

Praxis

HOSTOMEL, Was it Really Lost in Advance?

A Study of Combat Through the Use of a Manual Tactical Wargame



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February 24th, 2022, on the outskirts of KYIV, the Russian Armed Forces (RuAF) launched an operation as daring as it is risky, a task entrusted to its elite units: The Airborne Forces (VDV). The battle was short-lived, but the decisive action of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) thwarted a dangerous maneuver in the first hours of

combat. Thanks to wargaming, it is possible to methodically analyze this battle and gain useful insights into one of the most daring special operations in a Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) setting in recent years. Experience this battle with players who faced the same dilemmas as the real commanders.¹

Schlüsselbegriffe Spezialoperation; McRaven; Hostomel; Ukraine; Luftlandung; Krieg

Keywords special operations; McRaven; Hostomel; Ukraine; air assault; Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO); wargame



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About the Wargame and the Game Design

A few semantic considerations upfront: in order to adhere as closely as possible to the strong methodological underpinnings of the #infowargame project, and to avoid confusing the reader with a “playful” image of war – thus proposing a serious approach to the study of combat – we use exclusively the term “wargame” in this article. In its modern understanding, there is no more holistic term, neither in English, French or German. We understand its many definitions, some contested, but recognize it as being essentially made of three constituents: players, decisions and consequences.

From a game design perspective, a simple wargame allows to represent a complex situation and foster efficient experiential learning for all participants involved, if the emphasis is put on human decision-making and consequence-management. To get the narrative right and to depict this particular battle, we chose to use the *Ukraine 2022* system (Tom Jensen, 2022). This allows to represent small platoons of 15 soldiers for VDV and 20 soldiers for AFU units. Given the small number of complex weapon systems used, the fact that the battle is primarily centered around light infantry, air support being provided by helicopter gunships, and the fact that the range of fire does not exceed 1'000 meters, this was considered sufficient.

A few modifications have been made to tailor the wargame to our research needs. First, an initiative system was added to the normal command & control rules, to emphasize the effect of suppression upon infantry and maximize the effect of firepower in combat. Second, a number of available commands were generated with a dice-roll, to increase friction and force the commanders to improvise (possible orders being: movement, attack, ambush, tactical advance or assault). Third, the effect of the tactical leader on the battlefield was increased by conceiving a special phase, in which the commander could decide on its main effort and influence the course of events on a small scale.

Finally, this wargame design did not intend to depict reality in the form of a detailed simulation of the actions that day. Rather, its methodology and adversarial setting were part of a greater effort to depict elements of the battle and allow for a plausible narrative to unfold, in order to discuss and raise awareness about

some of the challenges of command & control, light infantry tactics in special operations, as well as their resilience against a mechanized counterattack in the case of an air assault behind enemy lines.

HOSTOMEL: At the Heart of a Special Operation

From the beginning of the campaign, the RuAF's invasion plans emphasized the speed and lightning-fast nature of their initial thrust. In their doctrine, the RuAF have developed an entire apparatus, the VDV, for conducting airmobile operations in depth.² As a group of large, elite units, the VDV were naturally predestined for preliminary action at the HOSTOMEL airfield, enabling a force to be brought as close as possible to the Ukrainian political center of gravity.

If Admiral William McRaven's theory of special operations is to be believed, the heliborne assault on the HOSTOMEL airfield has all the makings of one. The aim of special operations is to achieve and maintain relative superiority over the enemy until the objective is achieved, in order to compensate for the inherent weakness of small, lightly armed formations in the face of large conventional forces. This type of operation must strike a balance between six essential factors, or execution principles: simplicity, safety, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose.³

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Forces Involved

The Ukrainian defenders of the HOSTOMEL airfield are of lesser quality than the RuAF attackers. Their fighting mass consists of 3 to 5 reserve infantry platoons, while their anti-aircraft assets include two ZSU-23 (23mm) guns and two IGLA guided missile groups. This represents a total of about 130 troops.

