

SOVIET MECHANIZED AIRBORNE FORCES



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A swift, effective means of attacking throughout the depth of an enemy force has long been a battlefield requirement. Actions against the enemy's rear and flanks, as considered by Clausewitz in the 19th century, constitutes not an increase in force but only a more powerful application of that force. Since Clausewitz's day, battle areas have grown in size, making it even more difficult to use forces in an enemy's rear areas. At the same time, though, technology has increased the means available to a commander to strike throughout the depth of that ever-growing battlefield.

The Soviet armed forces in the mid-1930s were the first to recognize the possibility of using airborne forces for missions in an enemy's rear areas that no other force could accomplish. That early experimentation was only a part of a major effort in the development of modern Soviet military theory.

This development of an airborne capability as a new combat means was, in fact, closely linked with the Soviet

concept of *gluboki boi*, deep battle. Deep battle has become a fundamental tenet in Soviet military operational art that seeks to conduct offensive operations in depth. A central point in that theory is simultaneously neutralizing enemy defenses by various means throughout the entire depth and breaking through his tactical zone on a selected sector. This breakthrough is quickly followed by the commitment of the kinds of forces — such as tanks, motorized infantry, and airborne troops — that can rapidly achieve the prescribed deep objectives.

The combination of an offensive operation in depth, the recent developments in materiel and technology, and the lessons learned from airborne operations in World War II have resulted in a Soviet airborne concept with a range of use wide enough to fully complement the ground forces in wartime operations. By examining the implications of these factors, one can see the full potential of the threat that Soviet airborne forces represent to the conduct of a defense in depth.

Before assessing the Soviets' present capabilities, it is necessary to review their airborne experiences, and to understand the conclusions they have drawn from those experiences.

The official birthday of the Soviet airborne force was 2 August 1930. On that date in the Moscow Military District, during an exercise near Voronezh, the Soviets conducted the first operation by a parachute force dropped in the "enemy rear." Although small in numbers, this unit was given the mission of eliminating an army staff. The landing force successfully played its role and showed that such a force could be useful in modern combat. By 1938 the Soviets had six airborne brigades, and by mid-1941 were forming five airborne corps.

Despite this early lead in the creation of airborne forces, the Soviets' use of them during World War II was less spectacular than the airborne assaults of the German and British armies. In fact, popular histories of the war on the Eastern front contain little or no discussion of Soviet airborne operations. Soviet airborne forces were employed, however, with limited success in a variety of missions and made a major contribution to the defense of Moscow during the winter of 1941-1942. The Soviets also experienced a disastrous attempt to coordinate the breaching of the Dnieper River line with airborne forces in September 1943. They also conducted smaller airborne and air landing operations on the Kerch peninsula, on Sakhalin Island, and in Manchuria.

Colonel General D. Sukhorukov, Commander in Chief of Airborne Forces, observed (in an article in the July 1981 issue of the Soviet *Military History Journal*) that the Soviets' World War II experiences with airborne forces revealed some major weaknesses. Since airborne forces were light infantry, for example, they carried only light weapons, and this allowed them to be easily brushed aside by more heavily armed forces.

Although these airborne forces had great strategic mobility, once on the ground they had the tactical mobility of regular infantry — two or three miles per hour on foot. Consequently, to avoid wasting the swiftness of the strategic deployment itself, and to achieve tactical surprise, airborne forces had to be dropped on or very near their objectives. As a result, the landing party's engagements usually began and developed under conditions in which the enemy had both fire superiority and greater mobility.

Another crucial aspect of past airborne operations had been logistics. Airborne operations required a relatively long lead time for planning and a tremendous allocation of forces and equipment. Once behind the enemy lines, on foot, an airborne force could conduct only a short engagement, with any success, and the engagement was strictly limited to the time of arrival of the advancing troops from the front. According to the Soviet studies, the usual length of airborne operations in World War II were between a few hours and two or three days. When the advancing troops were delayed in reaching the landing party, the airborne force usually did not achieve its objective. (Many of

these problems continue to be major considerations in planning airborne operations today, but the Soviets have been trying to overcome them.)

