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DEFENDING RUSSIA: BELIEF AND COMING OF AGE IN THE SOVIET ARMY

Father Afanasy Ryumin, an Orthodox hieromonk in one of Russia's large provincial monasteries, reflects on his life as a young military recruit in the Far East and how he came to faith in the final years of the Soviet Army.

RTE: Fr. Afanasy, what are your recollections of growing up in the last decades of the Soviet regime?

FR. AFANASY: I was born into a typical Soviet working-class family in the Moscow Region. Although baptized, we were not practicing Orthodox, but I spent summers with my grandmother who was a believer. When her local church was closed during the Soviet period, the villagers took the icons to their houses and worshipped at home. I remember coming once on *Troitsa*, the feast of Pentecost, and finding the house full of elderly village women praying together. I made the sign of the Cross, but I was still very far from real faith. On Granny's 70th birthday, she wanted to have her spiritual father come and celebrate with her and her neighbors, so I and my teenage friends went to pick him up. We brought him to the house, but we watched it all with a smile—we were young Soviets.

Even before going into the army I loved reading history, Russian history in particular, and I was interested in politics. This was the time of perestroika under Gorbachev, and many books and articles were coming to light that previously had been suppressed. In high school a neighbor brought me the Bible, and although I wasn't a churchgoer, I read the Pentateuch—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—and a bit of the Gospel. My mother was a bookbinder and once a neighbor brought her some volumes to work on, including a pre-revolutionary text, *Talks on the Gospels*, which I also read. After this, I knew that I believed in God, although I wasn't sure about everything else.

RTE: Growing up as a Soviet teenager interested in the world, were you aware of a certain lack of political freedom?

FR. AFANASY: When I was about 13 and still a Young Pioneer, Lenin's portrait hung everywhere like icons—at school, at camp, in shops. Mother once came home with one that she had been presented with at work. She put it on a shelf, but my soul felt heavy looking at it, and after a few days I put it inside the bookcase.

When I was 16 or 17, I began listening to foreign radio stations like "Voice of America" and "Radio Freedom," because I wanted to compare what they were saying with what we were being told. This sharpened my interest in history and around this time I met a small branch of an historical/patriotic group called *Pamyat*, [Memory], that focused on pre-revolutionary history

and culture. Their historical emphasis didn't last, however. As the organization became nationalistic it splintered into factions, and I understood that these people were a little foreign to my soul; they reminded me of the *Oprichniki*, the strange militia of the time of Tsar Ivan the Terrible, which went about accusing people of treason against the state. The tsar himself finally suppressed them. At this same time I also went to the first post-Soviet assembly of Russian nobility—Russians from noble families who had survived the Soviet period. The pre-revolutionary atmosphere was intriguing, but it was nostalgic, and although I was interested in meeting these people, I wasn't as interested in their political views.

RTE: How did you view monarchy at the time?

FR. AFANASY: Like many people, I was discovering that not everything before the Russian Revolution was bad, and that there were positive aspects to monarchy.

RTE: In the early 1990s, I met a group of such elderly people in Moscow at a private tea, some of whom were born before the revolution, and all from upper-class pre-revolutionary families. They were dignified, noble, very humane—a different level of humanity. Their Orthodoxy wasn't a badge, it was woven into their lives and their faith was light and natural, without any pious rigidity. Their conversation was spiced with wonderful humor and a refined and lovely way of being that awakened me to how much we've lost over the past century. Although you were born later, there must have been bright spots in your youth as well.

FR. AFANASY: Yes, the Soviet regime had some positive sides to it, such as encouraging patriotism, but it didn't quite go together with Russian history and the Russian soul.

RTE: Was this patriotism encouraged towards Russia or the Soviet regime?

FR. AFANASY: The main thrust was towards the Soviet Union and its ideals; they used Russian patriotism for their own purposes, but when I began studying the Orthodox faith I felt something very close to my soul, and I found the love I had for my country deepening beyond any superficial ideology.

RTE: Wonderful. Can you tell us now about your military service? How did you begin?

FR. AFANASY: Throughout the Soviet period and until recently, Russian men served for two years after high school; we were told that army service was the honorable duty of every citizen. Although this was during *perestroika* and the army was already becoming unpopular, because of my feelings for Russia I was not sorry to go. I knew that I needed this experience and that this was something I had to pass through.

Before I reported for service, a neighbor told my mother that I needed to have Holy Communion, and Mother woke me early in the morning for the long bus ride to the nearest open church. I didn't want to go, but she said, "You're leaving for two years, so you need this Communion." When I came to the church and saw people waiting for confession, I didn't know what it meant. I received Communion but formally.

