country road which led to the highway.

– Which way? – asked Vitka, stepping on the gas so that the lorry could negotiate the steep bank of the roadside. Spinning the wheel, he drove out onto the asphalt.

– Let's go west, go home! – said Alyosha.

– Go west! – Vitka agreed, and put his foot down.

By now all three of them were imitating the noise of the engine, helping it drive the lorry along the flat asphalt road, only rarely breaking off for another drag. The kilometres flashed past, the wheels devoured the road beneath the lorry, as the red sun in the west beckoned the three soldiers onwards towards their homes. Vitka narrowed his eyes and looked only at the ground, so that he should not see the mountains which blocked the horizon. The few kilometres which separated them from the nearest mountain spurs became the endless

plains of Russia. The sun shone straight into their eyes, the poplars become Russian birch-trees, and the young fields of wheat became the fresh Russian grassland. Only the smells were wrong: in Russia you don't get that unbearable smell you get in an Afghan village of overheated stone, smoke, sheep manure, and ancient wooden buildings.

– We'll soon be home, said Alyosha.

– Yeah, there's not long to go. Home, Dzhuma! We're going home! – Vitka suddenly shouted with enthusiasm.

– Why don't we stop at my place in Ferghana? – Dzhuma suddenly asked. – Vitya, let's go to my place. We can kill a sheep, cook rice pilaf, eat the fruit, take a week's rest. My mother will be delighted. Shall we go to Ferghana? What do you say? OK, Alyosha? Shall we go?

– Hey, hang on, Dzhuma. Let's not go to your Ferghana yet. For me Ferghana is just as lousy as Badakhshan: if that's the choice we might as well stay here. What we need is to go home, to Russia. We're sick to death of the East. I can't bear to look at another piece of mutton or another rice pilaf. I'm fed up with the lot of it! I want to go home. So does Vitka. You let us get back to our forests and rivers! I want to see the plains around me, and not a single mountain for a thousand kilometres! I've got so sick of them in the last two years that I doubt if I'll ever want to see any mountain again. You've got used to all this, this place is pretty much like your home, so it's as if you've never been away. But for us, you know... No, sorry, brother. Maybe in a year we'll come to you on holiday. But just now it would be better if you came with us: there we can really rest up.

Vitka was goggle-eyed. Alyosha, a man of few words, now broke into a tirade. At first Vitka could not work out why his friend was so excited, but then he realised: they were both trapped. He could not follow Alyosha's line of thought. Probably Alyosha himself couldn't either. He kept forgetting what he had just said. He was intoxicated with the sound of his own voice, his own miraculous and marvellous phrases that seemed so full of mysterious meaning. They caressed the ear, nourished the mind, and conjured up bright pictures which to Vitka seemed like a whole movie.

So as Alyosha talked, Vitka could see himself in Moscow, roaming its streets, visiting relatives and friends. He could see himself in his dacha, walking through the forest, swimming in the lake. He could see beyond that. He saw himself taking a job in the autumn after his holiday. By then a year had passed and his nostalgic plan to visit Dzhuma in Ferghana was coming true. It was not a disjointed flight of imagination. No, the feelings, the emotions, the happiness and the sadness, the passage of a whole year, were all quite genuine.

Suddenly he was overwhelmed with the need to convey his impressions to his friends, to let them share in the movie unrolling in his head: the chilly August

evenings in Moscow, the lake in the forest not far from his dacha. Alyosha and Dzhuma listened fascinated, as he was carried away with his own story yet again. But then he understood that they were listening to him without understanding. Their faces lit up with interest and a kind of foolish joy, but their eyes were turned inward, and his words found no reflection there. He tried hard to make his story clearer and more logical, to convey the idea that now seemed to be of overwhelming importance to him. The effort was too much for him. He paused for a second, lost the thread, forgot what he had been talking about, failed to recover, and started to talk rubbish. He feared that the boys would be upset if they did not hear the end of the story, but they seemed to notice nothing, and he continued his disjointed story until he realised that his tongue was running away with him, missing out whole words and phrases.

He tried to speak slowly and precisely. But they were not listening, although they did not interrupt him. Now all three of them started to talk, pursuing their own line without being annoyed or bothered by the others: they wanted to listen to one another even while they were speaking themselves. Then suddenly they burst out laughing. Dzhuma was talking nonsense, giggling, winking his eyes. Alyosha was shaking with laughter in his seat, tied up in his own tangled story without beginning or end. Vitka could take no more. He brought the lorry to a halt hauled on the handbrake, and with his head on the steering wheel started to shriek with laughter. The truck shook all over.

Alyosha was laughing so hard that he sank down from his seat in convulsions. Vitka wondered if his friend was dying but his thoughts suddenly switched involuntarily to some different event that had happened two months earlier. The laughter suddenly stopped.

They had been smoking ganga behind a mud brick wall outside the fort, hidden from prying eyes by the First Company's armoured personnel carriers. Their pleasure had reached its height when Vitka heard something clang on the armour plating of one of the carriers, and the long coughing sound of a ricochet. The sound of the shot followed from the mountains a few seconds later. Without even realising what he was doing, Vitka leapt to the shelter of the wall, knocking Alyosha over as he did so, and dragging him to shelter. Alyosha gave his friend a questioning look: but he got his answer when another bullet showered dust over the place where they had just been standing. Huddled at the foot of a stone wall, all serious now, the friends tried to work out how to get from the vehicle park into the shelter of the fortress wall. First they needed to get from the mud wall to the APCs. But unfortunately the sniper on the mountain did not let up, and prevented any attempt to cross the three metres of open space which divided them from the nearest vehicle. Their drug-induced ecstasy was transformed into that terrible tormenting state of wild unreasoning fear familiar to any soldier

who has been interrupted in the middle of a smoke. When a man is frightened, he loses his willpower entirely. However hard he tries he cannot escape the real and imaginary terrors which assail him from all sides. There was no question of being able to make a dash to reach the APCs before the sniper could react. Even if they did, they could not hope to cross the next thirty metres dividing the vehicles from the high wall of the fort. In a few minutes Vitka started to come to his senses. He wondered if it might be possible to get to his own APC, dive into the turret, try to identify the sniper on the hill through the optical sight, and suppress him with a few well-chosen shells.

He was already about to crawl on hands and knees along the mud wall to his APC, when Alyosha gripped his shoulder and stopped him: "How are you going to operate it?"

Vitka had not thought about that. The vehicle had been powered down. Neither the revolving turret, nor the aiming mechanism, nor the triggers of the cannon and machine gun would be working. They would have to get the driver-mechanic from the fort to get them going, and the sniper would certainly not give them the time to do that. So all they could do was sit and wait for the shooting to stop.

It could not go on for long. If the sniper got too carried away by his game, he would be spotted by the lookout, the message would go through to the battalion commander, who would not miss the opportunity to punish at least one bearded rebel. In a few minutes the gunners would be standing by their howitzers. If by then the sniper had not taken cover behind the mountain, he would have almost no chance of escaping. The howitzers would open up, shell splinters would cover the hills, and nothing would be left alive for hundreds of metres around. The shells would be set to explode high in the air, showering large areas with flechettes (see "terminology and Glossary"—Editor), so that anyone who was hit would look like a hedgehog with its spines pointing inward. The rebels knew that, and never stayed in the field for long.

And indeed the shooting soon stopped. The friends went around the vehicle park hiding behind the mud wall just to be safe, then through the woods and into the fort by the main entrance. Vitka could not rid himself of the thought that Alyosha could have been cut down by the sniper's bullet. For a while the image of such a terrible and senseless death had put him off wanting to smoke ganga. But only a few days later Alyosha thought up the idea of having a smoke in the shelter of Dzhuma's lorry cabin.

But now, looking at Alyosha convulsed with laughter, Vitka was once again overwhelmed by the same terrible vision. He wanted to drop out of the cabin, to crawl and run under cover past the mud wall, back to his bunk in the platoon hut, which now seemed to him to be the safest place in the world.

– Just like the three little piggies! – he said, following a sudden new train of thought.

– What, bacha (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor), what’s got into you? – said Alyosha, who had by now come to his senses.

– I don’t know, – Vitka admitted honestly, realising that there was no way he could explain his thinking to Alyosha.

– Let’s eat. – Dzhuma suggested.

For a few minutes the three of them chewed dried fruit in silence.

The laughter was over, the three men fell into a gloomy reverie. It was time to go, back to their bunks to relax on their beds, to let their thoughts arise unbidden, to watch events unroll at random in their imagination.

Once safely inside his billet in the fort, Vitka was overcome with joy. He almost died laughing as he looked at the young soldiers with their cropped hair and their absurdly protruding ears. He clambered onto the top bunk to relax, lay on his back and stared at the boards of the ceiling just above him. It was all so familiar, so pleasant, so homely, that he was filled with carefree happiness. Filled with emotion, he put his hands behind his head and imagined himself on the edge of a forest. He lay on the soft grass and looked at the distant sky. It was so beautiful that Vitka arched his back with pleasure. Unexpectedly his hands touched cool metal. It was the headboard, and he clutched automatically at its thin metal tubes. One of them spun in his fingers with a short metallic creak. For anyone else it would have been no more than an unpleasant screech. But for Vitka it filled in the missing link in his imaginary forest. It was the cry of a bird! Vitka began to spin the metal tubes slowly and his forest was filled with the singing of birds. With his eyes closed he savoured the unrestrained concert: the trilling of a nightingale, the song of thrushes and finches, orioles and waxwings. Vitka did not know one bird from another, but he did not care: all he wanted was for the singing to go on.

The nearby sound of irritated voices – too far away to distract him – ruffled the edge of his dream, which covered him like a web. But then harsh reality broke in on his idyllic Russian forest. Something rough landed on his face, the birds flew off in all directions. Vitka threw off the pillow which had been thrown at him, and jumped upright on his bunk.

– Come on, pull yourself together! Let’s roll a joint, – said Kolya.

– Push off, you wanker! I was on a high and you’ve ruined it.– Vitka groaned.

He threw his head back on the pillow, and tried to doze off again, but was soon awakened by loud laughter from some of the men from the bottom bunks. Kolya noisily continued his story, of which Vitka had missed the beginning.

– ... and I said to Yakub that I won’t share another joint with him. And don’t you dare either! Do you hear me, you drivers? Don’t you dare smoke with Babay.

For nearly a year Kolya had supervised the company's drivers. He had handed over his duty a month earlier, but even though he was now waiting to be demobbed, he still issued orders to them all.

– Why are you bugging me about? – said the offended Babay. – Just because you are the guy who thinks he can mess with everyone?

– I'm not messing you about, Yakub.. You're such a midget I'm really afraid for you. A couple more little puffs and you'll be so stoned we won't be able to bring you back down to earth. When our replacements arrive we're all supposed to go home together. How could I go home without you? No one would be able to hold you down once we'd gone. Without us you'd be flying around here forever. – Kolya answered in all seriousness.

Those who were waiting to be demobbed roared with laughter. Looking down from the upper bunk Vitya saw Alyosha trying to hold Babay down.

He realised that the others were also half stoned.

– Guys, look! Viktor's woken up. Come down, Vitka, let's hear some of your usual bullshit! – Alyosha called him, – I'm sick of these lorry drivers, talking so big that you would think they were helicopter pilots.

