

Our Worst Has Got To Be Better Than Their Best

By John Giduck

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Despite the fact that the terrorist atrocity at the Beslan Middle School No. 1 in southern Russia from 1-3 September 2004 is now almost three years old, there seems to be ever growing interest in that event from many groups here in the U.S. From a law enforcement, government and military perspective, the study of this atrocity is not only relevant, but important, for a number of reasons. One of those reasons is that it reflected a terrorist-mass hostage siege that demonstrated the most current evolution of tactics of al Qaeda and its related groups. Another reason is that it cleaved so closely to basic al Qaeda doctrine for such attacks, as we have come to learn them from almost fifty hours of captured training tapes and printed manuals. Perhaps the best reason, however, is that it represents the worst terrorist attack that we might ever face here in America.

In the past two and one-half years it seems that everyone from PBS to school organizations and law enforcement tactical teams is attempting to re-examine what happened over those fateful three days in September 2004. Now two major motion pictures are in the works for everyone's entertainment. For me, however, these words merely echo stark visions of shredded bodies, of children brutalized in ways that were unspeakable, and of brave young commandos staring off into space while with trembling voices recounting the horrors confronted while battling to retake the school and save innocent children over a ten hour firefight. You see, I was there for much of this.

The organization I work for is the Archangel Group, a non-profit agency that exists to provide anti-terror tactical and academic training to U.S. law enforcement agencies, military and government departments. We have operated in such places as Kosovo and Serbia, Sudan and Chechnya. With an international network of counter-terror experts, our small organization has the aggregate experience of hundreds of years of combat training, dozens of years of combat, all in more than 100 countries. We train tactical teams across the U.S., and such military units as Army Special Forces. We specialize in such things as hand-to-hand combat, close quarters combat handgun, tactical diving and terrorist-hostage negotiations, often for police SWAT teams. Having worked in the former-Soviet Union and the Russian Federation for more than the past decade and a half, including tours in both Chechen Wars there, we had a more than passing familiarity with the region, with the war, and with the tactics of the Wahabbist Islamist terrorists who have completely conscripted any original notions of mere Chechen independence.

When the Beslan siege first happened I grabbed Archangel consultant Yuri Ferdigalov, a former Soviet Spetsnaz (Special Forces) commando, and we got the first tickets we could and headed straight for it. We recognized that with the complete Arabization of the Chechen War, and with Usama bin Laden's own instructors and commanders now calling many of the shots in the ever-increasing terrorist assaults throughout Russia in that war, this would serve as the blueprint for a similar attack on a U.S. school. While some of this may be heretofore unheard information to many, I have attempted to provide as complete an analysis of the connections between bin Laden, al Qaeda and other Arab Islamist

terror groups to the greater conflict in Chechnya as is possible from open source records and declassified reports in the recently completed book *Terror at Beslan: A Russian Tragedy With Lessons For America's Schools*. Make no mistake, there has been a natural and completely foreseeable marriage between the Taliban, Chechen rebels and terrorists, bin Laden and al Qaeda since the early 1990s. Chechnya has become al Qaeda's favored training and proving ground, allowing scores of young Saudis, Afghanis, Yemenis, Algerians, Egyptians, Jordanians, Syrians and the like, to receive expert training and gain real experience in combat and terror assaults before being turned loose on a Western world still clinging to the naive belief of a "Chechen war for independence."

Years ago while undergoing a training program from veterans of the vaunted British SAS, the father of all Western counter-terror teams, I came to understand the mentality of those elite commandos. It was screamed at you a thousand times a day, week after week: *Your Worst Has Got To Be Better Than Their Best!*. No more important or prophetic words can be uttered that capture the psychological and tactical preparedness anyone in the arms professions must possess every waking moment. For the terrorists will come at us, as they did on 9-11, when we are at our weakest, at our most vulnerable, at our lowest point of awareness and preparation. And they will come when they are at their best.

As I speak to SWAT teams, sheriffs and police chiefs across the country about Beslan I tell them that the Beslan School siege was the terrorists at their best. It was their best plan, with the best number of hostage-takers and weapons, they could muster. And as I detail that tragedy, I implore them to ask the critical question: Would their team's worst have been better than the terrorists' best if Beslan happened here in America? And if the answer to that question is "no," would their team's *best* have even been up to the task?

At no time in America have we ever confronted a true terrorist siege, much less one of the proportions of Beslan. The official number of hostages from the government after the siege was 1,181, but in recent conversations with members of Russia's elite Spetsnaz units that number is believed to be closer to 1,300. There were 49 terrorists armed to the teeth with AK 47s and 74s, PKM bipod mounted machine guns, hundreds of grenades and IEDs, RPGs and RPOs, the latter firing a high thermal incendiary napalm-type round. They had Dragunov sniper rifles and under-barrel grenade launchers on their AKs, night vision and body armor. They had everything. They were allowed more than 48 hours to completely fortify their positions in a school of enormous and complex design while 400 commandos of Russia's most elite counter-terror units, Alpha and Vypel, attempted to solve the tactical riddle they were presented with, to develop some plan of assault that might give the hostages a chance, any chance, of surviving. During that same 48 hours the terrorists summarily executed 21 of the largest teenage boys and men taken hostage, shot another eight in and outside the school, and gang raped young girls and women relentlessly, at times with the barrels of their guns.

