

Soviet Amphibious Operations

The breakthrough of a defense in World War II was always a complex problem for the attacking side. Forces and means were carefully prepared and amassed; a time and place were selected. What would be the outcome of an operation in which the troops went over to the attack at night or in poor weather conditions, practically without artillery preparation? This would be absurd, you say. Such an operation would be bound to fail. But this is exactly how one could characterize the overwhelming majority of our amphibious landing operations of the first and second periods of the Great Patriotic War.



Suffice it to say that of 52 amphibious landings executed by the Soviet Navies in 1941-1945, in only two cases did tank troops participate in the battles for the landing. (There hardly would have been a single such attack without the use of tanks in a land operation.) Here is an account about the largest "tank landing" of the Great Patriotic War.

One hardly need be reminded how difficult the year 1942 was for our country. In the course of this difficult year we gradually came to believe that the Germans could be beaten, although victory was yet far off. After a new round of difficulties and misfortunes came the great victory on the Volga. As a result of a whole series of interconnected offensive operations, the southern wing of the German front crumbled and units of the "victorious Wehrmacht," like a year earlier, were rapidly rolled back. Our forces, which just yesterday were retreating and conducting fierce defensive battles, went over to the pursuit.

These changes were particularly acute in the Caucasus. The enemy hurriedly abandoned territory acquired with great effort but despite this, to allow him to retreat unhindered was in effect to abandon the possibility of a great victory. Stavka understood this very well. As early as 26 November 1942, that is, three days after completion of the encirclement of the enemy's Stalingrad grouping, a directive for the preparation of a plan of a large-scale offensive operation was sent to the Trans-Caucasus Front (commanded by General of the Army I. V. Tyulenev). This plan was quickly drawn up. At its root lay a desire to cut off the path of retreat of German forces in both possible strategic directions - to Rostov and to Taman Peninsula. It was totally logical that units of the Black Sea Fleet (commanded by Vice Admiral F. S. Oktyabrskiy) would take an active part in the offensive on the Taman axis. At this time the fleet was directly subordinated to the front commander. The participation of the fleet was planned quite broadly, in the form of an amphibious landing operation in the enemy's rear.

It is interesting to note that an instruction regarding the planning of an amphibious landing was issued to the fleet immediately upon receipt of the Stavka directive, that is, long before the concept of the offensive itself was determined or even the operational mission for the amphibious landing units themselves. By Soviet standards, it was a significant effort: two naval infantry brigades, one rifle brigade, 563rd Independent Tank Battalion [IndepTbn], and reinforcing units. This concentration of forces executed an operation that subsequently received the name "Southern Ozereyka," (Uzhnaya Ozereyka) third in size

during the Great Patriotic War.

Unfortunately, only fragmentary information has surfaced about 563rd IndepTBn. By all accounts, it was formed in the early summer of 1942 in Sumgait tank camp. The battalion was assigned to Trans-Caucasus Front on 31 August and participated in combat actions in the area of Mozdok and Nalchik as part of 37th Army. Precise information regarding the type of vehicles assigned to the battalion at this time is unavailable, but it is highly probable that the unit had British Valentines and American M3s "General Stuart". In early December the battalion was withdrawn from the front and transferred to the Tuapse area, where it underwent reconstitution and preparation for the operation. At this time the battalion was fully re-equipped with the M3.

The Southern Ozereyka amphibious landing operation is the absolute leader among all amphibious operations in the important indicator of length of preparation. In point of fact, the initial date set for the operation - 15 December - was subject to repeated change. December passed, then January, and an order for the execution of the operation had not been issued. Meanwhile, the landing forces trained intensely. This bore its own fruit. In the sparse lines of archival documents it is noted that the tankers all attained "expert" status. The themes of exercises, in addition to the normal ones, in accordance with unit specialties, also included landing and battle on the shore, embarking on ships, and so on.

A few words need to be said about the latter. The role of the absent amphibious landing craft in the operation was to be played by the so-called "Bolinders." This intriguing name was nothing more than the name of a Swedish engine-building firm. The vessel was a shallow-draft self-propelled barge, constructed in Russia before the Revolution (1917). At the time these events occurred, the Black Sea Fleet had three such vessels, which, by this time, had long ago lost their capability to proceed independently. They were being used as temporary piers or as towed barges. The fleet simply had no other asset that could serve in the role of tank landing ships.



