
Attacking in a City:

The Russian Motorized Rifle Battalion Approach

LTC (RETIRED) LESTER W. GRAU

Fighting large-scale conventional maneuver war in Europe will inevitably involve fighting in built-up areas and cities. Urban sprawl, transportation networks, geography, enemy occupation, and economic and political considerations often make bypassing built-up areas unrealistic. Yet, urban fighting is the antithesis of high-tempo sweeping advances, accurate intelligence, and responsive logistics. Russia and previously the Soviet Union have a great deal of experience in offensive urban operations: the good (Stalingrad 1943-1944, Minsk 1944, Vienna 1945, Prague 1968, Kabul 1979, Herat 1984, Baku 1988-1989, Grozny 1999-2000, Simferopol 2014); the bad (Kiev 1943, Warsaw 1944, Budapest 1944-1945, Berlin 1945, East Berlin 1953, Aleppo 2017); and the ugly (Budapest 1956, Grozny 1994-1995 and twice in 1996). In all cases, except for the 1996 battles for Grozny, they won the city fight.

The Russians prefer to take a city “on the bounce” (or “from the march” as they would put it). Grab a lodgment in the suburbs, move quickly into the city, seize the key parts before the enemy has a chance to establish a coordinated defense, establish local order and a garrison, and move on. Warfare does not always permit preferred scenarios. Often, the attacker will face a determined defense and will have to smash his way through block-by-block leaving smoking rubble in his wake. Resolving this artillery-intensive, time-intensive, logistics-intensive approach to urban combat does not come cheaply or easily. Local government, city services, emergency services, and law and order disappear. Disease and predation increase. Water and electrical power are sporadic. Food and gasoline distribution networks are out of commission. The civilians that remain demand food, medical attention, drinkable water, protection, and restitution for damages. The economy is in collapse. The military is expected to make everything right again, but it is the wrong instrument for the job. No wonder that an attack from the march is the preferred method.

Russia’s recent conflicts have been against bordering states for limited objectives or against guerrilla and local combatants. Yet, Russia emphasizes training for conventional maneuver war against a peer or near-peer adversary under nuclear-threatened conditions. Russia does not consider this as its most likely future conflict, but it is the most dangerous one as it threatens national integrity and even national survival. Russia would prefer not to fight in cities, but that option may not always be available. The January 2017 issue of *Army Digest* published the following article on urban combat at the motorized rifle [mechanized infantry] battalion level. It emphasizes taking the

city from the march but being prepared to revert to deliberate block-by-block combat if necessary.

Urban Assault — A Subtle Affair¹

As a rule, according to tactical precepts, seizing cities and other populated areas is conducted from the march. It begins with the destruction of the enemy in the outlying areas before entering the city. Then the motorized rifle battalion burrows its way into the city and advances without pause into its depths. If the attempt to seize the populated area from the march does not succeed, the senior commander may decide to conduct its encirclement or blockade. Then, following thorough preparation, begins the assault and seizes it by force.

In most instances, the motorized rifle battalion (MRB) will advance as part of a brigade (or regiment) along one or two main streets lined with adjacent city blocks with an area of responsibility of one-to-two kilometers of width. Each of its companies will be responsible for a street or the interior of a block. The MRB combat mission will be divided into an immediate mission and a further mission. The immediate mission will be to destroy enemy company strongpoints and often, to seize one or two city blocks. The further mission is to seize and hold an important objective within the depths of the city’s defenses.

As a rule, the MRB combat formation will be in two echelons. Storm groups will be formed to seize buildings that have been prepared for a defense and important objectives. Reinforced companies (and sometimes platoons) form storm groups. Furthermore, combat in subterranean passages may require specialized storm subgroups composed of reinforced platoons or squads.

During urban missions, the bulk of the attacking companies will be reinforced with fires from the grenade launcher and anti-tank platoons, the mortar battery, an artillery battalion (or batteries), tanks, and the flame thrower company. Anti-tank squads and a flamethrower platoon may be attached to companies. Tank movement is designed to cover advancing motorized rifle subunits.

Developing a successful advance in a city depends to a large extent on the reserve’s ability to accomplish the following missions: attack the enemy from another direction; assist the actions of the storm group; carry out the destruction of remaining enemy in positions bypassed by the storm groups; secure flanks; participate in securing the rear area; and perform other missions as needed.

