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NA FRONTNI ČRTI KIJEVA: TAKTIČNI VPOGLEDI IZ BITKE ZA LETALIŠČE HOSTOMEL

ON THE FRONT LINES OF KYIV: TACTICAL INSIGHTS FROM THE BATTLE FOR HOSTOMEL AIRPORT

Povzetek Februarja 2022 je ruski zračni napad na letališče Hostomel oziroma mednarodno letališče Antonov zaznamoval odločilen neuspeh moskovske strategije za hitro zavzetje Kijeva. Letališče, ki je bilo namenjeno kot strateški vhod v prestolnico, ni bilo zavarovano kot funkcionalni zračni most zaradi kombinacije ukrajinskega odpora in operativnih napak ruskih sil. Odločna obramba letališča Hostomel je omogočila pomemben čas za okrepitev obrambe Kijeva in na koncu imela odločilno vlogo pri preprečitvi ruskega načrta za obkolitev prestolnice.

Ključne besede *Bitka za Kijev, napad na letališče Hostomel, ruske zračne operacije, strateške in operativne napake.*

Abstract In February 2022, the Russian airborne assault on Hostomel or Antonov International Airport marked a critical failure in Moscow's strategy for the rapid capture of Kyiv. Intended as a strategic gateway to the capital, the airport was not secured as a functional airbridge due to a combination of Ukrainian resistance and operational missteps by Russian forces. The determined defence of Hostomel Airport bought valuable time to reinforce Kyiv's defences and ultimately played a decisive role in thwarting Russia's plan to encircle the capital.

Key words *Battle of Kyiv, Hostomel Airport Assault, Russian Airborne Operations, Strategic and Operational Failures.*

Introduction

In February 2022, Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine under the assumption that it could overthrow the government in Kyiv within days and accomplish its strategic goals before Ukraine or the broader international community had time to react. Russia assumed that it would force Ukrainian government officials to flee or be captured. The invasion plans, obtained by The New York Times, show that Moscow expected to triumph in Ukraine within days (Troianovski, 2022). Instead of the expected blitzkrieg, Russian forces encountered determined and fierce Ukrainian resistance – an outcome that took many international observers by surprise. The Russian invasion has since evolved into a protracted and brutal conflict, the most devastating war in Europe since World War II. This article offers an exclusive look at one of the key battles during the early phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: the battle for Hostomel Airport, just 25 kilometres from Kyiv. The Russian High Command launched an airborne assault with the objective of establishing an airbridge which would allow thousands of additional troops and heavy weaponry to be transported directly to the outskirts of Kyiv. Russian forces crossed the Belarusian border and advanced along two primary axes. The western thrust moved past Chernobyl toward Hostomel, north-west of Kyiv, while the eastern push bypassed Chernihiv and ultimately reached Brovary on the capital's eastern outskirts. Moscow's operational strategy for capturing Kyiv hinged on rapid manoeuvring and the element of surprise, aiming to overwhelm Ukrainian defences before a coordinated response could be mounted.

Despite several existing analyses of the fighting for Hostomel Airport (see Stewart, 2023; Reynolds, 2024), the study presented here offers by far the most in-depth and precise insight to date into the tactics and strategy of the Russian and Ukrainian units. Previous studies have largely relied on the analysis of available official sources; in contrast, this paper aims to provide a greater amount of information, supported by the detailed accounts of numerous witnesses, to enable a more comprehensive analysis of the events. This article presents notes from extensive conversations with Ukrainian commanders, soldiers, and civilians. Documenting these insights is crucial, as the battle for Hostomel Airport offers valuable lessons on tactical errors by both Ukrainian and Russian forces, and sheds light on the management and deployment of military resources. It also provides a rare opportunity to analyse a special forces airborne assault alongside its defence.

1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I obtained information about the battles for the Hostomel Airport through research I conducted as a war correspondent, focusing primarily on qualitative research based on interviews with eyewitnesses. With this method, I emphasize in particular the importance of careful comparison and verification of different sources of information. I observed that some eyewitnesses unintentionally provided inaccurate accounts of the fighting at the airport, mainly because they inferred the course of certain events; later, cross-checking of facts revealed that they had not actually witnessed those events or could not have observed them from their location. I primarily relied on

information that I was able to corroborate through testimonies of independent and unrelated witnesses.

The sample of respondents was designed to include as many eyewitnesses as possible, regardless of whether they were civilians or members of the military. In total, the research involved 37 respondents. Certain individuals provided minimal information, while others offered substantial insights. Some soldiers and officers were unwilling to discuss the battles in detail, citing the confidentiality of the information. Some testimonies, including statements by the commander of the Ukrainian military units at the airport, were drawn from Ukrainian media reports. Unfortunately, sources from the Russian side were not accessible, which constitutes one of the key limitations of this study. Another limitation is the ongoing nature of the war in Ukraine, which led some respondents to refrain from sharing all the available information due to concerns about disclosing sensitive military details. The timeframe of the research extended from March 2022 to June 2023.

The information I collected was documented partly in the form of transcripts (as most interviews were recorded with a video camera), while a portion of the interviews was captured through notes rather than verbatim transcripts. All the material is owned by RTV Slovenia and is stored in the archives of the News and Current Affairs Department of Television Slovenia (Slovenian: Informativni program TV Slovenija). Most of the material has never been published. The analysis of the material and the data processing were conducted at the end of 2023; only now are we publishing the results in this article, as we believe they may also be of interest to the professional community. For the analysis of the interviews, I applied both thematic and content analysis. Within the thematic analysis, I extracted from the interviews all the data relevant to the examination and interpretation. This required repeated listening and reading of the conversations, coding, analysis, and interpretation of the data. I also conducted qualitative content analysis, focusing on the frequency of specific statistical data, pieces of information, concepts, terms, or meanings.