Regardless of how good these tanks were, they would become combat vehicles only when they experienced firm soil under their tracks. Until this moment they were simply breastplates of steel with poor swimming capability. Thus, their combat capability depended heavily on how quickly they could be disembarked from the deck of the landing vessel. In turn, this speed depended to a great degree on the construction and characteristics of the vessel itself. According to the plan it was intended to land 30 tanks of the first echelon, the other vehicles, and approximately 1,000 naval infantrymen! After the landing, again returning to their role as piers, the vessels were to support the unloading of equipment and personnel from the gun boats, minesweepers, and transports, which themselves were unable to approach the shore because of their deeper draft. Although the Bolinders had been repaired before the landing operation, in no way did this reflect in their speed and survivability qualities, both of which were negligible.

In all fairness it should be noted that the command understood the dependence of the success of the operation on the capability of the three "floating boxes" to approach the shore at the designated points.

The system of enemy firing points, which was fully discerned by Soviet reconnaissance, was to be suppressed by powerful aviation preparation and the fire of naval artillery. It was planned to disorient the enemy reserve by demonstration actions of ships, and to confuse its combat command and control with diversionary parachutists. The first to be landed on the shore were 300 sailors of an assault detachment, and only on signal from this group commander's cutter were the Bolinders to begin their approach to the shore. There was a chance for success of this plan, especially if one considers that the landing was executed at night, and those not German units, but troops of the 10th Romanian Infantry Division occupied the shore defenses.



Analyzing unsuccessful operations of the Great Patriotic War, not once will you find that the roots of their failure lay not so much in the plans themselves as in the absence of reserve variants, even of theoretical possibilities to correct something in the conditions of the changing combat situation. An even greater paradox is that it can be demonstrated that in some cases it was not the sober realities of war but our own military leaders who changed and complicated the situation.

That is what happened in this case. Although the assault forces were prepared in general, the operation was postponed through the entire month of January. The principal factor in its success—a breakthrough on the ground front—was absent. A successful offensive, which was constantly demanded by Stavka, had not developed, forcing General Tyulenev to throw the landing force into the fire first.

In this situation the "reshuffling of the deck" (ground forces breakthrough and naval landing) seriously influenced the operation's outcome. In the absence of special landing craft and equipment, even the very well trained landing forces were not prepared for the repulse of a serious, full-scale onslaught on shore.

This "coincidence" that arose as a result of the subjective decision of the front commander literally opened the road to the broad flow of objective coincidences that always occur in war.

The embarkation of personnel and equipment was begun on 3 February. The 563rd IndepTBn was loaded up in Gelendzhik. Because of the lack of a commandant's service and corresponding disorganization at the moment, the embarkation of naval infantry units extended into the evening. Finally, at 19:40 (30 minutes late), the first echelon of the assault force began to move into the outer channel. Here they encountered a force 2 or 3 sea, which at this time of the year was minimal on the Black Sea. However, for some reason this was not foreseen!

Immediately it became clear that the seaworthiness of the Bolinders, loaded as they were with tanks and trucks, was worse than first believed. The heavily laden barges broke the tow hawsers, the repair of which required an additional 40 minutes. The operation's schedule was thrown off and the convoy of vessels and escorts was strung out. It quickly became clear that the assault force would reach the designated landing area not earlier than 1.5 hours after the designated time, that is, a considerable time after the artillery and aviation preparation, demonstration landings, and so on. Considering that this would mean a disruption of

the entire operation, the commander of the landing forces, Captain 1st Rank N. Ye. Basistyy, requested of the commander of the operation (fleet commander Oktyabrskiy) that he slip the landing time for an appropriate interval. The fleet commander did not support this request, but because of abominable organization of communications they did not learn of this in the headquarters of the landing detachment until 45 minutes after H-hour of the original landing schedule.

Thus, there was no opportunity for surprise. Aviation struck first, then naval gun fires (a substantial amount was fired -2011 rounds, but without adjustment). Only then was the assault launched. Six patrol cutters with naval infantrymen of the assault detachment aboard raced toward the shore at 03:35 on 4 February. A searchlight, rockets, and then countless tracers and explosions immediately lighted up the beach, which had been neutralized by 2.5 hours of fire preparation. Fire covered the cutters and disabled two of them. SKA-051 quickly was blown up. These losses not only weakened the assault detachment by one-third (200 personnel were landed vice 300) but also stripped the forward cutter detachment of its leader. The detachment commander, Captain 3d Rank A. P. Ivanov, located on SKA-051, was killed.