Artillery plays a decisive role in seizing a city. It participates in the fire accompaniment of first echelon subunits, conducting suppressive and annihilation fires on enemy strong points on the approaches to the city and its outskirts. The tactical maneuver of artillery gun crews along with the subunits attacking in the city allows the consecutive shifting of fires against buildings and surroundings in the depth of the city and preventing the arrival of enemy reserves at areas under attack.

During the seizure of the outskirts of the city, which motorized rifle subunits accomplish under conditions of limited visibility (at night or under the cover of smoke and aerosols), and most often from the march, the MRB establishes a lodgment area in which to concentrate its forces and equipment designated to storm the city (populated area). Each platoon within a motorized rifle company is given a specific mission. Thus, "the leading motorized rifle platoon must seize this street to a depth of one city block (150-200

meters) and secure it. Further movement along it depends on the orders of the company commander depending on the developing situation and orders from higher. The second motorized rifle platoon will follow the lead platoon at a distance of 200-400 meters and, upon command, close up to it. Then pass through the first platoon and complete seizing the first block with the possibility of continuing on to seize the second."

There are two variants for how the third motorized platoon may move. First, trail the second platoon at a fairly close distance in order to destroy any remaining enemy and secure the route between the two lead platoons and the rear. Second, move together with the first platoon and, upon getting within direct fire range of the inhabited area (500-1,000 meters), stop and provide fire support to the first and second platoons.

In the event that tanks are employed, move them at the maximum possible speed, firing on the move at those enemy firing points that are discovered — usually in building basements or within the buildings.

When seizing the outskirts of a large inhabited area, it is expedient to do so simultaneously on a wide front, best of all, from three directions. This will aid in the seizure of several streets.

Depending on the situation, an enemy strongpoint may be taken by several approaches. One approach is to bypass a house that has been converted into a strongpoint and blockade it with motorized rifle personnel. Another approach is to destroy the house with artillery and engineers, and then a storm detachment or storm group will seize the house and clear it.

As a rule, supporting tanks moving along a street are echeloned in depth. Their formation varies and is a function of the situation. For example, on a street that is 50-60 meters wide, two or three tanks may move abreast, trailing 40-50 meters behind the tank ahead. They move in close coordination with their accompanying motorized rifle subunits which will destroy enemy firing points and personnel. Their priority target is enemy anti-tank gunners. One of the tank crews will conduct fire at the upper stories of buildings. Tanks coordinate with motorized rifle subunits through visual signals and marking fire. Radio communications are limited. The tanks begin an attack only after the motorized riflemen seize and hold the enemy anti-tank firing points.

In order to insure sufficient visibility for the tank crews, the tank subgroup leader fires at the upper floors of buildings and (when there are no fewer than two tanks in the first group) moves down the street, providing mutual support to each other. Figure 2 shows how a tank platoon observes and fires during street movement. The red dots are dismounted motorized riflemen securing the intersection and its corner