This study draws on firsthand accounts from eyewitnesses who either observed the combat or participated directly in the defence of the airport. It also incorporates analysis of field footage and tactical decision-making. I included information from Ukrainian and other journalists who closely followed the fighting, also with the assistance of their sources. As a war correspondent, I covered the conflict from Ukraine's front lines between 2022 and 2023, reporting from Kyiv to Bakhmut. In 2022, alongside fellow journalists Igor Vucic and Sandro Dokic, I was embedded on the frontline west of Kyiv. After the Russian withdrawal, I visited multiple sites north of Kyiv with colleagues Tjasa Platovsek and Viktor Boiko, including Irpin, Bucha, Hostomel, Ivankiv, Chernobyl, and Pripjat near the Belarusian border.

2 HOW UKRAINE UNDERESTIMATED THE THREAT

The Russian invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022. To a certain extent, the Ukrainian military was prepared for the invasion. Strong reinforcements in the form of infantry units had been deployed to eastern Ukraine, to the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. In several cities, Ukrainian soldiers reported that, prior to the launch of the full-scale attack, the Ukrainian High Command had proactively relocated a substantial portion of its personnel and military equipment away from their usual bases. This move significantly reduced the effectiveness of the initial Russian mass strikes. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, ordered command posts moved into the field towards the probable axis of a Russian advance. As Stewart (2023) observed, despite existing preparations, the overwhelming number of the advancing Russian troops – with analysts estimating a 12:1 force ratio in Russia’s favour north of Kyiv – still caught the Ukrainian forces off guard. Numerous Ukrainian soldiers and civilians told me that “the effectiveness of the initial strike was extremely low” (Interview No. 4, 2022) for such a massive Russian air assault, “and most of the missiles simply didn’t hit their target,” (Interview No. 11, 2023).

It appears that Ukraine was completely taken by surprise by the northern assault, as the Ukrainian forces failed to form any significant defensive units capable of at least attempting to halt the Russian advance. While it is entirely understandable that both the international community and the Ukrainian public were caught by surprise, the Ukrainian security forces should not have been. They had received numerous intelligence reports from the United States indicating precisely such an offensive originating from Belarus. In mid-January 2022, the CIA Director, William Burns, made a secret visit to Kyiv to personally brief President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on intelligence assessments which pointed to an imminent Russian invasion. The briefing emphasized that Moscow’s plan hinged on a lightning assault on Kyiv, with Hostomel Airport as a critical objective (Khomenko, 2025). “Burns reportedly told Zelensky that Russian forces planned to take control of Hostomel Airport in Hostomel, outside of Kyiv, and use it to fly in troops who would be used to topple Ukraine's government,” (Thomas, 2022). According to Kyrylo Budanov, the Chief of Ukraine's Main Directorate of Intelligence, banker Denys Kireyev received intelligence from Russian sources on February 23, indicating that the Russian invasion of Ukraine would begin the following day, February 24, and that Hostomel Airport would serve as the primary target of the initial assault (Forrest, 2023). The Ukrainians could not have obtained more precise information. They spoke of an airport which, as a key international cargo hub, was reportedly capable of handling even the heaviest aircraft. As a result, it held strategic importance as a potential hub for airlifting troops and heavy equipment in support of a rapid offensive on Kyiv.

Despite clear and repeated warnings from US intelligence, Ukraine failed to adequately secure this strategically critical airfield. One of the Hostomel defenders was later critical: “The problem is that the senior leadership did not really seriously

consider the possibility of carrying out a real air assault operation on critical infrastructure, such as military and civilian airfields, or a dual purpose,” (Yan, 2023). Who was truly responsible for ignoring the warnings about an impending attack from Belarus towards Kyiv remains unclear. Were the poor decisions made by the military leadership, or by the civilian authorities led by President Volodymyr Zelensky? Or both? Some sources suggest that the near-fatal error was the responsibility of the Ukrainian presidential administration, and that there was no internal consensus on whether the warnings were accurate. The Zelensky administration was reportedly vocal in its opposition to the idea that Russia would actually escalate the situation. Consequently, the Ukrainian government deployed a large portion of its forces to the Donbas, expecting that this would be the most likely axis of advance for any Russian offensive (Reynolds, 2024).

2.1 Unprepared Personnel and Troops on the Eve of the Russian Assault

Volodymyr Smus, head of Hostomel Airport’s control and dispatch centre, later told journalists: “We were not prepared for war. The airfield was preparing for the arrival of Boeing and Hostomel planes... Missile strikes on the territory of the airfield were considered at planning meetings. But not a full-scale invasion,” (Stewart, 2023). No efforts were made to evacuate the Hostomel An-225 ‘Mriya’, the world’s largest cargo aircraft.¹ Subsequent investigations conducted by the Security Service of Ukraine revealed that, on the eve of Russia’s full-scale invasion, Serhiy Bychkov, then Director General of Hostomel, and Oleksandr Netosov, Head of Aviation Security, refused to grant access to personnel of the National Guard of Ukraine, thereby preventing them from preparing defensive measures at Hostomel Airport. Despite explicit warnings from Ukrainian state authorities and the awareness of expiring insurance coverage, Hostomel officials failed to evacuate the Hostomel An-225² (Oliylyk, 2024). Responsibility also lies with the Ukrainian military command, which should have intervened immediately when the conflicts with the Hostomel leadership impeded defensive preparations. Equally troubling was the weak defensive posture of the units stationed at the airport and their overall lack of readiness. Soldiers told me that after the New Year, they occasionally conducted military drills. At the sound of an alarm, they were required “to run to designated defensive positions around the airfield,” (Interview No. 16, 2023). I had to perform the same exercises myself during my military service between 1990 and 1991, when I was stationed in Bihac, the largest military airbase of the former Yugoslav People’s Army. We had to occupy pre-assigned defensive positions on hearing the alarm. However, such activities can hardly be described as actual military training. They more closely resembled hurried running and positioning of military beds in designated spots. While these routines may have helped in assigning positions during a moment of emergency, they offered little to no substantive tactical or combat preparation.

