The 1956 British Tactical Army Wargame by Martin Rapier

The article was previously published in the Nugget, 216, April 2008.

Introduction

These rules were originally published by the War Office as an Operations Research tool to explore different tactical approaches to fighting a defensive war in Germany at the operational level in the 1950s, including provision for the use of nuclear weapons. John Curry has reworked the original set to refine some of the data tables and provide some commentary on how they might be played, but the originals are in the public domain and are interesting in themselves. The norms in the rules for march rates, unit density, casualty rates, planning times, durations of engagements etc are based on operational experience in The Second World War and Korea, and so are of interest to rules designers for earlier periods of the twentieth century as well.

Key design features

Unit representation is at the battalion level (with the possibility of breaking down into batteries/squadrons for some types of troops) and formations are brigades, divisions and corps. Turns are hours and the game envisages multi-day engagements.

Movement and combat is regulated by a grid of 2km squares, the game is intended to be played on maps or models of the terrain suitably gridded up. Movement rates vary with troop type, whether the units are in contact, whether roads are available etc but the vast range of different terrain types seen in many wargames are not present, going is either 'good' or 'bad'.

The main emphasis in the game is on planning times to carry out particular tasks, especially planning for battles, digging in, changing unit posture (defensive, offensive, taking cover etc) and the players pre-commit their units to the various activities in advance.

Some activities take a great deal of time indeed, infantry conducting a full divisional attack require a minimum of 24 hours planning time. This gives the game a unique flow, as players are more concerned with planning what they want to do, than the mechanics of executing their plans. In many ways it is like John Salt's planning game from COW 2006 writ large.

It also means that in fluid situations, getting inside the enemy's decision loop is actually possible and their whole situation is eroded as they can't respond quickly enough. Conversely, long periods of time can elapse without anything apparently happening at all, just like real life but very unlike many wargames where every turn is frantic activity.

Combat is very abstracted, almost cursory. The sizes of the engaged units are compared, and simple charts referred to for different types of attacks (infantry assault, tank battle, meeting engagement etc) which gives a probability for the attack to succeed.

One nice twist is that the duration of the battle is unknown, but even battalion sized attacks can take a few hours before the players get the results. Losses are derived from the outcome of the combat, a complete reversal of most wargames practice, successful participants taking lower

losses than unsuccessful ones. Losses are also determined on a per unit basis, so a higher unit density results in more casualties, again contrary to common wargames practice.

This system is very similar to that used in Jim Wallman's big operational game rules, and also my own operational rules (ahem, ahem), as well as Phil Yates's little known 'Operation Brevity'. It models the tension between generating sufficient firepower at the point of contact, with the possibility of mass casualties as the attacker density goes up.

One thing the rules do not do is differentiate between unit quality, but it is relatively simple to apply Dupuy style CEV modifiers to the combat results.

Unit posture is important, when deployed for defence they can see enemy activity in adjacent squares (or further if on high ground) and interdict enemy movement with fire - effectively a form of Zone of Control. Units formed up for movement can obviously move, but they can't see into adjacent squares nor can they fire into them until they have deployed.

When deployed for defence the unit occupies the entire square, but units formed up for attack can 'stack' two infantry units in a square plus up to two armoured units as well. It takes time to change between modes, and in particular it takes a lot of time to dig in effectively (24 hours for maximum protection), so once units are dug in, they don't have a great incentive to move.

It is possible to take over friendly or captured enemy entrenchments, but this also takes time. This is critical as the combat charts make counterattacks against captured positions extremely dangerous before they are consolidated. The maintenance of reserves to conduct such counterattacks is therefore encouraged, although poor planning can render them ineffective.

The Game

The rules call for the usual military training wargame type setup, multiple maps, vast teams of umpires and assistants to push counters around, pass messages etc and clearly all day (at least) to play as it suggested a map 100km x 200km.

It is quite possible to run it as a normal wargame on a single map with one side run by the umpire(s) using hidden movement for the plumpired side. Hidden movement is essential or the game just won't work as so much of it relies on planning and trying to determine the enemy's intentions.

I just used my standard sub-divisional scenario I use to test most grand tactical or operational rule sets - the Canadian attack on Agira in Sicily. It has all the key elements, a reasonable sized engagement with some supply and replacement issues, plus some terrain challenges but is fairly restricted in scope which keeps it manageable when trying out new sets of rules solo.

I put all the players on the Allied side and came up with a pre-programmed plan for the Germans. I was mainly interested in exploring how good a simulation of WW2 combat the rules were, and whether any useful ideas could be gleaned to aid in more conventional rules development.

One modification I did make was to adjust the combat results by CEV values, rating the Germans as 1.3 (ie 30% more effective than the Allies) and the Italians as 0.8 (20% less effective).

The Allies duly assembled under Major General Kleanthous and took the Italo-German position apart with some thoroughness (if not exactly light casualties).The players seemed to get into the planning cycle fairly easily, perhaps aided by the ahistorical passivity of the Germans (their one and only proper counter-attack never really got going, although they did manage a successful attack into the flank of a brigade level night attack).

We got through four of five days fighting in an hour or so, which is pretty impressive considering the basic turns are an hour long, but the periods of action were interspersed with long periods of inactivity whilst planning etc took place.

Conclusions

This is a very different type of wargame, and I'd like think of ways of incorporating some its elements into more mainstream games. Delays for various activities are fairly easy, the difficulty is in modelling the planning process without requiring reams of written orders, although perhaps that is just impossible. Some commercial rules do a reasonable job of implementing written orders with just lines, blobs and arrows on a sketch map, so perhaps that is the approach to take.

The combat system could also fairly easily applied (and in fact a similar system is used in a few operational games currently) with some sort of random determination of battle duration, and movement rates, stacking limits etc are old hat but it is useful to base game distances and densities on real practice.

One of the really interesting things is what is left out, logistics are mentioned but dealt with very lightly, there is no provision at all for attacking artillery positions (presumably no gunner would be so foolish as to be overrun) and no combat modifiers for difficult terrain etc. This does fit in with a lot of OR which shows that the main effect of difficult terrain is to slow the pace of combat down, rather than cause more casualties, so maybe we should be getting rid of '+1 for being in a wood' as well?