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# SPECIAL REPORT

FROM INDUCTION TO DEFECTION: A SOVIET SERGEANT'S REPORT

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FROM INDUCTION TO DEFECTION: A SOVIET SERGEANT'S REPORT

This article is based largely on information received from one man, a Soviet citizen of Ukrainian origin who deserted his unit in the Soviet Border Troops last year. Nikolay, as we shall call him, had served two years of his compulsory three-year term. During that time he rose to senior sergeant and was decorated with the "Distinguished State Border Security Medal." Although Soviet Border Troops are actually part of the Committee of State Security (KGB) and not of the regular army, much of Nikolay's story would apply to other components of the armed forces. They present an excellent picture of the impressions of one man who, even though rewarded by the USSR for his abilities, elected to "vote with his feet" and deserted both his military unit and his homeland.

Induction

The usual Soviet conscription practice is to call up all physically fit males, except those given deferments, in the late summer or early fall of their 19th year. According to this procedure, Nikolay, born in 1939, should have been drafted in 1958. Instead, he was deferred until 1960 because he was obligated to work in a combine factory for one year following his graduation from technical school.

Nikolay was first summoned in January 1957 and ordered to appear at the military commissariat of the city in which he lived for a complete physical examination. He returned several times to bring his registration forms up to date before his final physical in August 1960, when he was advised by the examining officer to go home and enjoy his last 30 days as

a civilian. He was also told that he would be assigned to an antiaircraft rocket artillery unit. Two days before he was to report, Nikolay was told that his orders had been changed because the antiaircraft unit was filled and his induction would be delayed for 13 days. No mention was made of his new assignment.

One morning in mid-October, he reported at the city stadium, where some 400 people had come down to see the 40 conscripts off. Induction of a young man into the military service is considered a major event in the Soviet Union and relatives of all the conscripts, who had been drinking with them all night, came down for a noisy farewell. Meanwhile, the bus driver, as the representative of authority, struggled to separate relatives from conscripts, collect registration certificates, and get the conscripts into the bus.

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Finally he succeeded and they were off to the oblast forming point, where other groups joined them until around 400 conscripts were assembled. At this stage, three KGB Border Troop officers and six noncommissioned officers (NCOs) took over the unruly group and marched them to the local railroad station. The appearance of the Border Troop officers was Nikolay's first clue as to what his assignment would be.

The group joined others headed for other armed forces units at the railroad station, boarded a troop train composed of freight cars with sleeping tiers added, and started off on a six-day train trip. During the trip the conscripts--because of their status between civilian and military life--were not closely supervised by either their military escorts or the civil authorities at the various stations. The conscripts took full advantage of this situation to have one last fling before arriving at their basic training sites. To get vodka, they traded the rations they were issued and finally the clothes off their backs along the way until, at last, the train was not allowed to stop at any of the usual stations in towns but only in the open countryside.

During the trip, Nikolay learned that about a third of the group were, like him, members of older draft classes who had been deferred. There was even one conscript who had been born in 1932. The most

common draft class among those who had been deferred was 1938. Nikolay believed that many of the deferred men were being called up then in order to compensate for the smaller draft classes of the late World War II years. During a later political discussion, he was told that the draft class of 1943 would be about 50 percent short of the armed forces' needs.

#### Basic Training

Upon arrival at the Border Troop headquarters to which they were assigned, the conscripts ate and bathed and were issued uniforms. Later, all of them were trucked to the detachment's recruit training site. There the 400 conscripts were issued field equipment and organized into a provisional training battalion by a cadre of about 20 officers and 50 NCOs drawn from the line units of the detachment. The basic training period lasted one month and covered briefly all of the traditional basic training subjects of any army--physical training, close-order drill, individual weapons qualification, and basic infantry tactics--as well as that Soviet specialty, political training. The recruits were also introduced to chemical warfare in basic training. Elementary chemical warfare training--such as simple decontamination procedures and practice in performing normal functions while masked--is integrated with other training throughout the Soviet conscript's service.