Once I reported for duty, I was sent to an induction center near Moscow. When we arrived a colonel came to our group and said, "I need volunteers to go to Kamchatka. No one will force you to go, you can refuse, but I need soldiers." I understood that because Kamchatka was in the Far East we would go by plane. I had never flown and very much wanted to, so I volunteered. There were eight of us from the Moscow region, and we flew for nine hours to the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky.

RTE: That's about how long it takes to fly from Moscow to New York.

FR. AFANASY: Yes, and we had a good solid plane, the Ilyushin IL-62. This was the largest jet in the world when it first flew in 1963, with seats for 200 passengers—the same jet that Gorbachev used to meet Reagan in Reykjavík, Iceland in 1986. Not having to refuel during such a long flight was remarkable in those years. As we landed in Kamchatka we could see the unique mountains that the Kamchatkans call *sopka*, many of which are active volcanoes, covered by snow even in late May. From Petropavlovsk we flew for another hour to an army base at Ust-Kamchatsk, a tiny peninsula on the eastern coast. This was June, but there was still snow and we had to wear our winter uniforms. The Far East military uniform is unique because of Siberia's extreme cold. The soles of the boots are about five centimeters thick, and the



fur military cap has flaps that tie under your chin to keep your head from freezing. In western Russia, soldiers wear them tied to the top of the cap, but in the Far East you wear them down with a scarf to keep the cold from your neck and chest.

RTE: How did you bear such bitter cold?

FR. AFANASY: It isn't easy, because winters in Kamchatka easily reach -30° C. If you wore the uniform coat made for the cold European Russian winter longer than the required morning and evening roll-call, you would freeze. For work and daily wear there was a special Kamchatka coat that was more padded than our winter uniform coat, with a tight neck and sleeves so that the wind wouldn't penetrate. We were also issued special winter scarves with our uniform and a face protector to put over your nose when the air was too cold to breathe.



There was a two-meter [six-and-a-half foot] fence around the camp and in the winter the built up ice and snow put the road level with the top of the fence. You could see cars passing on top of the packed snow. The snow-lined paths between the buildings were over our heads, and instead of calisthenics we shoveled snow to keep the paths open. Because this was the end of the Soviet period and the military vehicles were outdated, they simply broke down under such conditions.

RTE: In the 1990s, Muscovites heard stories about the difficulties of the Russian army for new recruits. Most armies have some degree of hazing, and we've had our own share of scandals in the U.S. army. What was your experience?

FR. AFANASY: My experience wasn't all positive, but the Russian army has changed and is much better now. I don't regret anything, however, because for me the army was a line that had to be drawn between childhood and adulthood. It was the setting in which my mind changed and where the Lord showed me my future life. I was very fortunate because in volunteering for Kamchatka I had unknowingly joined a very good regiment. Our regimen-



tal administration was not in the Far East, but in Krasnogorsk, close to Moscow, and we had good commanders both there and in Kamchatka. Headquarters was far away because our regiment was secret and our regimental banner was kept in Moscow, not in Kamchatka. We

were responsible for air defense, which meant monitoring the eastern borders with air surveillance and satellites—mostly watching the movements of the American army.

RTE: Just as they were watching you from Alaska.

FR. AFANASY: Yes, probably. There was a liaison regiment near us under the Far East command, but the conditions there were much worse; relations between soldiers were absolutely inhuman. I remember their soldiers passing us new recruits one day and shouting, "Hang yourselves". In our regiment, the hazing was tolerable because our officers were much better—in fact, they were very good at every level, although that didn't extend to relations among the soldiers. When my father served in the army in the 1970s there wasn't any hazing. It started once ex-convicts began to be required to serve in the military after their release from prison. Earlier, ex-convicts hadn't been allowed to serve, but because we had an immense territory to defend, the policy changed. These ex-convicts were often put into building battalions, and many of these battalions were from the Caucuses and Soviet Asia. Slavs usually served on border frontiers or in paratrooper units. The most difficult units were those where Russian Slavs served with Muslims from the Caucasus. Russians were the main ethnic group in the Soviet army, but Russians are independent and don't naturally unite into parties, while other Soviet ethnicities are based on clans and kinship and easily unite into factions that leave the Russians at a disadvantage.

In our mostly Slavic regiment, half the recruits were from the Ukraine, half from Russia, and only a few from the Caucasus. When we finished our

six-month basic training we took our military oath and then separated into working divisions according to our specialties. The recruits of my year, the spring of 1989, were the last to take an oath to the Soviet Union; the recruits after us took their oath to the Russian Federation. We also retained the two-letter Soviet Army abbreviation on our epaulets.

