

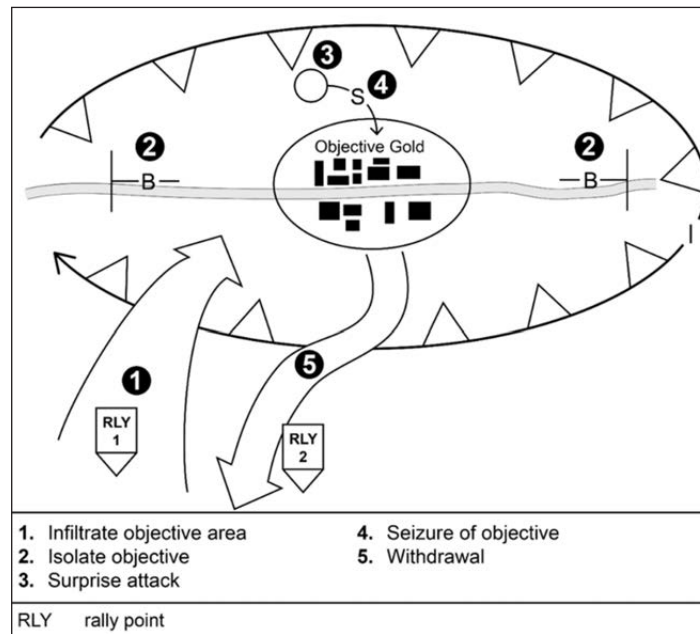
The Airborne Mechanized Raid: A Russian Concept

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Over time, U.S. military raids have decreased in size and become frequently air-inserted and multiservice.¹ Washington's Christmas Eve raid across the Delaware led to victory at Trenton. During the American Civil War, Jeb Stuart's cavalry brigade rode completely around George McClellan's force twice during McClellan's Peninsular Campaign. The World War II U.S. Army Ranger/Alamo Scout raid on the Japanese Cabanatuan prison camp in the Philippines freed some 500 U.S. prisoners. The Son Tay raid's attempt to free U.S. prisoners in North Vietnam failed, as did the effort to free the American Embassy hostages in Iran. The raid to kill Osama bin Laden succeeded.

According to the latest U.S. Army tactics manual, a raid is a variation of attack to temporarily seize an objective with a planned withdrawal. The purposes of a raid are to secure information, capture personnel or equipment, destroy a capability, rescue and recover individuals and equipment, or confuse an adversary. Raids are usually small, involving battalion-sized or smaller forces. Figure 1 illustrates the five phases of a U.S. Army raid. In the first phase, the raiding force inserts or infiltrates into the objective area. In phase two, the raiding force isolates the objective area from outside support or reinforcement, including enemy air assets. In phase three, the unit overcomes any enemy forces at or near the objective in a violently executed surprise attack, using all available firepower for shock effect. In phase four, the force seizes the objective and accomplishes its assigned task quickly before any surviving enemy forces in the objective area can recover or receive outside reinforcements. Lastly, in phase five, the raiding force withdraws from the objective area and is extracted, usually using a different route than it used for movement to the objective.² The U.S. view seems to reflect recent Afghanistan experience.

Figure 1 — Five Phases of a U.S. Army Raid (Field Manual 3-90, *Tactics*)



The Russian View

In Russian military science, a “raid” does not have a single, strict definition. The concept generally entails different interpretations, such as “a method of action of the troops,” “a form of carrying out combat missions behind enemy lines,” “a type of maneuver,” and also as “a method or variety of offensive actions.” Due to this nuanced understanding, Russian military science has several terms for the raid concept that all can be roughly translated as “raid:” *vylazka* [вылазка], *nalot* [налёт], and *reyd* [рейд]. A *vylazka* is a short, tactical sortie that is usually associated with an encircled and/or besieged force attacking to conduct reconnaissance and destroy or capture personnel, weapons, and kit.³ A *nalot* is sudden, short, and tied to the means of delivery — such as an artillery or air raid.⁴ The third term for the concept — *reyd* (borrowed from the English) — is described as an attack (a combination of maneuver and combat) carried out behind enemy lines.⁵ In addition, it is important to note that the Russian concept of a raid cannot simply be seen as just an attack; raids also usually involve relatively long tactical road marches both to and from the objective, further differentiating them from traditional offensive actions. This third definition is the focus of this article and will hereafter simply be referred to as just “raid.”