There was no one to give the signal to the Bolinders to come in, but despite this they were ordered to move toward the shore. The most vulnerable vessels of the landing force were moving first and this determined not only their fate but also the fate of the tanks they were carrying.

Approximately 20-25 minutes after the beginning of the landing, at the same time that the sailors of the assault detachment who had been landed on the mined shore under a hurricane of machine gun and mortar fire was attempting to seize the first line of Romanian trenches, an enemy searchlight, positioned on the right flank of the landing, suddenly captured the barges that were slowly crawling out of the darkness. A storm of fire immediately engulfed them. Although in the landing sector the anti-landing defense contained 2-3 field batteries and one heavy anti-aircraft battery, the primary firepower of the defenders was mortars. Already the first strikes of artillery and mortar rounds had inflicted heavy damage on Bolinder No. 2 and its towing vessel, "Gelendzhik." Soon both vessels were set on fire, lost their motive power, and began to sink. At this moment some 250-200 meters of relatively deep surf remained to the shore. The 350 naval infantrymen and tankers who remained on board had no choice but to jump into the icy water and attempt to reach shore by swimming. It should be kept in mind that all this occurred under heavy small arms fire.

The tankers on Bolinder No. 4 were somewhat more fortunate. Despite heavy counter-fire from shore, their barge continued stubbornly to approach the beach. Approximately 100 meters of surf remained when the men felt a heavy shudder. The Bolinder had struck a steel hedgehog deployed in the shallows. Water quickly entered the vessel's hull and it soon sank to the bottom. Fortunately, neither the depth nor the position of the barge was an obstacle to the disembarking of tanks, which one after the other began to enter the water. At the same time the stationary Bolinder became an aiming point for dozens of enemy

guns and mortars, and was quickly set on fire. Although the vessel's crew and the assault troops took energetic measures to extinguish the fire, it gradually overran the entire barge. An explosion ripped through the air as the assault force's ammunition blew up. Some 7-8 tanks had managed to disembark from the barge by this time.

The tankers immediately entered into battle when they reached the shore, but initially they were unable to achieve much. A fierce battle was raging on shore that several times was manifested in hand-to-hand combat in the darkness of the night. Observation from the tanks was difficult at the same time that they themselves were lit up against the backdrop provided by illumination rockets and the fires on the sinking vessels. It cannot be excluded that a pair of vehicles became victims of the German 2-gun 88mm battery positioned directly at Southern Ozereyka. Nonetheless, the sudden appearance of Soviet tanks made a made a strong impression on the Romanian soldiers.

Approximately an hour of combat had passed when the remaining Bolinder (No. 6) approached the shore. By this time the fire from shore had weakened somewhat. But the enemy was still able to set this barge on fire just at the moment when it reached shore. The towing vessel SP-19 was also struck. The hawser either was cut or prematurely released and the Bolinder began to rotate. It quickly grounded in the sand and began to disembark tanks. By this time the vessel was totally engulfed in flames. Several of the six tanks that had disembarked were on fire. In photographs it is clear that at least two tanks lost their turrets from ammunition explosions. One could only hope that the tankers had managed to abandon their disabled vehicles in time.

The destruction of all three Bolinders and continuing barrage from the shore made the planned landing from the gunboats and minesweepers extremely difficult. These vessels attempted several times before 06:00 to approach the shore, but each time encountered fierce resistance and withdrew with losses. Dawn was approaching and, fearing hypothetical enemy air strikes (which, it should be said, were not anticipated at that time according to our own intelligence reports), at 06:20 Captain 1st Rank Basistyy gave the signal to the landing forces to withdraw. By this time, in addition to 563rd IndepTBn, the 142d and portions of two other battalions of the 255th Naval Rifle Brigade, and crews of sunken vessels-altogether up to 1500 personnel-were ashore, but without a single working radio receiver/transmitter. The headquarters of the landing commander-the staff of 255th MSBr (Commander Colonel A. S. Potapov) also had not landed from the gunboat Krasnyy Adzharistan.

