

# The Russian Breakthrough Tactical Group

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As the experience of military conflicts of recent decades shows, the Russian military believes that subunits are most effective when they deploy in a combined arms tactical group. These combined arms groups usually form within a ground forces' motorized rifle battalion or company, or similar subunits of other branches of the armed forces (airborne troops, naval infantry), combat arms, and spetsnaz. The training and coordination of these tactical groups, and their integration with branches of arms and combined arms formations, are the main efforts of combat training in the Southern Military District (SMD), according to Rafail Nasybulin, the chief of SMD's Combat Training Directorate.<sup>1</sup> Although the battalion tactical group (BTG) is the most well-known of these combined arms tactical groups, this article describes a new type of combined arms tactical group that is being developed in the SMD — the breakthrough tactical group [тактическая группа прорыва].

## Purpose of the Breakthrough Tactical Group

Russian studies of modern warfare show a trend of combined arms combat transitioning from large groupings of forces opposing one another along continuous front lines to a "fragmented battlefield" with smaller groupings of forces employing strong points and more mobile actions. The lessons of Afghanistan, Syria, and the wars in the Persian Gulf show that the main methods of combat are the achievement of surprise, high mobility and maneuverability, the skillful use of air assault detachments (TakVD) [тактических воздушных десантов (ТакВД)], and raiding [рейдовых] and bypassing [обходящих] units. When these methods combine, they lead to the sound defeat of the enemy.

Due to the political-military situation in the SMD's area of responsibility, which includes Georgia and Ukraine, the district's training directorate focused on the development of methods to increase the mobility of its combined arms formations. Given the area of responsibility's terrain and limited routes of advance, the nature of the enemy's defensive capabilities,

and the minimal air defense capabilities, conditions favor the use of air assault detachments.<sup>2</sup>

The effectiveness of TakVD significantly increases if the main body is able to expediently reach the area that the TakVD has seized. Therefore, the motorized rifle and tank units of the main body train to advance rapidly, by way of tactical road marches, to access the flanks and rear of the enemy.

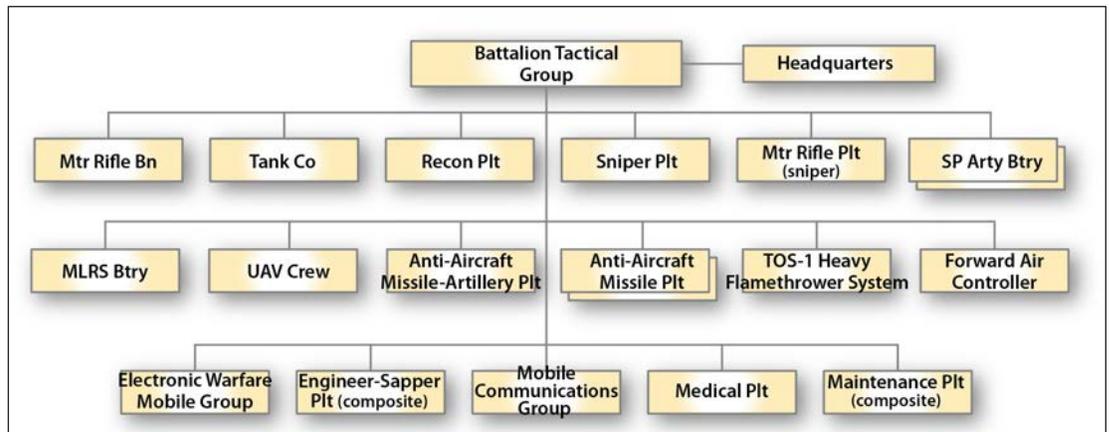
While on the march, the main body must proceed through rugged terrain and obstacles, and since the number of routes are limited, the enemy can create serious knots of resistance and strong points on certain axes. In certain situations, it may not be possible to bypass these areas. In these situations, tactical groups that operate autonomously, separated from the main forces, will have to break through the well-prepared enemy defenses in these areas. It is important to note that the concept is not to break through a traditional positional defense; it is to breach obstacles and/or strong points on a given route of advance.

