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A Russian Approach to a Battalion Hasty River-Crossing Assault

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A RUSSIAN APPROACH TO a Battalion Hasty River-Crossing Assault



By Mr. Charles K. Bartles

Introduction

Large rivers and lakes dominate Eurasia and have served as major shipping arteries of industry and commerce, defensive barriers, lines of communication, and avenues of advance. Due to this geography, most Russian ground force vehicles have some amphibious capability and can ford water. Water crossings, which are practiced regularly, differ by season and weather. In the winter, crossing depends on the strength and stability of the ice. In the spring, there is drifting ice and flooding. In the summer and fall, table of organization and equipment and attached crossing equipment can be used. If the water obstacle is less than 5 meters deep and the riverbanks and bottoms are suitable, tanks can snorkel across. Crossing on a wide front at a quick tempo using a forward detachment or advanced guard is usually preferred.

Specialized Russian Water-Crossing Equipment

Russian engineer battalions (organic to maneuver brigades) have many assets to overcome water obstacles and support river-crossing operations. These assets usually include truck-launched bridges for narrow waterways or TMM-6 vehicle-launched bridge sets. To overcome wide bodies of water such as large rivers and lakes, the battalion has a PP-91 pontoon bridge company that can emplace the bridge in under 1 hour.

(A 268-meter-long bridge can carry 60 tons, a 165-meter-long bridge can carry 90 tons, and a 141-meter-long bridge can carry 120 tons.) The pontoon bridge company has six BMK-255-1 cutter vessels to help assemble and maintain the position of the pontoon bridge. The vessels can also function as tugboats to allow the pontoon bridge to function as a ferry if needed.

The battalion also has six PTS-2 tracked, amphibious transports that can haul loads of up to 20 tons on land and 12 tons across bodies of water. The PTS-2 can carry



Open water-qualifying operation

a wheeled or tracked vehicle, one heavy artillery gun, or 75 troops. Some units may have GSP-55 tracked, self-propelled ferries based on the PT-76 amphibious tank chassis. Working in pairs, they can be connected to carry loads of up to 52 tons at a rate of 6 kilometers per hour in water. The GSP-55 is being replaced by the PMM-2M self-propelled ferry vehicle. The PMM-2M is a tracked vehicle with two pontoon platforms that unfold on each side. With pontoons deployed and in the water, the PMM-2M can move at a rate of up to 11.5 kilometers an hour (unencumbered) and carry loads of up to 42.5 tons. Multiple PMM-2Ms can be daisy-chained together to haul larger loads.

Conditions for a Hasty River-Crossing Assault

The Russian army conducts two types of river crossings—unopposed and opposed. The unopposed river-crossing is conducted against little or no effective opposition. The opposed river crossing is conducted against an effective opposition. The attack from the march (hasty attack) is the preferred method of conducting an opposed



PMM-2M self-propelled ferry vehicle

river crossing. Should that fail, a deliberate attack is considered. Conditions for the hasty river-crossing assault are usually created while pursuing a retreating enemy. While pursuing an enemy, it is important to keep the enemy from breaking contact, so fording sites may be seized, allowing the pursuing units to quickly cross a river and remain “on the heels” of the enemy.

Theory of the Hasty River-Crossing Assault

Conducting an opposed crossing of a river in combat conditions is one of the most difficult tasks for a unit to execute. As a rule, an opposed crossing of a water



Pontoon bridge system functioning as a ferry



Pontoon bridging operations

obstacle in combat conditions is executed without a halt, demanding significant preparations that include a thorough engineer reconnaissance of fording sites and sufficient cover from enemy fire. An opposed hasty river crossing is inherently difficult to plan and execute because the battalion subordinate units are moving up to the river and crossing it while deployed on line (in combat formation) in combat. This operation is accomplished across a broad front at a high rate of speed, preferably first by the advance force and then by the main body.¹

A hasty attack across a water obstacle from the march is preferred because it maintains the momentum of the advance, facilitates the seizure of bridgeheads, and allows the rapid occupation of the opposite shore or the securing of an assembly area for an upcoming operation. A motorized rifle or tank battalion can perform a hasty river crossing as part of a regiment or brigade—or on its own. If the battalion is operating as part of a larger formation, it is assigned an assault-crossing sector that includes primary and alternate crossing sites. The commander designs the concept of the operation, designating all fording sites, lines of departure, and loading or preparation areas. Air defense assets are employed to protect fording sites and preparation areas. If possible, an air assault may conduct a landing to seize the far shore. Smoke, air defense, and counterbattery efforts are particularly critical.

Fording Sites and Assembly Areas

Different types of fording sites are organized for the hasty river crossing: amphibious vehicle fording sites for armored personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, or amphibious light tanks (PT-76s);

fording sites for fully submerged vehicles with snorkels; fording sites for tracked amphibious transports (PTS-series tracked, amphibious transports), and tracked self-propelled ferries (GSP-series tracked self-propelled ferries) or pontoon bridges functioning as ferry fording sites. In an assault crossing involving the deployment of the main body of a battalion, an assembly area is designated at the water obstacle. The battalion negotiates the obstacle on its own if it is operating as part of a forward (raiding) detachment or in the advance guard.

