

LIEUTENANT PAUL H. VIVIAN

FIGHTING
IN

afghanistan



Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979, Western military observers have speculated on the nature of the tactics the Soviets have employed in that campaign. Most Western observers argue that the fighting in Afghanistan presents the Soviet forces with a special challenge. Since virtually the entire Soviet army is equipped and trained for conflict on the plains of Europe, combat in the mountains of Afghanistan is bound to test strenuously Soviet equipment, tactical doctrine, and men.

While it is difficult to piece together what is happening in Afghanistan without being on the scene or without access to photo or signal intelligence, it is still possible to glean some hints from open sources. One such source is the Soviet magazine, *Voennyi vestnik* (Military Herald), a monthly journal concerned primarily with company and platoon tactics, which is published by the Soviet General Staff.

It was an incident of some note, then, when in February and March 1980, just two and three months respectively after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, *Voennyi vestnik* published two articles on the tactics used by Soviet airborne units in mountainous terrain. This is especially significant because among the key units involved in the invasion of Afghanistan was the Soviet 105th Airborne Division together with units of the 103d and 104th Airborne Divisions.

Several other articles appeared in *Voennyi vestnik* during 1980 that, while not concerned exclusively with the tactics of airborne units, were devoted nonetheless to tactics in mountainous regions. To the casual Western eye, these articles do not appear to be concerned with Afghanistan. Indeed, they ostensibly refer to World War II or to training exercises. But such is typical Soviet practice; they often try to obscure an issue by talking indirectly about it.

No doubt all the articles that appear in *Voennyi vestnik* are carefully chosen. Not too surprisingly, they describe victories and not defeats, and they emphasize the positive over the negative. Even so, a close study of them can be of value to a Western observer; at least he can get some idea of what aspects of Soviet tactical doctrine are most successful. Such articles also give the reader an idea of some of the capabilities of the Soviet army as well as the problems it faces. (Most of these observations may be considered valid provided the reader is also aware of the use of the "disinformation" process by many Soviet authors.)

Of the several articles that have appeared in *Voennyi vestnik* since 1979 on fighting in mountainous terrain, one in particular warrants close analysis. Written by Guards Captain B. Koziulin and officially entitled "A Company Seizes a Command Point," the article describes a classic encounter between an airborne company and what was quite likely only a guerrilla outpost.

The protagonist of the article is Guards Senior Lieutenant Iu. Podkovanov, who is identified as the commander of the 2d Airborne Company of an unidentified battalion, regiment, and division. The major characteristic of the operation described was that it took

place at an altitude of 506 meters, in what the Soviets classify as a low mountainous region.

The operation properly began the evening before the company was to be deployed when Lieutenant Podkovanov received his operations order. He was instructed to seize and destroy a command point and aircraft early warning center located approximately 20 kilometers southeast of the city of Grigor'evka (a pseudonym?). Once he accomplished that task, he was to rendezvous with the main body of his parent battalion at an undisclosed location. According to the available intelligence reports, the objective was defended by a reinforced motorized rifle platoon. Moreover, the enemy was deemed capable of reinforcing his positions within 50 to 60 minutes after becoming aware of an enemy's presence. To help him accomplish his mission, Lieutenant Podkovanov's company of three platoons was to be reinforced with a detachment of sappers. Finally, he was told that his unit must jump and be on its drop zone (DZ) by 0700 the next morning.

