

STALIN'S ELITE BREAKOUT TROOPS THE SOVIET ASSAULT ENGINEERS

By Ben Moorhouse and Perry Bishop



It was the evening of August 10th 1943 on the Spas-Diemiańska Sector of the Eastern Front. Major Belokon's 1st Battalion of the First Assault Engineer Brigade were nervously but diligently conducting their final battle preparations. Their objective – the heavily fortified Hill 223. A piece of vital ground in the German line, Hill 223 was surrounded by a 900m anti-tank ditch, a double belt of barbed wire entanglements, was heavily mined and had been pepper-potted with concrete pillboxes and trenches. Garrisoned by 800 elite SS troops, many of whom were billeted underground in a network of barracks and bunkers, the position was considered by the Wehrmacht to be undefeatable. Indeed, several Battalions of the Soviet 10th Army had already failed to assault and capture this key position in the German Line. Consequently, Soviet High Command ordered Belokon's specially trained and equipped assault engineers into the line to take the objective.

The intent was to capture the hill by surprise; the attack would be launched just after dark while the dug-in German infantry were still eating their evening rations. Equally, the Soviets would forego the tell-tale preliminary bombardment. Instead, forward observation-trained engineers would call for fire support as required. After many days of planning, orders, rehearsals and equipment checks, every man knew the plan intimately. Laden with body armour, grenades, submachine guns and fighting knives, under the cover of darkness, 4 assault engineer companies infiltrated the German line to within 150 metres of Hill 223. Just as the first of the evening's sentry changes took place, Soviet Katyusha rockets began to fall behind the objective to cut the German's off from reinforcement. The shock close-combat that would follow would completely overwhelm the vast defensive position in less than two hours and conclude with the red banner hanging over the peak of the supposedly unassailable Hill 223.



Soviet sapper-engineer squad

THE HISTORY OF THE ASSAULT ENGINEER-SAPPER BRIGADES (SHISBR RKG)

In 1943, following the Battle of Kursk, the situation was changing on the Eastern Front. With much of the elite pre-war Prussian Officer Corps laying dead on the Russian Steppe and the materiel balance increasingly shifting to the allies, it was the Soviets who now had the strategic initiative. However, a decisive breakthrough of the German line was yet to take place. At the tactical level, the Germans still had a significant edge; whilst the Soviet trooper was brave, his tactical training and technical skill was poor. Consequently, the High Command of the Red Army gave orders to create specialist assault brigades that would be deployed to deal with the most challenging objectives. The manpower for these elite formations was largely drawn from engineering units due to their high level of technical proficiency, outstanding morale and the fact their officers had received significantly more combined-arms command training. The selection criteria were that personnel had to be under the age of 40 and be exceptionally physically fit.

By the Summer of 1943 the first of the 15 Assault Engineer Brigades were ready to enter the line. 1st Assault Brigade was the first into action in the Spas-Diemiańska section of the front (as described in the action outlined above). Despite the initial success at Hill 223, the early performance of the Brigades was suboptimal. Often, they were wrongly deployed as traditional infantry rather than being employed against specific heavily fortified targets. But by 1944, hard-won experience was seeing the brigades being deployed correctly on specific assault-focused missions and better supported by heavy weapons, artillery and armour. Still though, casualties were high and brigades were normally taken out of the line after an assault to retrain and fill the losses in their ranks. Outside of the contact battle, the brigades were also deployed to clear secured areas of mines and booby traps. By the end of the war, a total of 24 "Assault Engineer-Sapper Brigades of High Command Reserve" (abbreviated to ShISBr RKG) had been formed and they had participated in the capture of almost all of the Hungarian, Polish and German "Festung" (Fortress) cities. Some brigades even served in the Far East against the Japanese and others were awarded the title of "Guards Assault Engineers" for demonstrating outstanding bravery in the field.

SOVIET ASSAULT ENGINEER EQUIPMENT AND ORDER OF BATTLE

The structure of the Assault Engineer units was very much based upon those of the Engineering and Sapper Brigades they were created from. Each Assault Engineer brigade consisted of one headquarters and support company, five Assault Engineer battalions, a mine-clearance company, and a transport company.