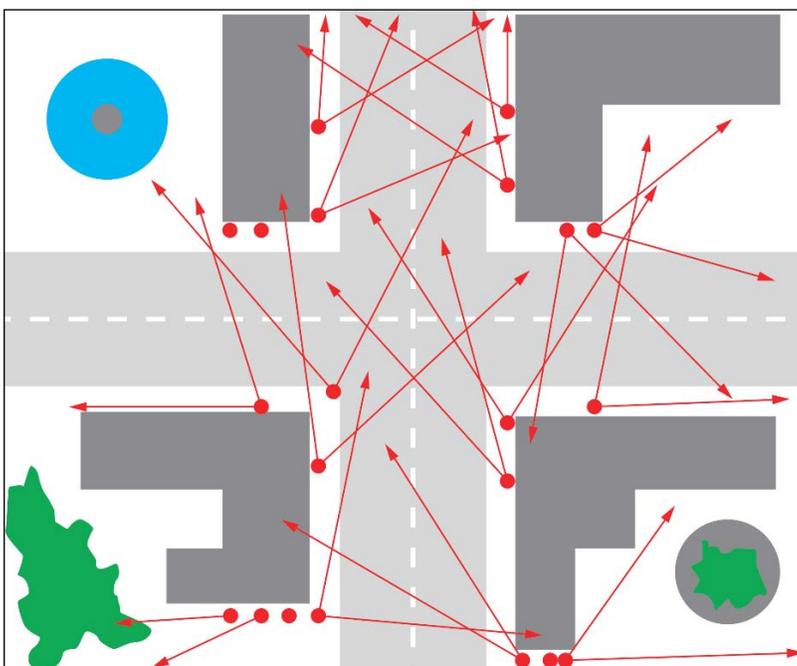


Figure 1 — Motorized Rifle Platoon on the Offense in Urban Area

This figure shows how a dismounted motorized rifle platoon may move through an urban area to seize a road intersection. Follow-on forces will clear the buildings if the enemy offers no apparent resistance. One squad moves along the left side of the street and the other moves along the right side. They hug the sides of the buildings and fire straight ahead and at the opposite sides of the street. The maneuver portion of the squad precedes the fire support portion. At the intersection, the maneuver portions of the lead squads move across the intersection and secure the intersection facings of their corner buildings. Their fire support portions secure their near side corner building facings. The third squad, with the platoon leader, moves behind the first two squads, split on both sides of the street. Once the lead squads seize the road intersection, the third squad secures the rear buildings' facings. This platoon has six-man dismounted squads with a platoon leader and senior sergeant (the vehicle driver and gunner/commander stay with the vehicle). Depending on its vehicles, it may have as many as nine-man dismounted squads. The platoon's infantry fighting vehicles or carriers may be in a follow and support role or part of a company bronnegruppa (mobile armored reserve).

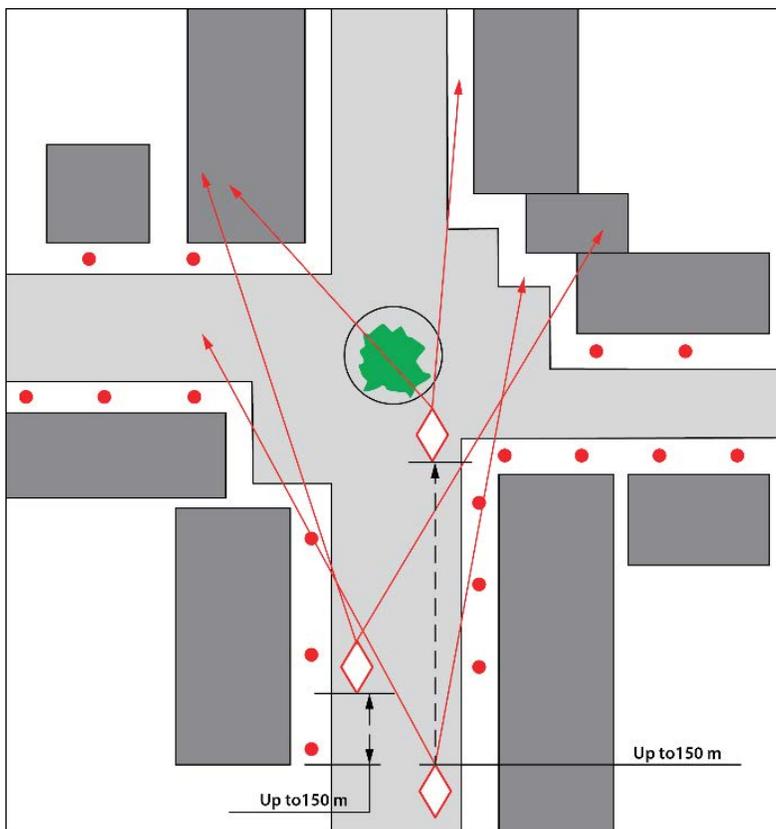


Figure 2 — Tank Platoon on the Offense in the Urban Area

buildings. The right tank fires forward and to the left. The left tank fires forward and to the right. [The platoon leader is in the rear tank].

Tanks cannot be used abreast when a street is narrower and the width of the passage is 7-15 meters wide. In this case, the lead tank platoon advances echeloned. The lead tank drives down the middle of the street and its crew only observes and fires forward. The second tank follows 20-30 meters behind, moving along the right side of the street. Its crew observes and fires at the upper stories of the buildings on the left side of the street. The third tank follows at about the same distance from the second moving along the left side of the street and fires at the upper stories of the buildings on the right side of the street.

In order to provide effective coordination and mutual fire support, the distance between the tanks and motorized riflemen must not exceed 50 meters. Dismounted combatants follow one-to-two meters behind and to the side of combat vehicles when it is necessary to work closely with them.