In furtherance of this concept, motorized rifle and tank units of the SMD are improving their tactical road march skills; practicing with heliborne TakVD; raiding and bypassing detachments to seize and hold designated routes, areas, and/or critical targets; and breaking through enemy defenses and exploiting successes. Specially trained BTGs handle these tasks.<sup>3</sup>

## Composition of the Breakthrough Tactical Group

At present, each motorized rifle regiment and brigade of the SMD has created and trained one breakthrough BTG

Figure 1 — Structure of a Battalion Tactical Group (Variant)<sup>4</sup>



and one exploitation BTG.<sup>5</sup> This is an interesting development as Russian motorized rifle regiments and brigades usually have two BTGs. Typically, these BTGs are “BTG No1” and “BTG No2.” In theory, these BTGs should have similar capabilities and be equal in terms of quality and readiness, but in practice BTG No1 is usually qualitatively and quantitatively better than BTG No2. If other military districts adopt this system, determining if a BTG is of the “breakthrough” or “exploitation” variety will become important, as these BTGs will have different capabilities.

The breakthrough BTG is the basis of the breakthrough tactical group (BrTG) which the deputy battalion commander commands. The BrTG usually includes a tank company (minus two tank platoons) with a motorized rifle platoon, a motorized rifle platoon (sniper) from the sniper rifle company, a roving mortar, a BM-21 multiple launch rocket system (MLRS), a TOS-1 heavy flamethrower system, a composite engineer-sapper platoon, and other forces as required.

The breakthrough tactical group consists of several functional subgroups:

**Strike Subgroup** - tank company (minus two tank platoons) and motorized rifle platoon

**Fire Support Subgroup** - BM-21 “Grad” MLRS, UR-77 “Meteorit” mine-clearing line charge vehicle (without drag line) [без тормозного каната], TOS-1 “Buratino” heavy flamethrower system<sup>6</sup>

**Minesweeping Subgroup** - tank platoon with KMT-7/KMT-8 trawlers<sup>7</sup>

**Sniper Team** - motorized rifle platoon (sniper)

**First Sniper Pair** - This pair does not normally destroy targets but instead conducts observation and target designation. These snipers typically report information to the commander of the motorized rifle platoon (sniper), who is collocated with the commander of the BrTG at the command and observation post (COP). Other sniper pairs destroy detected targets upon assignment. The pairs are both equipped with an OPR-3 range finder, VSS Vintorez sniper rifle, and SVD sniper rifle.

**Second Sniper Pair** - This pair is intended to destroy targets at short-range distances of up to 1,000 meters. The pair consists of a senior sniper and sniper. The senior sniper is equipped with an SV-98 or SVDM (7.62mm) sniper rifle, while the sniper has a SVD rifle, and both have a VSS sniper rifle as a secondary weapon.

