

The General Ascends

A tale through Russian lenses

by LtCol Rob Gerbracht

Gen Vitaly Komarov was a more petite man than he appeared in the stories. Observing him climbing atop the turret of a Russian T-90 tank surrounded by junior officers, one could assume that this had to do with the outsized popularity these stories carried in the Russian Ground Forces. Tales of his exploits were legion and repeated so often among Russian rank and file that they had become modern maxims of a sort, passed as easily between first-week conscripts as they were among career army staffers on Znamenka Street. His legend began early. As a private in the Punjsher Valley north of Kabul, Komarov famously assumed command of his platoon's column after it had been oversprayed by an errant Soviet Nivalenol attack meant for the Afghans. As Komarov had often since told the tale, chemical warfare was nothing more than "the spice of life for an armored soldier." He never publicly repeated that he was one of only six survivors.¹

The following year, during his second tour, a freshly commissioned Komarov regaled his troops with that story while they poured a drum of mycotoxin down a village well in Helmand Province. The proud Soviets would eventually leave Afghanistan as their war wound down, but Komarov's legend was already well-cemented in Russian military lore. Prestige postings took him from Dresden until the wall fell, to Moscow and the storied 4th Guards Division, to the chaos that was Chechnya and his new government's political betrayal through "limited victory" and the Khasavyurt Accords. Komarov remembered with fondness the awesome power of Russian air and artillery as his tank company rolled into Grozny and his men's unquestioning loyalty while carrying out his lethal orders during the

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Battle of Yaryshmaryd. His reputation steadily grew, and he always returned home, time and again, with life and esteem intact. The subtle murmurs that he did so across a bridge of his soldiers' corpses never bothered him.

Though Komarov's characteristic bluster had seemingly evolved into a career-defining charm and understated professionalism as he matured, this was, by all accounts, an act. As the new millennium came and went, Komarov's carefully curated response to a "restructured" Russian military positioned him well in the renewed order of things. He learned not to question what worked well enough. A victim of his successes, the new characters of war that brushed against his consciousness in senior officer symposia never shook his faith in naked force, violence, and simple numbers. Promotions came swiftly for Komarov as Comrade Putin's star rose from prominence to permanence, leading him to supreme officer rank and placing him in an ideal position to protect his cherished armored corps from the ravages of the 2008 defense reforms. While the eventual personnel bloodletting would claim a majority of his peers, Komarov had become an immovable force. Long after some believed he should have retired, he continued to make himself useful. As he saw it, his wisdom was forever welcome at the service academies and unified staff colleges, if only tolerated by junior army commanders who could do little to

prevent his frequent bouts of battlefield tourism.

So, here again, was Gen Vitaly Komarov, over 40 years a veteran of Russian military adventures and an unwelcome but not wholly unexpected visitor to Moscow's "special military operation" as it moved inward from the Ukrainian frontier. A mere ten days into the conflict, it appeared the Ukrainian forces were ill-prepared for Russian military power and likely unsupported by the remainder of Europe and a distant United States. Komarov's arrival at the front was a portent of good things, he thought. Few senior leaders would be willing to risk their lives and legacies for a chance to preach from the soldier's pulpit one last time.

Less than 100 miles from Kharkiv, astride a tank turret surrounded by young armor officers cut from his same cloth, he knew in his heart that this was the sole character of war. In the young officers' eyes, he saw fearful children hungry for the pride and *esprit de corps* their great-grandfathers might have felt rolling T-34s through Kursk during the Great Patriotic War. Children like this needed numbers and steel to win, not new methods. They needed his wisdom.

"Armor, pain, and poison win wars, young comrades," Komarov began. Aside from a slight buzzing in the distance, the general's voice registered clearly in the cold March air. "Anyone who says differently is at best a liar, at worst a poltroon, and perhaps even a politician to boot!" The young officers

appeared to laugh nervously, and Komarov adjusted his seat on the T-90's turret. So hard to be folksy with old bones, it seemed.

"Reform is an illusion, little wolves. It has been tried before and proven empty time and again. One cannot reinvent a fist, and the style of boot matters little when it is on your enemy's throat." Komarov gestured toward the men around him, an unlit pipe outstretched in his hand. "Even our Comrade Putin knows this—he is a wise man but one who knows that politicians must be sated from time to time with stories of future war and victory by computers." Komarov continued. "If you recall, many have told us that the next war would be won by information, by small planes without pilots, and through slanderous comments on mobile phones." Komarov pointed toward an unswayed young trooper filming him with such a device, then began waving his arms toward the horizon, squinting at a small bird loitering high against the sunlit sky. "Where are they now?" he exclaimed. "I must admit, I do not fear the sting of your Twitter as I sit here with you."