During the War of 1812 against Napoleon, the Russian armies conducted deep Cossack and cavalry raids using mounted detachments and horse-drawn light artillery under famous commanders such as Denis Davidov and Ivan Dorozhov. During the Russian Civil War, Semyon Budyonny and Kliment Voroshilov led the famed Red 1st Cavalry Army, and Konstantin Mamontov led the White 1st Don Army and then Don Cossack units in deep raids throughout the war. Cavalry and tactical maneuver groups used raids against Bashmachi insurgents (some coupled with aviation spotting and insertion of blocking forces). These proved effective in controlling the 1930s Central Asian breakaway attempts. During the Great Patriotic War (the Soviet War against Nazi Germany), Soviet tank raids, guerrilla raids, and cavalry raids were an important part of the struggle.

The goals of the raid also have changed little over the years, but in military conflicts of an intensity lower than war, such as “armed conflicts,” raids may also be employed to exercise control over a given area. In the Soviet-Afghan War and the two Chechen campaigns, Soviet battalions and companies tried new techniques of combat to fight the mujahedin and breakaway Chechens. One of these was frequent, unconstrained raids by tactical maneuver groups [войсковая манёвренная группа], which would engage highly mobile guerrilla and irregular forces and their base camps. The groups would fight independently in raids of one- or two-weeks duration. The tactical maneuver groups made independent raids with the goal of capturing and destroying supply bases, ammunition depots, command and control facilities, and major “bandit” detachments in areas located at a considerable distance from these tactical force elements’ bases. A motorized rifle battalion, and sometimes a motorized rifle company, was the basis of the tactical maneuver group.⁶

Tactical maneuver groups conducted raids based on intelligence, terrain, nature of the target, routes, and support required. An assault group (rocket-propelled grenade gunners, snipers, machine gunners, and combat engineers) and a covering group were designated. A recovery squad; armament and equipment servicing, maintenance, and repair squad; medical squad; logistic support subunit; and if necessary, a nuclear, biological, chemical (NBC) reconnaissance squad would also be attached to a company operating in the tactical maneuver group. A tank platoon attached to the company provided direct support. The tactical maneuver group commander controlled the actions of supporting artillery through an artillery observer and called in helicopters and target designations through a forward air controller.⁷

In the attack, the motorized rifle subunits advanced by bounding from cover to cover, going around hills through hollows, and taking advantage of terrain folds. The fighting men negotiated obstacles ahead of the forward edge of defense under cover of the fire of artillery, helicopters, tanks, BMPs (*Boyevaya Mashina Pyekhotas*) or BTRs (*Bronetransportyors*), and small arms. The safe distance from friendly artillery shell bursts was 200 meters for tanks, 300 meters for BMPs/BTRs, and 400 meters for personnel attacking in dismounted formation.⁸

This technique worked when fighting guerrillas and small armed groups, but it is not particularly well suited for large-scale combat operations. Although raids can be conducted by conventional forces, doctrinally, Russia tends to prefer to use airborne troops when fighting a peer-level adversary on negotiable terrain.

The Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) is a 100-percent mechanized force that is capable of flying into battle and landing via parachute or helicopter dismount. If the objective is well defended, they can land near or at a distance from their objective, mount their airlanded BMD personnel carriers, assemble into units, and road march to their objective to conduct a mechanized combined arms attack. The airborne troops are a lightly mechanized combined arms force with their own customized artillery, air defenses, anti-tank weapons, armored assault vehicles, and logistics support force. The Airborne Combat Vehicle (BMD) [Боевая Машина Десанта (БМД)]-] is a miniature version of the BMP ground forces infantry fighting vehicle. It only weighs 14 tons with a forged aluminum alloy hull and a steel turret. The latest version, the BMD-4, has a 100mm low-pressure rifled 2A70 main gun with a 30mm 2A72 automatic co-axial machine gun. The 100mm gun fires high explosive (HE) fragmentation rounds and 9M112 Konkurs anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM). It mounts two additional machine guns, has a crew of three, and carries five dismounts. It has an operational range of 500 kilometers on good roads.⁹