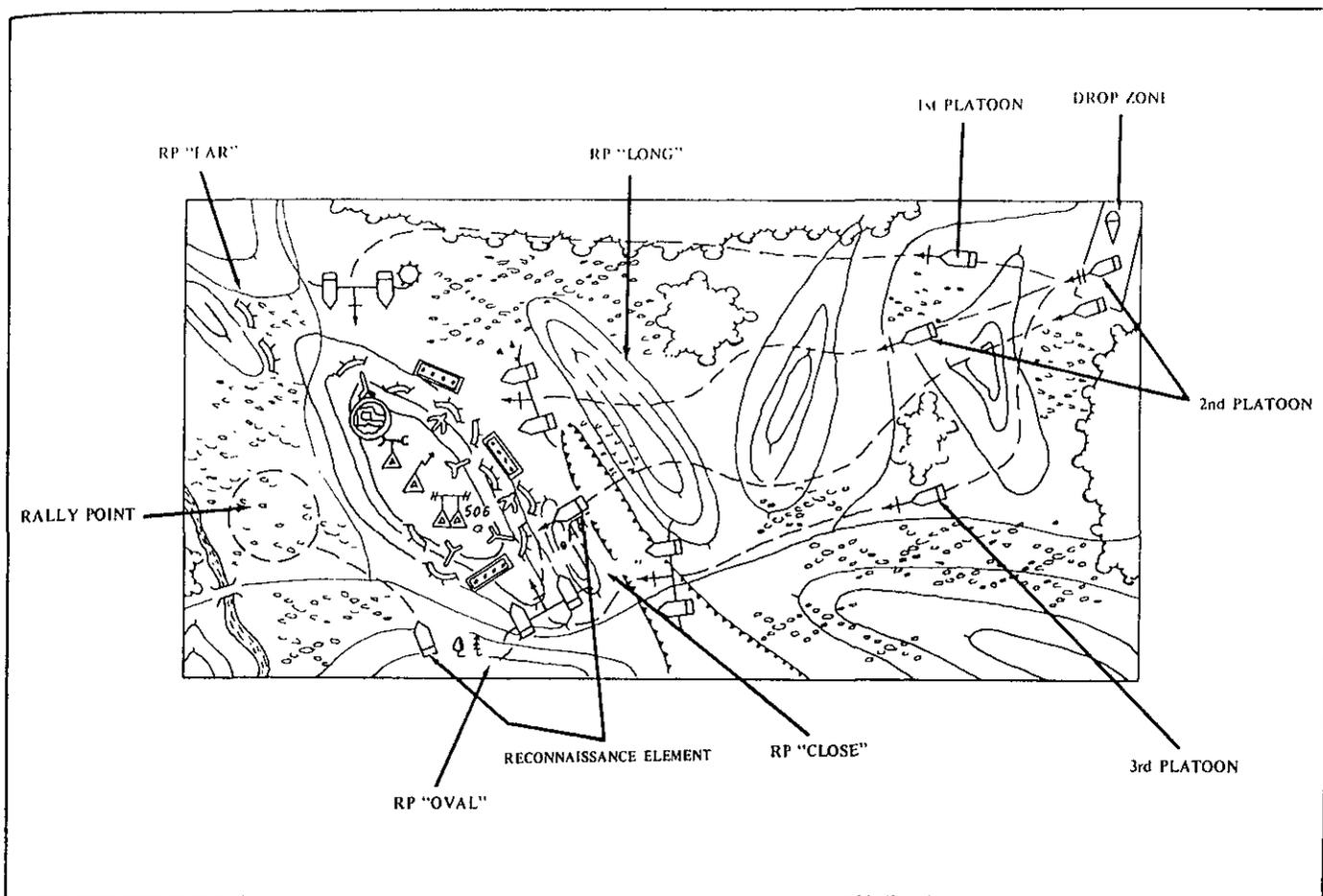
ANALYSIS

Lieutenant Podkovanov's first step was to study aerial photographs of the enemy's command point and to conduct a map analysis of the terrain around the objective. Apparently, judging from the aerial photographs, Lieutenant Podkovanov determined that all avenues of approach were covered by at least some defending fires and seemed to be mined as well. The eastern slope of the command point was the best defended with machineguns and light antiarmor weapons. Bearing in mind the principle of surprise and the fact that the objective could be quickly reinforced, Lieutenant Podkovanov determined that it was essential for his unit's drop zone to be close to its objective. Consequently, he selected an area northeast of the command point as the DZ. The terrain between the objective and the DZ was hilly and would help to conceal his unit's approach to the objective.

After selecting his drop zone, Podkovanov then worked out the details of his attack. He decided to attack simultaneously from the north, east, and south. He also selected as his rally point a clump of trees to the west of the objective. Once the company regrouped, it was to proceed to its rendezvous with the rest of the battalion.

