

Operation Victory *January 5-10, 1981*

The largest conflict during the Cold War era was the Iran-Iraq war. It lasted from 1980 to 1988. Combat operations were conducted practically along the entire Iran-Iraq border, on land, at sea and in the air. With the involvement of large masses of troops. The latest weapons were used at the time, both made in the USSR and USA/Western Europe, and even in China and DPRK. It was in this war that attack UAVs were first used, albeit in a rather primitive form.

Brief history

The war began with the invasion of Iraqi into Iran in the fall of 1980, with the goal of seizing disputed oil-bearing territories, mainly in the Iranian province of Khuzestan. In the first months of the war, Iraq managed to capture or besiege a number of Iranian large cities: Khorramshahr, Susangerd, Abadan, Ahvaz, Dizful. And significantly advance into Iranian territory. Apparently the reason was that the Iranian army, weakened after the 1979 Islamic revolution, would not be able to offer significant resistance. And as result Iraq will was able to gain control over oil-bearing areas, the disputed Karun River and port on the Persian Gulf coast (pic.1). But the stubborn defense of a number of cities, as well as counter-attacks by Iranian troops and militia forces, slowed down the Iraqi army's advance. In some places, Iranian troops even recaptured cities captured earlier by the Iraqis. For example, the city of Susangerd and the village of Hoveyzeh were liberated by the joint efforts of the army and Iranian militia.

As a result, by the end of 1980, the Iraqi offensive had stalled, and the configuration of the front line (in the Khuzestan province) was two protrusions towards Iran, which were captured by the Iraqis:

- 1) Near the city of Dizful (Dezful), in the north of the province.
- 2) Near the cities of Akhvaz-Abadan along the bank of the Karun River (on the south).

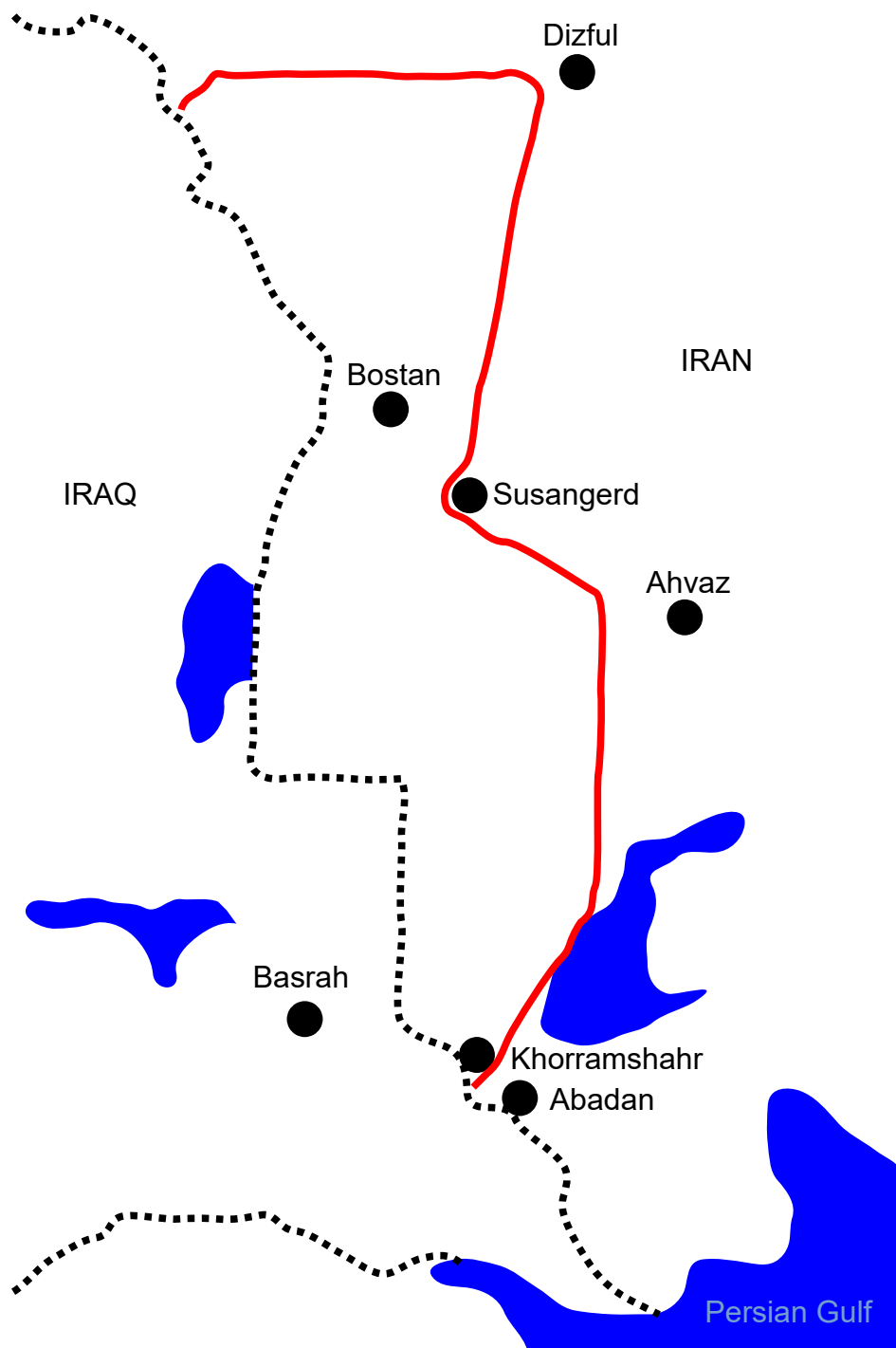
In the middle between these protrusions, a wedging of the territory liberated by the Iranians was formed near the city of Susangerd, in the floodplain of the Karkheh River.

