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Russian wars in Afghanistan (1979-1989) and Chechnya (1994-1996 and 1999-2006) reintroduced their ground forces to nonlinear warfare that lacked a clear front line and a rear area. Instead, combat was fragmented into close-combat fights, where the Afghan resistance launched sudden attacks against convoys, outposts and security elements or laid ambushes, heavily mined roadways and fought within urban centers or conducted long-range harassment fires. The Chechen resistance functioned under the concepts of “attack and withdraw” and “the attack of swarms of bees at night.” Often the Chechen resistance would form mobile firing groups. Two mortars with crews, each located in a cross-country vehicle, were accompanied by machine gunners, grenadiers, snipers and riflemen. The vehicles would drive into an area, fire a total of five to six mortar rounds accompanied by flat-trajectory fire from the supporting weapons, and then move quickly to a new firing area. Russian artillery would usually not be able to respond quickly enough to interdict these groups.¹

The conventional battlefield with prepared lines of trenches and interlocking fields of fire had been supplanted by mobile strike groups, strongpoint defenses, and combatants who would exploit difficult terrain and blend into the civilian population when threatened. The Russian Army realized that it needed to increase its ability to respond and gain the initiative through agility, mobility, and independent action over a much larger area. This led to reforming motorized rifle battalions and companies into mobile detachment combat groups by adding artillery, tanks, and engineers.² Helicopter gunship support complemented the formation by adding long-range, accurate fires to neutralize opposing forces. This combination of aviation and ground maneuver and fire strikes proved successful in urban areas, mountains, and forest when the situation called for independent combat while separated from the main body.³

Combined Arms on a More Permanent Basis

The base unit of the standard mobile detachment combat group was a motorized rifle battalion mounted on tracked BMP infantry fighting vehicles or BTR infantry personnel carriers. The battalion had an organic fire support battery consisting of a platoon of tracked 2S1 122-mm howitzers, two platoons of towed 120-mm Nona-K mortar/anti-tank guns, and a platoon of 82-mm mortars. The battalion also had an AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher platoon, an RPO flame projector platoon, a machine gun platoon, an engineer platoon and an air defense platoon. Often, the mobile detachment combat group had a tank company attached for additional firepower.⁴

Russian infantry companies were also organized to fight as independent mobile detachment combat groups. The company has two motorized rifle platoons and a weapons platoon. Each motorized rifle platoon has three squads and each squad has three fire teams. Normally, one fire team advances while the other two cover the advance. Squads usually function as part of a platoon effort, but can undertake separate missions such as providing security, manning guard posts, conducting ambushes, patrolling, and acting as the dismountable force for a *bronegruppa*.⁵ The weapons platoon consists of an AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher squad, an antitank squad and RPO flame projector squad. The platoon has an assigned forward observer.

One of the Chechen favored formations was a “trio” – a machine gunner, RPG-7 gunner and a rifleman. Occasionally it might be augmented with an RPO flame projector gunner and a sapper (demolitions man). Small but fire-power intensive, these teams presented a close-combat challenge, particularly in urban fighting. One of the most effective ways of combating these teams was with snipers. At first the “snipers” were ineffective, since they were regular riflemen equipped with a longer-range weapon and the platoon and company commanders were not equipped to train them to become effective snipers rather than simply marksmen. Trained snipers were eventually brought into the platoons and were employed in combat teams of riflemen, machine gunners and grenadiers, who covered the sniper’s movement, found targets for the sniper, and helped to prepare firing positions and to camouflage them.⁶ The Russians also fielded their own “trio” – either a rifleman, machine gunner, and sniper or an RPO flame projector gunner, machine gunner, and grenadier. At first, these trios tended to get too far in front of their supporting weapons, making coordination for supporting them by fire difficult.⁷