An intriguing question arises at this point in the article. BMDs, armored fighting vehicles specially designed for airborne units, were used in the operation. The article is explicit on this point. But when was the decision made to employ BMDs in the operation? Was the decision in the original operations order, or did the company commander, Lieutenant Podkovanov, make the decision? Perhaps the use of BMDs is such a standard part of the Soviet's operation doctrine that their use was assumed. Unfortunately, this question must be left unanswered.

When his operations planning was completed, Lieutenant Podkovanov summoned his platoon leaders. He gave them his operations order, maps, and aerial photographs



and showed them a sand table of the enemy's command point.

According to Podkovanov's operations order, the 1st Platoon, after landing and regrouping, was to serve as the company's right flank and move westward to the burial mound north of the objective (see map). At this point, the 1st Platoon was to deploy from its march column and attack up the northwest slope of the objective. Once on the objective, the platoon was to position itself so as to prevent the approach of enemy reserves from Grigor'evka.

The 2d Platoon, with its attached section of sappers, was to serve as the center of the company and after landing and regrouping was to move directly westward using the hollow as best it could for cover and concealment. Upon reaching the northern extremity of the hollow, the 2d Platoon was to deploy from its march column and attack up the eastern slope of the command point.

The 3d Platoon, minus one squad, after landing and regrouping, was to serve as the left flank of the company. It was to travel westward up to the point code-named "Close," from which it was to swing northward and attack up the southern slope of the command point. The 3d Platoon, like the 1st and 2d Platoons, received instructions not only to seize the objective but to destroy all objects and equipment on it.

A key role in the operation was given to the detached squad of the 3d Platoon. This squad, together with two attached engineer elements, was to carry out a reconnaissance from the drop zone to "Close" and then along the southwestern slope of the command point. After the

command point had been seized and destroyed, this squad was to be prepared to move out to the bridge that crossed the river "Fast." The squad's primary responsibility, however, was to watch for the approach of any enemy reinforcements.

Lieutenant Podkovanov emphasized to every platoon leader that it was vital for the company to conduct its approach, reconnaissance, and attack within 30 minutes.

Finally, before dismissing his platoon leaders, Lieutenant Podkovanov issued signal information. The signals for the attack would be the word "Thunder" on the radio and a green flare; when the objective was prepared for destruction the signals would be "Lightning" and a red flare; the destruction of the objective would be "River" with a white flare; and the latter would also be the signal to evacuate the objective.

Presumably the rest of the evening was spent briefing the airborne troopers, checking equipment, and tying up any remaining loose ends.

THE ATTACK

The next morning at the appointed time, 0700, Lieutenant Podkovanov's 2d Airborne Company carried out its planned jump. Immediately upon landing, the reconnaissance element under the command of Guard Sergeant V. Leonov left the drop zone and proceeded to "Close" to conduct a reconnaissance of the objective.

Upon receiving a report from all his platoons, Lieuten-



ant Podkovanov ordered his company to move out to the objective. As the company approached the height "Long," he received a report from the reconnaissance element. Sergeant Leonov reported seeing radio antennas on the objective. He also passed on additional details on the emplacement of machineguns on the objective.

After evaluating Leonov's report, Podkovanov concluded that the approach from the east offered his soldiers the best cover. He then refined his orders to his platoons. In particular, the 3d Platoon received instructions to travel through the hollow and attack from the southern slopes of "Close" from the direction of the house.

On the signal "Thunder," the attack began. Shortly thereafter, though, the reconnaissance element located near the position "Oval" reported seeing three enemy APCs on the road from Petrovsk. Lieutenant Podkovanov did not give any thought to breaking off the attack. Rather, he ordered the reconnaissance element to cover the left flank of the 3d Platoon and to destroy any approaching enemy vehicles. This the reconnaissance element did, using light infantry weapons and machineguns. Unfortunately, at this point in the narrative the details of the battle become sketchy. But we do know that the 1st Platoon reached its objective first, followed by the 2d and 3d Platoons. The company suffered only one loss, a BMD from the 1st Platoon.