The Ukrainians have placed a few disparate elite elements on alert in the vicinity, including two under-

strength mechanized companies (BTR-80, BTR-4, and BMP-2) and a detachment of territorial infantry. These forces will only play a role at a later stage, in response to the VDV assault. This reserve consists of about 270 soldiers in total.

VDV combat platoons are very small, consisting of a maximum of 15 soldiers. A company is therefore of about 60 soldiers, if we add a command squad and an antitank squad (RPG). A battalion tactical group (BTG) consists of two companies, plus 2 support weapon squads (ATGM, HMG, AGL, Sniper, Mortar etc.) and the battalion commander's command squad. The first wave and the second wave together consist of two BTGs, with a total of about 280 soldiers.

General Situation

It is February 24th, 2022, 0900. H Hour. Antonov Airport has been designated by the Northern Group Command (RuAF) as the center of gravity for the campaign against the Ukrainian capital. Its capture by heliborne assault should enable mechanized reinforcements to arrive by air and then push on towards KYIV.

The 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade and the 45th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade are tasked with leading the helicopter assault on the Antonov airfield. Significant Air Force support has been provided for this operation. The operation is to culminate in the airborne assault by the

76th Guards Air Assault Division, tasked with pushing into KYIV to capture the city.

The rear units of the 4th Rapid Response Brigade of the Ukrainian National Guard have been tasked with taking up positions at the Antonov Airport and occupying the premises, in order to provide resistance in the event of a Russian attack. Professional mechanized and airborne elements of the AFU are also present in the area, but communication between them is difficult.

The Shock of the Initial Assault

The commander of the first Russian BTG decided to land as close as possible to the administrative buildings, in order to secure the tarmac as quickly as possible while waiting for the second wave. The morning's preparations resulted in destruction and smoke covering the approach to the landing field. However, as the helicopters approached, the VDV's were surprised to see the 23mm anti-aircraft guns and the Ukrainian IGLA groups open fire. However, damage was minimal and the helicopter gunships quickly engaged the Ukrainian formations now discovered.

The Russian BTG quickly advanced to the north and south of the landing zone, closing in on the administrative buildings and securing the approach of the second assault group. The Mi-24 and Ka-52 combat helicopters were firing on sight during the approach and departure of the Mi-8 transport helicopters. The contact zone was saturated with smoke.

To the north, as soon as the second BTG landed, one of its companies attacked a position containing a 23mm anti-aircraft gun and a Ukrainian infantry platoon in a defensive position. Under supportive fire from a Ka-52, one platoon fixed the position with fire, while two other platoons charged across the field to quickly seize the emplacement. With the Ukrainian platoon stunned by the shock, the balance of power shifted to the Russians and they took the position.

Finally, after sweeping the entire area of the administrative building, the large hangars were under control, the end of the tarmac secured, and the high ground occupied. In the end, all the assaults resulted in the destruction of the Ukrainian elements defending the



Illustration 1: The initial thrust of the Russian assault sees a number of Mi-24 gunships and Ka-52 attack helicopters. (Source: author)

HOSTOMEL airfield, 60 minutes after the helicopter assault and 4 hours after the start of the entire operation.

Uncertainty Setting in

With the Ukrainian elements directly responsible for defending the airfield out of action or temporarily removed, the Russians began moving into the area and expanding their zone of control. They reinforced the terrain as best they could, but it was difficult to cover the entire airstrip in particular. The only weapons with both range and firepower, the ATGMs, were only two in the entire assault force.

Ukrainian units harassed the Russians with mortar and howitzer fire, as well as low-level strafing runs by SU-24 ground attack aircraft and Mi-24 helicopter gunships. The VDV's were unable to clear the airstrip of the truck wrecks, which the Ukrainian defenders had set on fire prior to the air assault in order to prevent any use of the runway.