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After basic training was completed, some recruits were sent directly to the operational outposts of the detachment, while others were selected for NCO or specialist training-- such as dog handling, driver, or signal training. Nikolay was chosen for a nine-month course at the "Inter-District Sergeants' School for Dog Service Instructors."

#### NCO Training

Nikolay's school was a combination NCO and dog handlers' academy. Graduates were made junior sergeants and assigned to outposts where they would be in charge of handlers whose

experience had been picked up on the job.

Eligible for attendance at the school were men who had already served a year with Border Troops and had been recommended by their units, junior NCOs who wanted the additional training, and some conscripts such as Nikolay, who were selected during basic training. In 1960, a minimum of a seventh-grade education was required, but in 1962 the minimum educational level for this school was increased to ten years.

About half of the school work was devoted to specialist

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training in dog handling. This included classroom work in the theory of dog handling and veterinary care as well as practical work in the feeding, care, and training of service dogs. Many of the students, including Nikolay, were assigned dogs which they trained as a part of the course. The objective was to teach the dog to detect and follow a scent three hours old, to maintain full composure despite the firing of weapons, to attack any person who threatens, runs, or moves when under arrest, and to capture fleeing suspects. Dogs were also trained to accept food only from their handlers and to respond to oral commands and signals.

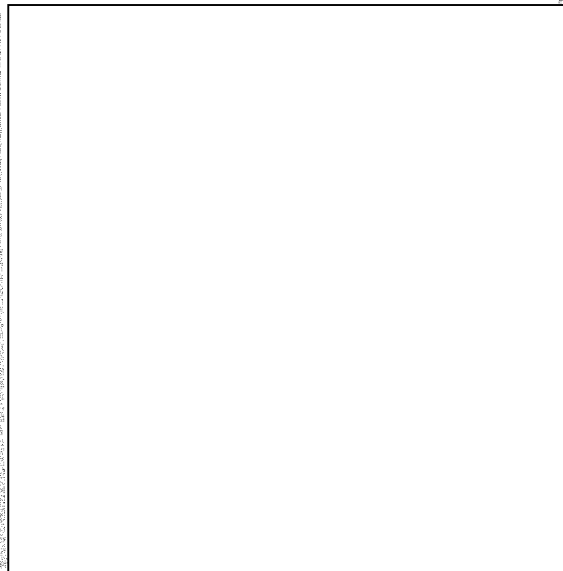
The students received extensive training with light infantry weapons. They fired the assault rifle in the standard Soviet Army course and a special Border Troop night firing course. Other weapons training included familiarization with the light machine gun, submachine gun, the machine pistol, and hand grenades.

Another major subject at the school was border training. This included familiarization with border laws, zones, and personal documents. In addition, of course, there were the usual close-order drill, physical training, infantry squad tactics, and protection against chemical attack.

Two examinations were given--a mid-term exam by a

visiting board of officers, and a final exam by a delegation from the State Examining Board in Moscow, headed by a full colonel. The exams consisted of both oral and practical work phases and were considered very difficult by the students. Additional help was given to students falling below minimum standards until the mid-term exam, which served to cut the class to the size of the annual quota for the area. Immediately after the mid-term exam, the students who failed were sent to field units. Those who passed went to border outposts for 20 days of on-the-job training under the supervision of experienced NCOs before going into the second half of the course.

After the final examinations, promotions and awards were made at a parade before the students left to rejoin their detachments. In Nikolay's



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class, 152 of the 200 students who began the course completed it successfully. Upon completion of this training, Nikolay was promoted to junior sergeant and assigned to a Border Troop outpost on the Soviet-Turkish border along the Aras River.

#### Border Strip

Each Border Troop outpost is responsible for a strip of the border from two to six miles in length. In depth, the outpost is responsible for both the border strip and the border zone.

The strip of "forbidden land" which parallels the Soviet international border varies in depth from several hundred meters to several kilometers, depending largely upon the terrain. It is plainly marked by such means as barbed wire, plowed strips, or warning signs. Within the strip, there are fences equipped with electric warning devices and other obstacles placed by the border troops.

