

Blocking, searching for and destroying a guerrilla force in Ishkamesh region

by Major A. M. Kovyrshin¹⁴

The enemy established a base and training center near the village of Ishkamesh, 60 kilometers southeast of the city of Kunduz. Guerrilla forces trained at this center engaged in firing at aircraft landing at Kunduz Airport and attacked supply convoys along the Kunduz-Puli-Khumri road. This made it difficult to supply and sustain the garrisons and forces located in the province.

LTC V. M. Akimov commanded the motorized rifle regiment which was ordered to prepare for combat to destroy the guerrilla forces operating in this region.¹⁵ For this mission, the regiment was reinforced with a separate reconnaissance battalion, a separate helicopter squadron, and two artillery battalions. In addition, an Afghan infantry division supported the regiment.¹⁶

On 19 January 1984, the regiment and its subunits received their combat orders:

The reconnaissance battalion, reinforced with an 82mm mortar platoon and a flamethrower squad, air assaults into the Fuloli, Marzek, and Kokabulak region to cut off the enemy in Ishkamesh and Fuloli by 0900 hours 20 January. Be prepared to cooperate with the 2nd Battalion in blocking and destroying the enemy in Fuloli.

The 2nd Motorized Rifle Battalion, reinforced with a flamethrower squad, air assaults into the Kuchi, Badguzar and Apikutan region and destroys the enemy located there. Link up with your *bronegrupp*a no later than 0700 hours and conduct a raid in the direction of Kuchi, Badguzar and Pil'kha to destroy the enemy located between Pil'kha and Ilig and to seize the ammunition stores located there. Subsequently, be prepared to link up with the reconnaissance battalion on the axis Kokabulak-Fuloli to block and destroy the enemy in the village of Fuloli.

The 1st Motorized Rifle Battalion, reinforced with an artillery battalion and a flamethrower squad, conducts a road march to arrive at Marzek by 0800 hours, 20 January and destroy the enemy located in the Marzek-Ishkamesh region. Be prepared to advance on the axis Ishkamesh-Darayi-Pashay.

Regimental subunits and the reconnaissance battalion were at 70% personnel strength and 90% equipment fill. Enemy personnel in the area numbered 1,100-1,300 men armed with approximately 70 grenade launchers, 25 DShK 12.7 mm heavy machine guns, 40 mortars, and 10 artillery pieces. Intelligence revealed approximately seven caches in the area containing weapons, ammunition and supplies.

At first light on 20 January, after we conducted an airstrike on the area between Kokabulak and Marzek, the reconnaissance battalion made an air assault landing east of Marzek while the 2nd Motorized Rifle Battalion made an air assault landing two kilometers north of Kuchi. The *mujahideen* did not react to the helicopter flight since we used Mi-6 helicopters, a cargo helicopter not usually used for air assaults. This deception effort against the enemy paid off.

The reconnaissance battalion, commanded by LTC Tikhonov, cut the guerrillas southern route of withdrawal and blocked them in the strongpoints of Kokabulak and Marzek.

The 1st Battalion, commanded by Major A. V. Vlasov, exploiting the success of the reconnaissance battalion, arrived at the villages of Marzek and Kokabulak by 0830

hours and joined forces with the reconnaissance forces. Over the course of the next two and one-half hours, they destroyed the enemy in these strong points.

The 2nd Battalion, commanded by LTC V. Krokhin, landed and destroyed the enemy in the strong point of Kuchi. By 0830 hours, they had linked up with the approaching *bronegruppa*, which had driven there under the command of the 6th Company's commander, Senior Lieutenant R. S. Zarifov. The 2nd Battalion mounted its vehicles and conducted a raid on the axis Apikutan-Badguzar with the missions of searching and destroying weapons and ammunition caches.

The enemy, while conducting delaying actions withdrew part of their force into the mountains, while the other part withdrew into Ishkamesh, the main strong point in this *mujahideen* training center.

The 1st Motorized Rifle Battalion, having destroyed the enemy in Marzek and Kokabulak, moved on Ishkamesh from the south and arrived there at 1300 hours. Meanwhile, the 2nd Battalion, having destroyed the enemy in Badguzar and Apikutan, moved on Ishkamesh from the north. The *mujahideen* in Ishkamesh were blocked from two sides.

After a ten-minute artillery barrage by three artillery battalions, both motorized rifle battalions, supported by a flight of helicopter gunships, attacked Ishkamesh. By 1500 hours, Ishkamesh had fallen.

The 1st Battalion pursued a group of *mujahideen* who managed to break out and flee toward Darayi-Pashay. The 2nd Battalion moved to the area south of Fuloli to link up with the reconnaissance battalion and join forces to seal off and destroy the enemy in Fuloli.

By 1600 hours, the enemy had broken off his main attacks and concentrated his main forces to defend the villages of Fuloli and Darayi-Pashay.

The 1st Battalion having reached the village of Darayi-Pashay at 1700, was unable to take the village from the march mounted on BMPs. They dismounted and tried to encircle the village by climbing the mountain and coming over the southern flank. However, they were unable to do this since the encircling force came under interlocking enemy fire. The battalion fought for possession of the village for the next 24 hours, but was unable to take it.