– Hang on, Vitka will tell you something about flying. Remember how he flew with Sinitsky! – yelled Kolya cheerfully, – Come on, Viktor, tell us about that war.

Vitka smacked his lips, and gave his best imitation of Leonid Brezhnev (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) television, reciting in his nasal voice from his wartime memoir “Malaya Zemlya: “I didn't keep a diary during the war, but I still remember clearly every one of those 1458 days”... No! To hell with him! I'd rather tell you a joke! Listen!

– Once upon a time there was a bear who grew cannabis in a clearing in the middle of a forest...

He didn't finish. The whole barrack room broke into hysterical laughter:

– A bear growing cannabis!... Hold Babay down, or he'll fly away!!!

Vitka waited for about a minute until the audience calmed down, then continued: “Every day the bear came to the clearing, to see how his plants were growing. When they were nearly ripe, he saw that someone had cut down some of the plants. Holding a cudgel, he set an ambush to catch the thief. A hare trotted into the clearing, cut down some cannabis, took a quick drag, got stoned, and started to leave. The bear bashed him over the head, the hare shook himself and said: Wow, that was something else! I'd better nick the whole crop straight away!”

Vitka was met with a resounding silence, which lasted for several seconds. He thought that his joke had fallen flat. Then Kolya suddenly doubled up with laughter, then Sultan, then Alex, then Oleg. The young soldiers at the other end of the barrack room, expecting trouble, panicked and jumped off their creaking bunks.

- That was something else! Wow, that was something else. Ha-ha-ha!
- Nick the whole crop! I’m going to kill myself laughing!
- Think, guys – a bear growing cannabis!!

The demobees ( see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) heaved, groaned and scrambled down from their bunks. Even Vitka was affected and joined the general hysteria..He peered over the top bunk and nearly fell off. Only Babay looked blank, turning his head from side to side with a dazed smile. When Kolya saw that Babay had entirely missed the point, he whispered through his tears:

- Bash him too: then he’ll be as stoned as the hare!

Something clicked in Babay’s head. He too began to laugh, panting and yelping and repeating: Nick the crop! Nick the crop!

The laughter went on and on. We gradually calmed down a bit, and Vitka tried to tell another long-drawn-out joke about the Lilliputian who picked up a bit of hash on Gulliver’s hand. But just when he got to the point where Gulliver, tired of waiting for the idiot to get enough together for a proper smoke, tells him to sort himself out somewhere else and rolls the cigarette for himself, someone else burst out: “Nick the crop right now! I” and the boys collapsed with laughter all over again.

It took them at least half an hour before they finally calmed down a bit.

– How about some music, guys? –said Kolya. Alyosha backed him: – Why not? Come on Vitka, give us one of our tunes!

Vitka himself had already been feeling for some time that he needed to play. He jumped off the bed, picked up the guitar standing at its head, and began to tune it up. The ancient instrument was past its prime and hard to tune. The tuning pegs kept sticking, the strings kept cutting into his finger pads. Nevertheless, even an inadequate instrument made a great difference to their boring life. Only five men from the entire troop could strum out even a few chords, so Vitka, who did have a certain skill, was regarded for a long time as the only capable guitarist around. But then he was displaced by a young soldier from the Second Company who had a genuine musical education, He was a professional, he could play the accordion as well as the guitar, he knew many songs, both funny and sad; for three months he had been giving concerts every evening for the benefit of the senior soldiers. All those months Vitka had been resting, waiting for his finger pads to heal. Then people got sick of the new musician’s songs, which were all about civilian life, and demanded a return to their old favourites, the ones which Vitka had learned from tapes of the “Cascade” (see Terminology and Glossary”–Editor) ensemble.

– What shall we sing, Kolya? – Viktor asked as he picked out the first chords and flexed his fingers.

– What about “Tracer” to get us going? – suggested Soltan: it was Kolya’s favourite song.

Without waiting for any other ideas, Vitka started to play:

*"... The blue sky is over our heads, and our hands can reach out to the stars!"*

Several voices joined the chorus. Kolya, carried away, shouted out:

*"Just listen to the tracer as it flies  
And drones through the silent night."*

Then Vitka went straight into "Dawn": slow and sad. No one objected. Most of the boys fell quiet, some joined in gently. Yakubzhon screwed up his narrow eyes, whispering the strange Russian words:

*"... and in the morning, along unseen paths  
We'll again explore the Afghan land."*

Suddenly Alyosha broke in forcefully. The words of the song had bitten into him for two long years: now they struck a chord with what he was thinking at that moment, and he poured out all his frustration at the endless waiting:

*"The guitar speaks of the frozen dew,  
Of young girls and their golden hair.  
Guitar, you can end your song without sadness!  
After all, you and we both  
Serve in Badakhshan".*

Vitka realised that he had hit the mark. All the demobees in the corner had been hooked by the music. Sometimes a musician catches the mood of his audience and instinctively plays what they want to hear. Then each feels as if he is part of the music. Each takes part in creating the song, whether or not he has a good voice or a good ear, whether he remembers the words or not, even if he does no more than accompany the simple tune with a primitive mumbling. That's just what happened now. Stimulated by the drug, their minds could produce ready answers to barely formulated questions: there was no need to think, to analyse, to ask where the song should go next. His eyes on his listeners, his hands and fingers functioning automatically, his voice reproducing the practised words, the player could guide the disorganised chorus into the right pitch, and pin down the outburst of emotion called up by the song. When they came to the last verse, Vitka could see tears in the corners of the eyes of the listeners, and he put his whole soul into the final phrases.

*"The horizon expands  
As the soldier goes home,  
We will walk with our friends  
Towards the plane.  
Until it lifts us  
Over the land,  
And strikes out towards  
Our homeland at last".*

He saw the faces of his friends changing as he sang. The coarse soldier's faces that had got on his nerves for two whole years suddenly became the faces of twenty year old boys. Their shorn heads made them look particularly young and naïve. Could you call them warriors? Hell, they were no more than schoolboys, greenhorns who still know nothing about life. They were merely pretending to be grown up: behind their coarseness and cruelty they hid half-formed young souls, pining for their distant homes, their families and their homeland. What did they know of the realities of adult life, these boys who had been torn from their everyday life at the age of eighteen and hurled into a strange and incomprehensible land? How would they live when they got home and came up against the realities of civilian life? Now they only thought of one thing: how they would soon be out of this crazy Afghanistan, of which they were so heartily sick. They would forget everything they had learned here. In no more than a few days, a couple of weeks at most, they would be back in the Soviet Union, face to face with an incomprehensible new life. How would they live there? How would he be received?

“No”,— thought Vitka. It was not a matter of “they” and “I”, but “we”, all of us! Here we had all become to resemble one another, regardless of where we came from, our upbringing, our way of life and our education. Now we all know the same things, and are ignorant of the same things. We know how to place our feet carefully on the stones as we climb a hillside in the dark. We can march for dozens of kilometres over the mountains carrying thirty kilograms of weapons and ammunition. We know how to apply a tourniquet to stop the blood, how to dress a wound and inject a painkiller. We know how to kill a man! But we don't know anything about how people live outside the army, what they think about, how they talk, how they sing. Our former life is an unreal dream. Will our present life also seem like a dream one day?

Vitka struck the final chord, slowly ran his fingers over the strings, and ended the song. All fell silent, not wishing to break the mood of sadness. So he decided to continue in the same mood and began to play “The Cuckoo” by Cascade, assuming that someone would pick up the words “I often remember my home”. But Alyosha put his fingers on the strings and asked:

– Vitya, how about the one about the cigarette, eh?

It was an old joke. The first time Alyosha made the request, Vitka spent twenty minute trying out one song after another with him, but could not find one which even mentioned a cigarette. Alyosha could not remember what the song was about, nor the tune, nor even a single line of the verse. He could only click his fingers and repeat: “Well, that one ... There's something about a cigarette in it.”

In the end, after much trial and error, Vitka wormed out of Alyosha the information that the song was about a friend who did not return from battle. It was the well-known song by Vysotsky (“Terminology and Glossary” – Editor),

and cigarettes barely figured in it: but for some reason it was just those words that Alyosha remembered, and when Vitka got to them, Alyosha shook his head in embarrassment and began to join in. So now, as he began to perform the song “about a cigarette” for his friend’s benefit, Vitka waited for Alyosha to join in. Alyosha was not much good at singing, but he waited patiently, looking into Vitka’s eyes. When Vitka arrived at the verse Alyosha was interested in, he nodded, stopped singing himself, and Alyosha took over:

*Spring has broken out from the prison of winter,  
And I called out to my friend – by mistake:  
“Leave us a fag!” But the answer was silence.  
He never came back from the fight.*

The others listened in silence. Now Vitka was launched on his favourite hobbyhorse. He played the songs by Vysotsky that were closest to him: “In the mountains you can’t trust the rocks, nor the ice or the cliffs”, “The sunset glittered like a shining blade”, and his favourite, about stars falling from the sky:

*They told us to climb up the mountain,  
To fire without sparing a shot.  
But another star flashed down from above  
That seemed to be aiming for you.  
I had thought that our troubles were over,  
That we’d managed to get off scot free.  
But that crazy star came down from the sky,  
And hit you right in the heart.*

The last chord died away in the silent barracks. Vitka slowly laid the guitar aside, unable to sing any more. All sat with their eyes cast down, not looking at one another. It was Kolya who broke the mood. He shook his big head with its dark hair and its crude crew cut, rose in a businesslike way and gave the order:

– Stop snivelling! Stand up! Follow me, quick march!

They all got off beds, stamped off to the door past the now silent younger soldiers. Outside they rolled a couple of joints, handed them round and afterwards returned to their barracks in a more cheerful mood.

– Come on, Sultan, – said Oleg, – put your tape recorder on.

– Yes, don’t put on “Cascade”, put on the tape with the various songs, and Jakub will sing us his song about the fly with one wing.

Yakub drew his head into his shoulders in embarrassment. He loved singing Russian songs, but barely understood the words, and made up his own versions, such a muddle of more or less similar words that he made his listeners fall about laughing. With his Tajik accent he would mangle the Pugacheva’s (“Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) song by: “Without mine you me love, me fly with one wing”.

Sultan rummaged for his tape recorder in his bedside table, rewound the tape, and started it from the beginning, where the “Jolly Fellows” (“Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) are singing a song about their aunt: “Oh, auntie, you’re wasting your time, Looking out of the window in tears.”