Immediately after destroying all the objects and equipment on the objective, Lieutenant Podkovanov's three

platoons met at the predesignated rally point. It is unclear whether any attempt was made at this time to redistribute ammunition, to take care of the wounded, or to communicate with battalion headquarters. Presumably some steps along these lines were taken. Yet, it is clear that at the rally point, Lieutenant Podkovanov relieved the detached squad from the 3d Platoon of its reconnaissance and screening duties and sent a squad from the 2d Platoon to take its place. After completing this task, the company left the rally point for its rendezvous with the main body of the battalion.

At this point in the article, the Soviet author — Captain Koziulin — announces that the entire article has been a deception. It does not really describe a training exercise employing BMDs, Captain Koziulin declares. Rather, it describes a real battle that took place in the Carpathian Mountains during World War II involving the 615th Rifle Regiment of the 167th Rifle Division. In the place of BMDs, he tells us, we should read tanks.

Despite this last-minute attempt to deflect attention from what is almost certainly a description of a battle in Afghanistan between Soviet airborne troops and Afghan guerrillas, Captain Koziulin focuses his attention on the lessons that can be learned from this skirmish.

First, he argues that this battle teaches that an airborne commander must choose a drop zone that allows attacking troops to move quickly and secretly to their objective. Secondly, he stresses that in moving to the objective it is necessary to keep the enemy guessing as to where the at-

tack will be made, and that the attacking forces should hit the enemy where he least expects it. Finally, a reconnaissance of the terrain and the objective should be conducted from high ground, if at all possible.

Captain Koziulin's observations are not especially profound. Indeed, the entire conduct of the operation described in the article, on the surface, seems rather ordinary. Yet, looking at it more closely, there is much that the Western military observer can learn from it about Soviet military operations in mountainous terrain:

- Most significantly, the Soviets do not hesitate to employ BMDs in mountainous terrain, an area where many American commanders would be reluctant to commit mechanized forces. The vulnerability of armored vehicles increases in mountainous areas because their maneuverability is limited by rocks, sharp drop-offs, and forest vegetation. Yet the Soviets seem prepared to forfeit maneuverability as long as the armored vehicles can provide mobility. The Soviet commanders apparently reason that any increase in casualties caused by limited maneuverability can be compensated for by a decrease in the number of casualties that a mobile force can achieve through speed and surprise.

- While the Soviet analysis of the operation stresses the importance of choosing a drop zone close to the objective, in reality Lieutenant Podkovanov's choice of a drop zone would be considered distant by U.S. standards. Since U.S. airborne troops do not have air-droppable armored vehicles, U.S. commanders must choose drop zones either on the objective or immediately adjacent to it. Soviet airborne troops with their BMDs have the option of landing some distance from the objective and launching a coordinated attack from several directions.

- Rather surprisingly, Lieutenant Podkovanov did not employ any artillery preparation on the objective before attacking. While the objective may have been out of range of the usual 122mm, 130mm, and 152mm weapons, the lieutenant chose not to use any of the 120mm mortars usually found in Soviet units. Apparently, he felt the element of surprise would be lost with an artillery preparation.

- Lieutenant Podkovanov and his superiors apparently believed that a three-to-one ratio in favor of the attackers was enough to defeat a dug-in enemy in mountainous ter-

rain, provided the attacking forces achieved surprise. This is a risky assumption, especially given the nature of the terrain. Most U.S. commanders would probably prefer a more favorable ratio when attacking a dug-in enemy, especially if the enemy were well trained and armed.

- Judging from the responsibility given to the reconnaissance-screening unit commanded by Sergeant Leonov, Soviet NCOs seem to have much more responsibility and freedom of action than we in the West commonly believe.

- It is generally believed in the West also that Soviet officers are set-piece commanders. But if even a small portion of the Soviet officer corps is like Lieutenant Podkovanov, our picture of the Soviet commander as a man thrown into a fit of confusion at even a slight deviation from the plan is a dangerous and misleading simplification.

Finally, the study of articles of this sort from the open Soviet press is of value to U.S. combat leaders, NCOs as well as officers. While such articles might not contain any great revelations, they do show general operational methods, self-perceptions, national attitudes, and thought patterns found in today's Soviet Army.



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