A raid may be conducted after an air landing, the essence of which lies in sudden, swift strikes against enemy targets combined with high mobility of the entire or part of the air landing force airborne assault. For the successful conduct of raiding actions behind enemy lines, the airborne troops have modern military equipment that provide substantial firepower and mobility. Although less heavily armed than conventional Russian forces, they have significantly more vehicles and firepower than any Western airborne force. The airborne troops can carry out raids in almost all physical and geographical conditions. The most significant impact on the organization and execution of the raid will be the accessibility, protective, and masking properties of the terrain.¹⁰

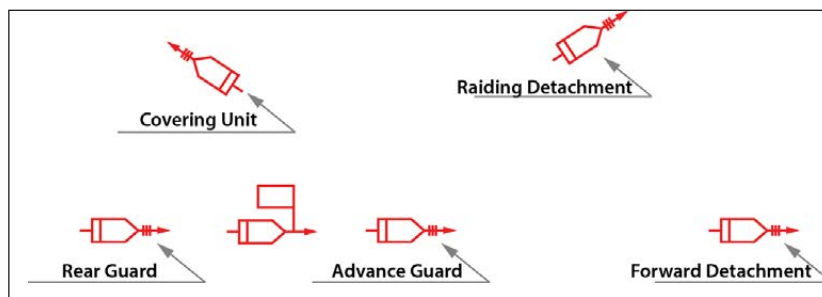


Figure 2 — Role of a Battalion Acting Independently of the Main Force of a Regiment (Brigade)

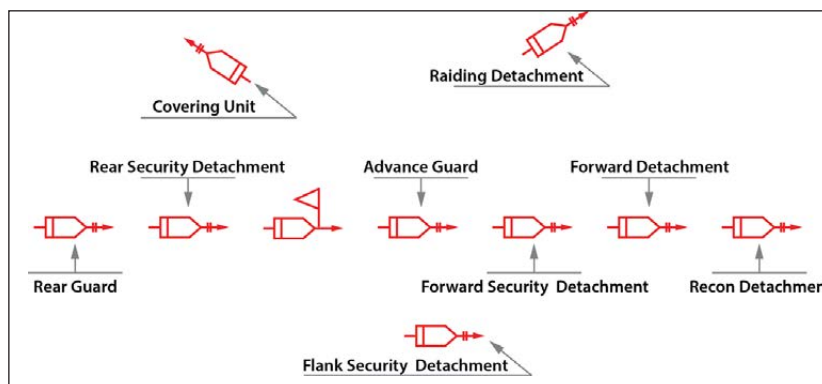


Figure 3 — Role of a Company Acting Independently of the Main Force of a Battalion