At the beginning of 1981, the Iranian command planned the first major counteroffensive, operational plan "Victory" (Nasr), which was to cut off the Iraqi protrusion near the Ahvaz city. And under favorable circumstances, destroy the Iraqi troops in this area, breaking the siege of Susangerd and Ahvaz cities.

What was the battlefield looks like?

Let's refer to the Iranian documents again: "In general, the weather in the fall and winter of 1359 (1980-1981 according to the Gregorian calendar) was mild, there was no cold as it happens in this place every year. Visibility was limited." There were no autumn rains this year, which usually fall at the end of each year. As a result, the ground in the area of operation was dry, there was only partial precipitation. But in the beginning of January, a relatively heavy rain fell, which slightly flooded the territory of future battles in some low places. But immediately after that, the weather was sunny, the ground almost dried up within 48 hours, and the remaining moisture prevented the formation of dust from vehicle movement, which contributed to the covert preparation for the operation.

The terrain in the area of operation had no significant elevation changes and was almost completely open. High grounds began northwest of Ahvaz and north of Hamidiyeh and the Karkheh River outside the battlefield. The area between Hamidiyeh and Ahvaz was an outstanding land area in the Kamboye artificial forest (what that means is not entirely clear). The Karun and Karkheh rivers were impassable without a bridge or pontoon.



Pic.1 - General strategic map

The Karkheh-Kor River is a natural channel following the dam on the Karkheh River, stretching south from Hamidiyeh and turning west to Hoveyzeh was also impassable. However, due to the fact that an earthen dam was built on this river south of Hamidiyeh, in the place where the river went out onto the plain (turned on Hoveyzeh), the east-west branch almost dried up. But in any case, in order to cross it was necessary to build a crossing or a bridge.

A wide channel was created to artificially flood the area south of Ahvaz and create an obstacle to the Iraqi army advancement towards Ahvaz. Water from the Karun River was pumped into this channel by 3 pumps. Water from the channel flows out onto the plain to the west of Ahvaz, creating a relatively good barrier - flooding the area west of Ahvaz. Thus, it was impossible to move

through these flooded areas. The branch of the channel at Hamidiyeh also flooded the area in the vicinity of Hamidiyeh. The territory in these places turned into a swamp. But the Iraqi forces, in turn, built embankments along their positions, so that the flooded area did not go exactly as the Iranians had planned.

Due to the flat surface, the field of view and firing range were excellent for any weapon and range. Swamps and channels built in the area were also artificial barriers. As a result of all these floods, the width of the available area for tactical operations has been reduced.

So what were the Iranians really planning?

Let's look at the order signed by the first Iranian President (and Commander-in-Chief) Banisadr, which was received by the units participating in the operation. The army of the Islamic Republic of Iran was to be ready in a week after receiving this order of command to attack the enemy forces south of Ahvaz. Destroy the enemy at Susangerd and Karkheh-Kor, capture and secure the barracks in Hamidiyeh. And then advance to the south. The main tasks were to be performed by the elements of 16 and 92 ArmTD (pic.2).

