

Spetsnaz: Russia's elite force

The crack anti-terrorist commandos who ended the Moscow theatre siege are part of a Russia's elite Spetsnaz forces.

The word itself translates as "special designation", and is often applied to any elite military or police unit.

The Alpha unit, whose men spearheaded the attack on the Chechen rebels on Saturday, has reputedly only lost four officers during its entire history.

Controlled by the Federal Security Service, Alpha troops are trained for armed response and intelligence-gathering activities and number between 1,500 and 2,000 men.

Some 200 men took part in the operation, an un-named Alfa officer told the Izvestiya newspaper.

On the battlefield, Spetsnaz soldiers have the reputation of being among the world's toughest and most ruthless soldiers.

They have seen extensive action in Afghanistan and Chechnya.

During the Cold War, the prime objective of military Spetsnaz troops would have been to act as an airborne battlefield reconnaissance force, operating deep behind enemy lines.

Specialist role

But in the decade following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, large numbers have been recruited for a range of security and counter-terrorist roles.

A Spetsnaz unit known as Vega specialises in dealing with nuclear incidents.

Units going under the name Fakel, or torch, which were also deployed in the theatre siege, are skilled in dealing with hostage incidents inside prisons.

" Unfortunately it appears that rescuing hostages came second in priority to killing terrorists "

Dr Mark Galleoti Russian military analyst

The selection process for Spetsnaz troops is gruelling, and training can last up to five years.

Recruits are submitted to an intense and deliberately brutal five-month long induction intended to strip away dignity and instil the toughness and resilience needed to endure harsh combat conditions.

According to analysts, Spetsnaz tactics are far more improvisational than those of Western special forces, with more emphasis placed on sheer physical strength.

Spetsnaz recruits are sometimes hand-picked from the conventional military, usually those showing signs of the toughness of character and ability to use initiative.

Their fearsome reputation is not matched by the quality of their equipment however.

Equipment failings

According to military analyst Dr Mark Galleoti, the hi-tech night-vision and surveillance equipment issued as standard in Western elite corps are not available to every Spetsnaz commando.

"Their equipment tends to fall into two categories. Either it is quite clever but fragile - no use when your job involves breaking in through windows - or it is fairly crude," he told BBC News Online.

"Spetsnaz groups often buy in foreign-made equipment."

Assessing events in Moscow, Dr Galleoti suggested that these shortcomings could have affected the outcome of the siege.

"Tactically, this scenario is very difficult, but they made a mistake in going in, in the first place, believing the Chechen had started to execute hostages.

"They ought to have known exactly what was going on inside before they did anything."

Dr Galleoti added that the tactical decision to use gas to subdue the terrorists must also have been taken with the knowledge of the effect it would have on the hostages.

"With the aim of eliminating [the Chechens], they came up with a very effective solution. Unfortunately it appears that rescuing hostages came second in priority to killing terrorists."