TRENDS

In their combat studies, the Soviets have isolated a number of trends from the lessons they learned in World War II, and these lessons have had a significant effect on the post-war developments in the theory and practice of airborne operations. According to Colonel General Sukhorukov, the main lessons were these: Parachute forces should be equipped with more powerful weapons and combat equipment, equivalent or nearly equivalent in performance to that of the conventional ground forces; improved landing means should be developed to allow the massed use of airborne forces and parachute drops of all authorized heavy combat equipment; and the air transport should be able to complete the drop of a large airborne force with one flight by the aircraft.

The build-up of Soviet airborne forces after World War II was not a steady process, primarily because the Soviet leaders gave little consideration to the use of those forces in future wars. There were several reasons for this. First, there was no immediate advance in technology that would overcome the earlier shortcomings, particularly in the areas of larger air transports and air-droppable combat vehicles. And under Premier Nikita Krushchev, the airborne forces, like many of the conventional forces, took a back seat to the development of the strategic rocket forces and other force modernization programs.

In the early 1970s, however, the concept of employing airborne forces began to receive attention in such doctrinal writings as A.A. Sidirenko's *The Offensive*, a work that prescribed the expanding role of conventional and airborne forces in a nuclear age.

He said, "It is now possible to disrupt the enemy's organized move of reserves . . . and deprive them of the opportunity to set up a defense on advantageous positions by delivery of nuclear missile attacks and . . . by employment of airborne landings . . ." Sidirenko argued that the importance of airborne troops had increased greatly with the appearance of nuclear missile weapons because those troops could quickly exploit the results of nuclear strikes by landing in the depth of the enemy's dispositions.

More recent Soviet doctrinal writings and combat studies have developed a need for a greater conventional role for airborne forces. General S.P. Ivanov, in a study published in 1974, clearly identified a role for Soviet airborne forces other than as a follow-up to nuclear strikes. He was impressed by the Germans' use of small airborne units in the Netherlands to support the German blitzkrieg across the Low Countries in World War II. The German airborne employment had proved tremendously effective in disrupting the Dutch main forces and in easing the crossing of the Maas River and the Albert Canal by German ground forces. This operational level consideration for airborne attacks into an enemy's depth, in fact, com-