When advancing along the streets, tanks move behind motorized rifle subunits at a distance that guarantees their main gun and machine gun support (100-200 meters). The bulk of this force, when advancing with tanks along a street with a width of 50-60 meters and lined with large multi-storied buildings, conducts observation and fire against the upper stories from the opposite side of the street. The subunit does not move without checking its sides, particularly the

upper stories of buildings. Two or three soldiers in every motorized rifle squad have the job to observe the upper stories, basement entries, and other places where the enemy could have an ambush.

In those instances where the width of the street or boulevard exceeds 50-60 meters, observation and small arms fire is conducted on the same side of the street the motorized riflemen are advancing on.

In a populated area, the lead tanks move slowly, attacking one target and then another. The crews usually conduct stationary fire or come to a quick stop. Main gun fire is used against enemy positions on the ground and first floors of buildings.

Prior to combat in a city or population center, expedient preplanned missions are distributed among the tank platoons in a tank company. Thus, the lead tank platoon, together with motorized riflemen and sappers, will clear the street, tearing down barricades and other obstacles, destroying any forces covering the obstacles, and suppressing enemy firing points on both sides of the street. The following tank platoons, together with motorized rifle subunits, will destroy the remaining fragments of resistance.

In the event that one of the enemy firing points is located in a building that cannot be suppressed by tank main gun fire, the motorized riflemen will bypass the building, go through the courtyard passage, and make a hole in the wall to attack the enemy from the rear. Usually they will employ hand grenades in the process.

The third tank platoon follows the second, prepared to support the lead or second platoon by fire. If necessary, it will replace one of these platoons (due to serious losses or expenditure of onboard ammunition).

In a large populated area where the enemy is putting up a stubborn resistance, the attacking side will have to seize streets in stages — block by block — then fortifying them for its own use. In a lightly populated area, the attack will be conducted without a pause to seize the enemy outskirts.

When planning for an attack in a city, it is necessary to consider that the enemy will attempt to lure part of our [the Russian] tank force into a cul-de-sac or narrow passageway where he will have organized a fire sac and mine trap. Therefore, a reliable and knowledgeable local guide plays a significant role when working with the leading subunits.

In the course of forming up for a fight in a populated area, the tanks move to the line held by the motorized riflemen. There, they initiate a brief, aimed engagement of enemy firing positions and then withdraw out of the zone of return artillery and anti-tank grenade launcher fire. The tank crews observe the enemy fire and use intersection and data furnished by the motorized rifle subunit commander to pinpoint enemy firing points. Frequent fires from likely enemy

firing points are noted. In order to preclude an ambush, reconnaissance should also be directed against those city blocks and streets from where there has been no apparent resistance.

When moving into the outskirts of a populated area, the leading subunits will fortify their positions in order to defeat a possible enemy counterattack. Reconnaissance should be dispatched along the direction of the enemy withdrawal and the likely avenue of approach for his reserve.

Enemy defending a city block may make wide use of underground passages, and motorized rifle subunits must be ready to interdict these to prevent surprise sorties and counterattacks. Therefore, it is important to quickly secure the structures behind and on the flanks of our advancing force. Frequently during a high-tempo advance, these structures can be mined or blocked with obstacles.

There are several peculiarities involved in seizing a city square. The enemy may rapidly equip and fortify firing positions in the corner buildings from which he can conduct deadly crossfires against our forces. In this instance, if the rear area of our advancing force has not been cleared of the enemy, it is not prudent to conduct a massive attack against the central square of the city.² Instead, it is necessary to sequentially deploy separate groups to force the enemy from the corner buildings on one or both sides of the corner. Only after this can motorized rifle storm groups slowly advance and destroy the enemy located on the opposite side and along the entire perimeter of the square.

If the city square is not too large, the size of the force and resources needed to seize and liberate it from the enemy are reduced so that the advancing forces do not interfere with each other.

If the city square is good-sized, advance simultaneously on combat vehicles along several streets to the corner buildings under artillery and mortar fire and storm the buildings. After destroying the centers of resistance in these buildings and clearing obstructions, the tanks may depart on a new road.

When fighting in smaller towns and hamlets, it is expedient to use a more advantageous form of maneuver-flanking or surrounding successive enemy blockades. In this event, the subunits combat formation is designed to continue the attack into the depths of the enemy defenses — from one outskirt to the other.

