

In 2004 I took a train from Beijing to Ulaanbatar. From there I crossed into Russia and from some point near Lake Baikal a troop of dangerous looking men boarded. They were short and stocky, except one large man who kept asking to check people's documents and then pretending it was all a joke when it was really far beyond amusing for the person pinned to the wall by their lapels.

We got talking and drinking and the group leader showed us bullet wounds gained, he said, from Chechnya. They claimed to be Spetsnaz. They didn't look particularly athletic but the leader had that curious mix of authority and madness in his eyes which suggested he knew his business.



(Photo from www.rvcj.com, showing sensible and useful training of Spetsnaz forces).

Then, some 2 hours into the 52 hours it would take us to get to Ekaterinburg, some Australian pensioners appeared on the train. They were part of a running/drinking club called the Hash House Harriers, having started their journey in Vladivostok.

And so ensued the most ferocious drinking session I have ever witnessed: Spetsnaz vs Australian pensioners free from their wives and with nothing else to do. I retired to sleep at night, but they didn't and in the morning I found them still drinking. Slowly the numbers were whittling down, the big man was swearing about the pissy nature of Scotch whisky, then he went to bed. That left a few pensioners and the Spetsnaz leader.

Finally, about two hours outside of Ekaterinburg the train ran out of alcohol and the Spetsnaz leader threw in the towel.

We waited until he was out of the dining car which had borne witness to the showdown, before letting out a quiet cheer.

So Spetsnaz vs elderly Australian Hash House Harriers? It's close, but the Aussies have it.



Photo of typical Aussie Hash House Harriers, taken from The Mercury news website.
Edit* Through the magic of Quora, one of the Hash House Harriers from the train has commented below to add some colour to the story. See Ron's comment from a key drinker's perspective.

But his comment has got me thinking. These Spetsnaz fellows were accommodating and friendly. They were, when it comes down to it, just regular chaps with a particular type of training. They had worrying wives trying to keep them in line. They liked a laugh like anyone, and in that sense not dissimilar at all to other tier 1 SF from various countries I have crossed paths with (mostly UK, but also US, South Korean, Hungarian, Danish and French). And so I suppose this is a bit of an appeal to common humanity, because we're all the same underneath it all. In any future conflict, which I hope will never occur, remember that even the most elite soldiers have wives and families waiting for them to come home. And I suppose that should also include the Hash House Harriers.

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Commander Head