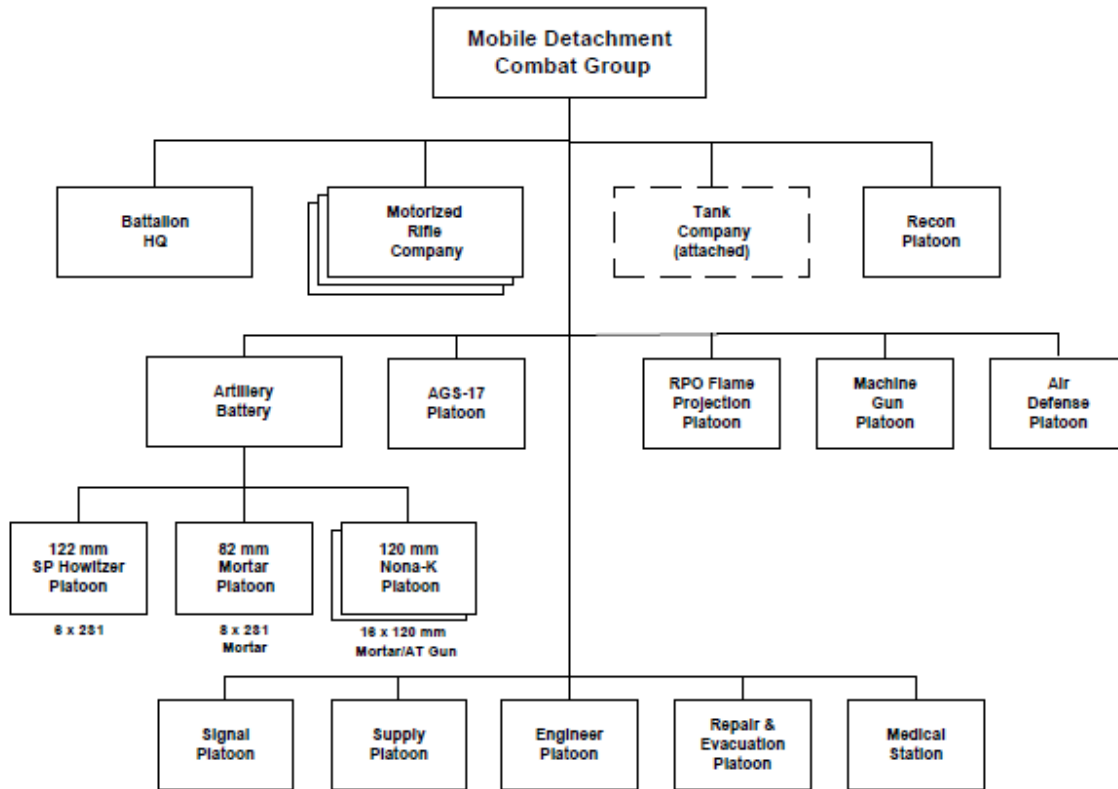
The Russians employed mobile detachment combat groups in the mountains. Fighting in the mountain heights, crests, and crags was often at close quarters and was resolved with hand grenades and firing at point-blank range. During defense in the mountains the mobile detachment combat groups concentrated their fires to hold the commanding heights, mountain passes, road junctions, and hollows.⁸

Urban combat showed the need for mobile detachment combat groups. Quite often, heavily defended and fortified buildings had to be taken. The group would use tanks, artillery, mortars, antitank guided missiles, flame projectors, RPG-7s, and demolition charges in building reduction. The group would use high explosives, flame, and smoke to assist breaching actions.⁹

GPS was used to supplement map sheets, radio signals, and range-finder binoculars. The Russian GLONASS satellites supported the GPS devices that were issued to squad leaders and higher, as well as to artillery forward observers. GPS furnished coordinates and firing data to artillery units while laser designators painted targets for the guns. Combat showed the need for computer terminals at the lower tactical levels in order to integrate GPS data and improved navigation.¹⁰

The mobile detachment combat group was a temporary structure, but most lasted for the duration of their combat deployment. The advantages of a permanent combined arms organization are ease of transition into combat, responsiveness, habitual relationships and familiarity with the unit’s processes, confidence in mutual support, and shared battle rhythm. The problems with creating permanent TO&E mobile detachment combat groups are maintenance, training, logistics and leadership. Maintaining tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery, and trucks in the same motor pool requires more mechanics with different skills, bigger tool sets, and additional special testing equipment, and can result in conflicting priorities as to which vehicles get fixed first. Training tankers, gunners, and motorized riflemen in the same battalion creates its own set of problems. Different tables have to be fired, range management is a beast, and ammunition control and accountability triples. Logistics support requires more types of ammunition, increased PLL (prescribed load list) items, increased POL types and quantities, and a wider variety of specialized gear. The biggest problem is leadership. How does one develop commanders and staff who can fully understand and fight each component of combined arms combat and still be able to use them while they are young enough?¹¹