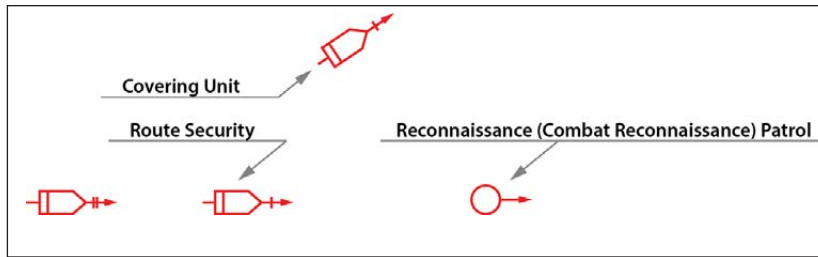


Figure 4 — Role of a Platoon When Conducting Raiding Actions

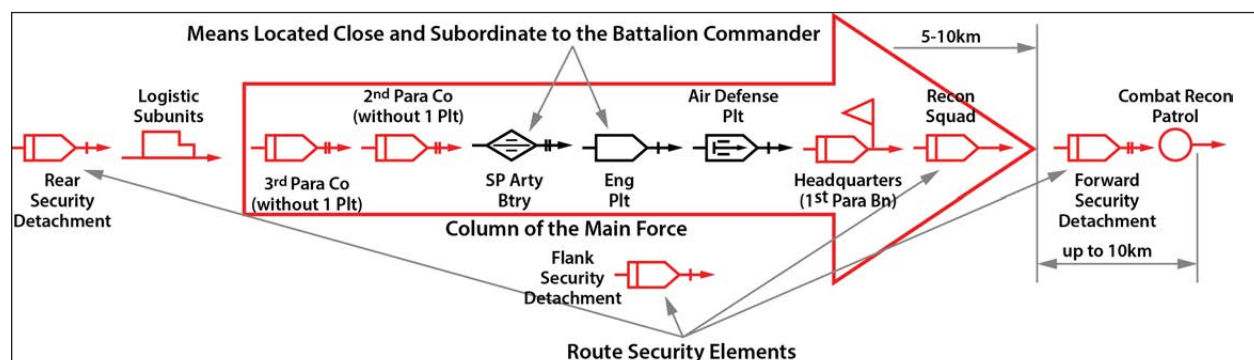
An air landing raid seizes and destroys previously designated or newly identified objectives. A battalion (or company) can independently conduct a raid behind enemy lines in order to seize and destroy (disable) an objective (enemy command and control, rear areas, lines of communication, etc.) located away from the general direction of the brigade's/regiment's main force, or it can link up with the main force after landing at a different site and conducting its immediate objective while separated from the main force of the air landing forces.¹¹

A battalion typically conducts a raid as part of a brigade/regiment; it can act as part of the main force or independently as a forward detachment, vanguard, rear guard, raid detachment, reserve, or as a covering unit (see Figure 2). A company can act as part of a battalion or independently as a reconnaissance detachment, forward security detachment, flank security detachment, rear security detachment, plus the same independent roles as a battalion (see Figure 3). A platoon can act as part of a company or independently as a reconnaissance (combat reconnaissance) patrol, route security, or covering unit (see Figure 4).

The successful conduct of the raid by the battalion (or company) will depend on the subordinate units' skillful organization and thorough preparation, a well-organized reconnaissance of the enemy and terrain, route security, reliable air defense, the skillful use of surprise and firepower to defeat the enemy, and high unit mobility. The battalion (or company) usually starts a raid after seizing its immediate objective. Sometimes the beginning of the raid may be preceded by withdrawal from battle. In the first case, the battalion or company begins the raid in full force; in the second case, part of the force covers the subunit's exit from the battle to start the raid. In order to conduct the raid, the battalion needs reinforcements, a route (direction) of advance, an objective(s) for seizure/destruction, a mission, start time for the raid, and instructions for breaking contact or withdrawing from battle. The route should avoid populated areas, road junctions, gorges, areas of mass destruction, and irradiated areas.¹²

A battalion (or company) conducts a raid in a column. The movement is carried out at the maximum possible speed under the given conditions, using the masking and protective properties of the terrain. The march order of a battalion as part of the main force includes a column of its main force and a column of logistics units. The march order of the battalion (or company) assigned to the forward detachment, vanguard, rearguard, and raiding detachment is determined by taking into account the rapid deployment