Despite the withdrawal of the ships, strangely enough at dawn the predicament of the landed units improved. Although the fighting did not cease for even a minute, the commanders who remained ashore rallied around themselves groups of fighting men and agreed regarding their combined actions with the crews of the functioning tanks. They determined the locations of firing points and organized their liquidation. Troops briefly engaged in the hand-to-hand combat that had been so exceptionally difficult during the night. Many tankers from destroyed vehicles armed themselves with tank machine guns and other rifled weapons, and joined themselves to the infantry units.

Soon they managed to ferret out a thin spot in the Romanians' defense - the shoreline was not guarded in the place where the Ozereyka River flowed down through a steep ravine. A sudden attack by a large group of men from 255th MSBr and 563rd IndepTBn bypassed the right flank of the enemy defense and attacked his rear, a position near the village Southern Ozereyka. Who knew if the Romanians would be able to hold them back, but in this place the commander of the German 164th Reserve Antiaircraft 8,8-cm Battery lost his nerve. Considering his position to be hopeless, he blew up his guns and abandoned the position. For the Romanians this served as a signal for general flight. Having withdrawn in disorder, according to eyewitnesses they left more than 500 dead and wounded on the field of battle and, in addition, nearly 100 prisoners from their 2nd Battalion, 53d Regiment. Thus, Southern Ozereyka was captured soon after dawn, but not more than 700-800 men with eight tanks remained in the assault force.

The descriptions of all the subsequent events are a result of this author's reconstruction based upon extremely sparse Soviet and trophy source materials. There were no official accounts regarding the

actions ashore because there was not a single staff there to supervise them. By all appearance, leadership of the actions of the core of the assault force fell to the commander of 142nd Battalion, Captain Kuzmin. What conditioned the decision to move farther inland into the depth of the enemy-held terrain is not known. It could have been his striving to carry out the assigned mission (to capture Glebovka) or the desire to break through to our own forces. But the amphibious detachment continued to advance. At this moment the enemy lacked sufficient forces to block the assault force, but continued to offer fierce resistance. In particular, at 12:35 the headquarters of 17th Army reported to the headquarters of Army Group "A" that the anti-tank battalion of 73rd Infantry Division that was located in the Southern Ozereyka area had destroyed three "Stuarts." Nonetheless, by evening 4 February the sailors reached Glebovka and occupied its southern outskirts. Meanwhile, the German command brought into the area of the breakthrough quite significant forces: mountain rifle and tank battalions, four artillery battalions and two anti-tank batteries, and a group of anti-aircraft guns. The Romanian forces were also regrouped, and that evening they occupied the remaining sector of empty beach. As a result, the two cutters that had arrived from Glendzhik with the onset of darkness to establish contact with the assault force again were subjected to bombardment from the shore and returned to base. Considering the assault force to have perished ashore, Admiral Oktyabrskiy refused to land reinforcements.

However the "buried alive" sailors and tankers continued to fight fiercely for several more days. Despite the fact that our aviation reported this continued fighting, no measures were taken to supply the encircled troops. By this time the front and fleet commands had already made the decision to shift the axis of the attack across the bridgehead occupied by the demonstration landing to the area of Myskhako-Stanichka (the now familiar to everyone "Malaya Zemlya"). They did not desire to waste even the smallest drop of forces and means on the supply of the encircled forces. Pressed in from all sides and lacking ammunition, the assault force suffered enormous losses. The remaining tanks exhausted their main gun ammunition and the last two vehicles, which had only machine gun ammunition, were sent out to defend a shelter with the wounded. The enemy quickly set them on fire. By the end of the day only approximately 100 troops were capable of holding weapons. The total losses in the assault force, according to German data, were approximately 630 killed and 542 captured. It is possible that 200 additional personnel drowned during the landing.

At night the remnants of the detachment separated. Some 75 personnel led by battalion commander Kuzmin decided to break through to Myskhako, and the remaining 25 remained near the shore in the direction of Lake Abrau. They were lucky-partisans met them, who had contact with the "main land" and quickly evacuated these men by cutter. Only five men of the main body reached Myskhako bridgehead some 22 days after the landing. There was not a single tanker among these survivors.

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