The tension was palpable among the VDV's, who didn't know when and where the AFU counterattack would take place. One thing was certain: it would happen sooner or later. Their hope rested on the imminent arrival of mechanized reinforcements, which were on the move towards HOSTOMEL from the north, but these were being slowed down by fierce Ukrainian resistance and ambushes.

Fire and Maneuver

Just before the start of the counterattack, a Ukrainian SU-24 dropped bombs on the tarmac and a Ukrainian Mi-24 fired a salvo of rockets at a building at the edge of the runway housing an antitank squad and a platoon of paratroopers. A first thrust was launched by a Ukrainian mechanized company, two platoons in line with a flank-guard platoon to the east, pushing back a VDV platoon stationed behind the airfield wall.

A platoon of BTR-4 and a platoon of BTR-80 attacked from the northeast under cover of artillery fire in the administrative zone, ensuring suppression of the anti-tank group and generating smoke. At the same time, a special forces platoon approached the edge of the airfield from the west, but had little chance of success due to its numerical inferiority to the three VDV platoons

it faced. Finally, a platoon of BTR-80s drove along the tarmac from north to south, attempting to dislodge the paratroopers in their hastily dug-in cover.

The wargame ended with a Ukrainian counterattack that the Russians found very difficult to repel. Historically, the Ukrainians withdrew after the attack, fearing the imminent arrival of heavy Russian reinforcements. However, these did not arrive at the airfield until later.



Illustration 2: The Ukrainian counterattack from the east of the airstrip benefits from its mechanized means to punch a hole in the thin Russian line. (Source: author)

Conclusion: A Tactical Success, But an Operational Failure

In tactical terms, the RuAF engaged large numbers of elite units against an outnumbered and inferior Ukrainian defender. Not surprisingly, the Russians quickly took control of the airfield with minimal losses.

With the first phase of the assault complete, the real work of securing the airfield began. The Ukrainian forces then made continuous use of indirect fire (mortars, howitzers) and available air assets (SU-24, Mi-24), giving the VDV's no chance to consolidate their gains.

Operationally, with the runway under sporadic fire and the heavy transport aircraft unable to land, the VDV's were unable to receive heavy equipment (tanks, heavy mortars, additional antitank missiles, etc.). Despite all the forces at their disposal, the limitations quickly be-

came apparent as the Russian players tried to prepare for the defense of the airfield.

To understand the dimensions of such a daring action, it is essential to understand the layout of a campaign, the alignment of objectives in time and space, and to weigh up risks and opportunities. In the case of the RuAF initial plans, it is clear that the possibility of a deep operation on the HOSTOMEL airfield was considered opportune, even though the risks were high as to the ability of subsequent formations to quickly reach the airborne troops.

In the end, the tactical success of the Russians was offset by the cross-domain use of Ukrainian fires (Grad, Gvozdika, aviation, etc.) to harass the airfield and hinder, if not interrupt, air traffic. Moreover, it should be noted that the counterattack had no impact on the operation, except to prolong the disruption of the airport. This last point alone justifies the counterattack after all.

From a strategic point of view, the overemphasis placed on the capture of this military airfield in the overall planning was, although proportionate to the strategic objectives, at the same time its greatest weakness. Thus, the RuAF planned on the basis of important variables over which they had little influence or which, due to their uncertain nature, could generate a negative cascade of events, an exponential friction that would threaten the entire operation. The resistance of the AFU, their fighting spirit and speed in the counterattack, as well as the harassment of the VDV at the HOSTOMEL airfield, contributed significantly to the failure of the initial Russian invasion plan.

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Mc Raven argues that special operations should always be about gaining relative superiority in battle as quickly as possible and maintaining it for as long as necessary to achieve the intended objectives. We have seen above

that he emphasizes on six essential planning and execution principles for conducting special operations. But further, in the face of uncertainty and the threat assessment, it is possible to modify three elements of a special operation to increase its chances of success: reduce the vulnerability of the force or the operation as a whole (more forces, more heavy equipment from the outset, better intelligence), reduce the objective range (seize another airstrip, seize vs. hold airstrip), and reduce the task duration (achieve better synchronization with following formations, reduce time to hold airstrip).