The lively rhythm of the music cheered everyone up, and they soon started to stamp their feet in time as they sat on their bunks, and swayed from side to side. Vitka kept himself under control, sprawled back against the bed head and looking sideways at his friends. He already knew what would happen next: the dope would take over, and all the pent up emotions would break out. He did not have to wait long. The “Jolly Fellows” began a new song, and Kolya suddenly jumped into the aisle between the bunks and began dancing to the music and singing:

*We wander all across the land, come winter storm or rain,  
We sleep just where we find ourselves, we eat what comes to hand.*

Sultan was the next to break out. Picking up the guitar, he followed Kolya out, stood beside him, and now they both stamped their boots on the floor together. Sultan pretended to play the guitar. Alyosha grabbed a gun off a sentry coming off duty, lengthened the strap, and hung the gun over his shoulder as if he were a musician with an electric guitar, holding it low down as if it were a bass instrument. He picked out chords with his left hand on the barrel of the gun, and drummed with his right hand on the body of the gun. Babay appeared beside him, rattling away with imaginary drumsticks. The four of them were imitating the “Jolly Fellows” whom they had seen a couple of times on television. They shouted out the words of their favourite song, assaulted the non-existent strings of their imaginary instruments in a frenzy and stamped their feet in time:

*We’re strolling players, we’re always on the road.  
Our little wagon, the open field, is what we call our home.*

The music was beginning to make them weep a little. Vitya looked at the bowed heads of his friends, their eyes turned in upon themselves, and understood that they were feeling much the same as he was. It was true: the words of the song applied to him too. They were the strolling artists, travelling the mountain roads day after day! What was their armoured personnel carrier if not a little wagon in which they bedded down for the night wherever they happened to find themselves? They ate well enough if they were not too lazy to lug an extra few tins of food.

Vitka suddenly felt very sad. He felt with every fibre of his being that he was surrounded by real friends, such as he would never in his life find again, that once he had got over the first intoxication of homecoming he would miss these guys, with whom he had shared so many bad times and so much happiness. Demobilisation – they had wanted it, they had dreamed of it for ages, they had

waited for it passionately. Suddenly it took on a different aspect: demobilisation meant the inevitable parting with friends.

In a few days they would have to say goodbye. Some would go off in the first contingent, leaving the others to await the next draft, and they would say goodbye to their friends beside the helicopter. Some of them – Kolya perhaps, or Sultan, or Oleg, would go aboard, turn round on the ramp, wave goodbye, and disappear forever. Even if they all set off at once, somewhere along the way – at the airport, at the station – the moment would arrive when they had to part! They would embrace one another, turn round, and go off. Of course one could glance back, wave, and realise that one would not see many of them again in this life. “Jolly Fellows” continued meanwhile:

*“We’ll arrive and depart in winter, in summer, and the fall,  
As the children dream once more of our little painted wagon”.*

Vitka was finally overcome by his emotions. The boys were stamping their feet and shouting at the top of their voices, and he sat on his bunk, his head drooping lower and lower.

Our tour is coming to an end, he thought. None of the locals, especially not the children, are going to dream of our little green wagons. But we will certainly dream of this savage incomprehensible country, the high mountains, the green valleys, the clean fast-flowing rivers, the flowering gardens of Bakharak, the summer heat, the dusty roads, the autumn winds, the dust storms, the cold of winter. We’ll have much to talk about back home, about the exotic beauty of this country. Perhaps we will even remember it with affection.

But for the moment he wanted one thing only: to get out, never to see all that beauty ever again. He did not need money, or jeans, or souvenirs! To hell with the photo albums, the home-made tie pins, the dress uniforms specially stitched and ironed, the remodelled forage caps, the ballpoint pens, the Japanese watches that could play seven different tunes, the shiny souvenir cartridges, all of these stupid things which the soldiers prepared for the ritual of demobilisation. It was all superfluous. If you still had your arms and your legs, if you had not gone too far off your head - that was enough to be thankful for. I will make my way home in my worn out uniform and my worn out boots, and I certainly won’t ever ask to come back. All I need is to get a few photos through the frontier, and hope to see some of these guys again, who are stifling their homesickness by fooling about, stamping their feet in time to “The Jolly Fellows”!

Viktor lay back on the pillow on someone else’s bunk, closed his eyes, and collapsed into sleep as if he had jumped off a high cliff into the unknown emptiness on a mountain slope.

“Home!” he thought as he fell asleep.

“Home!!!. Go West! Home ...”

## GLEB BOBROV

Bobrov, Gleb Leonidovich was born in 1964 in the city of Krasny Luch in the Lugansk region. He completed his army service in the 860th separate motorized rifle regiment, located in Afghanistan (Badakhshan Province, Faizabad). Gleb Leonidovich was awarded the DRA medal “For Courage”. He is a member of the Writers’ Union of Russia. Currently, he is the Chairman of the Board of the Union of Writers of the Independent State of Lugansk. He lives in the city of Lugansk.

### The Torn Souls

It was an autumn fall; a relocation of the 84th military division was postponed several times and the armed group was able to march again only in mid-November. That was the way! Three or four days to Kisima, one day there, and after one week we will be back. A day or two for unloading and then the convoy will be off again. With some luck, we will be back to celebrate New Year. Then will be holidays, and after that there will be a long-awaited replacement. And finally I will go home. I have had enough, I have done my service here...

The majority of my comrades have finished their service and gone. Only three of us were left in the third platoon from the fall of the 1982: Grisha Zubenko, Bogdan Zawadzki, and myself. Just like the famous movie’s name could be rephrased as “Three glorious poplars in the mountains of the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan”. The three stupid experts of the glorious military service.

Grisha Zubenko, or Zubysara as we called him, is now stretched along IFV-1 snoozing, his noggin propped against the turret, the bastard... I would like to have a nap as well, but my position is in full sight of the commander of the turret model 147. I am not in the mood to start the day with a collision with the commander Seryoga. I am sitting with my legs dropping into the driver’s hutch and leaning on the turret aimlessly gazing around. So nice... The sun is hot, the day is warm. The road like a dirty stray dog zigzagging from one side to another. Heavy dust, pressed down by the night dew, does not come up higher than the tank’s skirt. Blue sky hangs heavily over my head, almost as if it could be touched.

The mountains around my head are swaying, kneeling and covering themselves with yellowish dandruff of fallen leaves. Soon this will end as we will be compelled into going down into the valley. Over there is the valley, with a couple of burnt patches which used to be green, then fucking Badakhshan, and then the beloved Kisima, the home of our 3d Division and tankmen.

Here they are: tankachi ( see “Terminology and Glassary” – Editor). Obviously, they had put the guarded post for 24 hours beforehand, and now we are expected. It is nice: well done, guys. Useful welcome.

.... We got up.. A lovely voice of the platoon commander was crackling in the portable headphones:

– Hey you, assholes! Climb! Are you fucking mad? And push your fat-faced buddy too! Sappers will be coming soon...

What a fuck?!! What for ?!

So I ask:

– What is it?

– I do not know. I heard at night by radio that we were twice attacked and maybe mined, maybe some other shit happened. Anyway, wake up, mother fuckers, and at least grab your rifles!

Well, do not overheat yourself, darling. Give me a second and everything will be all right....

I sat up and pulled my sniper rifle by its butt out of the driver’s hatch and then pushed my buddy Zubyara but he only mumbled in return. I pushed harder. The bro raised his left eyelid slightly and moaned lazily:

– Fuckin’ ... helll...

– It is not me, it is a platoon commander.

– Gee... platoon..... – and he shut his eye again.

So that was our conversation, so meaningful...

I stood up and looked around. Everywhere I can see our tanks arranged with their main guns like a Christmas tree. We are at the head of the armored group. In front of us is only the APC ( see “Terminology and Glossary”) with an officer from headquarters, three old army vehicles and two tanks with flails. I drove and stopped just as I reached the guard vehicle, I stopped looking at this direction and turned around. Our column, like a cavalry sword, got two-thirds of its blaze into the Kisima foothills and ripped its belly. It seems like everything is okay and quiet. In front of me and on the left I see neglected gardens and a small Afghani settlement with several destroyed houses, On the right are two shitty animal pens with a useless fence, and under the cliff is a river.

The place is very narrow, sandwiched between mountains and the hysterical river Kokcha with murky water roaring and rushing through. On the opposite bank, the rocks begin to grow into a mountain. Here, is a little bit, then more, then close to third bridge, they stretch out – nowhere else in the world can we see this sight - monstrous giant basalt needles, stabbing heaven.

There are also small mountains in clear visibility but they do not look small, and we are almost no distance away, only four hundred meters. Undoubtedly, from this direction, the shooting range of Allah’s faithful followers will bring no fun.

Yep... I could perhaps get them with my grenade launcher, but I have my doubts. Then I spotted a place from where they could easily get rid of us all! 150 meters away was a place which was neither a valley nor a corridor of rocks.

I leaned towards Kataev and struck his helmet. He comes out from IFV-1 and his eyes are laughing. I point at the place I spotted. At the same time, the gunner with a malicious smile and cackling, pointed at his gun. Good minds achieve good deeds. What a fool! Okay, it is time for you to get used to this situation as you have already been crawling over these mountains for one and a half years.

Waving to young soldiers, I shouted, so people will start to move and get their ammunition ready. Ha! Everyone differently demonstrated their readiness for military activity..

Zubyara, for example, sat down and put his gun across his knees. What a bastard!

In his sleep, he used to put his gun between his legs, and now, with the gun across his knees, he rested his knuckles under his chin and his elbows on the gun trying to pretend to be busy. What you can say?! He is the super-wise, fast-sleeping military guru!

Trying to get a response from the commander at number 147, I looked back but only silence in return. Zvonarev is chatting about something into his headset. He looks at me meaningfully, spits directly right into the hatch, raises his eyes and waves at me.

Moving towards him, I stopped near a soldier nicknamed Doughnut, a Deputy Commander of platoon, from the number of 148, who has finished what he was doing and was coming down from the IFV-1. Together we approach Seroyga, who curses a bit and gets down to business:

– We cannot get there at once. Damn! We have received instructions to proceed by foot. In front of us will go the sappers. The APC is going back. You, Bober, will follow the APC and I will follow you. Slobodyanyuk takes all the young soldiers and with 148 you will all wait here till the rest of us arrive. Any questions?

Which questions? Everything same as usual. Its okay, Serge! The salabons (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) will stay behind and we will go on. But as it turns out, there were some questions.

– Yes, Gleb, you send Tkach and Boldy stay here: three Kalashnikoff machine guns to the head vehicle – it is worth it.

Thank you, my dear, you have comforted me. We went to the vehicles.

Everything is simple – destiny is set. There are not many experienced soldiers in the infantry platoon, let’s say one or two, maybe a handful, a maximum of twelve or thirteen men. And the time of service in the army is not evenly divided. The majority of us, Autumn recruits, have already left. Now a lot of younger soldiers are

coming. Due to the fact that we have not got the military order for demobilization, in fact we are not even soldiers, so in fact we are civilians. But who cares about that?

Three of us decide to go together in one group, and to ensure everything will be okay, each of us takes with us two younger soldiers who we called salabons. So I took two salabons: Yuri Tkachenko and Temir Urgals.

Yuri was from Kiev, a clever and pleasant boy, of medium height but physically weak. He was really still a child. His pale eyelashes could hide nothing and he always has a wondering expression in his eyes. If he is really involved in listening to a story, his mouth is open as if he were a child.

No! You tell me, what kind of piece of shit are you, to send this child to fight for this river?! I pity him and in every possible way try to protect him. Several times during the fight operation I carried his machine gun, you see Tkach and his machine gun are the same height and I was scared that Tkach simply will fall down from the weight of his gun. The commander likes this combination of me being not only an experienced sniper but also a machine gunner.