Figure 5 — March Order of Battalion Conducting a Raid



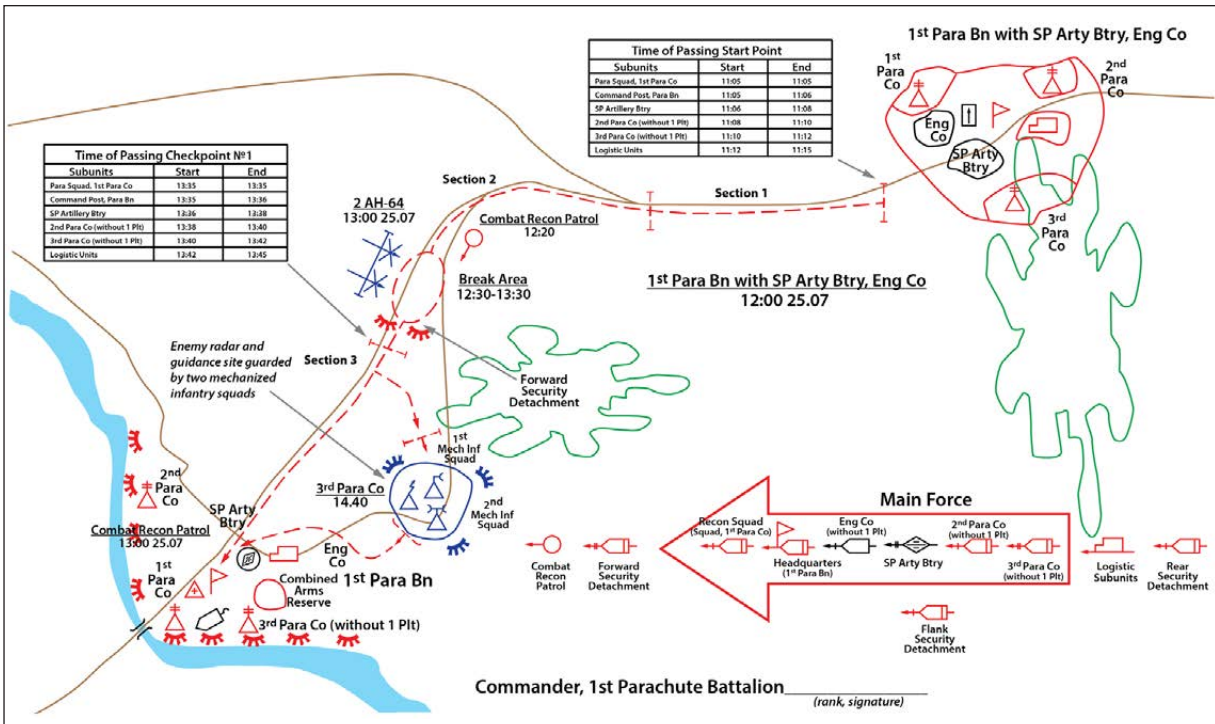


Figure 6 — Example of a Commander's Working Map for a Raid

of units into combat formation and entry into battle. For a battalion, this includes route security, the column of the main forces, and the column of logistics support units; for companies, this includes route security and a column of the main forces (see Figure 5).¹³

The locations of subunits in a battalion column are determined by the order in which they will enter into combat according to the commander's plan. Typically, artillery subunits move closer to the head of the column to provide fire support to the maneuver companies' commitment to battle. The battalion commander and the battalion headquarters are at the head of the column so that when the battle starts, the commander can move quickly to the forward route security patrol to observe the situation. The commanders of attached units follow directly behind the commander of the unit to which they are attached. When distributing reinforcement subunits among parachute (air assault) units and forming marching columns, the march capabilities of the reinforcing units are considered so that they do not lag behind and hinder the movement of the main force. The reinforcement units' vehicles should have mobility characteristics similar to the vehicles of the units that they are supporting. Engineer and NBC reconnaissance are located with the forward route security patrol, towards the head of the column or as local security.

Raid capabilities are characterized by the ability of the battalion (company) to conduct combat in isolation from the main force, the average speed of column movement, the depth and duration of the raid, level of enemy resistance, the state of the route, season, time of day, weather, ability of commanders to direct columns, the vehicle maintenance, the training level of the drivers, and logistic support. The average speed of movement on roads is 30-40 kilometers per hour for wheeled vehicle columns and 25-30 kilometers per hour for mixed and tracked vehicle columns. Since a full-strength raiding battalion will seize or destroy objects, repel enemy counterattacks, and hold important lines of communication for the time specified by the senior commander, the raid speed will be significantly lower than the average march speed. The average raid speed can be up to 10 kilometers per hour. The duration of a raid depends on the mission assigned as well as available logistical support. A battalion (company) that is adequately supplied can conduct raid actions for about two days.¹⁴