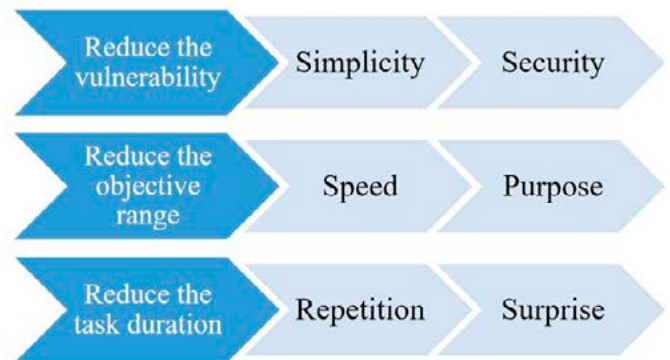


Figure 1: The six principles for special operations planning and execution and the three dimensions that affect the concept of relative superiority. (Source: Author in reference to and adapted from McRaven)

Insights for the Swiss Armed Forces

The aim of the “sandbox” wargame conducted on 10.02.2024 was essentially to study the Battle of HOSTOMEL itself, and its place in RuAF operations plans. Emphasis was therefore placed on combat platoons as maneuver elements, and specialized squads (RPGs, ATGMs, HMGs etc.) in support, all acting as part of a battalion tactical group (BTG).

Several insights could be drawn about the general conditions of the operation and its tactical, operational and strategic implications. But there are also interesting observations that can be made about countering special operations and, in particular, air assaults:

1. **Find, Fix, Flank & Fight ASAP:** Engage the enemy as soon as possible, on its way to the landing zone (LZ) or immediately after landing. The faster you can detect the enemy’s movements, the better you can

threaten the security of his operation and reduce its intended surprise effect.

2. **Send what you have now, not all you have later:** The reaction to a special operation has to be swift and decisive, in order to deny the enemy gaining relative superiority. There has to be a constant pressure on him by fire and maneuver.
3. **Focus on the operational objective rather than the tactical victory:** Special operations are highly time and objective sensitive, which means that as long as you can delay their execution and the achievement of their subsequent objectives, you can afford to just isolate the threat until that phase of the operation is lost for the enemy (maximum 72 hours).

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Infowargame: Investigating Military Thought and Doctrine through Wargaming

In 2022, the *Centre d'Histoire et de Prospective Militaires* (CHPM) in Pully set up a wargaming working group made up of passionate individuals. The project aims to provide a platform for exchange between professionals, academics and wargaming specialists, both in theory and, above all, in practice.

The group works to strengthen the wargaming culture in Switzerland and is to become a reference organization for professional, military and hobby wargamers across the country. Wargaming can have a great impact, however, methodology and practice need to be understood in order to unleash the power of games.

An annual program allows a group of specialists and experts to study different battles and complex problems through the medium of wargaming. These events are accessible through the CHPM website, and registration is by direct request through inforwargame@protonmail.ch. ♦

Video

“Why Russia’s Invasion into Ukraine Failed on Arrival”, Battle Board. *Daily Mail*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pe8AWujGuRo>

Notes

1 A full report of this wargame is available under Vautravers, Alexandre; Penseyres, Nicolas; Colak-Antic, Ivan. “Ukraine tactique 3.0 Hostomel (VDV). Rapport détaillé d'activité”. Pully: Centre d'Histoire et de Prospective Militaires (CHPM), online, https://chpm.ch/wp-content/uploads/240321-Rapport_Ukraine-Tactique-3.0-1.pdf, 23.03.2024.

2 A full and free edition of the *Revue Militaire Suisse Internationale* focused on the VDV and the war in Ukraine: *RMSINT+*, May 2024, online, <https://revuemilitairesuisse.ch/rmsint/>, 13.02.2025.

3 McRaven, William H. *Spec Ops. Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Novato: Presidio Press, 1995.