When using a frontal attack in a small town, tanks envelop enemy defensive points from the flanks, taking advantage of courtyards and gardens. Constitute a two-to-three tank reserve when confronted with a barricade that the enemy has built to block the road. These tanks will fire from a stationary position to break the defense and allow the main force of the attacking group to pass over it.

When in an enemy-held city, the MRB commander should constitute a covering force (or guard posts) to cover his flanks and turn back enemy counterattacks. It can also be

used to seal off a single fortified building, permitting his main force to continue the offensive.

In the event that the MRB is designated as a storm detachment, it is reinforced with tanks, artillery, mortars, flamethrowers, sappers, and NBC troops. This battalion must be supported with demolition charges, aerosol [smoke and thermobaric], and flame weapons. A forward air controller may be attached to the command post.

As a rule, when organizing an advance into a city, use the following guide when forming a storm detachment [reinforced motorized rifle battalion]: two-to-three storm groups [reinforced companies], reserve, covering force, fire support group, an obstacle removal group, a demolition group, a command group, a consolidation group, a convoy group, a specialized group, and an air-assault group. Recommend that this grouping be further organized into subgroups: seizure (storm), support (fire), consolidation, reserve, an observation subgroup, and specialized subgroups.

Depending on the complexity of movement in restricted spaces, basements, and underground passages, the commander may constitute specialized subgroups for subsurface reconnaissance, capture of basement factories, depots, storehouses, and other facilities. Often, such specialized subgroups, using subterranean passages, could move into the enemy rear and attack him from the flank and rear. Further, the activities of such specialized subgroups could be directed to seize an important objective in the path of the main body. Depending on the mission, the subgroups' composition may incorporate various military specialties.

Storm groups are formed to seize buildings (the objective of the attack) or parts of buildings. They are constituted from reinforced motorized rifle companies or occasionally motorized rifle platoons.

The reinforcement of the storm groups or of the covering force is at the expense of the reserve. The reserve's mission is to develop success and also to fulfill other unexpected missions that arise. The reserve for a storm detachment [motorized rifle battalion] is up to a motorized rifle platoon.

The covering force enables the advancing force to consolidate on the objective.

The fire support group uses its weapons to secure the movement of the storm group [motorized rifle company - MRC].

The obstacle removal group has the mission of opening passages through minefields, clearing obstacles in front of enemy positions, creating gaps in walls that protect the assault's objective, demining buildings and other points in the attack zone, and fulfilling other missions as assigned. The engineer-sapper subunit is included in its composition.

The seizure subgroup, as a rule, is usually a motorized rifle platoon or squad. Its mission is to destroy the enemy at the objective and seize the building. Flamethrower gunners may be included in this subgroup.