Temir was different. He was a large, stocky strong fellow from the Ural Mountains. Witty, quick thinking, with an open and honest personality. He has enormous bright eyes that you can see under a spiky thatch of hair the color of anthracite coal. Does not look like a Tartar, more like a Chinese. He speaks without any accent. There is one problem which is his stupid nickname. Now I will tell you how he got it.

One of his old pals was bullying him, shouting at him, and eventually got on his nerves. Timur sat, closed his eyes and started to mumble in his language “Boldy...boldy... boldy” meaning “enough”. This is how his nickname became glued to him.

I approached the vehicle:

– Tkach, run to Doughnut’s APC (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor), leave the machine gun here! Give it to me in the hatch, quickly! And the bullets too. Come on, come on, son!

While we shuffled between vehicles, the sappers started to march and so we followed them in clouds of dust...

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No wonder that this morning Serge has become very irritated. His instinct told him that there will be nothing for free; the time to pay is coming.

We had hardly moved 50 meters when they hit us in a shower of grenades. How? From where? We had not expected it.

First, from ruins a hundred meters away the grenades flew and exploded right in the middle of the caterpillar tracks of the head tank. Then immediately

from surrounding gardens came echoes of single shots from the guns of the mujahedeen, who were shooting our sappers one by one.

While a grenade was coming towards me, like a fly I jumped from the turret to the left of my tank and hid. Something inside me pushed me to not go to the opposite side.

Like a leaf, Temir stretched out next to me.

Zubov dived into my hatch and got out a machine gun. One of us who got a gun started to fire the first round of fifteen bullets towards clay huts in the village. On the top of the tank Kataev turned the turret around.

I looked into the viewport – no one there! I imagine that this bastard is hiding on the floor of the cellar, praying devotedly to his demon god. Dickhead! – Do not think you are safe, bastard! I swear I will get you, piece of shit.

There is also no one in clear sight in the gardens, only one by one they popped out, shouted and disappeared. They and we too are having fun.

From the opposite side, somewhere near the river Kokcha, intense gunfire has commenced. As I can tell from what I can hear, there are around ten gunfighters, and heavy machine guns one by one have started coughing as well, the first mortal mine is exploded. Here we go again! How can it be? Returning home was just around the corner! But what can I do?

Looking around, I can see they have hit us quite badly, mainly targeting sappers leaving for us a gentle slap on our asses. The guys and dogs who first ran to the right side have faced death. Screaming, swearing.... Like in Shanghai!

The turrets keep turning and therefore are silent. The covering tank behind us is also raising its turret targeting not the river but the gardens. It is understandable. Over there could be an anti-tank grenade-gun and you better give medicine before you get sick. Why do they have to aimed at a heavy machine gun, if the death from a grenade-gun machine faces them.

I exchanged my rifle with Zubov's machine gun. Now you will see, fucking bastards! All of this took just seconds. Give me a moment and I will help Timur to chose his position...

I pointed out for Timur the position which was close to our IFV-1, there was a rut close by, and I directed him toward the nearest garden, promising to put my deadly spell on him if he ever will try to get up. Now it is time to get dirty.

Turning back to the gardens, I placed bipods of my machine gun on the top of our ACP-1(see "Terminology and Glossary"– Editor) and let's go boogie-woogie.

At present, when I recall this, my memory seems like a compressed paper brick that I can unfold forever. Comprehension of the speed of events, without boiling adrenalin, is totally different. Time is always ticking differently; memory is also selective. The first memories returning to you are the most striking, the most shocking... like a gunshot, for example..

The world from the sky to the deepest essence of the earth has burst, cracked, and there is a feeling as if nirvana has come to me. Then emptiness has blown up and unbearable pain is in my ears and the raging sound of millions of cicadas has hit every inch of my body and in the end poured a hot shower of fire in my face. Around me the fighting is continuing...my body has met a familiar feeling of nausea, confusion and loss of reality. Long live all who have suffered contusions!

Alright.. all the tanks' turrets have turned towards the river. Thank God!

I looked at Boldy and he is all right; he has not tripped up; he keeps on firing as if writing a school essay.

In the meantime, behind the river, the dirty asses "comrades" have gone really crazy. There is no doubt they are stoned, as they charge directly into our line of fire. Sanyok Kataev is really in business. All his military service he was in infantry but now he got a present – the automatic gun of the BMP-2. He keeps spraying the mujahedeens (see "Terminology and Glossary"– Editor) with bullets, considering neither the bullets nor my hearing.

Me too: without any sense of saving bullets, I am showering the enemy blindly.

I spot three mujahedeens and do not give them a chance to hide behind the wall, Kataev spotted my tracer shots. He got my idea and joined me to move them towards a rock. Together we finished off those three. I started and Sanyok finished them off.

I was just starting to enjoy the craziness of this unhealthy fun, when I heard someone calling "Paramedic! Paramedic!" This was not good.

The sappers have their own combat paramedic. I knew him when I was in a field hospital. Insigne Stepan, our paramedic, is also going with them to help.

I am calling out to Zubov:

– Give me a full machine gun box!

This dick is so tight-ass, he gave me only a belt. I am not arguing because there is no time for it. Returning to him the empty belt, I reloaded my gun and run to the sappers. Hearing heavy breathing behind me, I turn around and...what the hell! Timur is coming towards me, dragging his gun – his "bitch" – behind him. What the fuck are you doing! Stay there! Kill you, bastard! Bloody hell, but this fool is already here; I cannot send him back.

And here is also a complete mess. Two wounded are already treated and waited when Stepan fwill apply his death magic on the third one. I see where he is now! Leaning backwards to the vehicle, another soldier is hosing bullets somewhere towards the mountains. Between the vehicles is a complete chaos. Covered with blood, two soldiers are trying to drag a third one, who is shouting, crying and resisting them. He is trying to reach his dead dog, whose half-crashed

body was lying in a pool of blood. Everything is a complete mess. No clue which blood is it- human or animals? Who is crying? Who is wounded? But there is no time for emotion...

Between the APCs, I see two sappers, wounded but not mortally. The resistant one worries me; he is completely covered with blood. To restrain his convulsions, I throw myself on top of him and use wadding to cauterize his wounded leg. At the same time, not letting him move, I inject anti-shock promedole (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) with into his other leg. There is no time for bandaging.

He tries to kick me, but the wound is such a mess that I cannot see what to fix, where it is nerves, bones, or blood vessels. Doctors will fix it later.

These two who had held him, now drag this fellow to Stepan, but the kid has lost his mind and screams, yells, crying for his dog “Darling Dusya! Darling Dusya! Darling Dusya!”.

Come on, sleep, brother. I will take care of your dog. Lifting the animal, I run behind the tank. Such a huge dog, just enormous! Boldy comes to help me: he jumps up, grabs the tail and a leg of the dog; and two of us can move the dog to a safe place. What a clever Tatar man! Spotted immediately which leg is not hurt... But this mate of mine has dropped his gun! What a moron!

Meanwhile, the tanks so enthusiastically showered cartridges towards the rocks that, in my opinion, the shallow Kokcha-river produced some waves that in agony climb the river banks. On the ground, the previously spotted unfriendly valley was ironed so tidy that Afgan’s kalashnikovs (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor) stopped making its mortal noise after only three outbursts. Then the iron of death transformed into a pointed hose of Armageddon that reached the highest and therefore the most hidden placed amongst the rocks with no way to escape. As a result, the enemy’s machine gunners were silenced. The heavy machine gun also went to sleep.

I can imagine how these brave Afghanis were looking for any tiny cracks to crawl into it, but it was pointless, there was no place to hide...

The tankmen are famous for a very methodical approach and seldom do things spontaneously. Their fists are small but heavy, if they are involved in a fight, any wish to resist will vanish into the air quickly.

And finally, the pair of “crocodiles” (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor), had arrived. They circled above with hushing noises sending their unguided rockets and left off with a sense of honestly delivered international duty. What can I say – the elite! I always envied pilots.. I guess, I should have paid more attention to a saying my Mom kept telling me during my childhood: “Those who are studied will fly, but whose who are not – will cry”.

But the battle is still on... Sappers rushed at once to the hot spots trying to finish the business as soon as possible: there was not much time to do scrupulous de-mining: a battalion of wounded soldiers needed be transported immediately to the landing points as helicopters will be there in a matter of minutes. A column of armored vehicles showed off as well and after sending few lines of rockets towards the bare mountains, left in a hurry, speeding up to Kisima.

We did not leave; we stayed on the same spot as before- fifty meters from the outposts of the tank, but when we will be marching back, we will be the first, leading the march. We get used to it and are not surprised any more.

But I have a feeling that something is not finished. Kind of feeling that I forgot to return a favor and this was bothering me! I don't want to do a big return of favor, as I had in the beginning of my military service. No, I am a different now, I am almost home but I need something smaller, something that only can satisfy my itchiness. I waved to Bogdan, who picked up his rifle, jumped out of his car. We left young soldiers on our spot, and we waited for a while when a continuous stream of moving armored vehicles will be broken up into a small shattered window to be able to cross the road. We were heading towards the kishlack (see "Terminology and Glossary" – Editor), well, let say, the remains of kishlack, the destroyed Afgany's settlement.

Yep... a good job done by tanks... This bare land is used producing a bare minimum for living, but now, as far as you can see, no sign of life is left, nothing alive and some bits of house stamps like rotten dragon's teeth were sticking out from this dead land.

We spotted him immediately. This son of sneaks was still, laying next to a funnel and already spreading stinking odor of his dead body. I remember that I was surprised when mentally assessed how well thought-out his position was. His position was not in kishlack as we always presumed they are, but 30 meters away down the hill. From our position we would mistakenly think that he is in the middle of kishlack but it does not matter now... his trick did not work. He could not destroy our tank, only minor damage has been done. Soon his dissembled body will be buried in pieces.

We went closer to the body. Buried his snout in the dust, I can see his right arm together with a shoulder are dissembled from the body. His left arm is twisted up. One leg is missing from the knee, only a rubber shoe is visible, by the way, the common Soviet black rubber shoe with pink velvet inside. This devoted believer to Allah is completely chopped in pieces, burned, covered with blood and shredded pieces of clothes and skin...so tiny and pitiful... Only when he is dead.

I turned the body on its back with a gun barrel. We are standing and blatantly staring at the body. Other guys popped out from tanks' manholes and also looked towards us wondering what was in front of us.

And in front of us on the ground we saw human remains – a body of an inexperienced human cockerel, only twelve years old, maybe a little bit older, with open eyes filled by pale yellow dust to the point that it looks like he was wearing dusty glasses. His facial features reminded me of Mephistopheles in his adolescence, a kind of prototype for a medieval image of little devils. An inhuman face of an animal nationality.... Devils bastard! Why did your Mother brought you into this world, dead meat?!

And then I cannot explain what got into me. In the past nothing even close to this had happen and I cannot re-call that other guys had experienced something like this ...I got mad..I picked up my gun and started to shoot. I kept shooting this ugly face till the very last bullet. Take it all, bastard! Now, these pieces can be buried, these leftovers of a devoted martyr for jihad, a twisted seeker of the Islamic state, mothers fuckers!

Zubyara heavily approached me from behind and took PC mine. Patting my shoulders, he said softly in his native Ukrainian:

– Lets go, brother, he had got enough....

Indeed, he got too much enough! With all of these we left....