Once we arrived at our new units in the spring of 1991, the harassment began. When the officers left for the evening, older soldiers would gather the newcomers together and give them tasks, such as doing their personal laundry by hand, while the seniors watched TV. They also made us stand watch for officers returning to the barracks because according to regulations, we were only allowed to watch daily news at 9:00 pm and other programs on Sunday. This treatment was mild compared with other units. We were able to keep money and food sent by relatives and we even received our small monthly stipend. There were some unpleasant “rituals” when you graduated to the next stage, but most of the recruits just endured it, adopting the principle, “Now we have to bear this, but in six months we’ll be the seniors and can oppress the new recruits.”

In our unit such conditions were tolerable only because our officers were very good: they didn’t look down on the lower ranks and you could even compare them to officers from the tsar’s army before the Revolution. For instance, when we first came to the regiment, we had to wash in the banya, after which we were given a uniform. Instead of socks, we had old-fashioned leggings where you wrap a long narrow piece of cloth around your foot from your toes up to your knees. Russian soldiers still use leggings because socks get holes in them within a few days and you can’t get socks long enough to fit under the tall Russian army boots. When the leggings were first issued I didn’t have any idea of how to put them on, but seeing this, the sergeant, named Anatoly, came over, propped my foot up on a chair, and wrapped the cloth from my foot up to my knee to show me how to do it. His brotherly kindness was truly amazing. When he left he also passed the truck he drove on to me.

RTE: You were in a transport division?

FR. AFANASY: Yes, I was a driver. We drove the base cars, trucks, tractors, caterpillar earth movers, and heavy snow removal equipment. Our whole summer was taken up with getting the equipment ready for winter, but after the first weeks of hard snowfall, temperatures were so extreme that the oldest machines simply broke down. Once the snow fell so hard and fast that

that we couldn’t clear it in time. It broke through the reinforced roof of the hanger and destroyed some of our best equipment.

RTE: It must have been terribly difficult. What did you do in your free time?

FR. AFANASY: The youngest soldiers didn’t have free time because we had the “extra” duties or chores, but there was a community room called Lenin’s Room, with magazines and newspapers. The nearest civilian settlement was so far away that there was nowhere to go. During my first summer, the new recruits went once to the ocean. It was August, but the wind was so cold I had to wear my winter uniform coat. I have a photo where the coat is blowing in the wind.

The Kamchatka River flows through a huge plain that supports a volcanic belt of 160 volcanoes, 29 of them still active, called *sopka*. From our barracks we could see Klyuchevskaya Sopka, which at 4,750 meters [15,584 feet], is the largest active volcano in the northern hemisphere. Clouds of ash floating out of the volcano covered the camp several times, and people told me that closer to the base you could see molten lava. Kamchatka also has frequent earthquakes.

RTE: How did things unfold for you personally?

FR. AFANASY: Military regulations weren’t necessarily followed in the barracks when the officers were gone. I didn’t like this, and when I said that I wanted to live according to the regulations, I became an outcast. I was told, “You want to live by regulations—we’ll make sure you do!” One sergeant in particular wouldn’t leave me alone. If I washed the floor, he’d sweep his handkerchief across the floor and tell me to wash it again, or he’d pour dirty water on the clean floor and make me mop it again so that I’d be late for my other duties.

When he saw that I wouldn’t cave in and live like everyone else, this sergeant sent a group of older soldiers to threaten me. We had several confrontations, and at one point they ordered me to slip out of the camp to buy bootleg vodka. I said, “I won’t go,” because I knew that I’d be punished for leaving the camp without permission. They promised to make my life miserable, and when their demands became intolerable, I went to the commander. They called me a traitor and the hazing became much worse until the commander, a good and intelligent man, saw this and cut it short, telling the sergeant, “If you don’t stop this bullying, you’ll be demoted and sent to serve in a penal unit.”

Then he gathered the older soldiers and asked if I had done the right thing in coming to him. They all replied, “No, he was wrong!” but the commander asked, “Is it right to force the young soldiers to wash your clothes and break the regulations at your whim? Your lawlessness won’t become a law here. As long as I’m in command, I won’t have this.” So, for a while things were better, but gradually conditions deteriorated again. The sergeant who bullied me was demoted a few months later for other infractions. Later, though, we met again and were reconciled. There is a 1990 film called *Delay—Raz!* [Do it—again!] with Vladimir Mashkov, a well-known Russian actor, that reproduced this situation—a real picture of the army at this time.