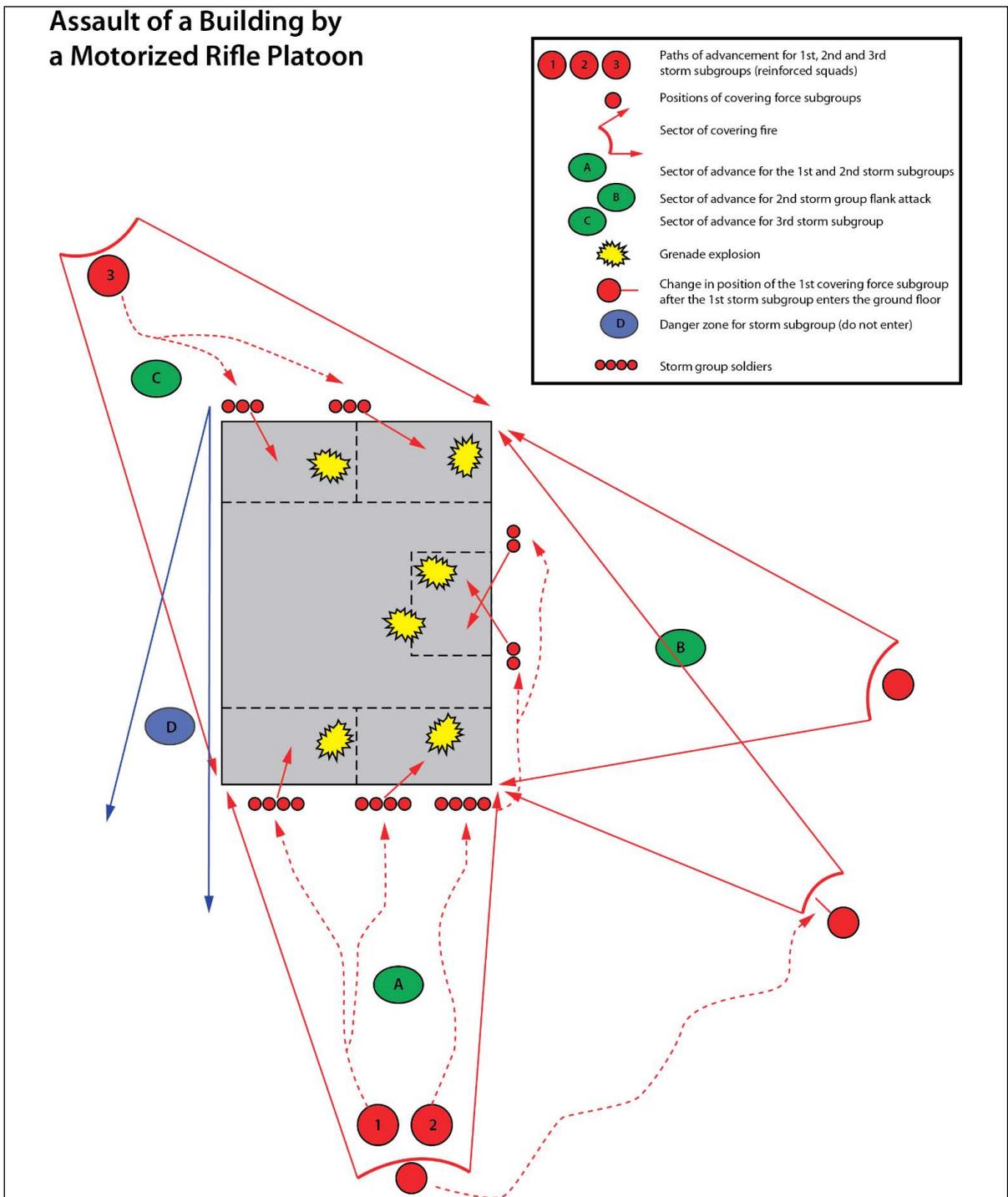


Figure 3 — Assault of a Building by a Motorized Rifle Platoon

Figure 3 shows a dismounted motorized rifle platoon's takedown of an enemy-occupied building. The platoon leader initially deploys two covering force groups to provide fire against the eastern front of the building and its southern flank. The covering force may include attached AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers, RPO flame thrower gunners with thermobaric rounds, and organic BMP IFVs with their 100mm gun, 30mm automatic cannon, and 7.62mm machine guns. The 1st and 2nd motorized rifle squads occupy assault positions on the southern approach to the building. The 3rd squad has moved behind the building (hopefully unobserved) and taken up an assault position facing the northwest corner of the building (green oval C). The 3rd squad provides its own covering force out of hide.

The 1st and 2nd motorized rifle squads initiate an assault against the southern flank shown by green oval A. When reaching the building, the squads throw grenades into the windows and the first squad climbs through the windows to take the ground floor rooms. The 3rd squad advances against the northern flank of the building, throws grenades through the windows, and enters the northern facing rooms.

As soon as the 1st squad enters the southern rooms, its covering force deploys to a position where it can add to the fire of the eastern covering force in green oval C. Under their combined fires, the 2nd squad moves along the building eastern facing, take sides beside the door, throws in grenades, and enters the building. Inside the building, the platoon systematically clears the basement and upper floors, usually marking its progress by hanging colored panels outside the windows.

The command subgroup coordinates the movement of the seizure subgroup and other elements (subunits) of the combat formation.

The subgroups of the fire support group participate in suppressing enemy weapons and personnel while supporting the storm groups' [MRCs] rapid advances. The subgroups include subunits of tanks, BMPs (BTRs), artillery, mortars, automatic grenade launchers, anti-tank, and flame throwers.

Recommend that the storm group detachment [MRB] include a command group, a consolidation group, a convoy group, a specialized group, and an air assault group.

The command group consists of the MRB command group and signal platoon, plus representatives of the various branches and services reinforcing the storm group.