"Reckless invention is a trick," Komarov continued. "Do you know what we call a nation without tanks, comrades?" The men stared back blankly. "Liechtenstein! Or perhaps the American Marines!"² Komarov laughed with abandon, the kind of unabashed emotion that had often set him apart from fellow officers but belied his lifelong fear of being ignored. The men closest to him laughed along, again uncomfortably, it seemed, and Komarov seemed to settle into a more serious, even academic tone.

"In the end the reformers would give us more space experts, cyber warriors, influence peddlers, missileers, and others with the skills of insects—many of which already are provided elsewhere in your fatherland's army. But it would only have these things because we gave up brave young soldiers like you, gave up brave young defenders prepared to close with and destroy the enemy."³ From their lack of movement and upright, quiet posture, the battalion's officers were either hanging on every word or had shut him off completely. "Would

we allow such a thing to come to pass, comrades? Would we allow an army without armor? Would we forget the lessons your grandfathers learned, or that I learned in victories won from Afghanistan to Chechnya?" His voice fell but still registered clearly. "Such an army would become something unrecognizable to those legions of Russian heroes who went before. No longer would it be the corps I've served and loved for so many years, but a mere shadow of what was once a feared fighting force!"⁴

A voice called out from below the general's perch. "You say all this, comrade general, but we have been waiting here two days for more rations and fuel," a voice exclaimed. "Would we not be better served by some reforms through weapons *and* will? Is it not better to teach a man to think and lead without fear of failure, rather than expect blind obedience to the way things have always been?"

The question appeared to take Komarov off-guard, or so his body language indicated. He attempted to stand up but staggered back to his perch, his movements registering more like exasperation than a rise to anger. The comment had come from one of the men at the foot of the tank. From a distance, the questioner appeared to be a young warrant officer, perhaps a maintenance technician or logistician attached to the T-90 company. He was likely the type of officer born from the 2008 reforms, one perhaps unswayed by the shadows cast by Komarov and his generation. Gen Komarov believed this type of man was unworthy of attention but not undeserving of impersonal correction.

"Certainly not!" Komarov said emphatically, not addressing the warrant officer directly. "Men who believe such things have embraced mistaken notions about the future of war.⁵ They fail to understand that it will be little different from the past." Komarov shook his head, his hand rising to a fading hairline and sliding off his cap. "I am sure some men think that learning to lead and learning to think are the same," Komarov continued, "but these men are mistaken." The warrant officer slid back into the gaggle of onlookers surrounding the T-90, realizing a fool's gambit

when he fell into one. Komarov heard a quiet whistle, he assumed from the men beneath him around the tank, and smiled with satisfaction, knowing that his message was being received. How the old general seemed to love an audience.

Komarov continued more vociferously as the whistling grew louder. "Do not forget the limitations of your adversary, young comrades. These Ukrainians are wayward children cowed by the thrall of Nazis and fattened with empty promises made by spineless Western diplomats—they are not a real nation." The men shifted and looked up at him, though some had begun to back away. His face reddened, and he began to thunder at them as he continued, realizing he was indeed in his element astride this iron stage. "Only shared struggle can build a legacy such as we have built as a Russian people!" The whistling grew louder still. "Our nation has fought many battles to preserve our status, but we have never lost from within—and we will not now! I will not see our history disregarded on the road to the future!"⁶ The whistling became a piercing shriek, albeit briefly, and it appeared Gen Komarov was the last to know his moment had truly passed him by.

In the end, it may have been the chastised warrant officer who dove away first, but it was already too late for the rest of the group. From high above, they appeared to have been consumed by the blast, their guest speaker ground zero at a moment he ironically had no ability to imagine. The feed dropped in a cascade of static as the weapon detonated, and Lt Shevchenko opened a window on her second monitor to display a mosaic of collected BDA footage.⁷ "That was the last audiovisual we received before the weapon struck, sir." Lt Larysa Shevchenko looked up from her terminal, a slight smile taking shape on the edges of her face. "The T-90 was a solid kill, major. Along with between ten and fifteen officers from the battalion tactical group."