By the unwritten rules, however, it was completely unacceptable to complain to the commander and I understood that I faced a very hard two years. After six months in this unit, I was given the choice to go to sergeant’s school, but the officers warned me that because I was so young, it would be impossible for me to command older soldiers. “You won’t be able to deal with them.” To stay in the regiment was impossible, so I went to school, anyway. I learned the regulations by heart and received a commendation as the best student.

RTE: How was it being a sergeant?

FR. AFANASY: I was sent back to my regiment and now I was their senior and could insist that they fulfill the military regulations, but the older soldiers did small nasty things like breaking my bed. When new recruits came, the older ones tried to turn them against me. When one of the younger soldiers felt that he had enough support, he would physically attack me, so I had to fight. I fought several times; fortunately I was good with my fists. Self-defense became a norm of life, and I was threatened that my truck would be sabotaged so that I would have an accident far from camp. I could feel the circle of enmity closing in, and as my attackers began showing up more frequently with black eyes, the officer who was in charge of investigating such incidents recommended that I be transferred.

I was sent to the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, to Elizovo-5, a transit base for troops from Moscow, where, in 1992, I served my second year. There were three soldiers and one commander, and in the city I was able to go out to buy books and newspapers. When I had six months of service left, I began thinking of the future—not necessarily my own future, but the future of the country. I wanted to join the police or the special forces so that I could defend people and fight the kind of lawlessness that I had experienced in the barracks.

Around this time I bought a copy of the *Russian Herald* and found a very good article about St. Sergius of Radonezh. At the end of the article there was a verse that struck me deeply: “In Russia, once again, Christ is crucified and Judas is victorious.” When I read this, tears ran down my cheeks onto the newsprint icon of St. Sergius. I’d begun to imagine how I would come back home to my family and friends, to begin my new life, to have fun... but now a thought began to grow within me that perhaps I wouldn’t come home, that I might die, and that I wouldn’t live to do any of this: “Perhaps your parents will have to come here to bury you. Maybe you are destined to die here.” This thought came again and again until I was sure that death was very near.

Finally, I decided to go to church to talk to a priest, and my commander gave me leave, although I didn’t tell him where I was going. I put on civilian clothes because I didn’t want to approach the priest wearing a military uniform, nor did I want the military patrols to stop me, as there were



only a limited number of places we could go outside the base. There weren’t any open churches in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, only a house-church, where people were packed so tightly during services that you couldn’t raise your arm to make the sign of the Cross. At my first service, I was surprised that there were so many people there and asked, “Is it a feast?” A parishioner replied, “It’s the feast-day of St. Sergius of Radonezh—the 600th anniversary of his repose,” and he gave me a small paper icon.”

I made my way to the priest, Fr. Yaroslav, who was serving alone. He listened to me and said, “Don’t fear anything, everything will be fine. Nothing will happen.” He then asked, “You’ve never done occult things, like calling on the dead?” I said, “No”, and he said, “Good, you must come next time for confession and Communion.” I went back later, confessed as well as I could at that time, and received Holy Communion.

After the service, Fr. Yaroslav called me into the altar and began filling my pockets with chocolate, candies, and money. I was surprised and asked, “Why do I need this?” He replied, “Never mind. You’ll need it.” On my way back to the unit, I passed by an open-air market and saw a Bible for sale with old-fashioned engravings. I thought, “With this money I will buy the Bible and give it as a gift to this kind priest.” When I returned to give him the Bible, he said, “I have one already, this is yours.” When he understood that I didn’t have long to serve, he said, “Go back home and get married. We will help you study at the seminary, then come back and we will ordain you.” I said, “I’m homesick, and I miss my mother. I don’t want to come back here.” Fr. Yaroslav replied, “I haven’t seen my mother for all of the twelve years I’ve been in Kamchatka,” and he is still there now after twenty-five years.

It was a very long way, though, to the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky church, and when I asked if there was anything nearer to my post, people told me that there were services in the town of Yelizovo, in a Young Pioneer House that had been built over the site of a former church. The two priests were hieromonks from St. Sergius-Holy Trinity Lavra outside of Moscow. They had been sent to the Far East to help revive Orthodoxy, just as the original monks from Valaam Monastery were sent to Alaska.

The harassing feeling that death was near left only gradually. In this new church there was an icon of the Saviour, before which I frequently prayed to stay alive, and slowly I began to believe that everything would be fine. The monastic service amazed me because it was so different from the city house-church where the priest had to serve alone, not only liturgy but thousands of people needing baptism and the sacraments, and all the while overseeing the construction of a new church. Here everything was quiet and unhurried. The monks served the complete cycle of services and I stayed for everything—matins, liturgy, the *moleben*, a *pannikhida*. Although I was young, my feet hurt after all of the hours of standing. I came to know the monks, and one day Fr. Diomid, the igumen, invited me to the All-night Vigil for the Nativity.