As with the majority of Soviet Infantry at the time, transport for these units was limited with Battalions still relying on wagons and carts with which to move their supplies. However, by the spring of 1944, five Motorised Assault Engineer Brigades were created (2nd, 20th, 21st, 22nd and 23rd Brigade). These had light trucks and motorcycle transport and also included attached engineer tank battalions equipped with PT-34 mine-clearing tanks and OT-34 flamethrower tanks. In special cases some units were also converted into "Independent Special Purpose Battalions" (OBON) equipped with American amphibious vehicles such as the Ford GPA (light) or DUKW (heavy).

An Assault Engineer battalion had a total strength of 392 men (29 officers, 61 sergeants and 302 privates) with the bulk of the manpower formed into the battalion's three Assault Engineer

companies. Each company was 114 strong with three platoons of 33 men each. These platoons were equipped with SMGs, Degtyaryov DP-27 light machine guns, a single anti-tank rifle (issued from May 1944 onwards) and a variety of anti-personnel and anti-tank grenades (RPG-43, F-1 and RGD-33 amongst others). Finally, all troops carried a NR-40 Finnish Knife or "finka", a fighting knife design originating from the criminal underworld of Tzarist Russia.

The Assault Engineers trademark item of equipment was the SN-42 Steel Breastplate (later the SN-46) which was scaled at 125 per battalion. This was a two-piece shield usually worn over a padded jacket which protected the wearer from bayonet attacks, shrapnel and 9mm pistol or SMG lead-core ammunition. The bibs were an essential item of equipment in the tight confines of urban street fighting, but were found to be too cumbersome and restrictive when in the open field, where they were often left behind with the battalion's echelon. Captured German panzerfausts were also transferred as a priority to the Assault Engineer units. Indeed, reception of so many of these anti-tank weapons enabled engineer units to use them en-masse during attacks on key positions and strong points. During the storming of Gdańsk in March 1945, sappers from the 1st Assault Engineer Brigade were organised into 30 assaulting sections of 8 men, each supported by a smaller team of 4 sappers armed entirely with panzerfausts, known as a "Faustniks" section. These sections were typically armed with a staggering 50-80 Panzerfausts and possessed a rack and mechanism for firing the launchers in salvos (up to ten rockets at once in some cases). These teams had to be accompanied by transport, sometimes riding on a tank to ensure they could keep up with the assaulting infantry. Panzerfausts were used to great success in the assault on Gdańsk although daily consumption ranged between 200 and 250 rockets.

When attacking particularly heavily fortified objects, assault breachers were also attached to assault groups. Each such group carried 200kg of explosives used to breach enemy strongpoints and key locations. After the explosion, any surviving German troops were eliminated by ROKS flamethrowers, a weapon the Assault Engineers were particularly proficient with.



FIELDING A SOVIET ASSAULT ENGINEER PLATOON IN BOLT ACTION

Unlike many of the options in the Soviet Army list, fielding a Soviet Assault Engineer reinforced platoon is going to be points-rich and orders dice-light. Whilst an Assault Engineers list is unlikely to be competitive in Tournament play, or an open woodland or farmland table, it offers the potential to be absolutely devastating in an urban scenario. In terms of command choices, it is suggested opting for a regular or veteran junior or senior lieutenant to reflect the high standard of motivation and training of the Soviet engineer officers. Opting for a more senior officer also offers the opportunity to activate more squads using the “snap-to” rule, which could prove decisive when the number of order dice are unlikely to be in your favour. There is little mention of Assault Engineer commissars or medics in the records on these specialist units; hence they have been omitted from the suggested Army list above. A forward observation officer could also be included in your list to reflect the close all-arms support employed by these specialist units. Indeed, a well-timed barrage within a game may be critical in providing enough pins for your slow-moving body armour-wearing squads and flame throwers to close with the enemy.