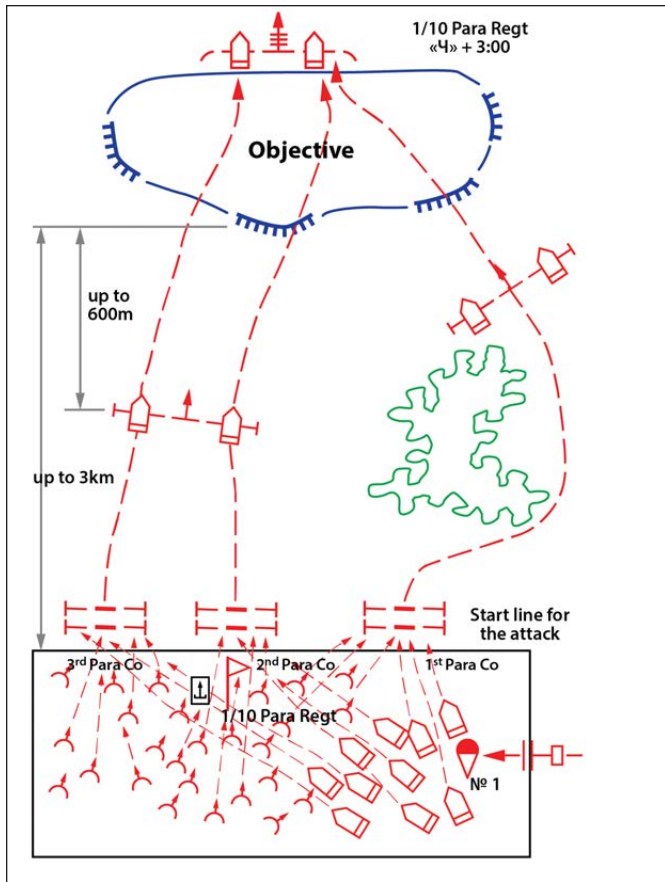


Figure 7 — Air Landing Near the Objective

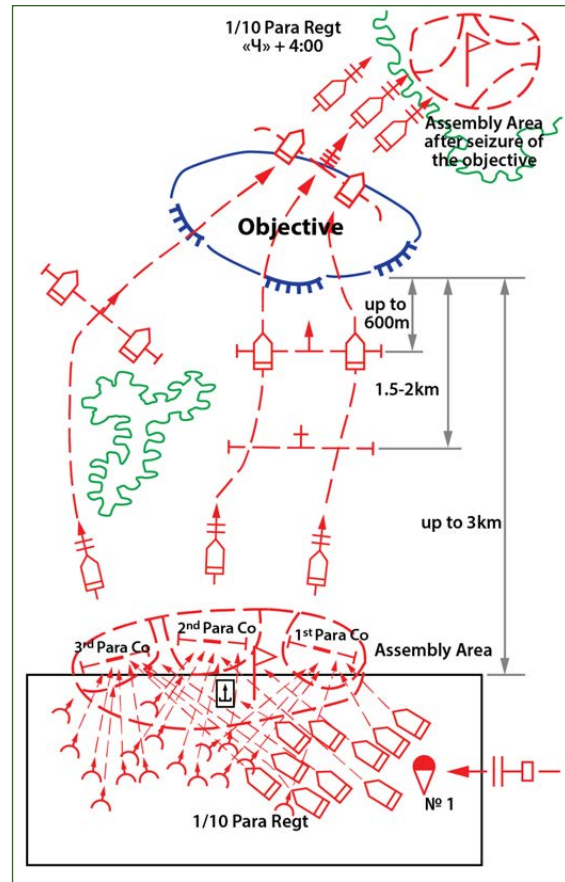


Figure 8 — Air Landing at a Distance from the Objective

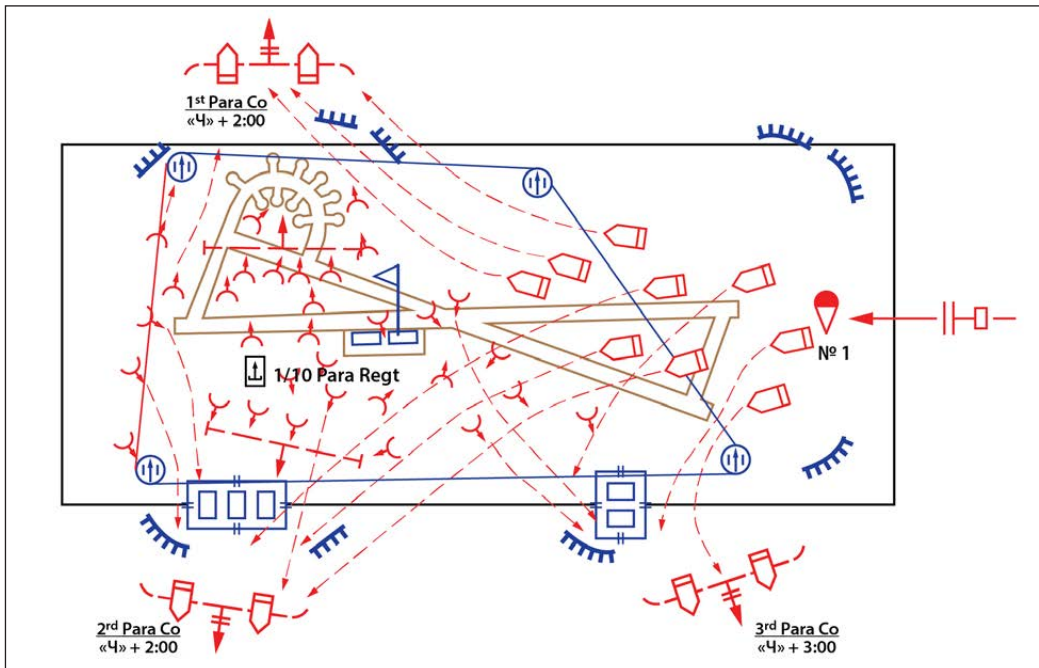


Figure 9 — Air Landing on the Objective

Russian airborne troops are an elite force that fights as a light mechanized combined arms formation. Unless the primary objective is undefended, airborne commanders prefer to land in a relatively “safe” or inactive area near or at a distance from the objective, where it can efficiently load personnel onto assigned carriers and assemble units before advancing on the objective as a fully mechanized force (see Figures 7-9). The airborne column(s) can include artillery, air defense, engineers, logistics, and even tanks. Most combat vehicles have some amphibious capability, and wet gap crossings are regularly practiced. Therefore, the depth of an airborne raid can be deep and unexpected.

In the Russian view, as military conflict becomes more intense and dynamic, the conduct of raids by its airborne troops will significantly increase. In modern warfare, the absence of a continuous line of contact between the parties, the increase in spatial scope of the military conflict, and the expansion of troop mobility will create conditions favorable for raid actions with an “airmobile” character.¹⁵

Conclusion

The practice of conducting a raid after an air landing has not been a regular feature of current fighting in Ukraine, but there is preliminary evidence that suggests that Russian actions on Hostomel airfield during the first few days of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine may have been a failed attempt to conduct a raid similar to the Soviet takedowns of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, where Soviet airborne and spetsnaz decapitated the governments and attempted to keep their armies in barracks. If a Soviet-style political “decapitation” was the Russian intent, the Hostomel airfield would be a logical starting point due to its close proximity to Kiev (10 kilometers).