I prepared carefully for Christmas, and even made new epaulettes for my uniform for the service. There were many people in church that night, but only Fr. Diomid served the Nativity vigil. There was a very small, modest choir, and a very elderly *altarnik* to help the priest. As I stood there in my uniform, I saw a very tall man nearby looking at me. Finally, he came over and whispered, “Do you know where I am from? I’m from the military procurator’s office.” Soldiers were not supposed to be anywhere but in their bar-

racks overnight, but as this was my second year, the rules were not so strict and my commander had let me go. I was bold enough to say, “I don’t care where you are from,” but he answered, “I didn’t mean that. I am procurator at the military airport and I can help you get tickets home.”

During that packed service, I stood near the candle stand where the candles were made of cheap paraffin, not natural wax, and after inhaling paraffin fumes, I became sick and dizzy. I went outside. It was deep winter, but I sat down on a frozen bench and some old women gave me a drink of water. Once I felt better, I knew I could receive Holy Communion, so I got into line and told Fr. Diomid, “I’m sorry, I didn’t feel well and had some water.” He gave me Holy Communion anyway, saying kindly, “Never mind, but don’t do it again.”

After the service, Fr. Diomid gave me many gifts including candy, and one of the parishioners gave me a lift part way home. Although I had to walk the rest of the way in the bitter cold with this huge armful of gifts, it was a starry, beautiful night, and I was very happy. When I got back to the post, I put everything on the table and said to the others, “Alright, guys, this is your Christmas present.” They were very happy, because they rarely had sweets.

One day, I asked the monks how they lived in the monastery. “Probably you were terribly bored and had very strict rules?” They answered that they weren’t bored because they had obediences all day and only late in the evening did they have a few hours of rest. A few weeks later, Fr. Diomid gave me the *Solovetsky Paterik*, which told of the fathers of Solovki Monastery. “This is for you to remember us. Maybe you will become a priest.” I hadn’t thought of becoming a priest, but I took the book and when I read it I understood why people go to a monastery. These monks had gone to uninhabited places of almost unbearable conditions to make their service to God. Solovki Island is even harder than Kamchatka because it is isolated in the White Sea, and when Sts. Zosima, Herman and Sabbatius founded the monastery, the island was almost uninhabited. This book made such an impression on me that it is still one of my favorites, and as I read along, I realized that I too wanted to become a monk.

Around this time, the new church at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky was consecrated, and I went there for my first Pascha on the 18th of April, 1993. There were so many people that they couldn’t all fit into the new church, and although it was April it was still bitterly cold. I remember traveling by two buses to get there, with a terrible wait on the road for the second one.

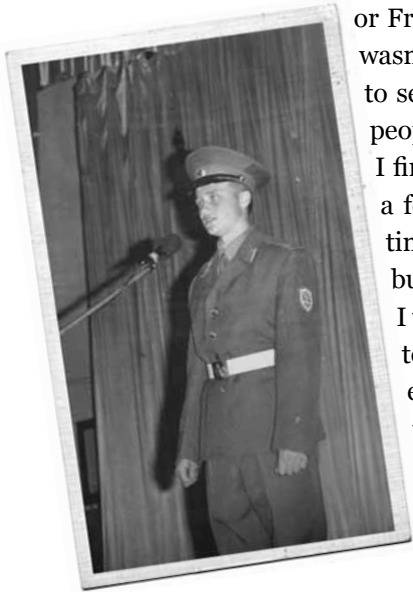
When I returned from army duty and the plane landed in Moscow, I was

so happy to be home that I crossed myself. I didn't manage to catch the last train home, so I spent the night at the railway station with a group of young soldiers. My mother didn't know I was coming, and when I showed up at the door she was very happy. As soon as I could, I went to the church where I'd received Communion before joining the army and thanked God that I had returned safely. Pentecost was a few days after my homecoming, and now I began a regular church life. I didn't work for a few months, I just rested, but I couldn't stop thinking of the monastery. I didn't want to upset my parents, so I lived at home for about a year, working at a day job unloading trucks.

I became so engrossed in my new life, that in October of 1993, when the Russian White House was fired upon by tanks in a stand-off between President Yeltsin and the Duma, I was sitting at work on my break reading Fr. John of Kronstadt's *My Life in Christ*. It seemed so much more real than what was going on in the city, and I found that I had lost interest in politics. Of course, God's providence was at work here.

