

Classic TAC NEWS

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THE CONCLUSION OF COUNTERATTACK

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Histories and Wargames: Missing the Point

“Both British and Canadians became increasingly convinced that, although brave to a fault, the German soldier was no match for them in this sort of close fighting (raiding). His reactions were less quick and he was more helpless when ‘on his own’ than our people.

Under control and with a determined leader the Germans would fight to the last. When ordered to advance they would do so until there was none left to stand. They would stick to a machine-gun or defend a post with magnificent determination, but they were clumsy compared with the British soldier of 1917. They were wooden in methods and movement, wooden in the way their guns fired a fixed number of rounds at the same object at the same hour each day, wooden in their reactions.

They lacked initiative, resource and quickness, but never courage, power of invention or industry. They are an enemy who requires time for preparation, and they should never be given it.”

- Prelude to Victory by E.L. Spears

Prior to World War I, it was customary following the autumn harvest for the Kaiser to gather a corps for a week-long wargame called the Imperial Maneuver. Attending foreigners noted the herd-like density of German infantry formations and their reliance on bayonet charges. This observation dovetailed with popular European stereotyping of Prussian militarism. German soldiers were seen as mindless automatons, imbued with a “cadaver discipline.” This prejudice so

colored the Anglo-American mindset it distorted World War I intelligence assessments. Germans surfacing in Allied rear echelons were assumed part of a bypassed pocket, a sniper, or an isolated infiltrator. It was never dreamed these men were parts of a tactical entity functioning within a standardized doctrine.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-R05148 / unknown / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Irony of Prussian Stereotyping

- A. German doctrine was utterly dependent on independent initiative originating from the bottom of the command chain.
- B. When studying the feasibility of using German defensive doctrine, a panel of British generals recommended against a universal adoption. Their reasoning being: the intricacies of small-unit tactics were beyond the capabilities of the British soldier.

Assessing Small-Unit Doctrine

As far as understanding German World War II infantry doctrine, the Allies never quite got it right either. Mass Nazi rallies featured in thirties newsreels embodied “cadaver discipline,” and after all, every German was a Nazi. After-action reports whistled in the dark about “futile” and “inevitable” German counterattacks. These same reports, however, also mention difficulties encountered consolidating objectives due to enemy “infiltration;” a specific term alien to German field manuals.

According to the 94th Infantry’s diary, (one of the better American divisional histories), the Germans were said to time counterattacks at dusk. There was no such German tactic. This anomaly, however, can be accounted for in American tactics. The 94th Infantry Division entered the line in November 1944, a point in the war in which Germany’s fate was already sealed. With a rallying cry of “Home alive in ‘45,” the Americans were in no particular hurry. Preparatory bombardments were therefore methodical and lengthy. With assaults occurring late in the morning or early afternoon, the first opportunity for a German counterattack would be dusk.

Military historians take, and are taken by, these contemporary accounts at face value. Ken Ford, in his otherwise excellent book “Assault on Germany,” ascribes the 183rd Volks Grenadier Division’s morale erosion to tactics.

“After each American attack, they had been methodically ordered to launch a *futile* counterattack with their depleted forces to *recapture the lost ground.*” (My italics)

- *Assault on Germany* by Ken Ford

The morale of the 183rd was low, but this was undoubtedly due to the strategic reality of November 1944. As far as the 183rd’s tactics were concerned, this under-strength bunch of geriatrics, with marginal support from the 9th Panzer Division, held the fresh American 84th (Railsplitter) Infantry division at bay until relieved by elements of XLVII Panzer Corps.

Wargaming Small-Unit Doctrine

Mistaken assessments incorporated into a military history further extend themselves, because, quite

logically, game designers use military histories as source material. Wargame designers acknowledge wehrmacht success in the face of “impossible odds,” but, as in the classic example of *Squad Leader*, explain it away in terms of cultural and equipage differences. As far as doctrine goes, well, wargames tend to get hung up on that “tank wedge” thing.

These are three elements normally missing from wargames that are essential to accurately simulate small-unit doctrine.