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Near the machines is a boiling pot. The young soldiers are preparing their positions. The platoon commander is rushing to a commander to make his report. I looked around, my comrade Yurets together with the rest of the young soldiers are hectically shoveling to prepare a stand point under the brisk shouting of Slobodyanyuk. But where is Timur? Timur has not been seen around. What a..?!

Here he is! I can see him sitting under a tree and saying something to – or crying over?– the dead dog. It cannot be right! I came closer.. It turns out he was singing! He was sitting down on his haunches and with a twig shushed away flies and, at the same time, was murmuring something special in his own language to the dog, unrecognizable to others, but distinctively very sad.

I looked attentively and to my surprise – the dog was breathing! What a cool dog! The breath of this dog was shallow, irregular, occasionally intermittent, but the injured body was not yet giving up life! I looked at the wounds... A terrifying line of razor was visible from the neck to the belly, forming a deep wound with visible edges and unrecognizable parts of this body: you cannot identify where the impact occurred and where not. The wound was a mess.. a mixture of dust, blood, curled fur in the chest glued with dried blood. The heat already did its job....

I remember that a leg was also broken. It was obvious no need to turn the dog for a further examination, no need to torment the animal. Without any doubt the dog was at the end of his unfortunate life. But as a four-legged soldier of the de-mining division, he deserved a better option to die rather than on the sidelines of this god forgotten road. As usual in this situation, I wanted to inject him with promedol (see “Terminology and Glossary”– Editor), but then changed my mind – who knows how the dog will react? So, we gently put him on the cape and carried him to my 149 division, absolutely sure that we will bury the dog this evening.

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We did not have time to have a rest. When a platoon commander arrived, the orders were followed one after another, and this bedlam was going on until we reached Kishim almost in the dark. But the order was given – no light or bonfire. Why? It was a mystery to me because after such a fruitful day, a single Allah soul could not be found in the whole area. Everything was combed, no fleas! The order was a complete nonsense!

But dinner time was fast approaching. We put the BMP’s ejectors under the cans of porridge and stewed meet and started to wait ... it is indeed a long procedure of heating up the dinner. Whilst waiting, I decided to have a stroll to see how the dog, Dusya, was doing..Surprise! He was alive! He even moved his tail to greet me! I called Tatar Timur and together we carefully moved the dog to a better place. Indeed, the dog felt much better: he was holding his head, his eyes were sharp and he was curious towards the things around him. At the same time, I spotted a deep sadness that seemed to be nested in the bottom of his eyes. So much understanding and anguish in his eyes... We fetched water for him from the jar – he gulped it at once.

I did find a couple of cans “Buckwheat with chicken broth.” This valued porridge, you know, can beat everything to hell. I throw these cans on the ejector, and went to get more, I whispered a couple of nice words to the guys....

“Yes, Glebych, no question, dear, take few more!”

I put everything together, tested how hot it is –just right! – and put the food, the size of just about the entire helmet, in front of Dusya, in the hole dug up by Temir.

Food, as they say, is a life....

The poor dog was working on the food so hard that I understood – it is time to call a military nurse and doctor Stepan. It was not easy..After a long conversation on the radio with a number of people, I was connected to Stepan who hectically was fixing wounded soldiers in different locations and therefore

was constantly on the move. In the beginning of our conversation, when he realized the nature of my call, he swore at me in any possible and impossible way (I want to say, that Stepan was a professor in this department), and after both of us got enough satisfaction from a heated argument, finally he instructed me to boil plenty of water and promised to come.

Considering the order of no fire under any circumstances, we found the way out how to boil water and our superior just scratched his head observing how enthusiastically and clever this challenge was overcome. The platoon commander only shook his head, watching this circus.

Finally Stepan arrived dragging his sack, full of medicine supplies. The dog was examined on the spot. I ask:

– Well?

– Yes, there is a lot of sewing that should be done: the leg, body... then look at the breast as you can see his dick is coming out but what a hell? It is not official, I suppose, we can try...Okay, lets do it ! Come on – time is everything now!

So, we began..

We took Temir, a lantern, the Stepan's medical kit, water and started to mend our Duxya.

The first step was to clean the numerous wounds, then to inject anesthetic. After this, we disinfected and covered in penicillin this poor pal, injected intramuscular painkillers, and flooded with iodine his entire wounded body.

Stepan spread the curved needle around with antiseptic conventional army harsh thread and says:

– What are you looking at? Grab the clip and go ahead!

– Gee! Should I to do sewing?

– Who else?

Well, it was not the right time to get myself into an argument with Stepan, thanks that he came at all. So, we began to sew. Stepan worked, shouted and cursed in such a highly professional manner, that at the end of surgery I could not laughed any more. I wonder, where he learned to swear so professionally? I cannot imagine the place....

Dusya was laying motionless... Only when nerves sometime distorted the skin, then Stepan had his go and vocalized a possibility to sew his dick to the tail. Oh, some funny stuff like this, until I could not cope any more, tiring from unstoppable laughter.

Serge, a platoon commander, also spend the whole evening with us, laughing until he could not continue to do it and convulsions spread over his body exhausted from laughing. Of course, what else can you expect from him, a lieutenant, on this cool day?

His platoon demonstrated its best – well done guys! He, himself, had the chance to show off his bravery in front of the entire platoon by seizing weapons from the enemy. He saved wounded soldiers. Nobody was killed and casualties of his platoon were zero. Even the dog survived and his surgery was much more entertaining compared even to a show of Raikin, an iconic comedian of the Soviet era.

They were laughing, good for them, but I kept sewing nonstop like a lady running the alteration clothes workshop, and could not say a word to Stepan: if I say one word, he will cover me with more than ten times of swearing. It is better to keep my mouth shut.

One side of the dog's body was fixed and now surgical yellow powder was drying up on the stitches. We moved to the chest. Muscles on the chest were well formed, massive and heavy with four holes but all small – rather splinters. But who knows will this dog see the next day? Only the “Fate Dog” card will tell what will be next. In this harsh environment with a minimum of equipment, limited water and surgery performed by a soldier, the fate of this poor dog can be predicted only by the cards.

Towards the end of fixing the dog's entire body, platoon commander Sergei said:

– You know, this dog is one of us... he is a fighter!

– What do you mean?

– You see, he did not cover his ass. All his wounds are on the frontal part of his body.

Well noticed, Serge! Indeed, all wounds were located on the chest. It means that this dog was facing a danger and did not turn away.

Stepan straightened:

– All right, guys, stop this baloney....

After treating wounds with crashed antibiotics, bitsilin, analgesics and tight bandages,, we went for cigarettes and I asked Stepan:

– What do you think?

– Oh, Glebych....he is a beautiful dog.

And a third round of swearing was ready to erupt in his throat but I interrupted him first:

– I'm talking about his health...

– To put him to sleep will be mercy as I told you before.

– Put yourself to sleep, mother fucker..

– Come on, don't be like a virgin girl. Think of what a life he will have from now if he will stay alive: no work, no play, no fucking bitches.. But, I did what I could and now I am off.. Good bye!

With these last words he climbed into the platoon commander's car and left.

When he left, I also did not wander around. I went to the trench of Tkachev, covered myself with a military coat and slept until morning, remembering only one thing: how my young soldiers, returning from duty, were quietly coming to and going from the trench. Really, I am turning into a bloody hell Mother Teresa...hmm...

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The night passed quietly, and in the morning a young tank driver ran from a nearby post with a blunt question: "Who is a doctor here?". This is a result of the gossiping between communication seeking engineers, who last evening had great pleasure to enjoy a master class of swearing via military radio and spread the news that the dog is alive. I said to this young salabon (see "Terminology and Glossary"— Editor) to get fucked and I went to see the dog. It is obvious that he is on the road to a recovery.

Young soldiers of my group reported: "The beast slept, drank, and waved his tail. Stepan checked him in the morning and left..."

Well done! I like when an army's Grandpa, sleeps but service is carried on!

I came closer to the dog. What a joy...His tail was playing drums on the dusty ground, his tongue was licking my hands. I checked his both sides – he was healing. I looked under his belly and spotted a new bandage on the leg. Ha! Somebody yesterday suggested to put him to sleep....

I sat next to him and wanted to pull his ears, but a warning muffled roar stopped me at once. A seriously dangerous eyes warning, a slightly elevated lip, and dangerously opened teeth – all were convincing. Why? My hand dropped immediately.

The dog was huge. His resemblance to an ordinary Shepherd was minimum because ordinary Shepherds have a long but sturdy body. This one was a tall specimen with powerful backbones and wide jaws; anyway his head was too big to be an ordinary Shepherd. Definitely he was a half-breed. His body was covered with a short, dense coat, almost creamy, with brown dark stripes on the top. A tough cocky look ....and now, as turns out, he is not a weak character.

I sat down blatantly and moved my hands away like a teenager on a first date, who received a slapping for an unwanted kiss. The dog put his head on my lap and looked faithfully into my eyes and moved the tail once again. What crap! Slowly I opened my palm and moved my fingers close to the red open mouth. He licked my fingers! I scratched his throat and his dark eyes softened, lips opened and, I can bet on this, this dog smiled! A strange creature, this Dusya: an appreciation for scratching but a roar for patting.

Twenty minutes later, we even did not heat up our food, two army tracks arrived with a de-mining commander and his boys. They immediately showered

me with questions: "How...?", "When..?" "What...?" "Do you...?" Everything okay, dudes, relax!

All of us proceeded to Dusya.

As soon as Dusya saw his comrades, he began whining with his tail thrashing the canvas. He tried to get up but even with all our effort to hold him, he could not and kept falling back. Our guests patted him, stroked, kissed... guys in vain, but when they arrived they looked so harsh! We had a chat about Dusya...

Actually the dog's nickname was Dick. Dusya was a soft affectionate name given by his owner Fedor who brought the dog to military service in May from a civil life somewhere near Boronezh where both of them lived. His owner, Fedor, was also wounded and yesterday was transported to a hospital. Guys said, he was lucky because he can count all his bones.

Whilst we were talking, I spotted that a military helicopter called "The Eight" started to land. Interesting, whom this beau will pick up? Who is a big dude here? It turned out that de-miners have arranged the famously established service for transportation of Dusya. Wow, this style I understand!

Towards the end of our chit-chat, I asked about some strange behavior of my patient-why he does not like patting? They all laughed.

- Say thank you! You are lucky that he did not chop off half of your fingers! No one can touch his head, except Fedor. Better not even think of doing it!

Well, we all have cockroaches in our heads...

The helicopter landed. Dick was lifted on a stretcher and loaded inside. A couple of engineers jumped on board. "The Eight" in three circles elevated from the ground, joined his second mate, formed a pair and took towards the mountains. In a few minutes it was just a dot behind the rocks.

Wish you well, Dusya...

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The rotation was conducted without any necessary entertainment. We did not stay in the position of our regiment, no.. we had rested on the banks of a river that was located not far from a de-mining platoon location where I know many guys..

After a good deal of oversleeping, uncounted visits to banya (see "Terminology and Glossary"- Editor), and stuffing our bellies, to the point if disgusting, with properly cooked food, one evening I decided to make a visit together with Baldy to the Corps of Sappers.