Contrary to what many newsmedia sources have reported, the horrible and chaotic firefight that began at 1:05 p.m. on the third day of the siege, September 3, was not due to any assault by the Russian military or government forces. Embarrassingly for them, at that time they had not even developed an assault plan. Fully one-third of the designated

400 man assault team was 18 miles to the south in the region's capital of Vladikavkaz, practicing an embryonic assault plan on a building of similar design. Another third was on stand-down outside the Beslan School. When the explosions and gunfire started, there were only 133 young men from Alpha and Vypmel on duty outside the school. The Russians were caught flatfooted. Simply, one of the bombs wired to a backboard of the basketball court in the gym where most of the hostages were held fell and detonated. Another went off seconds later. Hostages panicked and began fleeing in every direction, while terrorists began shooting into them. Within minutes the ceiling of the gym collapsed and caught fire, burning many hostages alive in the rubble that entombed them.

When this all took place the Russian forces reacted as best they could. As I was told by a number of these young warriors, at that point they realized that their assault on the school was not part of any type of military operation, they were just trying to save children as best they could. For all of this chaos and lack of preparedness on the part of the Russians, the Western newsmedia and many supposed experts have vilified the brave men of Alpha and Vypmel. They have been accused of gross negligence and even incompetence in their efforts to enter the school and save hostages, mostly women and children. When the last shot had been fired late in the night of September 3, 334 innocent lives would have been taken by the terrorists. To many, this number alone bespeaks lack of ability on the part of Russia's most elite counter-terror and hostage rescue teams. Yet there is more to the story.

Analysis of the deaths of each and every one of those hostages has now been done. In recent conversations with several of the assault teams' commanders we now know how these poor souls perished. The numbers and ways of death alone bear important testimony to the commitment, courage and professionalism of Russia's elite. Of the 334 who died, 8 were killed during the taking of the school or elsewhere during the first two days. This included one police officer and an armed security guard who were shot down within seconds of the terrorists' assault on September 1. Another 21 teenage boys and men were killed execution style, their bodies dumped out a second story window in the school's western yard. Approximately two hundred eighty died in the gym, from explosions, gunfire, or burning to death. As this is what instigated the assault there was little the Spetsnaz could do to stop it. Finally, 15 hostages were shot down outside the school as they raced to safety.

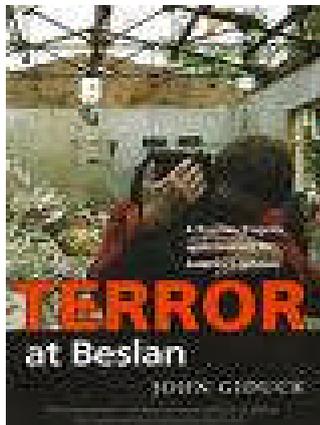
The most telling aspect of these statistics is that only nine hostages died elsewhere in the school – outside the gym – throughout the Spetsnaz assault on the school. As those young men moved through narrow corridors and entered dozens of small classrooms, engaging terrorists and saving children, for ten long hours, only another nine innocent lives were lost. As one SAS veteran remarked shortly after the battle had ended, "I don't know if any other unit with any other country in the world could have done better." His words have now been proven true.

Many have sought to judge the Russian soldiers who gave their all for victims they had never met, who came from a town they had never visited. But those people who would render judgment were not there, did not race to the school without body armor as the

Spetsnaz men did. They did not walk among the bodies of those burned and tortured victims. For such people there is only one other standard by which the men of the rescue teams can be appropriately judged: the number of their own lost. At Beslan, Alpha and Vympel suffered unprecedented losses. Fully 11 young men from those two units lost their lives fighting to save women and children. Another 10 soldiers died from other Spetsnaz units racing back and forth to the school, across open ground, shielding children with their bodies. Sixty more from both groups were wounded. These men died bravely. They died like Major Misha Kuznetsov, who lay on the ground alongside the western wall of the school, dying from a wound to the artery in his neck. He made no effort to staunch the arterial spray erupting from him, preferring to use both hands to reload his weapon. There he lay, firing up at terrorists in second story windows as children raced past him, dotted red with his blood.

Here in America we must ask ourselves if we are ready, could we have responded to the Beslan siege? *Is our worst better than the terrorists' best in that attack?* Are our policies and protocols for hostage rescue, negotiations, weapons and tactics up to that siege? Some would argue that we would never see fully 49 terrorists ready to die for their cause in a Beslan type raid. But on 9-11 we did see 19 ready to do so. And even at that lesser number, would we be ready, could we handle it? The Beslan School siege must be seen by American law enforcement, indeed by American politicians and military, as the best our enemies can muster. And we must be ready for it. For if we are ready for Beslan, we are ready for anything. In the book, *Terror at Beslan*, I have presented a detailed recitation and analysis of the terrorists' evolving tactics throughout Russia, including many sieges no one in the West has ever heard about. The relevance of the Beslan siege is explained and substantial information on ways U.S. law enforcement must modify its approach to barricade and active-shooter situations articulated. It is my sincere hope that someday it will help, but at the same time that it is never necessary.

By November 2004 when I returned to the Beslan School its walls had been covered with graffiti. Spray painted throughout that haunted building was a single theme: *Alpha and Vympel, you are our heroes, our angels, you came to save our children. God will never forget you.* I can only hope that when the day comes for us, when the terror comes yet again to American shores, we are prepared to earn such praise.



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Terror at Beslan can be ordered through Archangel at 303-215-0779, info@circon.org, or by going to the website www.terroratbeslan.com. It is also carried on Amazon.com and through Archangel's corporate website, www.antiterrorconsultants.org



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