**Third Sniper Pair** - This pair destroys targets at medium

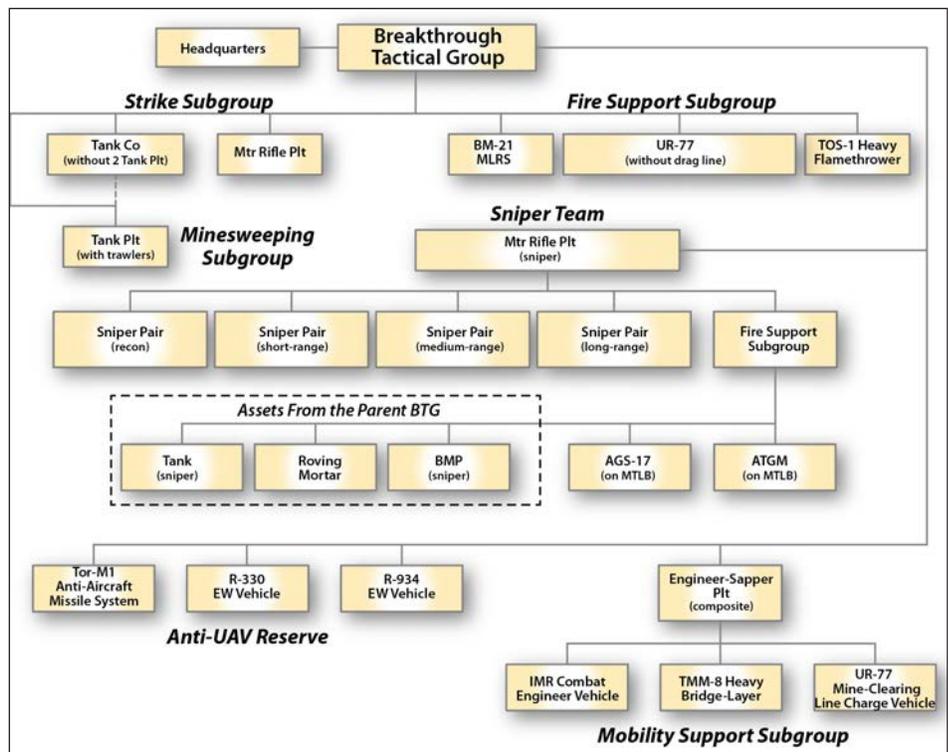


Figure 2 — Structure of a Breakthrough Tactical Group (Variant)<sup>8</sup>

range of up to 1,500 meters. The senior sniper is equipped with a ASVK or ASVKM (12.7mm) sniper rifle, while the sniper has a SVD rifle, and both have a VSS sniper rifle as a secondary weapon.

**Fourth Sniper Pair** - This pair destroys targets at long ranges of 1,500-1,800 meters. The senior sniper is equipped with an ASVKM (12.7mm) sniper rifle, while the sniper has a SVD rifle, and both have a VSS sniper rifle as a secondary weapon.

**Fire Support Subgroup** - AGS-17 “Plamya” automatic grenade launcher on MT-LB Russian amphibious armored personnel carrier, antitank guided missile (ATGM) on MT-LB, roving mortar (from the BTG), “sniper” tank (from the BTG), and “sniper” BMP (from the BTG)<sup>9</sup>

**Mobility Support Subgroup** - composite engineer-sapper platoon with IMR combat engineer vehicle, TMM heavy bridge-layer vehicle, and another UR-77 Meteorit mine-clearing line charge vehicle (with drag line)

**Anti-UAV Reserve** - If the enemy has a UAV capability, an anti-UAV reserve [противобеспилотный резерв (ПБПрез)] might form, consisting of a 9K33M3 Osa-AKM (SA-8 Gecko) or 9K331 Tor-M1 (SA-15 Gauntlet) anti-aircraft missile system, and R-330 “Zhitel” and R-934 BMW electronic warfare vehicles.

The source material describing the BrTG explicitly states that a few assets — such as the sniper tank, sniper BMP, and roving mortar — come from the parent BTG, while it suggests most other assets come from the parent regiment/brigade. The source material was ambiguous about the origins of the tank units and the motorized rifle platoon in the

strike subgroup; these assets are most likely drawn from the parent BTG but could be drawn from elsewhere within the parent regiment/brigade.

One interesting aspect of the BrTG is the use of the TOS-1 Buratino heavy flamethrower system. The TOS-1 is not organic to Russian maneuver regiments/brigades but is only in the NBC (nuclear, biological, chemical) defense regiments of the combined arms armies or the NBC defense brigades that report directly to the military districts. Given the Russian propensity to “push” these systems down to lower echelons, apparently Russian planners assume the TOS-1 will be available.<sup>10</sup>

