

The A-Teams by Shane Mooney - MAXIM - March 2001

In 1974, the USSR formed its own elite unit. They quickly became brutally efficient.

Some like to equate Russian's SPETSNAZ (SPETSialnoye NAZnacheniyе, "troops of special purpose") with the Green Berets or Britain's SAS, but anyone even remotely familiar with their Cold War recruitment and training tactics knows that there is no way such intensity would be allowed in the West. In 1974, Yuri Andropov established the stealth military group, SPETSNAZ Group Alpha, to act independently of the Red Army and to carry out any mission - legal or not.

Selection and Training

During the Cold War, Soviets didn't fill out forms asking to join the SPETSNAZ. SPETSNAZ chose them. Men from all walks of life were observed and handpicked for the arduous, long-term service by military superiors.

To this day, most of the recruits training for the secretive unit don't even realize they are prospective SPETSNAZ members until many months, even years, into the process. Notes former SPETSNAZ officer, Vladimir Vasiliev, "Even when you are chosen for this training, no one tells you that it is something special until you get up to a certain level ... but no matter how high up you get, you never get the whole story."

Of all the world's special forces, the SPETSNAZ is perhaps unparalleled in the time it devotes to mental training to toughen and magnify all the senses. Soldiers are blindfolded for hours until they are able to understand the exercises and principles the instructor is teaching without the benefit of sight, or thrown into pitch-black rooms for hours.

The physical training borders on cruel and unusual punishment. "We'd be forced to go through unbearable pain during some of these exercises," says Vasiliev. "The trainers would bend your arm back until you started screaming. Then, as if this wasn't enough, somebody would get a knife and start poking you with it. You were then given the choice of two extremes - having your arm broken or being cut with a knife."

All SPETSNAZ soldiers learn Systema, a Russian martial art many experts consider to be the best technique for knife defense of fighting multiple opponents --- essentially the most complete way to maim and kill. And thanks to inmates of the gulags, the soldiers have an endless supply of opponents to kick, beat, and abuse in the hand-to-hand phase of training.

Unit Highlights

In 1985, terrorists stormed the Soviet Embassy in Beirut and abducted several Russian officials, demanding that the Soviets force Syria to stop its efforts to drive Palestinians supporting Arafat out of Lebanon.

Then Soviet president Gorbachev was quickly able to get Syria to stop its operation, but the kidnapers were slow in releasing the hostages. The SPETSNAZ quickly went into action, rushing to Beirut and giving the extremists 48 hours to free their people.

When the terrorists let the deadline pass, the SPETSNAZ actually kidnapped four of them and sent one of their decapitated heads in a bag to the terrorist chief, promising further unrestrained action. The captives were quickly freed.

Personal Combat Story

"In the mid-80's, a dangerous prisoner in the medical unit of a large city prison seized a female doctor, held a knife to her throat, and began dragging her toward the first set of exit doors. The internal alarm was activated and an emergency call went out to my SPETSNAZ unit. While the murderer made his way through the corridors with his hostage, the unit arrived and one of our men replaced the prison guard on the other side of the exit doors. The criminal yelled to have the doors opened, saying he was prepared to slit the doctor's throat. Our guy was done up to look old, with scruffy hair and thick glasses. He started to whine and complain that it was his first day on the job and he didn't know what to do. Fumbling through his pockets, he took out a gun, held it by two shaking fingers from an outstretched arm, and offered it to the prisoner. Then, in the blink of an eye, the sniffling guard flipped the gun into his [own] hand and blew the guy's head off."

- Vladimir Vasiliev, a 10-year SPETSNAZ veteran.