When we arrived, a familiar noise welcomed us: I have met many friends from an Autumn enlisting. All were happy that we arrived just in time for baked potatoes or marijuana cigarettes, if you wish... No desire for potatoes, neither for dope. I came to see Fedor.

But it turns out that he was transported to Kunduz, a less dangerous place, if you can say it. Well, let's make a visit to Dick... and again – bummer! Now Dick has a new owner, the fellow who is famous for his skeptical and unfriendly character, so-called the Ensign Trubilin, nicknamed by guys as Truba in short...

He is a unique military and personal legend of the Sapper Regiment. He is a head of Military service dogs nursery, in common parlance – the kennel, and also, as I was told, a rare idiot. His nickname was chosen by his fate as well as his surname. However, this man has one good quality – he loves dogs to the Moon and back. For dogs he was a devoted teacher, nurse, doctor ...well.. everything, but for a human being..better not to say it.

I was told a story when after arriving to the regimen and taking the position, Truba almost killed a young soldier – Ryzhu – for serving hot food to dogs. You see, the dogs cannot eat hot food as it affects their senses. So, Truba saw that a young, newly conscripted private nicknamed Ryzhu, placed a plate of steamy food in front of a dog. Without any words, Truba grabbed a shovel and run towards poor Ryzhu. God heaven that Ryzhu spotted him in time! The whole regiment observed how for a half an hour with a roar: “Ugandoshu” (“Kill you”– Editor) Truba chased Ryzhu around the camp and enjoyed Rychu's maneuvers and zigzag rabbit tricks! After this incident, Trubilin bluntly reported to a commander about the incident and demanded that Ryzhu must stay at least within the distance of a gun-shot from the kennel; and modestly concluded his report, pointing out that if this bastard Ryzhu will ever appear near the animals, he, Guard Ensign of the Soviet Army, in spite of serving the Constitution of the USSR, will personally rip Ryzhu apart. The incident was ended.

To make the story short, Ensign Trubilin did not give a shit about others but I decided to try my luck and for a moral support I came with a couple of guys who claimed to be friends with him.

Approaching the kennel.. I saw Ensign Trubilin who was sitting and reading something in the gazebo. He reminded me of a dark thundercloud, puffed and full of anguishing words, ready to explode. He was a guy in his middle age, short but heavily built, with such a spotlessly shaved fat face that the blue color of a lower part of his face was vividly contrasted to the olive skin of his body. His facial features echoed Southern origin, not obvious but traced in his face. His heavy eyes were sharply pointed towards me and he frowned but did not put down his readings

I felt like a pioneer leader in front of a superior member of the Communist Party: “Good morning, let us appeal to your decision and allow us to do so and so.. We heard about your kindness and generosity and so on..” In short, we were like little girls asking Mommy's permission to take candies. Trubilin reluctantly

asked something and we answered, and after so-called friends of his were sent back empty-handed, he and I entered the kennel.

As soon as Dick saw us, he went crazy, the poor guy. He cannot stand up on his back legs, but tried to pull all his body, neck, legs towards us. He tried stretching to us and to get as close as possible to us in a puppy style, without losing face, but he did it with dignity. However, apparently, in few minutes his fire ended. He ran out of strength. He got tired and even his breath became difficult with a stuck out tongue.

Meanwhile, other dogs joined Dick's noisy entertainment. On this occasion, Truba decided to give me a tour around the kennel. We started a conversation. Indeed, he is, what we called a heavy metal soul, but this man was a magician with his dogs.

With obvious pain in his voice, Truba tells me about the Dick's health situation.

– He cannot stand up on his leg. One leg he cannot raise. His chest is also still a mess, there are discharges continuously coming out. I think, some piece of metal is still inside...

I suggested:

– How about to call for Stepan right now? Let's see what he can do...

Trubilin looked at me like I am a child in cuckoo land who has one leg shorter than the other and answered:

– The dog has the best treatment, every day a chief medical officer is checking on him and giving him all necessary injections, I give him injections too but..he needs different.. he needs his Fedor..

– But how Fedor will help?

– He is missing Fedor, and this is the root of his sickness. By the way, I already asked Stepan if any more can be done..You, pal, saved Dick. You sewed him well but now his health is affected due to a different reason.

Here we go! They said that Truba is a beast....Hm..

Meanwhile our four-legged friend stretched out on the yellow grass and squinted his eyes enjoying a psychedelic song, mumbled in Tatar by my nuker, my military shadow Boldy.

\*\*\*

January 1985 was the most depressive time. This endless and eventless time could be crowned on the top of all months of my entire military service. Before New Year nothing much happened, except for two trips to the God forgotten place called Baharak. During the first trip we sat at the “point” without even thinking to pick out our noses behind the gate. The second trip was even worse. It was

such a boring trip! Hiding in dugouts, we were doing nothing, except playing fools and entraining ourselves with our own dicks, constantly masturbating to kill boredom. The only one attempt to get to the mountains, was not successful because our new battalion commander had no balls for it. He was a replacement. A sissy boy, I would say!

I remember celebrating the New Year on duty by smoking marihuana to the stage when the word “mama” cannot come out from my tongue. When our duty finished, we again stoned ourselves to the stage of complete dummies... meaningful time, nothing more to say..

Only one thought was bumping in my head:” Where is my replacement”. I see, due to the shitty weather condition, helicopters could not pass the clouds... what was left for us? Only waiting...

At that time I visited Dick almost every day. My friendship with Truba has been cemented and the sappers were puzzled how I managed it. I do not know how it happened. We had a common interest talking about dogs, I guess, and this was enough for our friendship. In my opinion, Trubilin knew nothing except the dogs’ life and, as I understood, he had no desire to expand his horizon of knowledge towards anything else. He could talk days and nights about his four-legged friends, he knew everything about them, he loved them dearly and dogs loved him too, obeying not only a verbal command but a slight gesture.

During this time our kid was constantly medically treated. He did not die, of course, but the significant breakthrough did not happen either. Discharges kept coming out from his chest; he could not stand up on his paw, but, at least, started to move this paw and it was a progress. Continuously new problems were chasing him: if not diarrhea, then a King’s evil had happened.

This pal had only one joy in his life – a time when a letter arrived from Fedor. Fedor was writing to a whole division, but unopened letters were delivered to the kennel and placed into Truba’s hands. Once I had a chance to see this ceremony. I was moved to a core...

Trubilin ceremoniously placed a letter in front of Dick to sniff who immediately fell on the belly and froze,; then Truba opened the letter and slowly, with the pronunciation of a TV news reporter, announced the text. Our Dick has turned into a statue. The shaking ears were elongated upward. An unreal reaction! But the letter’s content was crap as usual, something like: “Hey guys, I am ok, from day to day just waiting to be back, everything is annoying.. Doctors are freaks, food is shit, nurses are bitches.. How is Dick? I shake your paw. Fedor”. The end....

After announcing the contents of the letter, Truba placed the open letter in front of the dog. Dusya stretched, reached the piece of paper and several times inhaled this treasured scent of his owner and froze again.. It seemed that he wanted to absorb literally the smell of Fedor to the last bit.... Then turning

around he hobbled to a far corner of his kennel, laid, stretched his body and closed his eyes. I can swear on the Bible that I saw tears coming from his eyes...

I wanted to give him hug, but Truba stopped me without words. By this time, I, like his dogs, was also trained to have a clear understanding of his gestures. Trubilin picked up the letter, folded it and, gently pushing my back towards the exit, pointed to the way out of the kennel.

I asked:

– Comrade Trubilin! But Dick’s sadness will be deeper without a human touch.

In reply, I got the telegraphic but gravely gloom answer:

– Yes. The depression. But it keeps him alive...

The military salute. Keep in touch!

That is all. As I said – we became friends...

\*\*\*

By the end of January, the weather finally turned to dry, sunny days. One morning, after the routine “Get up!, the youngest were outside for morning exercises, but I was still in bed, enjoying an unofficial military prerogative for military gurus, or “grandpas” as we said. My comrade Zubov, with firing insane eyes, jumped towards me. He threw me like a doll out of my bed to the floor and shouted:

– They are coming! Coming!

When he sat on my bed and stopped shouting, we distinctively recognized the noise of helicopters’ propellers. Forgetting about my underwear, in a second I was outside. Who cares! Other “grandpas” were the same and this entire ground was flooded with soldiers in their underwear like on a beach... Rio de Janeiro, far out! My dear Autumn conscripted brothers, finally this day has arrived! We hugged each other, we cried, we shouted something unrecognizable and non-comprehensive. It did happen! Wow! We all saw how a cavalcade of six helicopters MI-6, as we called them “cows”, heavily pregnant with newly conscripted meat, got closer to us every minute.

We got dressed and went to look at the replacements.

The newcomers were located in two tents that we usually use for a quarantine. All dembelya, (see “Terminology and Glossary” – Editor) turned immediately into A+ disciplined pupils. It was common sense that we will go in the first round, but with any mistake a possibility to meet March here was also very vivid.

On the same day I remember that we were sitting in front of the smoking room not far from the place where Sasha Moskovchenko, a political intelligence second commander, conducted classes. I will not go in details of what kind of classes he conducted, but I can assure you, that if Regiment Commander could hear what Sasha was bullshitting, to say at least, he would have a heart attack.

Sasha could not give a shit about how he carried on these political studies, same as the entire army. He put his dick on this military service a long time ago. He gibberishes on everything to everyone. He used to pull a young fellow out of a class and started to humiliate him to the point when the chosen one could not remember his own name, neither his biography.

So, whilst we were enjoying Sasha's performance, some bloke was coming to us. I looked at him closer.. this was Fedor! At last..

After Moskovchenko's permission to leave the class, I went to greet him.

– Hey, bro! How are you?

– Fine....

– When you arrived?

– In the morning.

– How is your leg?

– Okay... Let's go.

– Let's go!

A very talkative guy....

To say the truth, I did not know him well. We even did not greet each other before the Dusya's story, but now according the army tradition, I was his Godfather as I saved his life... I never understand this tradition. What will be different if somebody else will pull you out from the direct line of fire? Where is a heroic act? To save your brother was a daily routine of military assaults.... But, the tradition is, of course, a holy cause and according to the rules, I was his Godfather, and the savior should be awarded with a good dinner..

\*\*\*

They went to the kennel, approaching a gate.... when suddenly I stood up in shock and nearly fainted: on a cape, at the gate, Dick was laid down motionlessly with the recognized contour of a dead body.... Dick was dead.... Our Dick..I remember a sudden emptiness flooded into my chest, a spasm clicked my neck not letting the air in or out. An enormous pain froze my heart. I felt bad, really bad..

Next to Dick, Trubilin stood up lowering his head and looking lost and weak-where is his mask of a cool master and an emotionless order machine? – together with some guys from autumn's conscription. All kept silent.

– Well, let's do it? –the invitation to join then for burying Dick registered in my brain. They all were waited me. Composing myself, I told Fedor to bring a young solder to dig the grave. Fedor immediately echoed: “Ryzha...”, spitted his cigarette out and went to find Ryzha. I went to Trubilin.

It did happen unexpectedly and suddenly...

In the morning together with the replacements, Fedor arrived. Immediately after reporting to his superiors, he went looking for Truba and after finding him, both of them went to the kennel. Truba said that this morning Dick was not himself, unsettled, he definitely sensed that Fedor was somewhere very close to him.