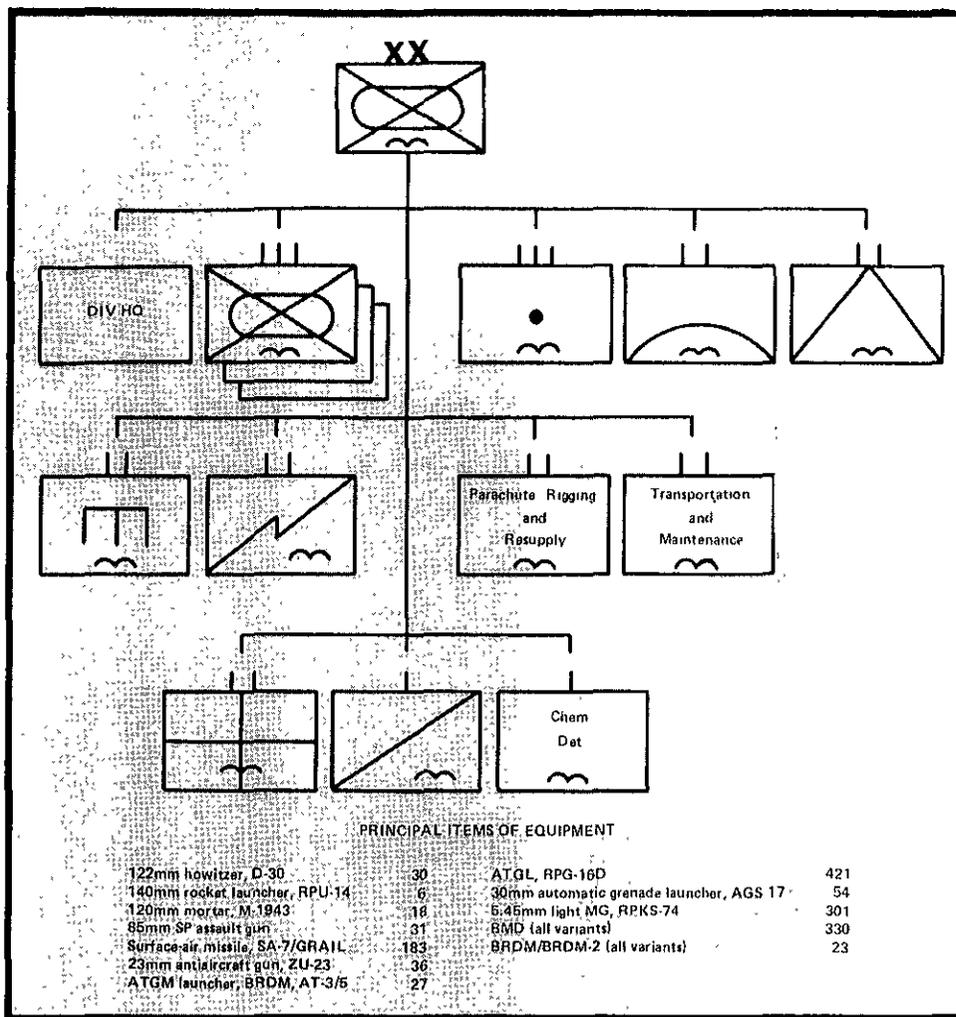


FIGURE 1 AIRBORNE DIVISION.

bined with other lessons learned from World War II, still provides the basis for the continuing effort to build up and modernize Soviet airborne forces.

The Soviets' airborne division today is smaller in personnel strength and in types of equipment than their motorized rifle division (see Figure 1). It is organized on the basic "triangular" system with three platoons to a company, three companies to a battalion, and so on. This force configuration allows operational and tactical employments by forces of regiment, battalion, or company size. Depending on the mission, these various echelons can receive reinforcing heavy combat equipment from higher units.

Recently, air assault brigades have also been deployed in the Soviet Union's western military districts and in the Groups of Soviet Forces in Eastern Europe. The new units, with a mixture of two airborne combat vehicle battalions and two parachute assault battalions provide operational level assets directly to front and army commands (see Figure 2). These brigades add strength and numbers to what is already the world's largest airborne force.

In the past few years a substantial increase in armored personnel carriers, cross-country vehicles, light tanks, and self-propelled artillery pieces has altered the traditional

perception of airborne forces. The Soviets, by arming their airborne units with air-droppable armored vehicles and heavy weapon systems, have put wings not only on their infantry but also on their modern combat vehicles, thereby creating a light mechanized airborne force. This mechanization gives them a more mobile, more maneuverable force with significantly increased firepower for operations in an enemy's rear areas to complement ground force operations.

For the Soviets, the basic factor for success is their airborne units' ability to stand and fight what they consider the primary threat to airborne operations — tanks and other armored combat vehicles. This ability to fight on relatively equal terms against armored forces requires tactical mobility and heavier weapons, and both have been provided, to a great extent, by the primary airborne combat vehicle, the *Bronevaya Mashina Destany* (BMD). The BMD can carry three crew members with four passengers. It can travel in excess of 60 kilometers per hour on highways for an estimated cruising range of 320 kilometers and can cross water at 10 kilometers per hour. In terms of firepower, it has two antitank weapons — the AT-3 (Sagger) ATGM (mounted on a launch rail) and the 73mm smoothbore gun. And the current ATGM can readily be replaced by succeeding generations of missiles.

In its fighting and command variants, the BMD is distributed on the basis of 11 to each company, 35 to each battalion, approximately 105 to each regiment, and about 330 to each airborne division.

In addition to the BMD, Soviet airborne units have other heavy weapon systems that clearly compensate for their previous lack of firepower, and this should concern those who must plan to counter a Soviet airborne threat. The antitank weapons are the ASU-57, the ASU-85 assault gun, and the 85mm SD-44 auxiliary self-propelled antitank gun. Although the ASU-57 and the SD-44 are generally considered obsolete, some airborne units are believed to have them. In the artillery regiment of an airborne division, there are 30 122mm D-30 howitzers and two 140mm RPU-14 multiple rocket launchers. The air defense battalion has three batteries of six ZU-23s with the prime movers being either UAZ 69 trucks or BMDs. In fact, the high density of crew and individual antitank weapons in all Soviet airborne units compares favorably with that of the motorized rifle divisions.

Having solved the major problems of mobility and firepower, the Soviets have turned their paratroop units into what are essentially light mechanized airborne forces with missions in enemy rear areas.