Maj Andriy Kovalchuk whistled over his mug of tea, his breath visible in the aching cold of the data center. "You're sure that was Gen Komarov on that

tank?” Kovalchuk asked. “I mean, the fidelity on that Leleka’s camera is good, but ...”

“It was good enough, Sir,” Shevchenko continued. “Good enough to match everything else we had. One of the troops standing near that T-90 was live-streaming the general’s speech, if you could call it that.” The major started to speak but paused to listen instead as he saw the lieutenant’s excitement grow. “Another trooper shared the livestream on Telegram, and a local resident shared it through Aerorozvidka, who shared it with us.⁸ Targeting approval came down while you were on the phone with your wife.” Larysa cocked her head, curiously. “How is Zoryana, sir?”

Kovalchuk shook his head at the lieutenant’s rapid-fire attention span. It was harder by the day for him to keep up with the younger troops. “She’s ... fine.” He nodded. “She says the Germans are more welcoming than she’d imagined.” Kovalchuk sighed. “Please continue, lieutenant.”

“Oh,” Shevchenko blushed. “My apologies, Sir. There is much on our plates these days.” She continued. “I have at least 20 or 30 screen captures from right before the strike. The soldier’s phone must have been new.” Shevchenko swiveled in her seat, clicking open another window that flooded with thumbnails of Gen Vitaly Komarov’s final adventure. She clicked one open, a particularly unflattering frame of Komarov flailing his arms at the edge of the image. “In this last one, sir, it looks like you can even see the Switchblade deploying, but it may just be the general’s hat in the air. Or perhaps it’s just a shadow.” The lieutenant looked up. “I’m uncertain, sir. Should I forward these to the information warfare team?”

Maj Kovalchuk stroked his chin for a moment as thoughts collided. Of shadows and uncertainty. Where had he heard such things before? For some reason, a year-old conversation with his faculty advisor from the U.S. Marines’ Command and Staff College sprang to mind. The officer, a lieutenant colonel combat engineer with a flair for speaking in metaphors, was counseling him on courses of action: “Make the best decision you can, Andriy ... Think criti-

cally, decide confidently, and trust your people to execute. It isn’t rocket surgery.” While seemingly a very American sentiment, it reminded him somewhat of the dead Prussian who haunted every one of their briefings that year:

We must, therefore, be confident that the general measures we have adopted will produce the results we expect. Most important in this connection is the trust which we must have in our lieutenants. Consequently, it is important to choose men on whom we can rely and to put aside all other considerations. If we have made appropriate preparations, taking into account all possible misfortunes, so that we shall not be lost immediately if they occur, we must boldly advance into the shadows of uncertainty.⁹

He wondered if Carl von Clausewitz could ever have predicted what had come to pass in Kovalchuk’s homeland. A Russian invasion? Of course, such things came and went with the seasons of history. But small groups of meme-driven Ukrainian infantry with rockets and drones nibbling away at the corners of the great Russian Army? It all seemed so aspirational, its grand design so farfetched. But here they were, linked in a web of violence to a bizarre mix of troops, civilians, and irregulars across the battlespace, witnessing in near-realtime the grasping hands of a famed Russian general as he tilted backward toward the grave. It was enough to give him pause.

“Maj Kovalchuk ... sir?” Lt Shevchenko’s voice broke Kovalchuk from his trance. “Am I good to forward this imagery?”

“Oh,” Kovalchuk responded. “Of course, Larysa. My apologies. I was lost in thought for a moment.” Kovalchuk sipped his tea. In the grand scheme of things, between old wars and new, between the uncertainties of the future and the shadows of the past, Andriy knew where he wished to stand. It was not rocket surgery.

“Let’s make the good general famous one last time. It’s the very least we can do for him.”

Notes

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3. Lt Gen Paul K. Van Riper, “Jeopardizing National Security: What Is Happening to Our Marine Corps?” *Marine Corps Times*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/opinion/commentary/2022/03/21/jeopardizing-national-security-what-is-happening-to-our-marine-corps>.
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8. Julian Borger, “The Drone Operators Who Halted Russian Convoy Headed for Kyiv,” *The Guardian*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/28/the-drone-operators-who-halted-the-russian-armoured-vehicles-heading-for-kyiv>.
9. Carl von Clausewitz and Hans Wilhelm Gatzke, *Principles of War* (Harrisburg: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1942).

