

Russian Spetsnaz sacrificed at the front: why using Special Forces as infantry is a mistake

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The war in Ukraine has shown with particular clarity one of the greatest risks in the employment of elite units: **using highly specialized men to compensate for deficiencies in conventional infantry**.

This is what would have happened, especially in the early phases of the Russian invasion, with some **Spetsnaz of the GRU**, deployed in frontline combat and missions closer to those of light infantry than to the tasks for which they had been selected and trained.

The result, according to various Western analyses and intelligence documents that emerged in subsequent years, would have been an extremely high level of losses and, above all, the dispersal of military capabilities that take years to build.

A lesson that goes far beyond the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Special Forces are not simply "better soldiers"

At the root of the problem there is a fairly common misconception: considering Special Forces as a kind of **particularly well-trained infantry**, to be used whenever a conventional unit fails to achieve an objective.

In reality, the value of a Special Forces operator does not reside solely in the ability to fight better.

Behind each man there is **selection, training, specializations, operational experience and technical capabilities** that can take years to develop.

Special reconnaissance, target acquisition, sabotage, direct action, support to partner forces, clandestine infiltration and intelligence gathering are activities in which a few men can produce operational or strategic effects far superior to their numerical strength.

Using them simply to capture or maintain a trench therefore means employing an extremely costly capability to perform a task that, in principle, should be entrusted to infantry.

What happened to the Russian Spetsnaz

One of the most significant documents to emerge during the war is contained in classified US material leaked in 2023 through the so-called **Discord Leaks**.

According to assessments by American intelligence reported by the *Washington Post*, the Russian command would have made excessive use of its Spetsnaz brigades, deploying them **together with infantry formations on the front line**.

The consequences would have been very heavy.

US assessments indicated that four of the five Spetsnaz brigades withdrawn from operations in the summer of 2022 had suffered significant losses. For some units, attrition rates were estimated at between **90 and 95 percent**.

One of the brigades analyzed would have gone from approximately **900 men deployed to only 125 personnel still operational**.

These are data from intelligence assessments and should therefore be considered as estimates, not as numbers officially confirmed by Russia. But the dynamics described have also been noted by several independent analysts.

From reconnaissance and saboteurs to light infantry

The original function of the **Spetsnaz of the GRU** units is particularly important for understanding the problem.

An Institute for the Study of War report describes these units as forces directly subordinate to Russian military intelligence, intended mainly for **reconnaissance and sabotage**.

The same report notes, however, that during the war in Ukraine, Spetsnaz units were also used as **light infantry in particularly hard combat**.

The problem is not that a Special Forces operator is unable to fight like an infantryman.

Obviously they can.

The problem is the ratio between **cost, training time and operational value of the resource employed**.

Losing an infantryman means having to replace a soldier.

Losing an operator with years of experience in special reconnaissance, communications, target acquisition or clandestine operations means losing simultaneously **a soldier and a specialized capability**.

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Kharkiv, Mariupol and Donbass

According to military analyst Rob Lee, cited in the *Washington Post* investigation, one of the reasons for the massive deployment of elite units would have been precisely the difficulty initially shown by some Russian motorized infantry formations.

Commands would therefore have used **Spetsnaz, VDV and naval infantry** to compensate for those deficiencies.

In Kharkiv, in the first days of the invasion, small Spetsnaz groups would have been sent to the city without adequate support from conventional forces. Several men would have been killed or captured.

Similar situations would have occurred later in **Mariupol, in the Donbass and in the Vuhledar area**, where specialized units were progressively absorbed by the ground battle.

It is the classic mechanism through which an elite force becomes a sort of **“front-line firefighter”**: it is sent where the situation is most difficult precisely because it is considered more reliable.

In the short term it can work.

In the long term it consumes precisely the units that would be most difficult to reconstitute.

The VDV also paid the same price

The phenomenon does not only affect Special Forces.

A similar argument can be made for the **VDV, the Vozdushno-desantnye voyska**, Russian airborne troops.

It is important to clarify: **the VDV are not Special Forces**, but traditionally constitute a highly selected and rapidly deployable component of the Russian Armed Forces.

For this very reason they were used repeatedly at the most important points of the front.

The symbolically most well-known example remains **Hostomel**, in the early hours of the invasion in February 2022.

The operation envisioned the occupation of Antonov airport through an air assault that was supposed to allow the rapid influx of other forces toward Kyiv.

According to a recent analysis by the **Royal United Services Institute**, approximately **200-300 VDV and Spetsnaz military personnel** were inserted into the area using a formation of 34 helicopters. The operation initially succeeded in bringing the troops to the objective, but the Russian force failed to transform the initial tactical success into the planned operational result.

In subsequent years the VDV continued to be used increasingly frequently as assault infantry.

The Institute for the Study of War noted already in 2024 that some Russian airborne units were now conducting **the same infantry-based frontal assaults as regular motorized units**, with the consequent erosion of the differences that traditionally distinguished formations considered elite.

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When the elite becomes the commander's reserve

The Russian problem highlights a temptation that can exist in any army.

When a conventional formation fails to advance, the commander naturally tends to employ the unit he considers most reliable.

The best units are used first.

If the situation continues to deteriorate, they are called in again.

Then again.

Eventually a force born for specific tasks is transformed into **operational reserve to plug the gaps in the conventional setup**.

It is exactly the opposite of the principle that should guide the employment of Special Forces: use them when **their peculiar capabilities produce an effect that a conventional force could not achieve with the same effectiveness**.

Losing men means losing years

Special Forces also constitute a resource that is particularly difficult to regenerate.

According to U.S. intelligence documents leaked in 2023, to rebuild some of the Spetsnaz capabilities lost by Russia would have required **years**, potentially up to a decade.

The problem is not merely recruiting new men.

A special unit lives indeed by its collective experience: commanders, communications specialists, snipers, medical personnel, sappers, intelligence specialists and personnel capable of working in small autonomous units.

When these skills are dispersed simultaneously, it is not enough to numerically replace the fallen.

One must rebuild **the unit's operational culture**.

War of attrition tends to consume even the elite

The evolution of the conflict has also profoundly modified the way Russia fights.

RUSI, the acronym for **Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies**, one of the most authoritative British think tanks specializing in **defense, security and military studies,** already described in 2023 a growing differentiation of Russian infantry between elements assigned to hold terrain, assault units, specialized forces and personnel used to locate Ukrainian positions through continuous contact fighting.

In January 2026 the Center for Strategic and International Studies highlighted how Russian strategy continues to favor small infantry groups, FPV drones, artillery and glide bombs to achieve very limited advances through continuous pressure on the front.

In a war of this type even the best units risk inevitably being absorbed by the logic of attrition.

And still in 2026 Russia continues to move units considered elite, such as elements of the **76th VDV Division**, from one sector to another of the front to respond to the most urgent operational needs.

The real lesson: do not turn a special capability into expensive infantry

The lesson that emerges from the Russian experience is not therefore that Special Forces should never fight on the front line.

Direct action is precisely one of their tasks and some missions may require extremely violent combat.

The distinction is different.

One thing is to use a Special Force because **the mission requires special capabilities**.

Another is to use it because **the available conventional infantry is unable to carry out its task**.

In the first case you exploit a capability. In the second you consume it.

And this is probably one of the most important lessons left so far by the Ukrainian front: **a Special Forces operator can certainly be employed as an excellent infantryman, but doing so systematically means spending one of the most difficult resources to create in an army to obtain a result that should be guaranteed by conventional forces**.

Elite infantry can be reconstituted very quickly.

A special capability, when dispersed, takes much longer.

News link: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/14/leaked-documents-russian-spetsnaz/