In terms of infantry selections, three 10-man assault engineer squads will quickly eat up your selection points. Submachine guns will be the order of the day, with your sections designated for close-combat being equipped with flame-throwers and body armour. These could be augmented by a further stand-alone flamethrower team to really intimidate your opponent. Only one of the assault engineer sections in the suggested army list has been equipped with body armour to reflect historical scalings. Equally though, the limitations on movement the body armour rule imposes make equipping all of your sections with body armour unwise. Cover and terrain will be your friend, therefore protecting the flanks of your body armour-wearing squads is absolutely critical, and this function can be delivered by cheaper units such as the Platoon’s AT rifle team or squads of tank hunters. The later should be well equipped with looted panzerfausts for both historical accuracy and much-needed AT support. Likewise, based upon the historical tactics, one of your

sections should be equipped with multiple LMGs to provide close-in covering fire to your assault sections. In some specialist scenarios you may also wish to pay the +1 point per man for the mine-sweeper rule. Of course, don’t forget your 12-man free inexperienced squad, who could represent rear-echelon elements of the Battalion thrown into the fight to provide additional infantry mass. They will doubtlessly have a role to play in securing an objective inside your own lines or even soaking up enemy H.E. instead of your precious, and rather expensive, engineer sections.

Snipers, medium machine guns, mortars and artillery selections should be avoided, as the Assault Engineers were not routinely equipped with them. Trucks would provide much needed mobility for body-armour equipped squads, but the transport the Assault Engineer battalions were equipped was for logistics movement, not tactical fighting. In terms of armour, the key tank that the Brigade’s were equipped with was the OT-34 (for mid-war forces) and the OT-34/85 (for late war forces). These highly-flexible flame-throwing medium tanks could be used to distract or fix your opponent to allow your close-quarter squads to get into a position to strike a decisive blow.

Other special Assault Engineer units that you could field using your own local “house” rules could include: Tank Hunters equipped satchel breaching charges (delivering H.E. damage against structures in the assault), mine clearing dogs (perhaps customising Warlord’s Soviet AT Dog Team models), “Faustniks” AT teams laden with extra liberated panzerfausts (based around a tank rider squad to reflect their preferred mode of transport), mine-clearing PT-34 tanks (modifying the Warlord plastic T-34 with custom-made mine rollers) or even amphibious operations with bridging troops including Lend Lease DUKWs and FORD GPAs. In sum, the Soviet Assault Engineer-Sapper Brigades offers a rich history of potential Army selections for the Bolt Action gamer. They will almost certainly provide army lists that will play very differently to the normal Soviet hordes that are so often seen at tournaments. To see how they perform, why not try deploying them to the field in the following special scenario?

SUGGESTED SOVIET ASSAULT ENGINEER ARMY LIST

10 orders dice at 999 points:

- Junior Lieutenant and 1 attendant (60 points)
- 10 Man Regular Assault Engineer Squad with body armour, SMGs and flamethrower (224 points)
- 10 Man Regular Assault Engineers Squad with SMGs and flamethrower (174 points)
- 10 Man Regular LMG Squad with 2 LMG and anti-tank grenades (139 points)
- 12 Man Inexperienced Free Rifle Squad with anti-tank grenades (0 points)
- Regular Flamethrower Team (50 points)
- Regular Anti-Tank Rifle Team (30 points)
- 3 Man Regular Tank Hunter Anti-Tank Team with SMGs and panzerfaust (56 points)
- 4 Man Regular Tank Hunter Anti-Tank Team with 2 SMGs and panzerfaust (70 points)
- Inexperienced OT-34 Flamethrower Tank

Soviet sapper-engineer flamethrower team



STRONGPOINT ASSAULT SOVIET ASSAULT ENGINEER REINFORCED PLATOON 1944-1945

A Soviet Force for the Strongpoint Assault scenario must comprise of one or more reinforced platoons picked from the following Army List. Each reinforced platoon is made up as follows:

- 1 Junior or Senior Lieutenant
- 2 Assault Engineer Squads (may carry 1 panzerfaust per model for +5pts)

plus:

HEADQUARTERS

- 0-1 Captain or Major
- 0-1 Medic
- 0-1 Forward Artillery Observer or Forward Air Observer

INFANTRY

- 0-4 Infantry Squads: Assault Engineer Squads, LMG Squads (max 2 LMG per squad), Tank Riders Squads, Shtrafbat Squads
- 0-2 Flamethrower Teams
- 0-3 Anti-Tank Teams: Anti-Tank Rifle Teams, Tank Hunter Anti-Tank Teams

ARTILLERY

- 0-2 Artillery Gun: Light, medium or heavy

TANKS, TANK DESTROYERS AND SELF-PROPELLED ARTILLERY

- 0-2 Vehicle From: OT-34, OT-34/85, IS-2, SU-76, SU152

TRANSPORT AND TOWS

- 0-1 Transport vehicle per infantry unit in the reinforced platoon from: Truck, Gaz jeep
- 0-1 Tow from: Truck, Komsomolets, artillery tractor

SPECIAL RULES

No inexperienced troops are allowed to be taken, except for the free inexperienced 12 man rifle squad

OPTIONAL

The Soviet Player may choose to ignore the 'Quantity has a quality all of its own' army special rule and uses the following one instead (the other Soviet army special rules remain in play):

Faustnik!

All 'Tank Hunters' Anti-Tank teams equipped with Panzerfausts gain the Tank Rider special rule and may carry up 1 panzerfaust per model. In addition to this, once per turn, two models in the unit may fire their panzerfaust together in a 'salvo' – if they do this, instead of using the normal panzerfaust profile, choose one of the two models and make a single attack up to 12" range treating it as a light howitzer firing directly.



Soviet Assault Engineers hunt their quarry through ruins.

SCENARIO: STRONGPOINT ASSAULT

A heavily fortified Axis position has thwarted multiple attacks by the Red Army. To deal with this salient, the Soviet High Command has ordered its shock troops into the line – deploy the Assault Engineers!

SET-UP

This scenario is designed to be played with equal points values on both sides. The Russian player must use the Strongpoint Assault Assault Engineer Reinforced Platoon list. The table needs to be dominated by a high feature or strongpoint of some description on one side of the table. This could be a headquarters surrounded by a series of bunkers or earthworks and trenches. The centre of the strongpoint should have a suitable objective placed at the centre of the table half (e.g. HQ, supply dump or communications station) this should be at least 12" from the table edge. The remainder of the table should have adequate cover, provided either by a scattering of ruined buildings in an urban scenario or a series of craters and broken terrain if in a more rural setting.

DEPLOYMENT

The Axis force deploys first as the defender in the strongpoint part of the battlefield. Half their force (rounding down) is placed in reserve, the remainder is deployed up to the halfway point on the tabletop.

The Soviet Player must decide whether or not they are going to use a **Preparatory Bombardment**. If they do not, then the Soviet player deploys their force anywhere in their half of the battlefield, with no limit to how close their units are placed to any German troops. If a bombardment is chosen, then units are still deployed in their half of the battlefield, but may only be placed more than 12" away from any German units. In either case, they may retain up to half their force (rounded down) in reserve.

SPECIAL RULES

Dinner Time. Due to the careful timing of the attack, Soviet forces have caught the German garrison during a mealtime – this explains how the Soviets got so close to the enemy unnoticed! In addition, all German units roll to come on from Reserve with a -2 modifier to the dice roll, rather than just the usual -1.

OBJECTIVE

The Soviet player must break through the strongpoint's defences and capture the central objective. The German player must prevent them from doing this.

GAME DURATION

Keep a count of how many turns have elapsed as the game is played. At the end of turn 6 roll a die. On a result of 1,2 or 3 the game ends, on a roll of 4,5 or 6 play one further turn.



VICTORY!

At the end of the game whichever player in possession of the objective is the winner. If the objective is contested then it is a draw. To hold the objective there must be a model from either an infantry or artillery unit within 3" of the objective edge at the end of the game. The objective remains contested if there are any enemy units also within 3" of its edge.