The 2d Battalion attacked Fuloli from the march mounted on BMPs. They were also unsuccessful, so they dismounted and blocked Fuloli from the south. The 2d Battalion and the reconnaissance battalion fought for possession of Fuloli for the next 24 hours. They were finally able to take it, but discovered that most of the enemy had slipped out under the cover of fog and darkness and escaped into the mountains to the southeast. During 20 and 21 January, we destroyed the organized, main guerrilla force in the Ishkamesh region. The enemy lost up to 150 men killed and captured. Further, we captured a large amount of weapons and ammunition.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: The following points are particularly noteworthy:

- deception against the enemy (using the Mi-6 helicopter instead of the normal Mi-8);
- misleading the enemy as to the actual region in which the combat actions were planned (through information supplied to the Afghan division);

- wide spread use of maneuver, combining frontal strikes with flanking attacks, encirclements, vertical envelopment, and on foot as well as mounted on various carriers;
- tight coordination between the combined arms subunits and the aviation and artillery support (an artillery FO accompanied every company and TO&E FACs accompanied every battalion, while additional FACs accompanied every company. They all adequate communications);
- inadequate quantity of forces for a 20x10 kilometer area denied us the opportunity to seal off and destroy all the guerrilla forces;
- use of reconnaissance forces as combat forces; and
- paying closer attention to the increasing scale of activities which lead toward sealing and destroying the enemy.

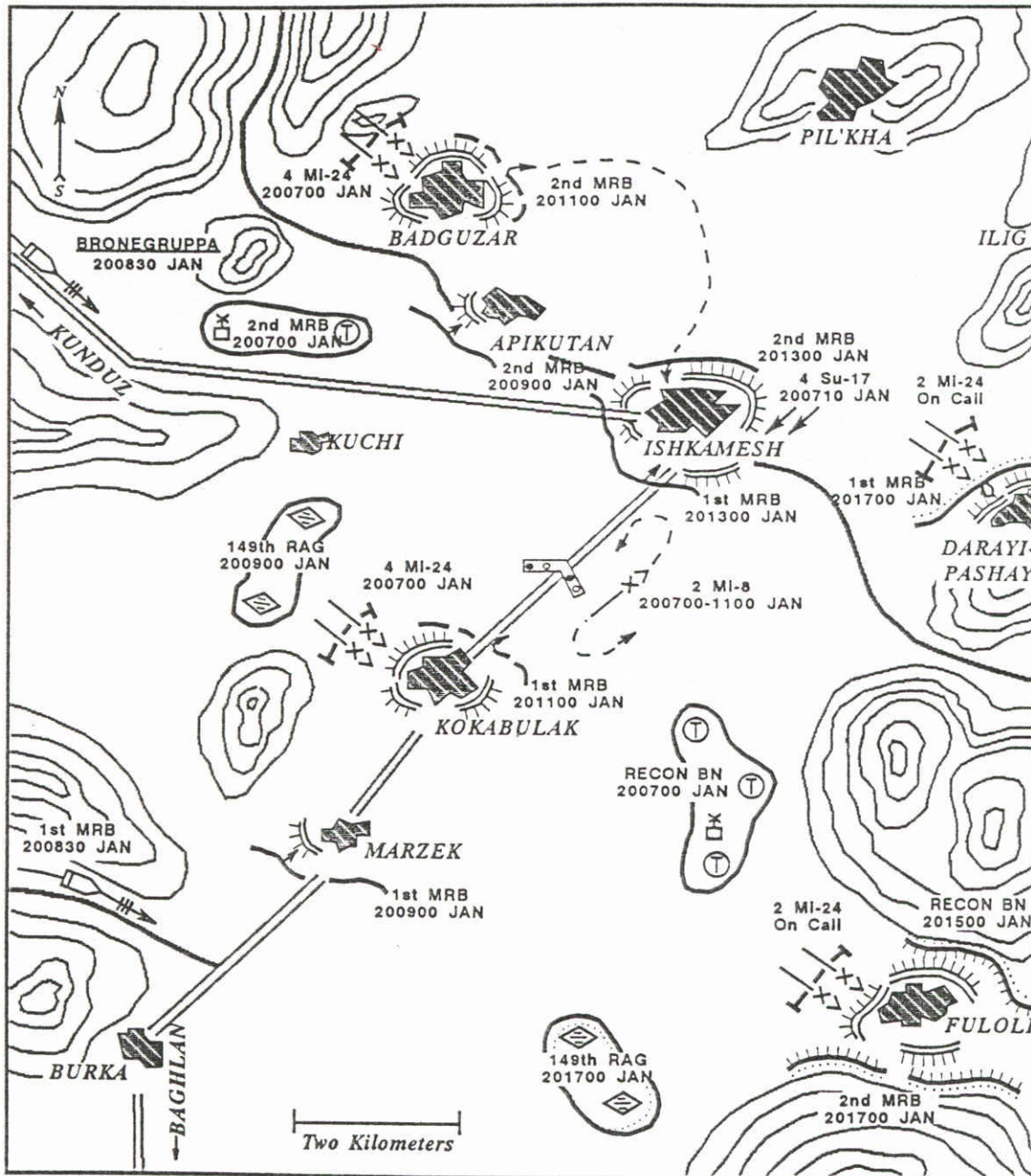
EDITOR'S COMMENTARY: Tactical surprise gained from air landings and air assaults dissipates rapidly. Once the enemy has dug into a mountainside, green zone or village, heavy forces with superior numbers and superior fire power are necessary to blast them out. Once the surprise had worn off on this raid, the Soviets were fighting two separated actions and lacked the combat power to win either of them.

The use of the Mi-6 transport helicopters for the air assault fits the motto "never set a pattern but do the unexpected." One has to ask, however, was it deliberate deception or were they just lucky that these were the aircraft available ?

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¹⁵Most likely the 149th Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 201st Motorized Rifle Division (ed).

¹⁶The 20th Infantry Division (ed).



Map 6: Destruction of the enemy in his training center in the vicinity of Ishkamesh

Extract from:

The Bear Went Over the Mountain, Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan, Lester W. Grau, ed., Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1996.