When they were approaching, Dick sensed him and began to howl loudly. He got off a leash and for a good five minutes these two were hugging and kissing each other. Right in the same place, where Dick was now.

Trubilin says that dog was not just screaming, he cried, shouted in a voice like a man. Trubilin even tried to mimick this sound being emitted by a dog: “Ah-ah Ah-ah-ah!”

Fedor sat on the ground. Dick placed his chest to Fedor’s knees and put his head in his hands... and became quiet.

When exactly he died, nobody knew but when it was noticed, of course, there was a great deal of reviving, massaging, injecting, even CPR was applied...

But it was the end of Dick’s road. He got what he wanted – to meet his master, his pal, his best mate. He said goodbye to Fedor and left this world.

Standing in front of me the tough man, Ensign Trubilin, was crying like a baby without even wiping his eyes. The strong, stern man, a real tough cookie was vulnerable and helpless. He has done so much! So much... And this was the end... Nothing you can change or amend, only accept this and keep living as you can.

Urgaliev came closer. They picked up a cape and carried Dick to his grave dug on top of the hill, about thirty meters away from an outpost of a tank’s regiment.

The hill offers the very best view that can be found at our regiment’s location. Deep down, at the bottom of hills, the Kokcha river makes a sharp bend which forces her turbulent water to rush further down for its unsettled journey through the mountains and hills. Straight across, the river washed away the cliff and formed picturesque caves displaying its glory. On the both banks of the river, reeds, never frozen during a winter, marched as soldiers.

In the very far distance, the sparkling white hats of Hindu Kush mountains loomed sending its brilliance all the time during winter and summer. If you look a little bit right, glowing overweight glaciers of Pamir were illuminating their shiny icy pinnacles.

From the opposite side, a surging pinnacle covered half of the sky. Very soon Dick, this coming spring, your master Fedor will be flying to this desired direction that seems in front of you and so close, but in real life – an eternity of waiting to reach...

Fedor composed himself well. He got down on his knees and said, “Goodbye, Dick”. He kissed his eyes and stood aside. Large round teardrops like beads were

hanging on his eyelashes, nose and rolling down to his cheeks, his lips, He did not move. He stood and looked at the dog weeping silently.

No one interrupted...

Then I came to Dick, I put my hand on the massive head the first and last time.... Goodbye Dick, goodbye friend, the best friend ever...

Trubilin pulled his small gun Stechkin (see “Terminology and Glossary” Editor) out of his jacket’s pocket and made three shots, saluting in the air....

Temir monotonically murmured the same favorite song of Dick. He always sang this song to him...

...It is only when you feel a real pain from your torn soul compressed in your chest to the point that you cannot take a breath, that only then you start to look around and notice what others do, what they talk and sing.

\*\*\*

In the early autumn of 1994, I arrived in Voronezh, a home town of a great Russian writer Ivan Ivanovich Evseenko, who invited me to stay at his house. This friendly family loves a literature, music. It was a house full of cats....

Despite my busy schedule, I had time to visit museums. The museums in Voronezh, unlike in my city Lugansk, are presented very well.

Once I was walking on the central New Moscow street and suddenly, from behind I heard “Glebych!”. I turned around... and I saw a man with a clean shaved face, dressed in the latest fashioned brick-and-lilac jacket and trousers with a matching t-shirt in a black color, with fashioned shiny shoes and gold chains reflecting the sunshine. Wow! What gloss! What glamour! The figure of a typical underground New Russian, with a compulsory attached Beretta gun, BMW with dark-windows and an openly displayed muscled security, opened his arms and was ready to give me his greeting kiss...wow-wow.. hold on! The last thing in my life that I wanted is to be kissed by a criminal representative of the new Russian economy.. Sorry, it is too much for me ...I stopped him with a polite but distant “Hello!”

The guy was seeking my eyes, twittering around me, trying to look into my face. He could not understand why I would not recognise him, nor praise him for his success or envy his money. I do not know him! I have not seen him in my life at all and that’s it!

With visibly evaporating self-confidence, the guy kept trying to reach my heart:

– How are you, Glebych? What business brings you to us? Where you are staying? How things are going?

I could not get it... He definitely knows me. I put my brain in a high speed trying to recall in which situation I could see him.. But I failed... and our short conversation for the next two minutes reminded me of a reprise of two clowns in a circus but clearly demonstrated to the guy that I indeed did not recognize him. A resentment quickly appeared in his eyes but was immediately gone.

– Hey, bro, have you not recognised me? I am Lyoha Ruzhy! From the demining battalion...Remember – Ryzha!?

Ah-ah-ah! Well, of course, now I remember! We cuddled to broken bones! Forgive me, my brother, my wounded head plays with me from time to time.

Hugging, we started on a new tone of what, where, how.. I could not resist to sarcastically pull him down:

– So, my friend, you joined the trend too? – I pointed at his “New Russian” fashioned outfit.

He got embarrassed and began to excuse: “You know... everyone is looking for life”, “now it is time for change”, and so on...

I understood: no need for excuses.

It is time to celebrate our reunion...

Two of us sat in a BMW but inside the car a heavy silence was a third passenger between us. In contrast to the past, we have nothing in common. His full of shit crew were mumbling about something meaningless and stupid. We drove for a long time. The driver was an illiterate half wit who obviously did not love his car. His driving was unprofessional and erratic: with no need he presses the gas giving to the poor car 5000 rmp, and then suddenly puts on the brakes. He did it all the time! Idiot! I got tired to see how disrespectful he was to the people from the other side of his tinted window. He was changing lanes without any signal, honing, beeping and torturing the transmission constantly. Maybe he got an idea that he should be the only one on the road and other people should be removed as an obstacle to his driving? It was typical, nothing new in this department, I had already seen this kind of behavior many times and it was no novelty for me.

Finally we have arrived. I did not know Voronezh at all. This typical city from the Soviet era, was presented by numerous unified and faceless suburbs, in which buildings were arranged in a way of marching soldiers. The ugliness of these Soviet buildings was contrasted to a soft beauty of the traditional houses you can find in some parts of Voronezh.

Members of the gang started their official ceremony of farewell. Slightly hugging each others, they mimic a kiss with their cheeks touching both sides of a face. It reminds me of the way how rhinos head butted among themselves. May be they adopted this cult farewell from rhinos?

Clearly embarrassed of his mates, Lyoha came closer to me. The latest 325 BMW like a black shadow, sped to a traffic light and again burned tires in an attempt to reach the green light, but suddenly changed its mind and brakes howled. Driving back at full speed, the car stopped at the point where the short journey started. Indeed, this is a good car but with a shit driver. I have got my satisfaction and sarcastically looked at Lyoha. The poor guy completely lost in his embarrassment, trying to find some excuses:

– Well, what can you do with these guys?!

Yep, indeed... what?

We decided to have a drink and went to a pub nearby specifically designed for this type of people. Apparently Lyoha was known in this place and received a full stream of respect. We sat in the corner and for a while we enjoyed food specially made by a chef and numerous drinks, until time for a topic “Do You Remember” arrived. And then Lyoha asked:

– Do you remember Fedor?

Of course I remember him! He is my bro! I am his army Godfather!

And Lyoha started to tell the story but it would be better if he kept silent!

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Fedor already started to do crazy things in the regiment. With these “clicks” in his head, he left the army in some month of summer. When he returned home, he had a severe alcohol problem, drinking non-stop. However, his parents were taught enough to pull him out of this miserable existence. He enrolled to a university, got married, a child was born. However, when his army friend visited him, Fedor lapsed again with his drinking problem. Seeing this, his wife grabbed the child and left to the village she came from, forgetting to withdraw from a university where she was studying and even applying for a divorce.

The kid started to drink seriously in a dangerous way. He dropped his university and parents could not change the situation for the better. Lyoha said, that during that time, he visited Fedor quite often and was stunned to see with what kind of people, Fedor was socializing. They were the complete rubbish of the human race, total losers, outsiders of any social ends, “dead meats”. Lyoha told me that Fedor even sold his bravery medal “Red Star” for a cheap bottle of home brewed alcohol!

In the beginning of 90s, Fedor decided to make a visit to his son. Before the trip he got blatantly drunk, which he added to during the trip. Delusional by consumed alcohol, he got off at a wrong station and went the wrong direction, got lost and froze to death somewhere in the middle of vast fields, not even close to the village where his son lived. His body was found only in the spring fall

when snow melted and farmers started unearthing soil in the fields. His burial was simple. This was the end of Fedor's life.

I could not believe what I heard but Lyoha assured me

– His grave is located in the St. Nicholas cemetery. His father erected a huge monument for him....

– Let's go there!

– Not now, Glebych... Relax...

How can I be relaxed after what I have heard? Have you, Lyoha-asshole, forgot our army code? I will remind you then! In five minutes, squashed up, we were sitting in an old taxi that was taking us to Fedor.

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St. Nicholas cemetery was huge and we walked a bit until we reached the grave...

I saw his grave monument at once. In black marble Fedor looked strange. He was wearing his parade uniform with his beret on. During our army service, we wore this uniform no more than twice. It is obvious, that enthusiastic young Fedor sent to his parents a photo from his army training and this photo became a prototype for his grave monument designed by a famous architect. I knew another Fedor who was wearing a different uniform and had a higher rank.

Thank God that Lyoha left me alone: he decided to visit some relatives' graves while he was here. He pointed out to the monument and moved into a different direction looking for other graves.

I recalled the last time I saw Fedor. That is right, I had not seen him since Dick's burial and in my memory Fedor stayed as an unhappy crying kid on the hill conquered by tanks.

You can say, he had proud parents.. mother and father.... Forgive us, fools, Lyoha and myself, for questioning the glorified memory of your son. You are very wise. You knew your son's heart. You looked to the very bottom of his tormented soul,.. and you had the wisdom to understand all of it and forgive him.

A twisted spasm crashed on my face, my eyes became cramped and watery...

I felt that my heart is melting, that I am softening and my skin of thick army roughness is peeling. My animal brutality of war is gradually disappearing and I am becoming a different person, not a quite boy with Kalashnikov, neither an insane army machine with a dancing machine gun.

Washed in the cruelty of war, drenched in my own tears, my eyes became clear, they received a crystal vision of the life in front of me, and all of these overwhelmed me... Thank you, my Lord! It was your blissful touch I felt! It was you who brought me here.

I looked again at the marble Fedor. At the bottom of the stellar, Dick was laid down stretching out in his full length. He was carved with remarkable accuracy: the smallest details, even individual hairs have been recreated. It was a masterpiece of drawing and of marble carving.

Without any doubt, it was Dick, or Dusya, as we gently called this half-bred Caucasian Sheppard, the beautiful, strong, and healthy creature. He placed his powerful head on outstretched paws, his ears attentively pricked with eyes looking directly at the bottom of your soul.

I am not Temur, I do not know Tatar, and I cannot sing.... And you don't need any song now, brother.. Above you is standing your master. He is handsome, strong and confident as if he never cried in his life. You waited for him too long but at last you two have met..