In the border strip, the border guards have complete authority and civilians may enter the area only with special permission granted by the local office of the Committee of State Security and approved by the local border troop commander. Although there are no residences or normal commercial activities within the strip, local civilians are sometimes granted special permission to enter the area briefly to harvest hay or cut timber.

#### Border Zone

The border zone is much deeper than the strip and its boundaries coincide with those of some other administrative area, usually the rayon. In the zone the border troops do not have the complete control that they have in the strip although they have certain administrative duties, such as checking the documentation of travelers. Residents of the zone are not restricted much more than any other Soviet citizen.

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All inhabitants over 16 carry conventional passports which are stamped with code numbers authorizing residence and movement in the zone. Other Soviet citizens who have business in the border zone or who have relatives there can travel under the "simplified regulations" which, generally speaking, require little more documentation than a letter from a government organization or business within the zone and a conventional Soviet passport.

### The Outpost

A typical border outpost has 3 officers and 45 enlisted men, although this varies somewhat from outpost to outpost. As of late 1962, the average outpost in Nikolay's area was short one officer and two to four men. Weapons at the outpost include four light machine guns--one for each squad--and one heavy machine gun. Nikolay's outpost also had one old radio of an unknown type which was used to communicate between the outpost and the parent detachment during alerts. He heard that "walkie-talkie" type radios were to be issued some time during 1963 for patrol-to-outpost communications. During his service, however, communication from patrols was limited to flare pistols and portable telephones which were carried by patrols between outlets installed at various points along the border strip.

Although the Soviet Union has motorized most forward line units of the regular army, Border Troops still depend largely upon horse and wagon for transport in rugged border areas. Of the 16 outposts in Nikolay's area, only seven had a Gaz-69 truck assigned. Each outpost had about six horses which were used both for riding and for hauling supplies.

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Soviet border troops are better fed than the regular army. In addition, the rations are generally supplemented by the off-duty activities of the men, such as gathering fruits and vegetables, fishing, and hunting. The first sergeant-- who is responsible for the outpost's supply, mess, and administration--is expected to be an entrepreneur of the first order. He may barter the issued rations on the local free market, draws cash in lieu of authorized rations not required by the outpost, and manages the funds earned by the outpost's agricultural efforts. The

considerable latitude he enjoys in these roles puts the typical first sergeant in a position to profit personally from the mess management. So long as everyone is well fed, no one appears to complain about petty profiteering by the first sergeant.

Troops at the outpost average eight hours of guard duty in a 24-hour period, usually divided into two or three tours. The majority of the walking patrols are conducted at night. During the daylight hours, the sector is covered by observation posts, supplemented by occasional patrols.

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In addition to their regular guard tours, the off-duty men constitute a reserve in case of an alarm. The usual source of an alarm is a wild or a lost domesticated animal which wanders into a signal fence in the border strip. Innumerable alerts used to occur during inclement weather when earlier models of the signal devices were set off by heavy winds.

Morale among Border Troops seems to be quite low. Outposts are generally in desolate areas, and the troops are assigned to areas far from their homes. In addition, long duty hours and lack of leave contribute to the poor attitudes of the men on an outpost. To counteract this, heavy propaganda emphasis is placed on the privilege the men have in defending the borders of the USSR from any intrusion. It soon becomes evident to many of the border guards, however, that the border strip is designed more to keep Soviet citizens in the USSR than to keep foreigners out.

Social contacts between regular army units and the local population are generally encouraged in the USSR. However, because of the police functions of the border guards, contacts between them and the local civilians are discouraged. In addition, the isolation of the Border Troops--who are primarily of Russian nationality--from the local population is increased in the many areas of the USSR where a national minority, such as the Kurds, inhabits the border regions. On the Soviet-Turkish border, for example, mutual antagonism exists between the Kurds and the border troops as representatives of the "central government."

It was against this background of harsh conditions of service, low morale, and antagonism between the population and the Border Troops that Nikolay viewed the "achievements" of socialism. His reflections finally led him to slip away, cross the border to Turkey, and ask asylum.

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