On my first vacation in 1994, I went to Optina Pustyn and afterwards to St. Sergius-Holy Trinity Lavra to talk to one of the spiritual elders, Fr. Kyril or Fr. Naum. When I arrived I was told that Fr. Kyril wasn't seeing anyone, so I went to where one waited to see Fr. Naum. There was a huge crowd and many people had been waiting for hours and even days, and I finally had to leave without seeing him. I returned a few days later, but without much hope. The first time I'd tried to make my way through the crowd, but now I just stood in a corner, not doing anything. I thought, "I'll never see him, I'll just go buy a ticket to visit my grandmother." In a little while, however, he came out of his cell and walked around the edge of the crowd to see who was there. When he came to the end of the line he looked at me and asked, "Why have you come?" I said, "I need to ask you a question." He took me by the hand and we walked over to a little chair in front of his

cell. Everyone was staring at us. I asked if I should go to the monastery and Fr. Naum responded by asking if I would like to enter the seminary and if my parents would be against it. I said I didn't know, but probably not. Father Naum was silent for a little while, and then said that I should go to



the Athonite *podvoriye*. I didn't know that a *podvoriye* is a city outpost of a larger monastery, but I had heard of Mount Athos in Greece and I was frightened that he was sending me so far from home. I said, "No, I belong here, I won't go there." Thinking aloud, he replied, "No," and named another Russian monastery.

I went to the monastery almost immediately. It had just been given back after the Soviet period and everything had to be rebuilt. The churches, of course, were completely ruined. One of the hieromonks listened to my story and repeated the Lord's words, "Come to me all those who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." At the end of the conversation he looked at me and said, "The monastery is a cross, it's a hardship, but I have had both a family and monastic life, and I can say that having a family is a double cross." I told him that I didn't have any aims or interests except the monastery and he replied, "Alright, wrap up your affairs and come back."

Before I left for the monastery a few weeks later, I asked my father to bless me. I thought he would use an icon of the Mother of God, but instead he picked up the St. Nicholas icon. When I arrived at the monastery it was time for services so I went to church and stood beside a large cross that cast its shadow on both myself and the nearby wall. I found myself crying, sorry for myself and sorry for my parents. When a priest came out of the altar to hear confessions, I told him that I had very little faith, but he was very comforting and reminded me that the Gospel says that even a tiny mustard seed can grow into a large bush. The priest's name was Nicholas, and I remembered that this was the icon that my father had blessed me with that morning.

Later, the monk in charge accepted me officially and gave me a monastery worker's uniform which reminded me of army clothes—high-top army boots and belts, leggings instead of socks, grey coats. I was also given an old army-type belt with a Soviet star on it that I had to sand off.

RTE: I imagine that it was easier for you to adjust to the monastic schedule of work and prayer than people who hadn't done military service.

FR. AFANASY: Yes, and I was very happy to be in the monastery. This might sound romantic but I was very glad to see other people who longed to live a monastic life. Our morning services were in the tiny lower church and seeing my brothers there so early in a kind of uniform felt very familiar. At that time only a few monks wore monastic clothing, the rest of us were workers who hoped to become novices. The army was a duty that I had to do for my

country, but the monastery was the place where I really wanted to be, and the long services with the obediences in the kitchen and dining room seemed special. Although there were difficult things in the army, it was an honorable duty that you had to perform. There was no way out. In the monastery, however I was here by my own choice—neither forced, pressured nor influenced. We used to say that in the army everything is done out of fear, but in the monastery everything is done out of love of God, from each person's conscience and his heart.

In the army, most people know they are there for only two years, but coming to the monastery is forever, and this can be intimidating. In the evening, from the church windows, we could see people turning on lights in their flats, and this reminded me of my parents and my relatives. It made me sad because I understood that I could never really go back home again. Once you are here you must have the resolve to not turn back. In the early days, I sometimes wondered if I'd made the right choice, so I went again to see Fr. Naum, who told me, "Just carry on, live your life, and you will see. You will understand whether your choice is correct or not."

I had a friend who, before the monastery, had gone to the university, had a good job and a fiancée. I remember that he was in the kitchen one day washing huge pots and wondering aloud why he had done this. Of course, everyone has these thoughts from time to time, this is normal, but you also have your inner voice that keeps telling you that your choice is correct, that you've done right.

RTE: And not only correct about coming to the monastery. Those of us who are married sometimes wonder, "Why did I marry this person?" We need to remind ourselves of the reasons for our choices.