¹ *The Hostomel An-225 “Mriya” was the heaviest and largest aircraft ever built. It could carry up to 250 tons of cargo, powered by six engines and an enormous wingspan (Gordon & Komissarov, 2020). The An-225, a symbol of Ukrainian engineering excellence, was ultimately destroyed during the fighting at the airport.*

² *In 2024, formal charges were brought against Bychkov and Netosov, both of whom face potential prison sentences of up to 15 years (Oliylyk, 2024).*

At Hostomel Airport, the military base belonged to the special forces of the 4th Rapid Reaction Brigade. These troops trained with US and Canadian troops for counterterrorism operations, urban warfare, and rapid deployment. However, in December 2023, these units were redeployed to the Donbas region due to the escalating tensions (Sladden et al., 2024). As a result, only conscripts remained at the airfield. Vitaly Rudenko, the commander of the Ukrainian National Guard base stationed there, later told journalists that “the airport was guarded by 120 soldiers,” (Stewart, 2023). The Kyiv Independent stated: “Only about 200 Ukrainian soldiers had been left to guard the airfield, many of them conscripts who were barred by law from taking part in combat. Most had no experience in battle: a local commander estimated that less than 20 men had seen combat prior to the morning of the full-scale invasion,” (Mak, 2024, p 1). A major mistake on the part of the Ukrainians was entrusting the security of such a strategically important facility to conscripts, even though they had information about a possible attack.

The extent of the Ukrainian unpreparedness is evident in the limited weaponry available to these units: small arms, Soviet-era portable Iгла MANPADS, and two ZU-23 twin-barrelled 23mm anti-aircraft guns. It is likely that Russian intelligence had identified these weaknesses, and that Moscow, overconfident in its assumptions, expected a rapid and uncomplicated victory.

2.2 Russian Forces Strike the Airfield

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched an unannounced invasion of neighbouring Ukraine. Global media and scholarly sources report widely varying times for the invasion’s onset, ranging from 4:30am to shortly after 6:00am, and often conflating Moscow time and Kyiv time. Given the importance of the timeline for this study, precise details are required. Reliable sources (BBC News Русская служба, 2022; Novaya Gazeta, 2022) confirm that Russia’s largest state television channels broadcast a pre-recorded address by President Putin at exactly 5:30am Moscow time, in which he announced the start of a “special military operation in Ukraine”. Accounting for Kyiv time, Putin’s pre-recorded speech first aired at 4:30am and lasted for 28 minutes, concluding at 4:58am. At exactly 5:00am Kyiv time, a large-scale Russian assault commenced by air, land, and sea. CNN reported that “explosions [were] heard in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Dnipro just after 5am local time,” (Breaking News, February 24, 2022, 10:00am), while the BBC noted that “explosions were heard in Kyiv at around 5:00am local time,” (BBC Breaking News, February 24, 2022, 1:00pm). A journalist from The Guardian reported that the first explosions in the Ukrainian capital were heard at 5:00am (Gumenyuk, 2022). According to the testimonies of numerous soldiers in and around Chernobyl, with whom I spoke, in the early morning hours of February 24 – at approximately 5:00am – Russian forces crossed the Ukrainian border from Belarus toward Chernobyl and Chernihiv. It is evident from this that the Russian military launched its ground assault on Ukraine at the end of Putin’s speech.

Why is an accurate timeline important? The alarm at the Hostomel Airport military base sounded only an hour after Putin's speech began, or about thirty minutes after the Russian army launched the invasion. At 5:30am on February 24 at Hostomel Airport (Stewart, 2023; Reynolds 2024), the commander of the Ukrainian National Guard base was awakened by a phone call. "Get up," the duty officer said, "and prepare for combat," (Stewart, 2023). The soldiers told me that Commander Rudenko immediately ordered them to evacuate the base and establish defensive positions at the airport. Two groups of soldiers were deployed, and two anti-aircraft guns were positioned in the northern sector of the airfield with the task of defending the radar installation. Before sunrise, trucks were driven onto the runways to block a potential landing by Russian aircraft.³ Stewart (2023) claims that Rudenko was already out of the door and on his way to the aircraft hangars in his car when the first missile struck. It exploded near the airport's administration building. Civilians living near the airport and soldiers told me that the first Russian missile exploded around 6am. According to the soldiers, the 3M14 Kalibr missiles targeted the Ukrainian military base in the airport.

Given the defensive importance of the military barracks, it is worth emphasizing that the facility was situated in close proximity to the runway – approximately 400 metres east of the airstrip and about 250 metres south-east of the airport control tower. South of the barracks complex, which consists of nine large structures, begins the settlement of Hostomel. To the north of the complex is the main access point to the airport, while to the east the barracks are bordered by residential housing blocks and a school. Witnesses claimed that "four Kalibr cruise missiles were launched, but none of them hit their intended target," (Interview No. 17, 2023). Sladden et al. (2024) reports that two missiles failed to detonate. One missile struck a residential building near the airport. Reynolds (2024) claims that two Kalibr missiles struck a residential building near the airport. Several civilians also confirmed to me that between 6am and 7am, two Russian missiles struck residential buildings near the airport, missing their intended target by several hundred metres. I saw that one explosion had literally split an old Soviet-style apartment block in half, destroying numerous homes. I assume that many civilians were killed or injured in their beds that night. The fact that none of the missiles hit their targets says a great deal about the inaccuracy of Russian missile systems.

The morning was cold and overcast, with a temperature of 2° Celsius and light rain. The Ukrainian conscripts were waiting in defensive positions at the airfield. Fearing a possible attack, the Ukrainian military command only then decided to reinforce the airfield's defences. They activated members of the Territorial Defence Forces in the area surrounding the airfield and ordered certain special forces units to redeploy to new positions in Hostomel. A member of the Omega special unit recalled that he and his colleagues received a message at 9:00am instructing them to report to the barracks, as they would be heading to Hostomel (Yan, 2023).