Current Russian Concept



1989 Soviet Concept

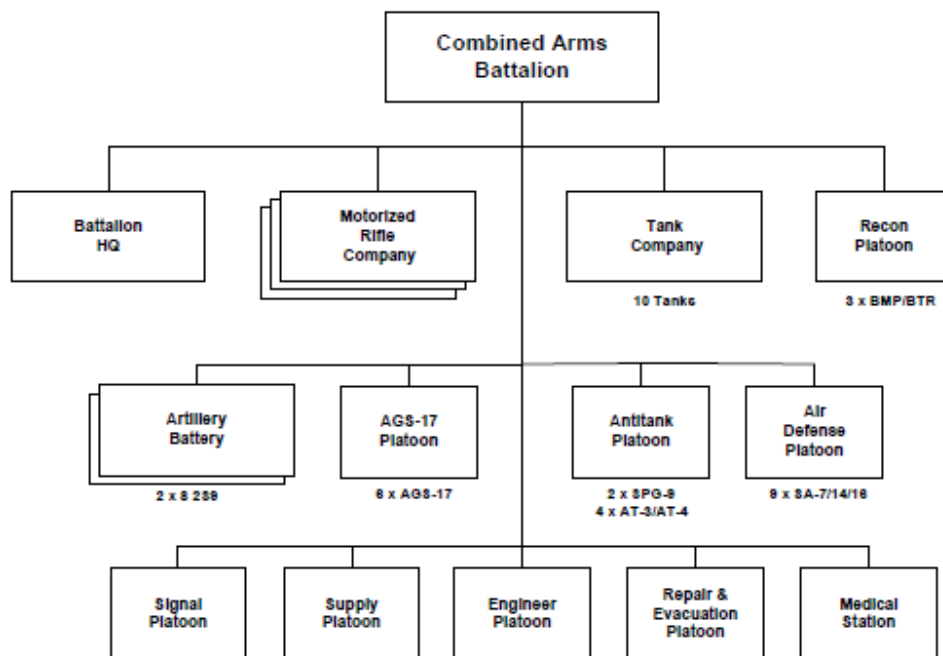


Figure 1. Evolution of Russian combined arms battalion concept

Combined Arms Battalions during the Cold War

This is not the first time that the Russians have considered creating permanent combined arms units below regiment or brigade. During World War II, Soviet infantry battalions had organic artillery batteries that were pushed forward for direct-fire infantry-support missions. From 1946 to 1957, the motorized rifle battalion had an organic artillery battery and an organic mortar battery. In 1958, the mortar battery disappeared, but the artillery battery remained. In 1966, there was only an 82-mm mortar platoon organic to the battalion. This was later upgraded to a battery of eight 120-mm mortars.¹²

In 1989, the Soviet Army Studies Office (forerunner of the Foreign Military Studies Office) examined the force composition of 551 Soviet motorized rifle and tank battalion training exercises conducted between 1964 and 1989.¹³ The battalions always fought as the nucleus of a larger combined arms force. In only 12 of the exercises did a pure battalion act without attachments or supporting units. Motorized rifle and tank battalions were organized as combined arms forces 98% of the time. A motorized rifle battalion had armor attached 89% of the time and armored elements were much more likely to be attached to motorized rifle battalions than the reverse. In 41% of the exercises, tank battalions functioned without motorized rifle attachments.¹⁴

The Soviets normally attached artillery or put it in support of motorized rifle or tank battalions. Artillery was attached in 77% of motorized rifle battalion exercises and 73% of tank battalion exercises. Attachments ran from a battery to several battalions, with a full artillery battalion being the most common (80%). Artillery was in support of 18% of motorized rifle battalion exercises and 13% of tank battalion exercises. Engineer elements (usually a platoon) were attached in 62% of motorized rifle battalion exercises and 57% of tank battalion exercises. The most common combined arms groupings were a motorized rifle battalion with a tank company, artillery battalion, and an engineer platoon or a tank battalion with a motorized rifle company, artillery battalion, and an engineer platoon.¹⁵

Soviet military theorists envisioned a fragmented battlefield facing China or NATO. Tactical units would have to fight over an extended high-tempo lethal area under nuclear-threatened conditions. The meeting battle would predominate, and prolonged, linear struggles against prepared positions with tied-in flanks had to be avoided. Units had to be more self sufficient on this fragmented future battlefield, and TO&E combined arms battalions made a lot of sense. Various proposed structures for combined arms battalions emerged in the theoretical writings, which continued up to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

So What?