FR. AFANASY: Of course. Also, monastery life differs quite a lot from army life. There are rules for both, but the principles are different. In the monastery, people try to follow the Christian rule, and treat each other with love. Everyone who comes to the monastery has their own unique character, their previous life and habits, and somehow they have to find a way to live the Christian life together. When I look back, it seems as if each new experience was a necessary link in a single chain. If I hadn't experienced the things I did, I probably wouldn't be in the monastery now. Those links go back to my youth, when I had a kind of foreshadowing of the monastery through a soccer team that was like a brotherhood. We had our sports camp and a coach

who, like an abbot, not only advised us on our game, but gave good counsel about our lives. It kept us inspired, committed, and off the street.

If I could have avoided army duty and remained a civilian, I might not have come to the Church. When you are alone in the army God feels closer than when you are at home among your friends and relatives. It was God's providence that I had those experiences in the army, because if I hadn't come to Christ in the army, I might easily have gone in a different direction.

RTE: Which warrior saints or historical military figures have most influenced you?

FR. AFANASY: In our own time, it is our own new martyr, the soldier Evgeny Rodionov, who was killed in 1996 on his 19th birthday by Chechen extremists. Although he was baptized as a child, his Soviet family were not churchgoers, and when he decided to wear a cross at about twelve, his communist mother asked that he not wear it in public, but he refused to take it off.

In 1995, he registered for his compulsory military service. At first he was in Kaliningrad, and afterwards when they asked for volunteers to guard the southern borders, he volunteered. On the night of the 13th of January, 1996, Evgeny and three other young soldiers were posted, unarmed, at a checkpoint close to their mountain base near the border between Chechnya and Ingushetia.

RTE: Why were they unarmed?

FR. AFANASY: The authorities believed that being so close to the camp, the guard wasn't in danger, and they didn't want to provoke the local people with a show of arms. During the watch they stopped an ambulance, in which Ruslan Khaikhoroev, a brigade general of the "Chechen Republic of Ichkeria" and a dozen insurgents were transporting weapons. During their attempt to examine the ambulance the young soldiers were overpowered and taken prisoner. At first the authorities thought they had deserted, but when they found bloodstains and signs of struggle at the checkpoint, they tightened security and issued weapons to the soldiers. For the captives, though, it was too late.

These rebel field commanders were allied with the Ingushetia army, but they were more like brigands than proper soldiers. The young Russian soldiers were held in the basement of an abandoned house near the Chechen village of Bamut for one hundred days where they were starved and beaten,

and Evgeny was hung up by his wrists. His captors were Muslim extremists who told them that they would spare their lives if they converted to Islam and became separatists. They wanted them to take off their crosses and when they refused, the other three were shot and Evgeny was beheaded with a rusty saw on May 23, 1996, his 19th birthday and the Orthodox Feast of the Ascension. The day after his death, Russian troops took Bamut, but it was too late for the captives. Khaikhoroev later admitted the murder in the presence of a foreign representative of the UNOSG [United Nations Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] saying, “He had a choice to survive. He could have changed his faith, but he refused to take off his cross. He tried to escape...”.

When Evgeny’s mother, Lyubov Vasilievna, received news of his capture she went to Chechnya to find him. She went first to a Russian church in Ingushetia where she received Holy Communion for the first time, and then on to Chechnya where she searched for clues to her son’s disappearance. She talked to anyone who she thought might be able to help her, and traveled through small villages, where she was often treated aggressively by the natives. She crossed minefields, was caught in aerial bombing, and was threatened by bandits. Along the way she met other Russian mothers also searching for sons who had been reported missing, deserted, or captured. Some were looking for the bodies of sons whom they were told had been beheaded, a practice of indigenous Chechens who believed that a decapitated corpse would not bother them after death. One of these mothers was shot while Lyubov Vasilievna was in Chechnya.

By 1995, impossible ransoms were being asked for living captives—from 50 to 250 million rubles [\$315,000—\$8 million] depending on the progress of the war and the captive’s rank. Evgeny’s ransom was about 50 million rubles. As the war went on, the demands became more extreme. Because no one could pay these ransoms, the captives were almost always killed. The Chechens themselves filmed these horrible executions, and we know that some Russian soldiers did become Muslim out of fear. The Chechens’ motive was to break the morale of the Russian army.