³ *A soldier told me: "When the alarm went off early in the morning, we thought it was just another damn drill. We woke up all pissed off, but we sobered up real fast when they told us that Putin had announced at 4:30am that Russia was attacking Ukraine. Sure, people had been talking about it for weeks, but no one actually believed it would happen. It just seemed too crazy," (Interview No. 16, 2023).*

According to airport personnel, at approximately 11:00am, a formation of 30-40 Russian helicopters approached the airport from the direction of Belarus. Sources most frequently cite the deployment of 34 helicopters, including Ka-52, Mi-35, and Mi-24 attack helicopters, as well as Mi-8 transport helicopters (Reynolds, 2024). To avoid detection by Ukrainian air defences, the Russian helicopters flew just above the Dnipro River and the Kyiv Reservoir, accompanied by Russia's most advanced Ka-52 Alligator attack helicopters. The helicopters took no risks, flying just above the water surface to avoid two large radar systems north of Kyiv. According to a Ukrainian journalist with excellent connections to General Zaluzhnyi, "the Russian military attempted to jam Ukrainian radars and suppress local air defence sites, while simultaneously unsuccessfully trying to destroy the radar systems with missile strikes," (Interview No. 4, 2022). According to witnesses from Novi Petrivtsi, the helicopters flew toward the Kyiv Hydroelectric Power Plant, located north of the capital. Before they approached the facility, they made a sharp turn to the west. It appears that the power plant and the dam on the Dnipro River served as a navigational reference point guiding them toward Hostomel Airport. The Russian commanders made a critical error in flying close to the power plant, as they should have anticipated that strong air defence systems would be stationed in that area. The Ukrainians successfully shot down two helicopters, killing the Russian soldiers on board; a Mi-35M crash-landed at the reservoir, and a Mi-24 went into the water, both hit by MANPADS (Reynolds, 2024). The Associated Press published videos in which two Russian helicopters can be seen being shot down over the Dnipro River (APTN, 2022). The remaining helicopters continued their flight, using decoy flares to divert surface-to-air or air-to-air missiles. After covering approximately 20 kilometres at low altitude, they arrived at Hostomel Airport.

Low clouds kept the Russian helicopters hidden: "We didn't see them because they flew so low to the ground," Commander Rudenko recalled (Stewart, 2023).⁴ A young woman filmed the arrival of the helicopters from her apartment located very close by. The footage is truly astonishing because, during the attacks, vehicles were still driving through the streets as normal, and civilians were running errands and observing what was happening (Military Videonews, 2022). People believed they were safe simply because they were civilians, naively assuming that the war would be fought exclusively between soldiers and that civilians would remain untouched. The footage also proves that a proper Ukrainian defence positioned in the tall buildings around the airport would have completely decimated the Russian special forces and their helicopters. As some soldiers explained, the Russians likely did not expect any resistance, as two Mi-8 helicopters attempted to land on the runway. One soldier recalled: "Enemy Mi-8s came in hot, heading straight for the strip. It looked like they weren't expecting any fire," (Interview No. 17, 2023).⁵ The testimony

⁴ "When helicopters flew over our apartment buildings toward the airfield, I was sure they were ours – Ukrainian military. Watching them, it never even crossed my mind they could be Russian" a civilian from Hostomel told me. (Interview No. 20, 2023)

⁵ Another recalled to me: "That first Russian helicopter came down right on the damn runway – like they really thought they could just land in the middle of the day, right in our faces. They clearly didn't think we'd fight back. It's crazy. I don't know what kind of crap their commanders or intel guys were feeding them. One of our boys who got captured said the Russians actually asked him why we were shooting at them. Can you believe that? You roll into our country with guns and then act all confused when we shoot back? That's just dumb as hell" (Interview No. 11, 2023).

suggests that Russian soldiers were misled prior to the invasion, having been told that the Ukrainians did not oppose the Russian military, and that – aside from a few isolated units – most would not respond with hostility. Such assumptions aligned with Moscow’s expectations of a swift and easy victory.

According to eyewitnesses, a helicopter that was intending to land was destroyed by 23mm anti-aircraft guns. All the soldiers on board were killed. “The fire was coming from all sides; that is, it was heavy and constant. So the first landing was suppressed and, I would say, defeated,” the Ukrainian soldier recalled (Yan, 2023). At that point, the landing was aborted, and they began attacking the Ukrainian defensive positions. This is evidenced by footage later released by the Russian Ministry of Defence (WarLeaks1, 2022). According to eyewitness accounts, the helicopters attacked the airfield in waves – flying over it, turning around in the surrounding area, and attacking again. In videos recorded near the airfield, small arms fire can be heard, suggesting that members of the Territorial Defence Forces were firing at the helicopters with AK-47 rifles (The Sun, 2022). Based on the footage, the helicopters appeared to be extraordinarily vulnerable, yet due to the defenders’ lack of appropriate weapons, they could not be brought down. As the helicopters flew over the airfield, the Ukrainian defenders used Soviet-made portable Iгла MANPADS to shoot down the most advanced Russian Ka-52 Alligator helicopter, which, according to Ukrainian soldiers, crashed in the middle of the runway, killing the pilot instantly.⁶ Commander Rudenko claimed that “they shot down around six helicopters in total,” (Stewart, 2023). Reynolds (2024) cites experts who analysed the wreckage and remains of the destroyed Russian helicopters and confirmed that on that day the Ukrainians shot down one Mi-8 transport, one Mi-28 attack, and a total of four of the most modern Russian Ka-52 Alligators.

Valerii Zaluzhnyi, as the Commander-in-Chief, accurately assessed the situation and dispatched more reinforcements to the airfield. They were reportedly brought in by helicopter, including from the city of Zhytomyr, located 120 kilometres away (Interview No. 6, 2023).

2.3 The Landing of Russian Special Operations Units

Two soldiers who were directly involved in the fighting for the airfield explained that after an hour of continuous fire at the helicopters, most of the young Ukrainian soldiers had run out of ammunition. The most critical issue for the defenders was the depletion of ammunition for the anti-aircraft guns. They had also fired all their man-portable air-defence systems, meaning they no longer had any weapons to use against the attacking helicopters. This exposed another flaw: the Ukrainian units had no ammunition reserves at their defensive positions. The commander therefore ordered the troops to withdraw. Only a team of 20 soldiers, guarding the radar in the far northern section of the airport with a 23mm anti-aircraft gun, chose not to withdraw – fearing they might be killed in the open by helicopters.

⁶ “Man, that pumped us up. We were all scared shitless, but when their top-of-the-line helicopter went down, we felt damn proud – and fired up,” one of the soldiers told me (Interview No. 14, 2023).

