

T-90 or T-72BM?

Did the Rebels Misidentify Knocked-Out Tanks?

by Adam Geibel

In early February, Pentagon intelligence officials told *Washington Times* reporter Bill Gertz that Chechen mujihadeen fighters had claimed the destruction of 13 T-90 MBTs, as part of a total of 70-some Armored Fighting Vehicles knocked out since August 1999. An unnamed intelligence official said that the Chechens had used rocket-propelled grenade launchers and that “It took them five or 10 rounds [for each tank], but they were able to knock out the tanks.”

This was no real surprise, as the Chechen news site www.kavkaz.org had published those same comments and figures by Mujihadeen field commander Shamil Basayev on 20 January, but in reference to MOUT fighting in Grozny (Chechen name “Dzhokhar City”). The first Chechen report of T-90s was a Kavkaz note that two had been knocked out in the capital’s 56th District on 4 January 2000. A month after the *Washington Times* report, the Mujihadeen would claim that they had knocked out 20 T-90s (as part of a total 400 Russian AFVs destroyed).

The Chechens even claimed a T-80 knocked out in a 30-minute engagement two kilometers from Dolinsky (a northern Grozny suburb) on 22 June.

But were the tanks the Chechens knocked out really T-90s?

Considering that the Russian military had clearly stated to the press that the T-90 had not been deployed to Chechnya, this might be a classic example of Armor Fighting Vehicle mis-Identification (AFVmisID). If an observer — any observer — isn’t careful, the T-72BM can be easily mistaken for the T-90.

With only 150 built by mid-1998, the Siberian Military District’s 21st Taganrog Red Banner Order of Suvorov Motorized Rifle Division received the first 94 of these MBTs and formed a tank regiment (T-90s were also issued to the 5th Don Guards Tank Division in Buryatiya).

However, when the Siberian Military District Guards Tank Regiment deployed to Chechnya in the fall of 1999, it was in T-62s. When asked in November by *Kommersant* reporter Ilya



A Russian T-72BM carries troops near Grozny, Chechnya.

Federov why T-62s and not T-90s had been dispatched from the Siberian military district, the Russian Forces Armed Forces Armaments Chief, Anatoliy Petrovich Sitnov, had a logical answer:

“Why are we shipping T-62 tanks? I feel that it is because these are tanks that we mastered back in Afghanistan. We do not consider it necessary to burn up T-72 and T-80 tanks. That is an expensive pleasure. There are no tanks on the other side, therefore, they will not have to fight tank against tank — there will be no such situation. The T-62 and T-55 tanks are the most preferable for carrying out the missions they have there. They are lighter, they work well in the mountains, they negotiate the higher mountains well — that is enough.”

Other Russian journalists were more cynical about the T-90’s non-deployment. Only eight days before the Pentagon’s announcement, *Komsomolets*’ Viktor Sokirko was asking whether a lack of funds was the real reason.

Considering that the planned deployment of other new weapons systems to Chechnya had been given strong media support by the Russians, who were eager to export ‘combat-proven’ armaments, the claims of T-90 kills in Chechnya reads more like a case of AFVmisID by the Chechen Mujihadeen.

Readers should take into account that most mujihadeen reports were taken

after the chaos of ambush-attacks, that the Chechens rarely retained physical possession of the battlefield, and the T-90’s similarity to the T-72BM.

This still leaves the Indian Army, which is in the process of acquiring their first batch of 100 T-90s as this is written, and other potential international purchasers with the wide-open question — “How will the T-90 stand up to combat?”

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- The photo above courtesy Venik’s Aviation Page, www.aeronautics.ru.*