In planning to use this mechanized airborne force,

Soviet airborne doctrine distinguishes between tactical, operational, and strategic airborne landings. These various levels are determined by the number of airborne troops involved, the objective, and the level of the ground force operation they are to support. Generally, depending upon the number of troops involved, a tactical landing could deploy up to a regiment; an operational landing, a division or less; and a strategic landing, up to two divisions.

The variety of objectives that airborne forces can attack and seize includes area targets such as key terrain, road junctions, bridges, fords, and airfields. Specific targets identified for destruction could include nuclear weapon-delivery systems, command and control centers, communication centers, ammunition and nuclear storage facilities, and other key installations.

Airborne forces can perform greater roles in tactical and operational employment, as indicated by General Ivanov, by supporting advancing ground forces, breaking through a deeply echeloned defense system, crossing obstacles, cutting off the enemy's retreat routes, and preventing enemy reinforcements from joining their frontline forces.

After achieving these primary missions, mechanized airborne units have a potential secondary mission — the creation of chaos in the enemy's rear areas through raiding ac-

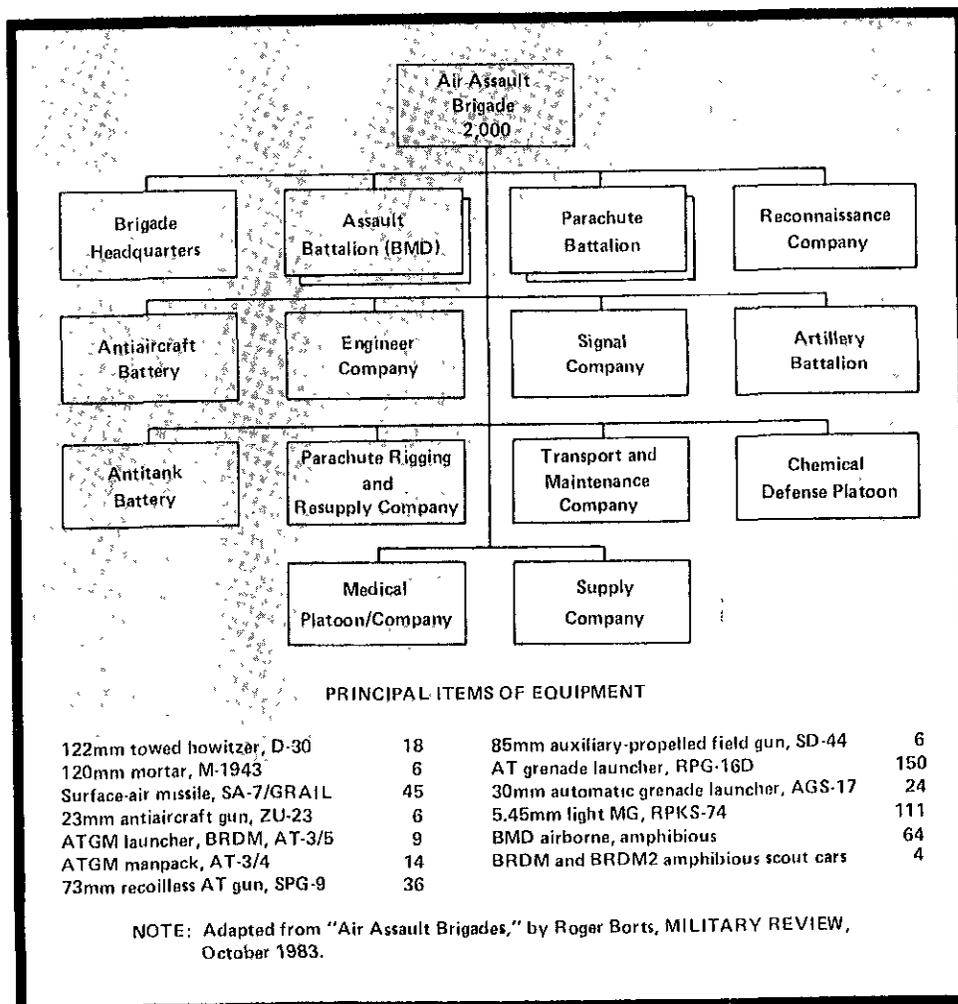


FIGURE 2. AIR ASSAULT BRIGADE

tivities and the like.

The question arises as to when, where, and in what wartime situations Soviet airborne landings might be expected. Here, again, a clear distinction must be made between strategic, operational, and tactical landings.