**Employment of the Breakthrough Tactical Group**

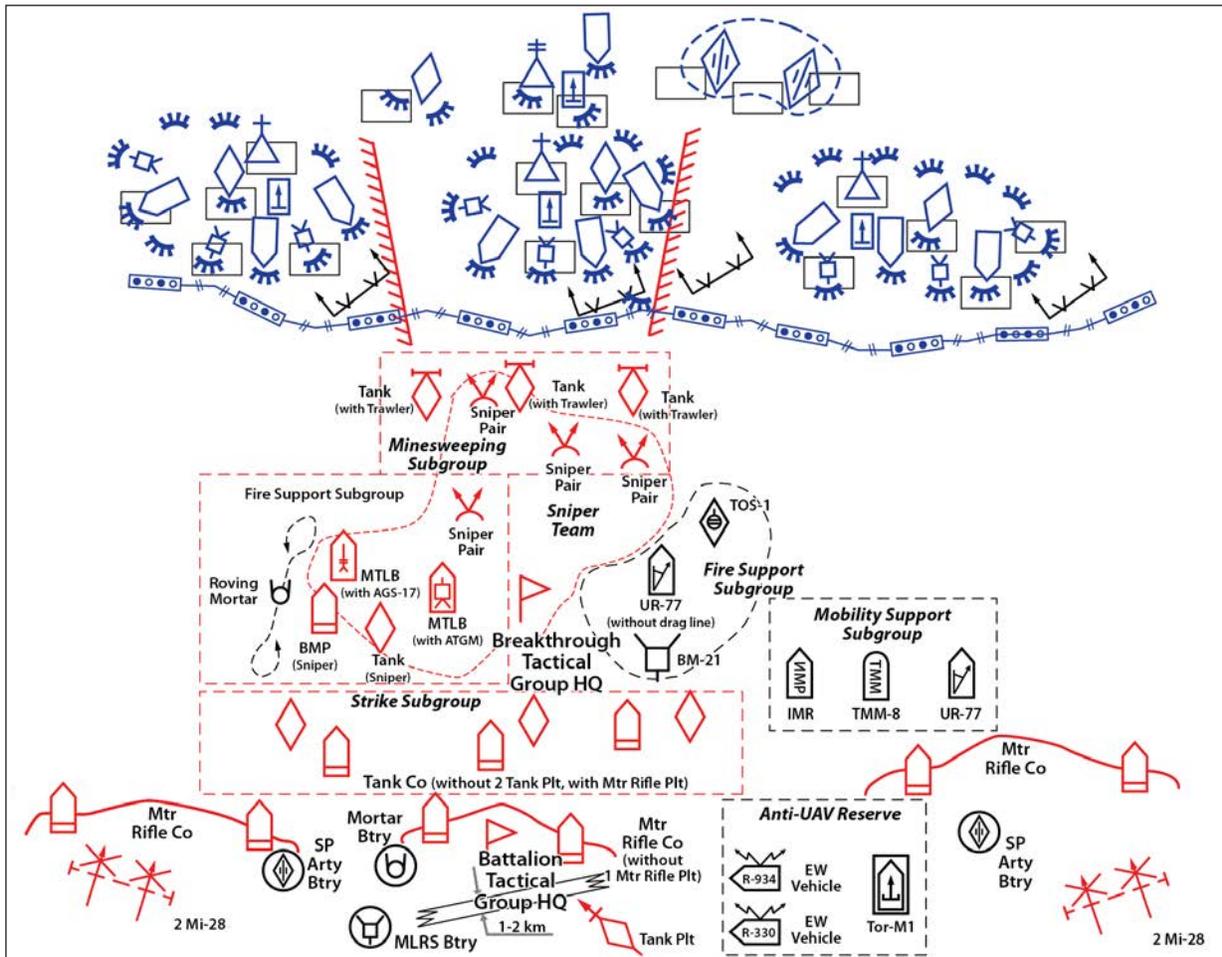
Theoretically, the breakthrough tactical group functions in the following manner. At the appointed time, the BTG artillery and the BrTG howitzer and mortar battery begin preparatory fires to start the offensive. If the expected resistance is stiff, the artillery of the parent regiment/brigade also may participate, as well as any available aviation assets. The mortar battery focuses on suppressing forward enemy dispositions, while the anti-unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) reserve disrupts enemy reconnaissance and strike capabilities. After suppressing the enemy’s forward elements, the sniper team and the minesweeping subgroup rapidly advance from their

initial positions, usually at a distance of up to six kilometers from the front line of the enemy’s defense to the minefield. The minesweeping subgroup deploys in combat formation on a front of up to 300 meters.

The other subgroups of the BrTG support the minesweeping subgroup’s advance and obstacle clearance. The sniper team advances covertly (if possible) and finds advantageous firing positions for its sniper rifles, antitank systems, and automatic grenade launcher. The sniper tank and sniper BMP emplace to destroy enemy antitank and other direct fire weapons, primarily tanks and ATGM crews. During periods of time when artillery and/or aviation strikes are not being conducted, the fire support subgroup (BM-21, TOS-1, UR-77) can lay semi-direct fires on targets as they are detected.

After the minesweeping subgroup reaches the minefield, launched smoke grenades conceal the tanks during mine-sweeping. At this time, the strike subgroup rapidly advances, engaging detected targets. Typically, the strike subgroup deploys in a combat formation of two lines, with the tank platoon on the first line and the motorized rifle platoon on the second. The front of the combat formation extends to 300 meters, with a distance between the lines of up to 200 meters. As the strike subgroup approaches the safe fire line

**Figure 3 — Combat Formation of a Breakthrough Tactical Group (Variant)<sup>11</sup>**



(up to 200 meters from the forward edge), artillery and/or aviation fires are shifted to suppress targets deeper in the enemy rear.