Motorized rifle subunits conduct the hasty river crossing in their armored personnel carriers or infantry fighting vehicles. Tanks cross by fording, by fully submerging with snorkels, or by boarding ferries (GSP-55s/PMM-2Ms). Artillery and wheeled vehicles that have no amphibious capabilities are transported by the PTS-2 tracked amphibious transports. Typically, the battalion is assigned a line of departure for the assault crossing at a distance of 1 to 2 kilometers from the water's edge and assembly areas for ferry and amphibious transport boarding and loading and tank preparation are located 5 to 6 kilometers from the water's edge.

Ferry and amphibious transport fording sites are commanded by officers from the engineer battalion. However, if the crossing is being made by fording or submerging, or if the vehicles are amphibious (infantry fighting vehicles, armored personnel carriers), then the fording site is commanded by an officer of the unit conducting the crossing. Fording site commanders are referred to as "crossing commandants."

Mission Command

Mission command of the battalion is exercised by the battalion commander in the command observation post during the hasty river-crossing assault. The

command observation post is located 100–200 meters from the bank, and the command observation posts of attached artillery and tank units are typically situated nearby. The battalion commander crosses to the opposite bank behind the first echelon companies. During the assault, combat missions are assigned by the battalion commander to subordinate units by radio. Coordinating instructions are issued at the same time.

The width of attack frontage and the make up and depth of the combat missions of a battalion operating as part of the main body are determined in the same way as they are when attacking a defending enemy without conducting a hasty river-crossing assault. When negotiating the obstacle, the immediate battalion objective is to destroy the enemy on the opposite bank in the defensive area of the enemy's first-echelon companies and to occupy their positions. The subsequent objective is to develop the attack and route the enemy in coordination with adjacent battalions throughout the depth of the enemy's defensive area. At the battalion level, Russian commanders are typically assigned an immediate objective, subsequent objective, and direction of farther advance.

The battalion commander must make the decision to conduct the hasty river-crossing assault as early as possible in order to assign combat missions to companies and platoons in a timely manner. The battalion subordinate unit combat formations are established in accordance with the assault-crossing concept and the combat mission that has been assigned to the battalion. This means that the battalion subordinate units are now in combat formation. Russian battalion commanders usually command a combination of companies and platoons—not just companies, as in the U.S. system—that report directly to them. A company is in

combat formation when its subordinate platoons are on line, while a platoon is in combat formation when its subordinate squads are on line. There must also be substantial coordination before and during movement to the water obstacle. This coordination includes the preparation of vehicles and equipment for the hasty crossing assault. Preparations begin in the assembly area, with special attention given to ensure that hatches, firing ports, and doors are tightly closed; bilge pumps are serviceable; and all personnel have life vests.

Role of the Engineer Troops

The effective use of terrain features, when moving toward the river, is essential for avoiding enemy reconnaissance strike complexes. The inclusion of engineer troops for the operation is vital for the hasty river-crossing assault. Engineer units conduct reconnaissance of the avenues of approach and fording sites to determine operation viability, prepare routes, place barriers upstream to prevent heavy objects such as logs and debris from colliding with fording vehicles, and support the movement of attacking units and river-crossing equipment to the water obstacle. In addition, they breach obstacles, perform traffic control and salvage recovery service at fording sites, and support the actions of attacking subunits on the opposite bank.

Execution of the Hasty River-Crossing Assault

The hasty river-crossing assault begins when units of the first echelon shove off from the friendly bank. Tanks and antitank units not crossing take firing positions and engage enemy targets on the opposite bank to provide cover to crossing units. Under cover of friendly fire and smoke, motorized rifle units cross the river in infantry fighting vehicles/armored personnel carriers and engage the enemy while afloat. Nonamphibious units in the first echelon cross with the assistance of amphibious transports or ferries. Tank units use bridges, fords, or ferries, as available. Typically, a tank company of 10 tanks can ford a 250–300-meter river in 8–10 minutes or be transported across the river by a pair of GSP-55s or a PMM-2M in 50–60 minutes.

After crossing the river, the first echelon is intended to rout the remaining defending forces in the area and begin to assault throughout the depth of the enemy defense. Artillery, air defense, and anti-tank units attached to the battalion, as well as the mortar battery, usually cross later by amphibious transport so that they may provide continuity of support and cover for the battalion assets on the opposite bank. Since an enemy counterattack to repel