Following the Ukrainian withdrawal, Russian helicopters enabled the safe landing of approximately 300 Russian Special Forces (Reynolds, 2024) at around 12:00pm. One of the soldiers recalled: “They landed their units north of the airport, on the edge of the forest, and the paratroopers were already moving out in foot combat formations: chain, diamond-shaped combat formations,” (Yan, 2023). They initially took cover among the low bushes near the airfield. Footage from helmet cameras shows this group disembarking and encountering no resistance (WarLeaks2, 2022). According to eyewitness accounts, Russian special forces advanced to the radar station, where the group of Ukrainian soldiers had remained. The Ukrainians surrendered and they became some of the first prisoners of war. A second group of Russian special forces landed farther south, near the Ukrainian military base. Official sources identified the special forces as belonging to the Russian airborne soldiers from the 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade and 45th Separate Guards Spetsnaz Brigade (Sladden et al., 2024). Russia had deployed its elite troops, who, according to a Ukrainian intelligence source, “had years of combat experience from Georgia and Chechnya, and had also participated in the 2014 occupation of eastern Ukraine – Crimea and Donbas,” (Interview No. 2, 2022). In the footage released by the Russian Ministry of Defence, the special forces are seen expanding their control from the runways and systematically clearing airport buildings, which they took without resistance (WarLeaks2, 2022). They brought with them ammunition, mortars, and anti-tank weapons. They also seized the administrative buildings leading to the flight control tower without a fight. In just one hour after landing, by around 1:00pm, they had secured control of the majority of the airport. At that moment, the Russian commanders were likely very pleased with the rapid advance and the Ukrainian withdrawal. In the office buildings at the airport and in the headquarters of the Hostomel company (right next to the airport control tower), employees were hiding in basement or ground-floor rooms. One woman said they were sheltering in the basement of the Hostomel office building (Interview No. 20, 2023). Among them were company executives and administrative staff, border guards, members of the National Guard, security personnel, and civilians.

Here, we can identify another significant mistake made by the Ukrainians. The Ukrainian soldiers and their commander, after retreating, were “completely unaware that a Russian special forces landing had taken place,” (Interview No. 11, 2023). This was only noticed by other Ukrainian units in the vicinity of the airport, who then reported it to their commander, Rudenko. He got into a vehicle to verify the situation himself. When he reached the airport buildings, Russian soldiers opened fire on him. He was incredibly lucky and managed to escape (Stewart, 2023).⁷ When the Ukrainian military command learned that the Russians had carried out an airborne assault and landed at the airport, it ordered a counterattack. All units stationed at and around the airfield were instructed to open fire on the Russian forces, who still had strong air support. The first Ukrainian special units, which hurriedly arrived in the vicinity of the airfield, were without anti-aircraft weapons. Initially, only soldiers

⁷ “I started to receive information over the radio that the paratroopers were landing,” Rudenko said. “We didn’t know where, and on which side, so I jumped in an armoured vehicle to go to the runway to see. As I drove my vehicle was under machine gun fire.” (Stewart, 2023)..

and their personal weapons were transported, while other weapons and ammunition were expected to arrive later. The soldiers told me they felt desperate and powerless because they lacked the means to shoot down the Russian helicopters flying above them: “If there had been anti-aircraft guns, they would have torn those helicopters to pieces at such an altitude...,” one soldier claimed, adding: “One of the main lessons of this war is that man-portable air-defence systems must be present in the companies, whatever they may be,” (Yan, 2023). Due to the helicopter strikes and attacks by special forces, the conscripts began to withdraw from the airfield. The Ukrainian defence of the airport collapsed (Stewart, 2023).⁸ The soldiers fled to the nearby town of Hostomel. Local residents living near the airport, witnessing the mass retreat of Ukrainian troops, stepped in to assist.⁹ Local residents helped the soldiers bury their weapons and documents, provided them with civilian clothing, and transported them to Kyiv. Meanwhile, the Russian forces were unable to capitalize on the collapse of the Ukrainian defence, as they were focused on securing the airport and awaiting reinforcements. During this time, the Russian forces were left without helicopter support – presumably because the aircraft had to return to Belarus for refuelling.

After the Ukrainian conscripts had withdrawn, Russian soldiers took control of the airport buildings and the captured civilians who had taken shelter in bunkers. All individuals were identified and registered. According to eyewitnesses, the Russian soldiers were “very polite and calm,” (Interview No. 20, 2023). They promised the civilians they would be allowed to leave and take their vehicles. They assured them that “the fighting was over” (Interview No. 24, 2023), suggesting that they believed that with the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces, victory was secured. They had no idea that the worst was yet to come. Civilians who were being registered by the Russians inside the buildings recalled that, at that moment, a Ukrainian plane flew in and bombed the runway. As we know from official sources, two Su-24 bombers from the Ukrainian Air Force targeted the runway to prevent the landing of Russian reinforcements (Aaron, 2022). Russian soldiers allowed the airport personnel to evacuate. They allowed them to walk toward Bucha on foot. No one was permitted to take any vehicles. The border guards were detained as prisoners.¹⁰

⁸ *Commander Rudenko said. “We didn’t Commander Rudenko explained: “Our enemy dominated us in the air, and they had many more paratroopers,” he said. “To save the lives of our team, we had to retreat,” (Stewart, 2023).*

⁹ *“The boys said the Russians had taken the airfield and they couldn’t hold the defence anymore. They were scared the Russians were right behind them. They took off their uniforms and asked us for civilian clothes. A lot of them buried their weapons in people’s gardens. They were really afraid of what might happen to them if the Russians caught them,” an elderly woman from Hostomel explained (Interview No. 22, 2023).*

¹⁰ *After more than ten days, the border guards were taken into captivity through Belarus and transported to Russia. They were not released until after a year of captivity.*