16 ArmTD task

- 1) Advance with two brigades from the Dizful area to the assembly point at Ahvaz (16 ArmTD was located at Dizful).
- 2) Reinforce the defense zone of the 21 ID in the Dizful area with an armored brigade. (one brigade of the division remained at Dizful).
- 3) Attack in the area between Hamidiyeh and Susangerd (at Karkheh-Kor).
- 4) Capture the area on both banks of the Karkheh-Kor according to the order.
- 5) Continue advancing southeast to capture Hamidiyeh barracks.

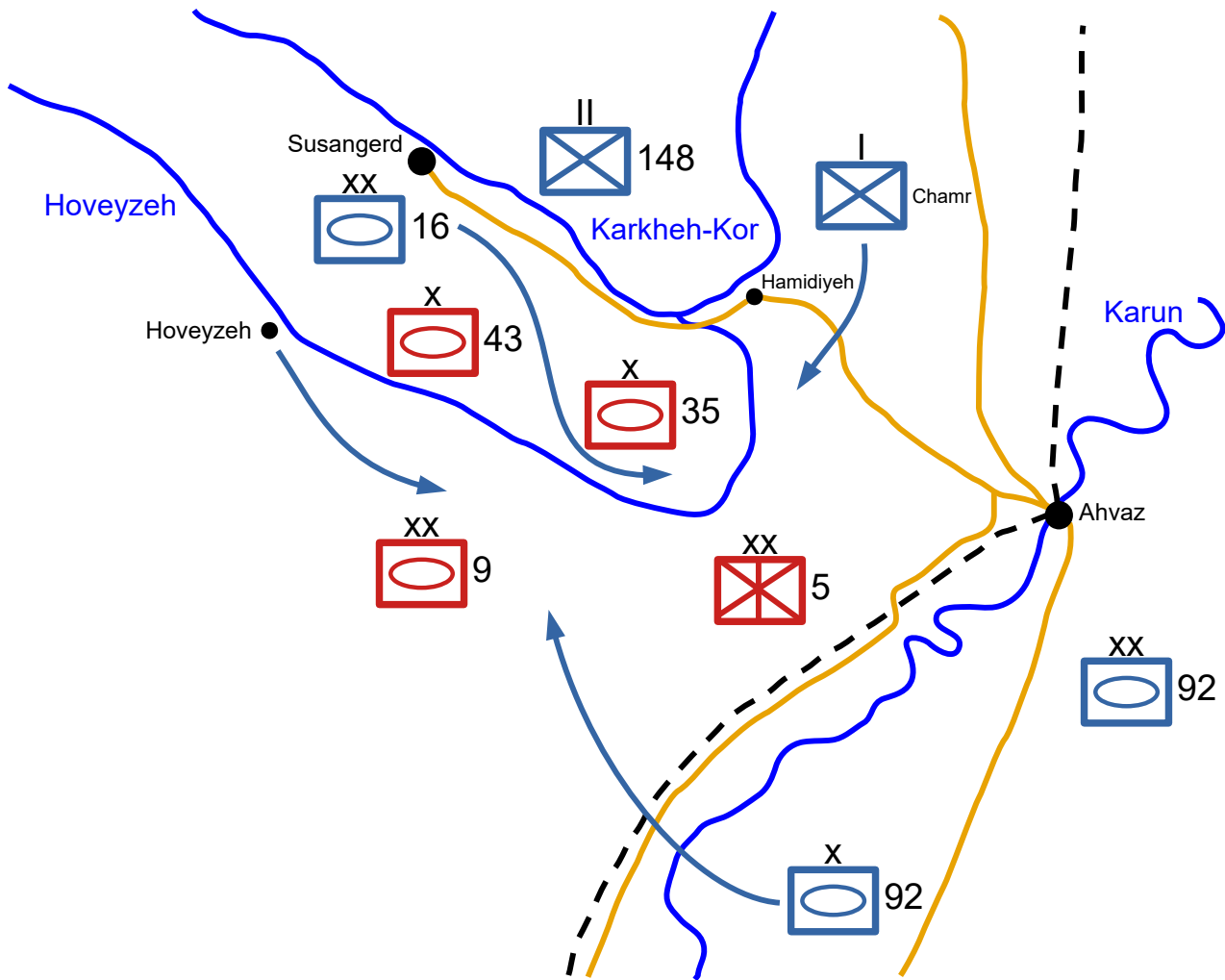
92 ArmTD task

- 1) Transfer one armored brigade stationed in the Susangerd area under the 16 ArmTD command.
- 2) Attack with the forces of one brigade south of Ahvaz.
- 3) Cross the Karun River in the Farsiat area and approach the Hamidiyeh barracks from the flank (in fact, attack to meet with the brigades of 16 ArmTD).