Tanks conducting snorkeling operations

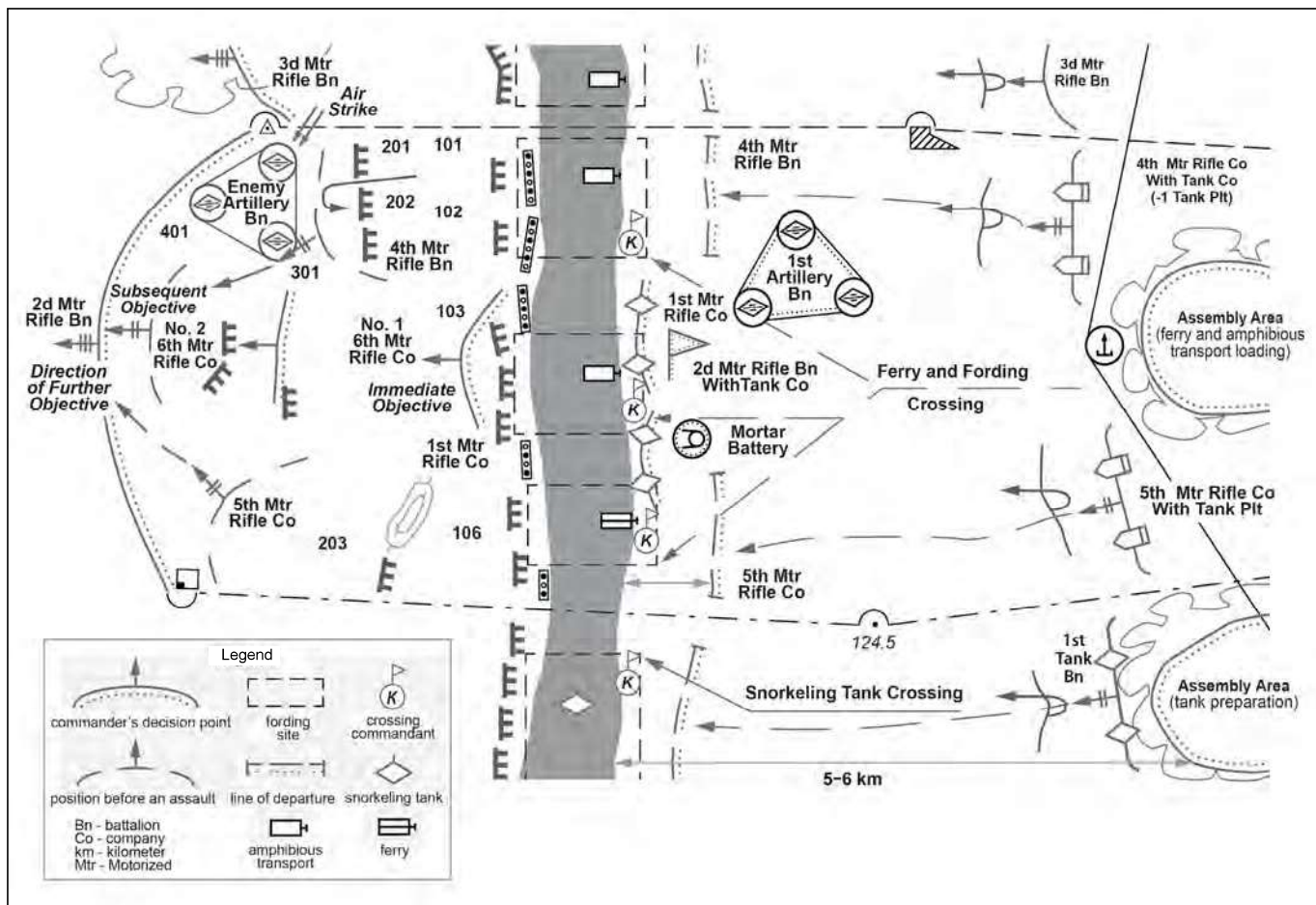


Figure 1. A hasty river-crossing assault by a Russian motorized rifle battalion

the landing force can be expected, it is essential that anti-tank weapons, tanks, and artillery be available to repel the counterattack. The battalion rear logistic support units cross on amphibious transports and ferries after the artillery and air defense subunits have crossed. Aid stations and ammunition vehicles are the first rear services elements to cross.

A Hasty River-Crossing Assault by a Russian Motorized Rifle Battalion

Figure 1 depicts several Russian maneuver battalions conducting a hasty river-crossing assault while pursuing a fleeing enemy. The battalions begin fording preparations in assembly areas approximately 5–6 kilometers from shore. These preparations include affixing snorkeling equipment for tanks and making amphibious vehicles watertight. Amphibious transports and ferries are loaded at this time. The first echelon, consisting primarily of tanks and infantry fighting vehicles and/or armored personnel carriers, moves to shore and, supported by antitank weapons and equipment, begins to cross.

The three-digit numbers on the graphic represent pre-designated target areas for friendly artillery. The enemy artillery has been designated for an air strike that will presumably

happen before the crossing begins. After the first echelon crosses the river, it destroys enemy units in the area (immediate objective) and continues to pursue enemy units and disrupt the enemy rear (subsequent objective); meanwhile, amphibious transports and ferries conduct operations to move the rest of the battalion elements across the river. After the immediate and subsequent objectives are achieved and a preponderance of supporting units arrive on the newly occupied side of the bank, the maneuver battalions move toward the direction of farther advance.

Endnote:

¹Aleksandr Anikeyenko, "The Battalion at a Crossing: From Experience of an Assault Crossing of a Water Obstacle by a Motorized Rifle (Tank) Subunit," *Armeyskiy Sbornik Online*, February 2007, <http://militera.lib.ru/periodic/0/a/armeyskiy-sbornik/as_2007-02.pdf>, accessed on 28 February 2018.

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