

Corruption-Fighting Air Force Pilot Loses His Wings

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July 17, 2011



Igor Sulim flying a Su-34 fighter jet. After his allegations, he cannot fly.

LIPETSK — Slim and bare-chested, his jumpsuit half-unzipped, Igor Sulim looks no different from the other parachuters kicking back in the warm summer sun after a jump.

But Sulim, 24, is a thorn in the side of commanders at an elite Air Force base in Lipetsk and an idol to many of his pilot friends.

Sulim, the son of a senior general stationed in Moscow, appears to have sacrificed a promising career to expose corruption at the base, where, he claims, top brass routinely extorted money from subordinates. His whistleblowing efforts have led to him being placed on unpaid leave, but he says he regrets nothing.

"What happens here is pure banditry covered by a romantic love for the sky," Sulim said in an interview.

"Generals don't want to listen to me. They think that if I have a lower rank, they can treat me like cattle," he said, his voice calm and reserved.

An avid parachute jumper, Sulim used a recent weekend jump to keep himself in shape because he cannot fly anymore with the Air Force. His superiors have suspended him from jumping and flying his Su-34 fighter jet due to his "psychological condition."

No one, though, has really questioned his mental health, including the military prosecutors who are [investigating](#) corruption reports at the Lipetsk base, one of the Air Force's best and located 420 kilometers southeast of Moscow. Pilots from the base fought in the Georgian war in 2008 and are regulars at Victory Day parades on Red Square.

Igor Korotchenko, editor of the National Defense industry magazine, called Lipetsk "a purely criminal case" that is illustrative of the state of affairs in the army.

"When total corruption pervades the country, the armed forces could not be a safe haven from it," he said.

Sulim outlined his claims in an open letter to Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov and Air Force commander Alexander Zelin, saying senior officers were running a de-facto racket in which they took hefty chunks of pilots' bonuses for themselves.

The bonus system, introduced by the Defense Ministry in 2008 and revised the next year, aims to reward officers for good performance on the job. The bonuses, which far exceed regular salaries, are intended primarily for some 46,000 highly skilled officers in the Air Force, the Navy, the Space Forces and the Strategic Missile Defense Forces. The system is to be replaced with salary increases starting next year.

Officers implicated in the ongoing Lipetsk investigation include Colonel Eduard Kovalsky, the head of Sulim's unit; and Sergei Sidorenko, who heads the unit's disciplinary section. Military investigators said in May that the duo had collected more than 2 million rubles (\$71,000) from pilots since 2010. Both face up to four years in prison on charges of abuse of office.

Sulim said Kovalsky ordered him to collect monthly payments of \$300 from each pilot in his squadron. The pilots, who were getting monthly bonuses of \$2,000, paid the cash to avoid being sent on unpaid leave, he said.

Sharing bonuses with lower-paid subordinates is a common military practice that helps "maintain social justice," but it has nothing to do with mandatory payments to senior officers, said Korotchenko, of the defense magazine.

Repeated attempts to contact Kovalsky, who has been reshuffled but faced no further penalties so far, failed. But Moskovsky Komsomolets [said](#) he threatened to strip pilots of their bonuses altogether if they continued to "blackmail" their commanders with the corruption complaints. Moskovsky Komsomolets obtained an audio recording where a voice identified as Kovalsky is heard making the threat.

Sulim said the racket was blessed by Kovalsky's superiors, including Lipetsk base commander Alexander Kharchevsky and Air Force commander Zelin, to whom Sulim nevertheless co-

addressed his letter.

Zelin has kept silent on the issue, while Air Force spokesman Vladimir Drik said no comment would be forthcoming while the investigation was ongoing. Reached by phone, the officer who replaced Kovalsky, Sergei Tereshin, said, "I don't talk to the press," and hung up.

Zelin's deputy Viktor Bondarev, who is overseeing the investigation, has confirmed that illegal payments were made by pilots in Sulim's squadron, but [said](#) no one would be fired at the Lipetsk base until the investigation ended. It is unclear when that might be.

The defense minister failed to provide a "decent answer" when asked about the Lipetsk base during a recent visit to the State Duma, Communist Deputy Svetlana Savitskaya said on a talk show on NTV television last month.

Parallel to the investigation, Air Force deputy chief Bondarev issued an odd order that de-facto bans officers from complaining about corruption in their units to anyone but their superiors. The order said such complaints showed distrust in senior officers and would result in dissenters being stripped of bonuses.

On Friday, President Dmitry Medvedev promoted Bondarev from Air Force deputy commander to Air Force first deputy commander and chief of the Air Force's General Staff. No explanation was provided.

Sulim said Bondarev accused him of pursuing his own interests during a May conversation. Bondarev purportedly said Sulim could have reported the extortion a year earlier but kept mum until he started seeking a promotion to squadron commander.

But Sulim told The Moscow Times that he did, in fact, report the extortion to the Lipetsk branch of the Federal Security Service, which never responded. "I even advised them to use marked bills," Sulim said.

Bondarev also warned Sulim that fellow officers would take revenge because they would be stripped of benefits by senior officers enraged by the exposés, Sulim said. "Your fellow soldiers will kill you for this," Bondarev said, according to the same audio recording obtained by Moskovsky Komsomolets.

Bondarev said Sulim's father, General Igor Sulim, who serves in the armed forces General Staff in Moscow, would also face problems over the incident, Sulim said, adding that his father had scolded him for going public with the story.

But other pilots interviewed by The Moscow Times spoke warmly of Sulim, who enjoys a reputation of being a down-to-earth person despite his father's senior position. His whistleblowing activities also have made him popular beyond his circle of friends and fellow pilots.

"My wife, who doesn't know him, just called him to wish him well," said Vyacheslav, a former military pilot in Lipetsk who asked not to be identified, citing the sensitivity of the matter.

Sulim's claims have been supported by the deputy commander of his squadron, Anton Smirnov, who also defended him from allegations of incompetence. "When Sulim went

public, he was called a bad pilot. I can say he is a professional," Smirnov said in an interview at the Lipetsk base.

Smirnov has paid a price for his support. He has been suspended from flying and stripped of his monthly bonus, a decision that he speculated was retaliation from Kovalsky.

But Smirnov said the whistleblowing efforts were an attempt to defend the military's honor, not his own wallet. "The money is not a question. It's just a shame to feel like a stupid sheep," he said.

Sulim said he has received support from fellow whistleblower Alexei Dymovsky, a former policeman who gained publicity — and trouble from his superiors — after posting a YouTube appeal to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in 2009 about police corruption in Novorossiisk.

But Dymovsky's anti-government stance does not sit well with Sulim. "If we started a fratricidal war, we would be destroyed," Sulim said.

A better role model, Sulim said, is former submarine commander Roman Shchury, who got a desk job after a YouTube video went viral in May of him peppering a superior officer with colorful curses for not showing proper respect to his crew after a long voyage.

"To ignore the arrival of a submarine is akin to spitting on the crew," Sulim said.

When Sulim is not parachuting, he is reading legal textbooks — and not only to wage further battles against his superiors. He expects to be fired and wants to become a lawyer after his military career ends.

"I know they will not allow me to stay. They will get rid of me within six months for sure," he said.

Kovalsky and the other officers accused by Sulim have not voiced any intention of retiring from the military.

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