A strategic operation would support the military planning in a theater of military operations (TMO). An airborne operation with a strategic objective would be very difficult, however, because it would require large paratroop units to stand by as well as certain comprehensive organizational measures — a large concentration of air transport units, for instance, and a strong air force for protection. Above all, clear air superiority would have to be guaranteed for an extended period, and the safe supply of logistical materiel would have to be organized. There is an inherent risk, of course, in every airborne landing. And in a strategic landing, the Soviets would have to risk losing a fourth, possibly a third, of their total airborne force.

Taking all these factors into consideration, it would seem that a strategic airborne landing by Soviet forces in Central Europe, for instance, appears to be unrealistic if not totally unreasonable. This assessment could and should be quite different for the areas with a lower concentration of troops. The trend in Soviet airborne exercises, in fact, has been to drop units smaller than a division.

Their experience in such exercises, combined with historical lessons and their theoretical development, provides the empirical rationale for the Soviets' application of airborne forces in support of their current doctrine. This doctrine still calls for Soviet forces to conduct a rapid offensive to the operational and strategic depths of an enemy's defensive area. A contemporary means of doing this at the operational level is what is currently referred to as the Operational Maneuver Group (OMG).

The OMG, a formation of division, corps, or possibly army size, is designed to attack into an enemy's rear areas. It has the following missions: exploitation into the depth of the enemy's rear; preemption of movement of the enemy's reserves; blockage of enemy withdrawal routes; parallel pursuit and destruction of an enemy's forces; and seizure of an enemy's defensive lines.

Airborne operational landings, coordinated with a front and in some cases an army, have ominous implications for defending forces. The airborne landings would be conducted by regiments or reinforced battalions. The OMG force, in close coordination with the airborne and air assault components, would seize key bridges, terrain obstacles, river crossing sites, and airfields and would destroy nuclear weapons, command and control centers, and logistical facilities.

The assessment of tactical airborne landings is an entirely different matter. By Soviet count, of the more than 150 airborne operations conducted during World War II, approximately ten could be classified as operational or strategic, while the rest would be considered tactical or commando operations. It can be expected that future Soviet airborne landings will be of battalion or regiment strength, and that tactical airborne landings will be conducted in the defensive zone of large enemy units at a

depth of 20 or 30 kilometers, which is greater than that considered feasible for heliborne operations. Their missions will be relatively simple and uncomplicated and will not require a great expenditure of resources.

In World War II, paratroopers in large numbers were used for the most part to support ground troops. Now the Soviets believe there is a role for independent airborne operations as well — to neutralize nuclear weapons and air and naval bases, and to occupy important targets in enemy territory, separate from the ground force objectives.

Since the equipment and the force structure of the Soviet airborne forces are equivalent to those of a light mechanized force, the implications for operations in the enemy rear areas are as far-reaching as the original concept of airborne landings was in the 1930s. Being able to put a light mechanized force in an enemy's rear area revives the shock and raid capability that was the domain of cavalry forces for centuries. With mechanized airborne forces, the Soviets will be able to raid throughout the width and depth of a modern combat force's dispositions. Their mobility precludes the past countermeasure of containing an airborne contingent with a preponderance of force. Additionally, their own armor makes the paratroopers less vulnerable to artillery fire.

This tactical mobility of the mechanized airborne force means that paratroopers will no longer have to wait until they are relieved. If ground operations in conjunction with an airborne drop fail, as they did in Operation Market Garden (the Allied airborne operation of "A Bridge Too Far" fame), Soviet airborne units will be able to move rapidly toward the frontline troops to effect a reverse link-up. But even this sort of action can cause confusion and possibly panic for the defending frontline troops who might find themselves suddenly attacked from the rear.

The Soviets have not been able to eliminate all the serious problems in conducting their airborne operations. As evidenced by their current force structure and equipment, they have sought ways to reduce their shortcomings and to develop more uses for airborne operations on the heavily armored battlefield of the future. The serious threat of light mechanized airborne battalions or regiments in rear area operations introduces a shock tactic. Once on a line of communications or once occupying key terrain, a Soviet airborne force will not be easily brushed aside — the density of its weapons will allow it to hold its positions.

In short, the concept of a light mechanized airborne force has changed the traditional ideas about the use of paratroopers and has expanded the ways in which they can be used on the modern battlefield.



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