Other tasks (for other elements) briefly.

- 1) Maintain defensive positions south of Ahvaz.
- 2) Continue defending at Al-Akbar hills north of Susangerd with the forces of an armored brigade.
- 3) Use an armored brigade of 16 ArmTD (the one that remained at Dizful) and 55 Airborne Brigade to strengthen the defensive positions of 21 ID. Apparently in case the Iraqis counterattack at Dizful.

Thus, one brigade of 16 ArmTD was supposed to advance from Susangerd to the north of Karkheh-Kor, and then turn east and attack the barracks near Hamidiyeh. Another brigade of 16 ArmTD was advancing along the highway from Hoveyzeh to Ahvaz (south of Karkheh-Kor). And the third brigade (92 ArmTD) must cross the Karun River and advance to meet the first two. Another brigade from 92 ArmTD, secured the flanks of the advancing group at Susangerd. IRGC units, local militia and a number of small units (force of several battalions) that performed auxiliary functions (this point could not be clarified precisely) also participated in the operation.



Pic.2 - General operation map

What does the enemy do?

Unfortunately, it was not possible to find any archival (or at least inspire some confidence in their consistency) documents from the Iraqi side. That is why we will use Iranian intelligence data received before the start of the offensive.

The area south of Susangerd, which was an agricultural area before the war, was devastated at that time, local residents mostly abandoned it. The fields have almost ceased to be cultivated. The village of Hoveyzeh was almost completely destroyed. On the Iraqi side, there were two divisions in this area: 9 TD (directly at the combat area near the Karkheh-Kor River) and 5 MID near Ahvaz. Herewith, it was the 5 MID that became one of the reasons and goals of the Iranian offensive since it was located in such an area from where it was convenient to strike both at the encirclement of the Iranian group at Susangerd, and at the encirclement of the group at Ahvaz, and it was also convenient to advance deep into the Iranian territory (to Dizful from the south).

And only a water barrier in the form of a water flood near Ahvaz held back the Iraqis from the offensive. But the Iranians reasonably assumed that as soon as spring comes and it gets all dry in this already dry year, this obstacle can become quite surmountable. Actually, "Hamidiyeh barracks" was apparently one of the key areas occupied by the 5 MID, "hanging" over the entire Iranian defense system and which was supposed to be liberated. The weakness of the Iraqi defense was the placement of units in a line along the front line without echeloning in depth.

Composition of 9 TD:

- 1) Division HQ
 - engineer battalion and AAA battalion
- 2) 35 TBde
 - Al-Badr tbn
 - Alkandi tbn
 - Deir Yassin tbn
 - 13 mbn
- 3) 43 TBde
 - Haifa tbn
 - Gaza tbn
 - Akko tbn
 - 10 mbn
- 4) A spec-ops battalion (31 Spec-Ops Bde).
- 5) Two tank and infantry BGs (what exactly is meant is not clear).
- 6) Arty group of the Division
 - 2 bns of 122 mm guns
 - 2 bns of 130 mm guns
 - 2 missile bns

Composition of 5 MID:

- 1) Division HQ
 - engineer battalion, AT battalion, AAA battalion
- 2) 15 MBde (three mbns)
- 3) 20 MBde (three mbns and 10 tbn)
- 4) Arty group of the Division
 - 4 bns of 122 mm guns
 - 1 bn of 130 mm guns
 - 1 missile bn

This information is based on intelligence and naturally may (and does) contain errors.

The Iranians had no information about the actual strength and condition of the enemy. The Iranian 16 ArmTD struck 43 and 35 TBdes. The attack area of 1 ArmTBde 92 ArmTD was apparently defended by the units of 5 MID.

Appendix A - Debriefing

Answers to important questions such as, what happened in the end in terms of losses? Were there T-72 tanks? How many tanks were knocked out by helicopters? And various other no less interesting moments.

Inspection of knocked out Chieftain tanks

Fortunately, British specialists were allowed to inspect the damaged Chieftain tanks. And those, in turn, made a report in which they kindly sorted out everything about what and how hit the Chieftains. Unfortunately, they considered only tanks damaged by Iraq in the first 12 months of war. And only those that were captured by the Iraqis. But, on the other hand, the territory at that time remained mainly with Iraq and it can be considered that this is a significant share of Iranian losses, at least irrecoverable. And Operation Victory was the main loss of Chieftain tanks in the first year of the war.