Now you are together for ever. Nobody- Trubilin or Stepan neither the Hindu Kush or Pamirs or vodka-animal – could separate you, pull apart you, place you on different banks of the same river. You are together now.... Side by side....

...It is all good now.. You both have a rest.....Sleep well, boys....Everything is good.....It is time for you to switch off the lights.

Life is good..

## TERMINOLOGY AND SLANG USED IN THE BOOK

### A

Afgashek, or afoshka – a slang for Afghani money.

AGS – automatic grenade launcher.

AK, or kalash- abbreviation for or a 7.62mm assault rifle designed by Mikhail Kalashnikov.

AKS – Featured a downward-folding metal stock similar to that of the German MP40, for use in the restricted space in the BMP infantry combat vehicle, as well as by paratroops.

AN (s) – a reference to a type of military aircrafts, designed and build by Antonov Aircraft state enterprise, the main activity of which is the development, production and repair of An-series aircraft.

APC or “the armor “, – armored personnel carrier

Arbat Street – a famous pedestrian street in Moscow.

ATAs – Armored Transporter of the Airborne

### B

BP – backpack of a paratrooper

Bacha– a Persian word meaning kid or brother, very close friend.

bai – a very wealthy person.

Baksheesh– see Bakshish.

Bakshish, or baksheesh– (slang) is a small sum of money given as alms, a tip, or a bribe; a payment for a help.

Banya – a Russian traditional wet steam sauna,

Bertz – modern combat boots are designed to provide a combination of grip, ankle stability, and foot protection suitable for a rugged environment

Board (army slang) –a military airplane

“Boer(s)” – a name for the rifle designed by Lee- Metford Mark in 1902 and adopted by the British Army during the WW1.

Brezhnev Leonid (1906-1982) was the Soviet leader from 1954 to 1982. During the war he was a divisional political commissar with the Soviet armies in Ukraine. Malaya Zemlya, his vainglorious memoir of his involvement in the operations around Novorossisk on the Black Sea in 1943, became the object of much cynical humour among ordinary Soviet citizens, as did he himself in his last years of physical decline.

Brownian motion ( physics) – erratic movement; bumping each other.

“ Bukvar” – is the text book for the 1st schooling year that introduces the Russian alphabet in order to learn simple texts

Burbahayki or barbukhayka has come to the Russian lexicon from Afghanistan with changed from original meaning in Farsi “wishing you a good journey” Soviet soldiers started to call these home-made trucks that were assembled from assorted parts, hung from all sides with bales.

## C

Cascade, or Kaskad was one of the musical groups that was named after a KGB special forces unit. During the Afghan war, a number of groups emerged which performed songs about the war written by the soldiers themselves Many of their tunes, and some of the words, originated before the war. Most were written at the beginning of the war. But as time went on, the mood evolved. Patriotic and optimistic to start with, they grew more disillusioned towards the end, to the dismay of the authorities.

Chirchik – a city of Chirchik located in Uzbekistan.

Chifir – a drink obtained by digestion of highly concentrated tea brewing; has psycho-stimulating effect.

CK – abbreviation for a combat kit.

“Crocodile”, “tank”, or “twenty-four”, “MI-24 “ (army slang) – MI-24 fire support and attack military helicopter.

## D

Dembel(s) (army slang) – experienced soldiers servicing the army after a demobilization order. Every spring and autumn the Soviet Minister of Defence issued an Order, naming the conscripts due for demobilisation. From the date of the order to the soldier’s actual departure for home could take between two to over four months. During that period the lucky soldiers were known as “dembels”, and were allowed a number of departures from the approved style of dress and other privileges. The conscripts as a whole were informally divided into categories according to their length of service. Next down from the “dembels” were the “Grandfathers”, conscripts in their last six months. Then came two more junior categories: those in their second six months (“Elephants”), and those in their first (“Ghosts”). Each group bullied the one more junior, and expected personal services from them.

Dembelya, – or dembels soldiers listed for ending a military service.

Dembel photo album – a compulsory attribute for any soldier who was sent home after army service.

Dukh aka Dushara,( army slang) – a fighter of the Afghan armed opposition

Dukhan(s) – small private shop(s).

Dushara, or dukh(s), or dushman ( Army slang) – a fighter of the Afghan armed opposition.

Dusha (Russ.) – a words that referred to a complex meaning including spirit, soul, inner space of a personality and personal characteristics of a person.

Duval(s) – a traditional Afghani stove, or ( army slang) Afghanis traditional settlement.

## **E**

“Eight” ( army slang) – MI8 modification of military helicopters.

Elephants– ( army slang) as heavy armoured machine, tanks.

## **F**

Fergana is the eastern city of Uzbekistan.

“First Alihey!” – a first baptism of fire.

Flechettes – aerial darts/metallic needles

”Friendly gang” – an armed opposition group with whom a temporary agreement of neutrality had been reached.

Fokker Scourge – a mechanism in machine guns’ for synchronizing the fire through the arc of the propeller without striking the blades.

## **G**

Gazavat – a sacred war.

Gerzen, Alexander Ivanovich (1812-1870) – a prominent Russian journalist, writer, philosopher, and teacher.

GRU – a Russian abbreviation from specialised forces of quick responses.

Guba (army slang) as a Russian Glasshouse, a place for the imprisonment as the way of punishment in the army.

## **H**

Hadzh –a religious pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca.

“Hero” title (army slang) short version of “Hero of the Soviet Union”, which is the most prestigious military award.

## **I**

ILs – a reference to a type of military aircrafts, designed and build by Illushin Aircraft enterprise, the main activity of which is the development, production and repair of IL-series aircraft.

ICV literally “infantry combat vehicle”)[2] is a second-generation, amphibious infantry fighting vehicle introduced in the 1980s in the Soviet Union, following on from the BMP-1 of the 1960s.

Ivanov, Alexander Andreyevich (1806-1858) was a Russian painter who became famous for his neoclassical painting “The Appearance of Christ Before the People”, the painting referred in the novel.

## **J**

Jihad – is an Arabic word which literally means “striving” or “struggling”, especially with a praiseworthy aim. It can have many shades of meaning within an Islamic context.

Jihadist – Islamist militants

Jolly Fellows” aka (Russian: Весёлые ребята Vesyolye rebyata), also translated as Happy-Go-Lucky Guys was a popular Soviet musical group

## **K**

Kaaba – a sacred black stone of the Great Mosque at Mecca, the goal of Islamic pilgrimage and the point toward which Muslims turn in praying.

Kalashnikovs aka “Kalash”, or AKs (Russian slang) for Kalashnikov Rifle that is any one of a series of automatic rifles based on the original design of Mikhail Kalashnikov. Officially known in Russian as “Avtomat Kalashnikova” or “Kalashnikov’s Automatic Gun”.

Kalym – a traditional ceremony known as a ransom for the bride paid to her parents.

Kandahar – mis one of the most culturally significant cities of the Kandagar province that has been a traditional seat of Pushtuns’ power for more than 300 years.

Karakurt – a black widow spider.

Karez – a traditional underground hydraulic system in the ancient cities of Afghanistan.

Kishlak– a traditional Afghani settlement.

Krasnuha – rubella, a highly contaminating disease.

## **L**

Landsmen – army personnel from the division of army supply.

“Leader” – the leading helicopter.

Lenin Hills aka Sparrow’s Hills – is one of the highest points – 720 ft.– on the right bank of the Moscow River.

## **M**

Madras – a religious school.

Messers ( army slang) – a type of military aircrafts.

Mujahedeens, or mujahidin – (an Arabic word) refers to the guerrilla-type military groups led by the Islamist Afghan fighters in the Soviet–Afghan War.

Mualems – academics, scholars.

## **N**

Namaz – time of praying for Allah.

NURSOV, or nursy – The unguided ground-to-ground missile is the simplest missile equipped with an engine, a warhead with a fuse and an aerodynamic stabilizer (feathering)... Such shells are used in systems of multiple fire, for example, “Katyusha”, “Grad” and others.

## **P**

Pantophagy – eating of all kinds or a great variety of food.

Pashtuns – historically known as ethnic Afghans and Pathans, are an Iranian ethnic group who mainly live in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

PO – (Communist) Party Organisation.

Promedole – Promedol is a synthetic drug with the structure that can be considered as analogous of morphine molecules. Widely used as a strong painkiller on the battlefields.

Pugacheva Alla (1948), a very popular Russian singer who occasionally performed for the Soviet troops in Afghanistan.

## **R**

Rassypuha – a soldier slang for reusable bits that were left in an army backpack after a military operation.

RPG – A rocket-propelled grenade (often abbreviated RPG) is a shoulder-fired anti-tank weapon system that fires rockets equipped with an explosive warhead.

## **S**

Salabons (army slang) – young, inexperienced soldiers, rookie in the army.

Samogon – an alcoholic drink made in primitive conditions.

“Samovar” – (army slang) a gun.

Sarbose – is a strong swearing word in Afghani culture meaning a bastard.

“Screamers” – (army slang) fire support helicopters MI-24

Shaitan – the devil.

Sharia – Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet (Hadith and Sunna), prescribing both religious and secular duties and sometimes retributive penalties for lawbreaking.

Shuravis – an Afghani slang identifying people from the Soviet Union

Stechkin – a Soviet selective fire machine pistol called after its designer Igor Stechkin.

Suras – chapters or sections of the Koran.

SVDashki – a military optical object.

## **T**

Thanatos – is a personification of death in Greek mythology.

Tankachi ( army slang) – tank unit personnel.

Tashakur– ( from Dari) Thank you.

## **U**

Union – see USSR.

USSR., or Soviet Union, or the Union- the abbreviation and forms for Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, a former northern Eurasian empire (1917/22–1991), stretching from the Baltic and Black seas to the Pacific Ocean and, in its final years, consisting of 15 Soviet Socialist Republics.

## **V**

“Vertical” (army slang) for “helicopter”.

Vodyara – a slang for vodka.

Vladimir Vysotsky (1938-1980) was a talented actor and “bard” (folk singer) whose songs, many about the war even though he himself had never been in battle, spoke to the mood of the Soviet people in the 1960s and 1970s and have had a lasting influence. He was regarded as faintly subversive by the establishment, but they never moved seriously against him. Tens of thousands of people lined the streets of Moscow as his funeral procession passed.

## **W**

“Whistles”, or “screamers” – model MI24, an attacking military helicopter.

## **Y**

Yat -an ancient letter of Russian alphabet that was abolished after the Great October Revolution.

## **Z**

Zarathushtra is an ancient Iranian-speaking prophet famous for teachings and innovations on the religious traditions of ancient Iranian philosophy.

“Zelenye” (army slang) – just conscripted soldiers.

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Уникальный сборник военной прозы о войне в Афганистане 1979-1989 годов: первый в истории проект подобного рода – ни в СССР ни в постсоветское время не издавалось столь представительной подборки «афганских» авторов. Также сборник уникален собранными под одной обложкой писателями, в своей молодости бывшими реальными участниками Афганской войны – солдатами и офицерами Советской армии.

Союз писателей ЛНР

# «ПОРВАННЫЕ ДУШИ»

Антология военной прозы  
о советской войне в Афганистане

*на английском языке*

Writers' Union of Lugansk People's Republic

# The Torn Souls

**a Prose Anthology  
of the Soviet - Afganistan War**

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