Tempo

A principle element of small-unit doctrine is the “fog of battle.” The whole concept of the localized counterattack was not to allow the enemy time to consolidate his strength. Once the enemy took the objective and had time to consolidate his strength and faculties, it was no longer the responsibility of the NCO at the point of attack to counterattack.

The fog of battle cannot exist in a game where the players are allowed 30 to 40 minutes to deliberate a situation. Given tens of minutes to decide what historically took just seconds, a wargamer can ensure not a round is wasted, or a line of sight unchecked. The decision making process, under fire in real world terms, is a multitude of snap-judgments with no opportunity to maximize each action. Blunders and missed opportunities were the lot of every battlefield commander, no matter how brilliant. Leaders were not measured on how few mistakes they made but, how they persevered despite them.

To match game time to real time requires the following:

- A. Defined time limits for each game turn.
- B. Straight forward rules and game mechanics.
- C. A referee understanding the importance of game tempo.

Terrain

A successful localized counterattack requires the squad to first close range with the enemy, launch a short ranged jab, and retreat. Each of these steps requires an expert use of favorable terrain. This is impossible in the smooth abstracted reality of

wargaming terrain. Wargaming terrain is smooth because the table top defines ground level. Unless one is willing to take a router to the family ping pong table, ground level is an absolute; everything exists on or above it. Lost are the myriad of undulations naturally existing on, or below, ground level. Open terrain, a real world oxymoron, is therefore truly open.

Abstracted terrain means infantry, with no armour and inherent short range weaponry, is virtually useless as a maneuver element. Infantry must either take long-range punishment with stoic passivity, or hope for a Parthian shot before being overrun.

Abstracted terrain means mobility, gained at the expense of armour thickness, is a liability. With no place to hide it really does not matter how fast you get there.

Abstracted terrain means wargaming's principal tactical concern is weapon range rather than line of sight. A reality dominated by 88s. A reality in which panzerfausts and grenade bundles, the real World War II tank-killers, are virtually useless.

Abstracted terrain means more rules. Without realism naturally occurring on the table top, it must be created artificially. Each layer of rules extends playing time and adversely effects game tempo.

Command Cohesion (Morale)

It is the responsibility of headquarter staffs to disseminate orders up and down the command chain. A cohesive command structure means an orderly communication of battle orders. If the structure is extended or broken, orders will be delayed or lost, and subordinate units will perform poorly or not at all. Command cohesion is always tested by combat, but even without battle, such things as a forced march, or marching over broken terrain, eventually force a period of consolidation.

Small-unit counterattacks were specifically intended to exacerbate this inexorable strain on command cohesion. Like a chisel striking a

fracture, a timely platoon-sized counterattack could hit a disrupted battalion and shear off a flank. Even a failed counterattack contributed to the cumulative effects of battle, setting the table for the next counterattack.

In miniature wargaming, there is no allowance for the natural erosive effects of combat; command structure is effected only by the application of firepower. Historically, however, losing command and control over a particular unit was not always simply a direct consequence of casualties.

Afterword

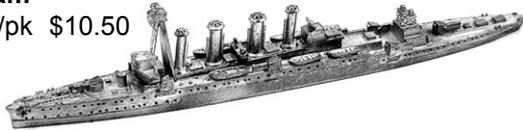
Fortunately, historical wargaming has evolved since this article appeared in the Spring/Summer 1994 issue of Tac News. Wargame terrain is becoming less and less "abstracted" and confined to the level of the table top. GHQ's Terrain Maker system allows for the modeling of below-ground level terrain like lakes, shoreline, streams, and dried riverbeds. These features, along with the ability to model hills, ridges, and even small mountains, make for more realistic and varied terrain. *Micro Armour: The Game* (platoon scale) and *Micro Squad: The Game* (one-to-one scale) both account for the effects of these variations on vehicle and infantry movement, line of sight, cohesion, etc. Cohesion and how it erodes during battle also figures prominently in these games. Taken all together, these features make for an enriched gaming experience.



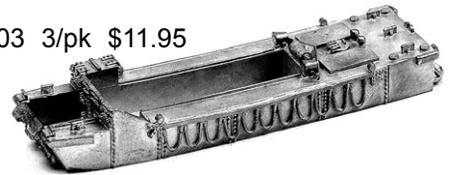
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