The study and training for high-tempo maneuver warfare on an extended fragmented battlefield has not been a priority of the world's leading armies since the end of DESERT STORM. This battlefield has been replaced by another fragmented battlefield—the unconventional war battlefield, where small groups of well-armed combatants use rugged terrain, surprise, and “death by a thousand cuts” to inflict light but continuing casualties on a modern, high-tech force. Some modern forces prefer to fight unconventional war as pure infantry battalions, leaving their tanks at home and conducting long-range artillery support from isolated fire bases. The Russian conclusions are different. In their experience, there is a vital role for the tank working with infantry. Artillery is best employed when accompanying the force, and it can be overwhelmingly effective in the direct fire role. The best place to have engineers is within arm's reach.

In Afghanistan, Soviet motorized rifle battalions were organized for combined arms combat often along the lines of the proposed combined arms battalions. Commanders fought these organizations for months on end without attached units returning to their parent units. Habitual relationships, an appreciation for the capabilities and limitations of different branches, and a simplified, quicker command and control rhythm developed.

After the initial disasters of the First Chechen Campaign, the Russians again began organizing into combined arms battalions and fighting as such for extended periods of time. Russian military theory is catching up with the reality of modern unconventional war and reviving the combined arms battalion debate of 25 years ago under the rubric of mobile detachment combat groups.

Notes

- ¹ Vorobyev and V. Kiselev, "Taktika otryadno-grupпового boya" [Tactics of a detachment group in combat], *Armeiskiy sbornik* [Army digest], September 2013, 11. BG Ivan Vorobyev is the grand old man of Russian tactics. A World War II veteran, he has written extensively on Soviet/Russian tactics for the past six decades. For a detailed discussion of Afghan opposition tactics, see Ali A. Jalali and Lester W. Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War*, Quantico: US Marine Corps Study DM-980701, 1998. For a detailed discussion of Chechen tactics, see Dodge Billingsley with Lester Grau, *Fangs of the Lone Wolf: Chechen Tactics in the Russian-Chechen Wars 1994-2009*, Fort Leavenworth, Foreign Military Studies Office, 2012.
- ² Motorized rifle is the Soviet/Russian term for mechanized infantry forces mounted on armored tracked or wheeled vehicles.
- ³ Vorobyev.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 12. The addition of the tank company raises the combat potential of a BMP-equipped battalion by 25 percent and a BTR-equipped battalion by 80 percent. Tank battalions may be reinforced with a motorized rifle company. In the Russian Army, units are frequently attached, but the Western custom of cross-attachment between armored and mechanized infantry forces is seldom practiced. A gaining unit normally does not surrender a similarly sized unit to the losing unit. The BMP or *boevaya mashina pekhoty* [infantry fighting vehicle] is a tracked vehicle that mounts a variety of automatic armaments. The BTR or *bronetransporter* [armored personnel carrier] is an eight-wheeled armored vehicle that can carry up to an 11-man squad. It mounts a heavy and medium machine gun.
- ⁵ While follow-and-support-by-fire is a standard mission for US Army infantry fighting vehicles and personnel carriers after the squads have dismounted, the Russian Army frequently constitutes a *bronegruppa* [armored group], which serves as a mobile reserve. The mobile BMPs and BTRs can be directed to a critical juncture where their massed fire power can make a telling difference.
- ⁶ Vorobyev, 12. The combat team also helped the sniper leave his hide once it was discovered by providing covering fire and feints. Between the first and second Chechen Wars, Russia trained a lot of quality snipers. For some reason, some of the best graduated from the River Police school.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* The Russian article does not include the most-recent Russian experience during its brief 2008 conflict with Georgia in Southern Ossetia. This conventional fight lasted five days, yet most Russian maneuver battalions fought as combined arms with attached companies and platoons.
- ¹¹ The US Army has a long history of educating and training young combined arms commanders and staff in its mechanized cavalry units.
- ¹² Lester W. Grau, "Reorganizing for Battalion-Level Combat," *Military Review*, December 1989, 66.
- ¹³ Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet Combined Arms Battalion—Reorganization for Tactical Flexibility," Fort Leavenworth: SASO Blue Book, September 1989. Battalion training scenarios included forward detachment, advance guard, meeting battle, assault river crossing, attack from the march, attack from a position in direct contact with the enemy, commitment of a second echelon battalion, battle in the depth of enemy defenses, transitioning to defense, defense, security detachment, counter-air-assault reserve, withdrawal, night combat, combat in swampy and forested terrain, combat in mountains, combat in polar regions, protection against weapons of mass destruction, relief in place, march, combat in the desert, amphibious assault, air assault, urban terrain and winter combat.
- ¹⁴ Lester W. Grau, "Reorganizing for Battalion-Level Combat," *Military Review*, December 1989, 66.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* 67

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