2.4 Russian Special Forces Capture the Airfield but Fail to Establish an Airbridge

The Ukrainians tightened the encirclement around the Russian forces, with a wide range of units rushing to the scene at the airport, including the Special Operations Forces, Military Intelligence, the Omega Special Anti-Terrorist Unit, National Guard units, volunteers, and Territorial Defence (Yan, 2023). At that moment, a team from the American television network CNN arrived at the airport. No one knew that the Russian forces had landed. War correspondent Matthew Chance later explained that they stopped the news vehicle as soon as they saw soldiers near the airport. They initially believed they were Ukrainian troops. Only after speaking with them and their commander did he, to his surprise, realize he was talking to Russian air assault troops and that the Russians had taken control of the airport. On the first day of the invasion, the CNN reporter broadcast live from the outskirts of the airport, with Russian special forces in the background hurriedly preparing for further combat and distributing ammunition. The reporter said that there were clashes between Ukrainian and Russian soldiers (Chance, 2022).¹¹

In the late afternoon, at around 5:00pm, just before sunset, heavy artillery from the Ukrainian 72nd Mechanized Brigade began shelling the airport, with the objective of rendering its runways completely unusable. The strategic aim was to prevent Russia from utilizing the airfield as a staging ground for additional airborne operations. To destroy the runway, the Ukrainians also brought in two Soviet 152.4 mm 2S3 self-propelled guns. The Ukrainian intelligence services claimed that 18 Ilyushin Il-76 transport aircraft carrying Russian reinforcements had already taken off from Pskov, Russia. However, they were forced to turn back when they learned that the runway was too badly damaged and that Ukrainian forces could potentially shoot down the aircraft (Aaron, 2022). This was a major success for the Ukrainian forces.

Ground fighting continued into the evening, and by 10:00pm, the Ukrainian special forces had managed to retake some parts of the airport. The Russian special forces pulled back into the nearby forest west of the airfield. The Russian troops found themselves in a precarious position – surrounded and under heavy artillery fire – with several soldiers killed or wounded. The Ukrainians also faced significant challenges, particularly in terms of communication. This led to instances where Ukrainian forces occasionally fired on their own troops, exacerbated by the lack of effective

¹¹ *As a Ukrainian soldier recalled: "The enemy acted in a well-coordinated manner and had air support, which is important because the Ka-52s had very serious fire pressure on us... This included the firing of unguided rockets, heavy fire with autocannons, and the use of anti-tank guided missiles on our equipment. We lost two combat vehicles during the battle, and they were taken out of action by anti-tank guided missiles outside the line of sight... as soon as the enemy realized it faced organized resistance, their helicopters started operating from behind the forest edges. In other words, playing a kind of 'catch-up', they flew behind the undergrowth, appeared from behind the forest, dealt a quick blow, went down, and then chose the next firing position. The enemy acted competently and coherently." (Yan, 2023).*

communication – a critical factor in such circumstances.¹² The Russian special forces surrounded at the airfield were in serious trouble, partly because additional Ukrainian special units joined the fighting against them before midnight. The Ukrainian Armed Forces scrambled three Mi-8 helicopters carrying 48 air assault troopers. According to Lieutenant Kharachenko, who took part in the operation, they departed initially believing they were to conduct a counterattack and prevent Russian IL-76 transport planes, expected to arrive with reinforcements, from landing. Upon arrival, they were caught in a firefight that lasted through the night (Reynolds, 2024).

Despite Ukrainian successes, a sudden reversal occurred in the early hours of February 25. Civilians in Hostomel told me that despite the Ukrainian gains at the airport, they noticed that by the early morning the Ukrainian forces were beginning to retreat. They told me: “They said the runways had been blown up, and that heavy Russian units with tanks and armoured vehicles were coming towards the airport from Belarus,” (Interview No. 22, 2023). It was clear that defending the open terrain of Hostomel Airport against Russian tanks would be impossible.

However, although the Russian special forces succeeded in capturing the airport, they failed to establish an airbridge. From multiple sources, we know that the Ukrainian conscripts under Rudenko’s command did not suffer any casualties. However, it can be assumed that the units from the Ukrainian special forces did sustain losses. We know for certain that two Ukrainian armoured vehicles were destroyed. Various interviewees estimated that the number of casualties was low; I was unable to determine the exact number. Eyewitnesses also reported that several civilians were killed or wounded in the course of the missile and helicopter attacks. At least four firefighters were killed, including the airport’s fire chief. In contrast, it appears that the Russian forces suffered significantly heavier losses. In addition to losing at least six helicopters – along with the pilots and soldiers aboard – eyewitnesses reported seeing multiple Russian soldiers killed during the fighting at the airport. One Ukrainian soldier, who was captured by Russian forces and later released in a prisoner exchange, claimed that Ukrainian POWs were ordered to collect the bodies designated for evacuation. He reported counting 80 bodies (Stewart, 2023). If this account is accurate, and considering estimates that approximately 300 Russian air assault troops had been deployed during the assault, the loss of 80 men would suggest an high casualty rate – almost 27% – among the Russian special forces involved in the operation.

¹² “It was a fucking mess that night – we couldn’t see a damn thing. We were firing towards the airfield, trying to take out the Russian paratroopers. It wasn’t until over an hour later that we found out our own special forces had retaken parts of the airfield – and we’d been shooting at them. It was awful. We just hoped to God we didn’t kill any of our own. It wasn’t our fault. No one told us a damn thing,” said one member of the National Guard (Interview No. 11, 2023). “The number one problem that arose during the defence of the airport was communication. Unfortunately, National Guard radios operate on high frequencies; we had Motorola and Harris, so in general, we had a mixed type of radio. The Special Operations Forces used Harris exclusively... There were very serious difficulties with communication.” (Yan, 2023)

On the morning of February 25, the intensity of the infantry combat decreased. Around noon, strong Russian armoured units broke through to the airport. These reinforcements had pushed through Ukrainian defences near the town of Ivankiv in a rapid advance and reached the airfield. Civilians who observed the movement spoke of two long convoys of armoured vehicles and military trucks.¹³ The last Ukrainian units left the area around the airport by the evening. As one soldier explained: “The new defence line was established along the Irpin River, and there were fights in the direction of Bucha and Irpin” (Yan, 2023). The Russian armoured units were soon reinforced by artillery and rocket forces. When they encountered fierce Ukrainian resistance, a different Russian strategy emerged; using heavy artillery and multiple rocket launchers, they began to level everything in their path.¹⁴