The consolidation group establishes control of the buildings and objectives, checking documents and preventing penetration through doors, porches, attics, cellars, and underground passages by the opposition.

The convoy group conveys detained enemy soldiers and local inhabitants to the filtration camps where their identity and possible connections with the enemy will be determined.

Fire support is prepared in accordance with the plan of the senior commander for combat in the city or populated area.

The storm groups [MRCs] are provided an increased amount of ammunition, hand and illumination grenades, smoke, incendiary, and signal devices and other gear suited for overcoming obstacles and storming buildings.

The movement of a storm detachment [MRB] begins at the designated time from an assembly area which was selected as close as possible to the attack objective. Upon the given signal, the fire support groups begin to fire to destroy the enemy in the objective building and its neighboring buildings. The attack groups move to their objectives through holes in the walls and passageways. Moving under the cover of fire support groups and an aerosol screen [thermobaric strikes or smoke], the groups burst onto their objectives. The attack develops quickly as the attack groups increase their rates of fire to maximum against the enemy, then throw hand grenades. After the grenades explode, they resume full automatic fire, then move forward under the covering fire of their comrades, and again throw hand grenades...

In the ideal situation, the reserve will already be moving into a nearby building that was just cleared.

Once the battalion has met its immediate mission, it continues against the next buildings and blocks. The covering force and reserve mop up the remaining points of resistance and small groups of enemy. Captured buildings and street intersections are controlled by the covering force. Exits from subterranean passages are secured or destroyed.

In modern times, the attack in a city remains one of the most complex missions. It demands thorough preparation

for combat and skillful leadership of the attacking forces against an enemy defending in a populated area.

Conclusion

Russian urban combat tactics have changed since the days of the Soviet Union. Now infantry precedes tanks down the street by some 100-200 meters to protect the tanks from anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) fire. If tanks move forward to fight alongside the infantry, the distance between the tanks and motorized riflemen does not exceed 50 meters. Then dismounted infantry follow one-to-two meters behind and to the side of combat vehicles when it is necessary to work closely with them. There is a much greater emphasis on subterranean combat, and the Russians have created a new subterranean training facility at their Ryazan training area.

There is now a greater emphasis on organizing groups and subgroups within the storm detachment (reinforced motorized rifle battalion) and storm group (reinforced motorized rifle company) before the engagement. Artillery and flame has always played a key role, but the Russian introduction of thermobaric multiple rocket launcher systems and shoulder-fired thermobaric "bunker-busters" have added a powerful dimension to urban fire support. Improved load-bearing equipment and body armor enhance the dismounted soldiers' ability and survivability. Refueling tanks and Infantry fighting vehicles forward during a prolonged urban fight remains a problem, as does resupply and casualty evacuation using wheeled vehicles. Radio communications are problematic and much is still done through hand and arm signals and surface wire. FM communications within an urban fight often require supplemental retransmission systems. Internet may be one of the first casualties during a city fight. No one wants to fight in a city, but the infantryman does not often get a choice. Russia is not neglecting to prepare its force for the city fight.

Notes

¹ D. Epifanov, "Штурм города - Дело тонкое" [Urban assault – a subtle affair], Армейский сборник [Army Digest], January 2017, 25-30.

² Older European and Russian cities have a large central square that is flanked by key government, religious, civic and commercial buildings. The city square is the physical and cultural center of the city. During the initial battle for Grozny, the Russian Army fought to seize the Central Square and Presidential Palace from 31 December 1994 to 19 January 1995. After weeks of heavy artillery fire and ground assaults, precision-guided nine-ton bunker buster bombs demolished the palace and decided the issue.

LTC (Retired) Lester W. Grau, PhD, is a retired Infantryman who earned his Combat Infantryman Badge (CIB) in South Vietnam and is a long-time contributor to *Infantry Magazine*. He served as an Infantryman and Soviet Foreign Area Officer with four tours in Europe, a posting in Moscow, and a tour in South Korea. His first published article was "MOUT and the Soviet Motorized Rifle Battalion" published in *Infantry* in January-February 1985. The first Russian book he read from cover-to-cover was *The Combat Actions of a Motorized Rifle Battalion in the City*. He has since published some 200 articles including 21 on urban combat. He also has 14 books to his credit. Thanks to Chuck Bartles for redoing the illustrations for this article.