So, in the first 12 months of the war, the total losses of Iranian armored vehicles are estimated at 580 units. The losses on the Iraqi side are approximately the same (about 600 units). Iranian losses in the Chieftain tanks (captured by the Iraqis) - 190 units

By category:

- 1) 80 - light repair
- 2) 30 - medium repair
- 3) 30 - factory repair
- 4) 50 - permanent loss

By weapon type:

70% of the tanks were hit by the 115-mm APCR (from the T-62 tank gun). There is no evidence of a hit by the 125-mm APCR! Apparently, the T-72 tanks simply frightened the Iranians with their appearance, or it is true that the T-72 was first used in this war only in 1982. There is evidence of penetration by a 100-mm APHE projectile (T-54/T-55), ATGM "Malyutka", TOW and RPG-7. It is not clear what is meant about the TOW, Iraq had none of them. Presumably these are projectiles of recoilless guns or the BMP-1 gun.

Only 1 tank was hit by the helicopter. From the total of 88 hits by the 115-mm APCR, 71 were penetrations. HEAT shells account for 44 hits: 115-mm and ATGMs (or recoilless guns). The outer diameter of the penetration is 35-mm. Less damage than APCR, more rare fires. All except 5 (39) gave a penetration. 2 ATGM "Malyutka" gave a penetration. 7 hits from RPG-7 gave 0 penetrations.

16 Chieftain tanks were knocked out with the killed crew at the time of the hit. Apparently the small damaging effect of the 115-mm APCR affected the insignificant losses of the Iranian tankers. 49 Chieftain tanks were badly damaged, 16 of them were destroyed with ammunition stowage fires. Most due to a hit to the front ammo racks. Many Chieftains had damage of the gunner sights. Many hits of the commander cupola and apparently a number of tank commanders were killed. Telescopic sights remained intact.

What does a APCR hit with a penetration look like?

“A fireball of low duration but high intensity surging through the compartment. The turret padding and any cloth, such as crew clothing, was badly singed and paint was blistered. In any cases the padding and its foam lining had caused dense smoke and the production of a noxious gas.” The fragments fly off in a cone of about 20 degrees. The diameter of the cone is 600 mm for 4 feet from the hole. The inner diameter of the penetration is 60-80 mm

Was the very important tactical method known as Hull-Down used?

Few tanks were used properly, the hull was not hidden behind cover. Therefore, many hits fell on a relatively vulnerable hull. There is almost no evidence that gun stabilizer was activated at the time of the hit (how it was determined - unknown). Tanks are often used for indirect fire support.

Conclusions:

- special clothing is required for crews (not to burn).
- additional protection of the front ammunition stowage (charges) is required.
- protection of the gunner sights is necessary (welding of special deflectors).
- need to protect sights from indirect fire and the crew from fragments.
- new protection of the tank front projection is needed.

Where are the M-60 tanks?

The level of material and technical support of the units was at an acceptable minimum, that is, about 70%. For example, before Operation Victory, 1 ArmTBde from 92 ArmTD deployed on the southern front of Akhvaz had 3 tank battalions (264, 232 and 231), a total of ~30 tanks. But the 231st tank battalion equipped by the M-60 tanks had only 7 units, with a staff strength of 50. In order for the division to somehow make up for the lack of tanks in tank battalions, the tanks were removed from the tank units of the 16th ArmTD and 21 ID and sent to 92 ArmTD (the total number of tanks increased up to 60 units). Meanwhile, 92 ArmTD also faced a shortage of personnel to man the crews of these tanks, and a certain number of M-60 tank crews were transferred to the division from 77 Zahedan ID. Organizationally tanks from 92 ArmTD, before the start of the war, were in 7 tank battalions. The battalions of the division were staffed as follows: one battalion on the M-60 in tanks and 6 battalions on the Chieftain tanks. Each tank battalion had 53 units. In total, the division had 371 tanks, and at the beginning of the Iraqi invasion, this was the most combat-ready division, theoretically.

But some of the tanks were in the parks for repairs or due to lack of crew. For example, in the armored park in Dizful, there were more than 50 Chieftain tanks belonging to 2 ArmTBde 92 ArmTD. Only a small number of them were damaged in battles, and the main losses were due to technical malfunctions. The tanks were mostly disabled. The readiness of the other vehicles was slightly better than the tanks, but still not at an acceptable level. The lack of wheeled vehicles also led to very tense situations in 16 ArmTD.