3 LESSONS LEARNED

The importance of intelligence for the adequate formulation of strategy. Despite numerous warnings, the Ukrainian authorities failed to respond adequately. On the day of the attack, the airport was left almost without any proper defensive forces. The defensive positions at the airport were also neither fortified nor completed. The fact that satellite imagery just before the Russian invasion showed a concentration of Russian forces along the Belarusian border was a clear indication that an attack from the north could be expected. Of course, it was possible that the Russians intended to use this manoeuvre to stretch the Ukrainian defences across different parts of the country and then attack only in the east. The Ukrainian military command should have ensured significantly stronger defences in the north. I confirmed in 2023 that this lesson had been well learned by the Ukrainians. Although there were no signs that Russian forces would attempt to advance towards Kyiv from the north again, the Ukrainian military was well prepared. In this area, it maintains appropriate combat units and has reinforced numerous defensive positions. Because the war is ongoing, I am unfortunately unable to disclose further details. I do not wish to publish military-sensitive information, as this could compromise Ukraine’s security. The lessons learned are that commanders must always plan with the mindset that while what the enemy predicts or signals may indeed happen, the military must also be prepared for the possibility that these are merely deceptive manoeuvres intended to mislead or confuse.

Lessons learned from this operation show that success depends not only on obtaining quantitative intelligence but also on acquiring high-quality qualitative intelligence. Such intelligence must include not only information on enemy weapons and unit strength but also on their psychological readiness, which is considerably more difficult to assess. When intelligence fails, as demonstrated at Hostomel, soldiers

¹³ Sladden et al. (2024, p 21) citing the testimony of a civilian who observed the arrival of the Russian armoured forces: “About 250 armoured vehicles. And in the second column there were 114. They were driving from Ivankiv towards Hostomel. I had the impression that they did not understand where they were. They were in such a mood, without bulletproof vests. I won’t say they were nervous. They were relaxed”.

¹⁴ In March 2022, together with my colleagues Vucic and Dokic, I was on the frontline near the village of Bilogorodka in Bucha Raion, west of Kyiv. There, we witnessed and felt the sheer power of Russian artillery, especially the multiple rocket launchers. The destruction was devastating, psychologically breaking many civilians as well as some of the inexperienced soldiers.

bear the ultimate cost. An additional point of interest is the highly imprudent action of the Russian special forces, who planned to land in the open at Hostomel Airport with two Mi-8 transport helicopters at midday, prior to the outbreak of combat. The objective was to deploy troops directly onto the airfield. No reasonable justification exists for such a decision. Only after the first fatalities did Russian commanders cancel the landing and continue the operation via helicopter attacks on Ukrainian defences. It appears that Russian soldiers were misled prior to the invasion, being told that the Ukrainians would not resist the Russian military, and that – apart from a few isolated units – most would not respond with hostility.

The lessons learned indicate that pre-emptive attacks are of critical importance for such an operation. The Russian generals' plan to execute a pre-emptive strike with only four missiles, all of which missed their targets, is a truly humiliating fact for the Russian military. Considering that, due to poor communication, the Ukrainian defenders at the airport were still asleep in their barracks half an hour after the invasion began, the Russians should have exploited this opportunity – but they did not. The fact that the Russian state media broadcast a speech at 4:30am in which the Russian president declared war on Ukraine, while the commander of Hostomel Airport was not awakened by an alarm until 5:30am, seems almost unbelievable. However, this information is credible, as it was personally confirmed by the airport commander himself. This means that while Russian missiles were striking numerous targets across Ukraine at 5:00am, and Russian tanks were crossing the border and advancing toward Kyiv, the entire defence team at the airport were still asleep in their beds. They were an incredibly easy target, one that the Russians could have annihilated with precision missile strikes, opening the gates to the airport and capturing it instantly without firing a single shot. The Russians began attacking the airport with rockets only after 6am – an hour and a half after Putin's declaration of war – by which time the Ukrainian defenders were already awake and armed.

If an attack is carried out too late, commanders risk failure – and the soldiers usually pay the price with their lives. The key question for understanding the outcome of the battle for Hostomel Airport is: what were the Russians waiting for between the start of the invasion at 5:00am and their ground attack at 11:00am? Why did they land just five and a half hours before sunset, with none of the special forces soldiers equipped with night vision devices? Some of the Ukrainian commanders I spoke with speculated that the Russians delayed their airfield landing in order to first destroy the radar systems north of Kyiv and, above all, to eliminate the Ukrainian air force, thereby securing air superiority. This line of reasoning helps to explain the Soviet-style military mindset to which Russian generals adhere. This does not explain why, given the element of surprise, they did not launch the operation at the very start of the invasion at 5:00am, under the cover of darkness. Based on similar high-risk operations conducted by US forces in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq – which I covered as a war correspondent – I can say that American special forces usually launched such assaults in complete darkness.

According to the available sources, the Russian helicopters took off from the VD Bolshoy Bokov airfield in Belarus at “around 09:30 local time” as part of the attack on Hostomel Airport (Sladden et al., 2024, p 18). The fact is that the Russian commanders fatally delayed the attack, and this mistake had a significant impact on the high number of casualties among the Russian troops and on the overall failure of the mission. So, why were they so late? Was the weather to blame? No. Eyewitnesses in Chernobyl and Hostomel, as well as Hostomel Airport staff, stated that the weather in the Mazyr and Hostomel regions was suitable for helicopter flight both at night and throughout the first day of the invasion. They described it as cloudy but with good visibility – cold, around 2–3°C, with no signs of strong winds or storms. Were there technical problems with some of the helicopters? We don’t know. There are simply no data from the Russian side, and likely never will be. However, given the catastrophic state of Russia’s outdated and worn-out military equipment, this explanation is plausible. A more convincing explanation may be that the Russians feared the Ukrainian Air Force. Witnesses confirmed that two Ukrainian fighter jets attacked Russian forces at Hostomel Airport, showing that Ukraine’s air force was active even in the northern Kyiv region during the battle. The Russians may also have postponed the helicopter operation in the early hours because of the intense missile strikes on Kyiv and its surroundings. Between 6 and 7am, Hostomel Airport itself was under missile attack, making helicopter landings impossible until after 7am. Why didn’t the Russian generals launch the assault at dawn? According to a Hostomel Airport employee, sunrise in the helicopter flight area was at 06:58 local time in Chernobyl on February 24, 2022 (Interview No. 18, 2023). The earliest moment when a helicopter pilot no longer needs night-vision equipment is the start of morning civil twilight – when the sun is approximately 6° below the horizon and there is enough light for visual flight. In Chernobyl on February 24, 2022, this was at 06:24, or 34 minutes before sunrise at 06:58 (Interview No. 18, 2023). Unfortunately, we have no definitive answers to these questions. What we do know is that by launching the helicopter attack only at 11am, the Russians were far too late. By then, Ukraine had gained precious time to send reinforcements to defend the airport and effectively prevent Russia from establishing an airbridge through Hostomel Airport. If the Russians were truly waiting for the destruction of the Ukrainian air force, it would be really shocking that the Russians believed they could secure air superiority within just a few hours. It should be emphasized that they have not achieved air superiority even after more than three years of war.