After the minesweeping concludes, the minesweeping subgroup provides covering fire and then joins the combat formation of the strike subgroup. This reinforced strike subgroup advances towards and through the remainder of the enemy defense. After destroying the enemy's strong points, the breakthrough expands towards the flanks. This result creates favorable conditions for the deployment of the BTG, which will then rapidly advance to exploit breach.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Although Colonel Nasybulin's article was published in May 2022, he likely drafted his article well before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. If the SMD has adopted this tactical concept, it will take considerable time to fully indoctrinate and train the force on its employment.

That said, a hindsight look at Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine might reveal that some BrTGs fought. It is important to again note that the BrTG is not intended to penetrate or "breakthrough" a strong positional defense; it is designed for route clearance of a contested avenue of approach, such as a hasty defense, or a defense conducted by irregular troop formations, such as territorial defense units. If Russia did employ BrTGs in the early days of the conflict, it may be due to them expecting a nonexistent, or much weaker, defense than was encountered.

Although Nasybulin is discussing a tactical concept of using a breakthrough unit to relieve a TakVD in the Russian Ground Forces, perhaps this concept was attempted operationally. The seizure of the Hostomel airport on the first day of the invasion might have been an operational employment of TakVD (conducted by Russia's airborne force — the VDV). The mission of the Northern Group of Russian forces assaulting from Belarus might have been to conduct their relief by breakthrough. If this was the Russian vision of the operation, Russia's inability to retain Hostomel was not due to the VDV's failure to reinforce their initial successful seizure but was due to the failure of the Northern Group of Russian forces (primarily Ground Forces) to "breakthrough" and relieve the VDV. As details of the special military operation surface, understanding of these matters will certainly increase. Even if the breakthrough tactical groups fought and were generally unsuccessful, the overall concept may still be valid and just need further refinement.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Colonel Rafail R. Nasybulin, "Изыскание и освоение новых (нестандартных) способов боевых действий в ходе подготовки войск [Research and mastery of new (nonstandard) approaches to military actions in the course of training forces], *Военная Мысль [Military Thought]*, May 2022, 70-75, <https://vm.ric.mil.ru/upload/site178/6bDZRSvP0q.pdf>. Colonel Nasybulin is the chief of the Combat Training Directorate of the Southern Military District. His superior, General Aleksandr Dvornikov, was chief of the Southern Military District — the main effort during the initial Russian "special operation" in the Ukraine and is now the CINC of the Russian "special operation." General Dvornikov is a major supporter of the BTG concept. This article proposes a different approach to the failed Russian breakthrough to

the encircled VDV (Russian airborne) at the Hostomel airport on the first day of the invasion of Ukraine. This article may have been in the publisher's queue or written afterward in response to the Northern Group of Forces' failure to reinforce the initial airborne success.

<sup>2</sup> An air assault detachment is usually a reinforced motorized rifle company or battalion. In the offense, it fights in high-tempo situations to seize designated targets. In the defense, it rapidly inserts into an area, usually in the second echelon, that the enemy has penetrated. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics and Modernization of the Ground Forces*, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/hot%20spots/documents/russia/2017-07-the-russian-way-of-war-grau-bartles.pdf>, 45, 141.

<sup>3</sup> Nasybulin, 71.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. Although not explicitly stated, the structure of this BTG is slightly different from most others, notably the inclusion of an extra self-propelled artillery battery, air defense missile battery, and TOS-1 heavy flamethrower. Likely, these augmented capabilities are due to the BTG designation as a "breakthrough BTG."

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* This article does not discuss the exploitation BTG. Hopefully this will be a future article by Colonel Nasybulin.

<sup>6</sup> If the UR-77 or UR-83 mine-clearing line charge systems are used without a brake (drag) line, they can reportedly launch up to 1,000 meters with the use of two propellant charges, and 12 explosive sections. With the dragline, the distance is 90 meters. The TOS-1 is a limited range MRLS that projects flame or a thermobaric charges.

<sup>7</sup> KMT-7 and KMT-8 are heavy mine rollers pushed ahead of a tank to detonate mines.

<sup>8</sup> Nasybulin, 72.

<sup>9</sup> Sniper tank and sniper BMP are normally the vehicles of the top gunner in each category.

<sup>10</sup> Nasybulin, 73.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

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