According to most accounts, on 24 February 2022, a few hours after President Putin announced the beginning of a “special military operation,” elements of the airborne troops’ 31st Air Assault and 45th Spetsnaz brigades successfully air landed on Hostomel airfield. After landing, the Russians quickly seized an adjacent bunker facility. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksandr Reznichenko has since stated that he and his staff were supposed to relocate to this bunker facility one or two days after the start of hostilities, implying that if they had been in the bunker at the time of the air landing, a significant portion of the Ukrainian command and control would have been captured.¹⁶

Russian Colonel-General Vladimir Shamanov, who commanded the airborne troops until his retirement in 2016, has since described the operation’s initial objectives, stating that the intent of the operation was to seize two strategic targets in Kiev, the Vasil’kov and Hostomel airfields, by employing assets of the 31st Air Assault Brigade, 45th Spetsnaz Brigade, 76th Air Assault Division, and 98th Airborne Division. Although Hostomel airfield was seized, Ukrainian air defenses were not sufficiently suppressed to allow an appropriate flight corridor for incoming flights of IL-76MDs to offload reinforcements and supplies.¹⁷

Shamanov further elaborated on the operation’s problems: “The forces that were air landed destroyed the enemy guards force and dug in at designated positions. But the forces of the [Russian] Western Military District were unable to reach the airfield in time. Further, the Central and Eastern Military District forces were unable to carry out their mission to blockade Kiev from the east and south which was reinforced with groups of forces from the enemy reserve. The routes of advances were not reconnoitered, traffic control was not properly conducted, and a linkup between the airborne and ground forces did not occur. The airborne troops had only a day’s supply of weapons, ammunition, and food. By the third day, they had to fire rubber bullets [carried for riot and crowd control]...”¹⁸

Although the Russian airborne troops’ foray into Kiev was ultimately a failure, it is very possible that if one or both of the airfields could have been seized and reinforced, an airborne mechanized raid intended to “decapitate” the Ukrainian regime may have been attempted. In the coming months and years, more information will undoubtedly surface to confirm or refute this hypothesis, but what is certain is that the airborne mechanized raid will continue to be at the forefront of Russian military thought for large-scale combat operations.

Notes

¹ This article is based on a chapter from the authors' forthcoming book tentatively titled *The Russian Way of War: History, Force Structure, and Tactics of the Russian Airborne*.

² Field Manual (FM) 3-90, *Tactics*, May 2023, 5-27 and 5-28, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN38160-FM_3-90-000-WEB-1.pdf.

³ "Вылазка" [Raid], Russian Military Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=4717@morfDictionary>.

⁴ "Налёт" [Raid], Russian Military Encyclopedia, https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details_rvsn.htm?id=6801@morfDictionary.

⁵ Valeriy Kiselev, "Тактика: в рейде — маневренная-группа" [Tactics: Maneuver Group on a Raid], *Армейский Сборник* [Army Digest], December 2001, pages 36-41.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. Examples of Chechens fighting tactical maneuver groups are found in Dodge Billingsley with Lester Grau, *Fangs of the Lone Wolf: Chechen Tactics in the Russian-Chechen Wars 1994-2009* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2012), 9-41, 97-101, and 113-121. See also, Ali A. Jalali and Lester W. Grau, "The Campaign for the Caves: The Battles for Zhawar in the Soviet-Afghan War," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (September 2001), <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-mono-graphs/252376?pi296680=89>.

⁸ "Рейд" [Raid], Russian Military Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=12246@morfDictionary>.

⁹ Airborne divisions have main battle tank battalions assigned and can airland these full-sized tanks should the airborne seize a proper landing zone.

¹⁰ L. P. Serova, L. G. Ilchuk, and N. V. Копылова (Eds.), *Тактика: Воздушно-Десантных Войск (часть вторая)* [Tactics: Of the Airborne Troops (part two)] (Ryazan Guards Higher Airborne Command School, Ryazan, 2016), 89.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 90-91.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 90-94.

¹⁵ Ibid, 88.

¹⁶ As posted on Telegram on 10 April 2023, accessed from <https://t.me/uniannet/94913>.

¹⁷ Vladimir Shamanov, Vladimir Kulakov and Olga Kashirina, "Операция Промежуточный Этап [The Operational Intermittent Phase], *Защита и Безопасность* [Defense and Security], No. 2,(105), 2023, 15.

¹⁸ Ibid.

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