The lessons learned are that the Russian generals made an error in planning the route to Hostomel. Flying at extremely low altitude along the Dnipro River was an excellent decision, as it allowed them to avoid the defences. However, the flight all the way to the hydroelectric power plant near Kyiv was a mistake. According to the available sources, the Russian helicopters took off from the VD Bolshoy Bokov airfield in Belarus (Reynolds, 2024). The coordinates of this small airfield are 51.9835° N, 29.1636° E, near the town of Mazyr in the Gomel Region of Belarus. Satellite imagery reveals that the airfield is surrounded by forest, rendering it less visible to the public. The aerial distance to Hostomel is 172 km, sufficient for approximately

one hour of flight. Based on the available reports, it can be established that the Russian combat helicopters “took off around 09:30 local time” from this Belarusian airfield as part of the attack on Hostomel Airport (Sladden et al., 2024, p 18). They arrived over Hostomel approximately an hour and a half later, at 11:00am. The extended flight duration can be attributed to their non-linear flight path. Eyewitness accounts suggest that on entering Ukrainian airspace the helicopters first appeared over the Dnipro River, indicating that from Mazyr they flew eastward, then crossed into Ukrainian territory just east of Chernobyl, flying at very low altitude along the Dnipro toward Kyiv, and then turned sharply west towards Hostomel. The selection of this flight path for the attack helicopters was deliberate, coherent, and logically justified. The extraordinarily wide Dnipro River, with its banks separated by more than ten kilometres in some areas, provided near-complete protection against Iгла MANPADS and partial protection from the Ukrainian air defences. Flying at extremely low altitude, just above the water surface, reduced visibility and allowed the helicopters to evade radar systems effectively. This Russian tactic demonstrates prudent operational planning and a recognition of the threat posed by the Ukrainian air defences. Nonetheless, their subsequent error is noteworthy: the helicopters continued to fly as far as the hydroelectric power plant north of Kyiv. They should have anticipated that the Ukrainian forces would deploy air defences at precisely that location – and they did. It was there that Ukrainian forces successfully shot down the first Russian helicopters, and Russian special forces were killed before they could even set foot on Ukrainian soil.

The lessons learned show that operations such as seizing an airport deep inside enemy territory absolutely require air support from military aircraft and bombers. The Russian soldiers did not have it. Their aerial support relied solely on Russian helicopters, which were forced to withdraw repeatedly due to the risk of being shot down. From this perspective, the fighting for Hostomel Airport provides a clear lesson about the vulnerability of attack helicopters, the relative ease with which they can be destroyed, and the risks inherent in conducting such operations by means of a helicopter assault. Based on the footage, the helicopters appeared to be extraordinarily vulnerable, yet due to the defenders’ lack of appropriate weapons, they could not be brought down. Warnings of this nature have been familiar to US and broader NATO commanders since the 2003 Iraq War. Evidently, the Russian generals paid little heed to those warnings. Because Reynolds (2024) presents an excellent analysis of lessons learned for helicopter combat units, I will not repeat his findings here, as they fully align with my own conclusions.

The lessons learned show that military units must maintain constant situational awareness, even – or especially – during a retreat. Due to the ammunition shortages, the Ukrainian defenders were forced to withdraw from the airfield and failed to notice that the Russian forces had landed – without a single shot being fired at them. This represented a serious Ukrainian tactical error.

The lessons learned show that during combat, effective communication and coordination between different combat units are of critical importance, underscoring the essential role of reliable communication systems. The Ukrainian forces reported significant communication challenges. The National Guard units were using Motorola and Harris radios operating on high frequencies, while various special units employed different radios. This created coordination difficulties, resulting in incomplete awareness of unit locations and even incidents of friendly fire.

One of the main lessons of this battle is that man-portable air-defence systems must be present at the company level, regardless of unit type. The first Ukrainian special units which hurriedly arrived near the airfield were without anti-aircraft weapons. Initially, only personnel armed with small arms were deployed, with heavier weapons and ammunition expected to follow later. As a result, the Ukrainian special forces were initially limited to observing the Russian helicopters without the means to engage them.

The lessons learned show how rapidly battlefield events can influence the morale of soldiers. At the onset of the Russian special forces attack, the Ukrainian conscripts were initially terrified; however, after the first Russian helicopters were hit and casualties appeared among the Russian troops, a sudden psychological shift occurred. The Ukrainian soldiers gained motivation and, encouraged by their early successes, continued fighting until they ran out of ammunition.

Conclusion The Ukrainian resistance at Hostomel Airport was instrumental in buying this essential time to fortify the defensive positions around the capital. In the battle for the airport, both sides made major strategic and tactical mistakes. However, the Ukrainians proved more capable of exploiting the Russians' errors, ultimately preventing the Russian military from achieving its operational objectives. It must be acknowledged that the Ukrainian military command responded swiftly. Reinforcements from various parts of the country were mobilized to establish an effective defence in the Kyiv suburbs. The unexpectedly courageous and tenacious defence by the Ukrainian forces against a significantly more powerful opponent inflicted substantial casualties on Russian units, contributing decisively to Russia's defeat in the battle for Kyiv.

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