Evgeny’s mother finally found the rebel commander Khaikhoroev, who told her that he had personally decapitated her son with a saw because he had tried to escape and refused to convert to Islam. He said to her, “You had a very bold son.” The commander also told her that for 100,000 rubles, [about \$4000], she could claim the body. She sold her apartment, paid the money, and went back to Chechnya, where the Chechens led her to a for-

ested area where they allowed her to exhume the grave. She dug away at the earth with her bare hands until she found her son’s body, recognizing it by his boots and his cross that were found in the grave. Even after death, they hadn’t dared to take the cross. She took his remains back to be buried in the village of Satino-Russkoye near Podolsk in the Moscow region. Evgeny’s father died five days after the funeral.

Many consider Evgeny a new martyr, but objections have been raised because the Church does not canonize soldiers who have died fighting in war, and there are no witnesses that he kept his faith to the end, although his mother answers this objection saying, “except for the word of the Chechen commander who killed him.” Also, his cross was found on him. He hadn’t taken it off.

Openly calling him a martyr would make the situation in Chechnya even more difficult, because official recognition would change the status of the war from simply a civil, political war to a kind of “holy war” that could lead to more widespread conflict. Nevertheless, for many of us, Evgeny is a new-martyr. There are many icon-type portraits of him, both with and without halos, and he is greatly venerated in the army. His mother is now the head of a group of mothers of soldiers who work to improve conditions in the army and do charity work with army wives, widows, and orphans. Recently I heard that she was tonsured a nun.



There are also stories of otherworldly help in Chechnya. Once, for instance, soldiers on a dangerous mission in enemy territory each secreted a so-called “last bullet” in their uniform to use on themselves if they were about to be taken captive. Suddenly a very beautiful woman appeared, wearing unusual clothes with stars on them. She made the sign of the Cross over the soldiers and disappeared, then appeared crossing them again from another direction, and finally a third time. They all saw her, and the soldier who

reported it felt that this was the Mother of God. After she made the cross over them he had a deep feeling that nothing bad could happen, and he took the bullet and ground it into the soil beneath his heel. They all returned safely.

Another Orthodox soldier who was being fired on said that he saw a bullet coming directly towards him in a strange sort of slow-motion. When the bullet finally hit his cheek, it didn't penetrate, but simply fell to the ground.

As to the other warrior saints such as St. George, St. Demetrios, St. Mercurios, and so on, like Evgeny they are venerated first of all as martyrs because they shed their blood for Christ. The word for martyr in Greek is *mártys*, which means "witness", and their being a soldier is secondary to their witness for Christ, although some have appeared in later centuries as soldiers, such as St. Demetrios, who appeared on the city walls during sieges of Thessalonica, where he was martyred. The Orthodox Church has always supported those who stood up to defend their neighbor with love. When military men came to John the Baptist to ask how they should act, he didn't tell them to leave what they were doing, but said, "Do no harm and be content with your wages."

RTE: Yes. Which of the warrior saints do you feel closest to?

FR. AFANASY: St. Alexander Nevsky, the 13th-century Christian warrior, diplomat, Prince of Novgorod and Great Prince of Vladimir. He not only faced the attacks of the Mongol Golden Horde from the south, but also invasions from the north—both Swedes and crusading Germanic Livonians. Between the time he was sixteen to twenty years-old he led his armies to victory over both the Swedish and the Livonians. The pope later offered him military help against the Mongols if he would convert to Roman Catholicism, but he refused and personally negotiated a payment of tribute to the Horde rather than embarking on a war that would have devastated his kingdom. Because the Mongols were pagans, they demanded that vassals kneel to the natural objects they considered sacred, such as holy bushes or fires, but Alexander refused, saying, "I can bow to you because you are the Khan, but I cannot honor inanimate objects." At his funeral, the serving hierarch said, "The Russian sun has set. We will never again have such a prince as Alexander."

A recent popular television documentary series culminated in the selection of one historical individual who best characterizes Russian culture. Patriarch Kirill proposed Alexander Nevsky, and out of 500 historical personages he was chosen by a huge majority of Russians.

RTE: Veneration for him runs deep in Russia. How would you answer people who feel that Christianity is a peaceful faith?

FR. AFANASY: Christ said that there is no greater love than someone who gives his life for his friends, and a Christian army should be more about this than anything else.

RTE: How then should Christian soldiers respond when rulers of Christian nations mobilize their armies for aggressive invasions; for example, Germany in World War II, where soldiers were expected to follow appalling orders. On some level, these soldiers must have known that these orders were neither Christian nor in self-defense.

FR. AFANASY: There is always sin in human endeavor, we live in a fallen world. I don't know about the West, but in pre-revolutionary Russia, soldiers in the tsarist army swore to defend, "Faith, Tsar, and Motherland." The duty to God was always understood as first. ✝