

## OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS

# COBRA

## Encircle and Destroy

by David Werden

Mere days before S&T 65 was put to bed, David and I discovered all sorts of odd things in the *Cobra* rules. The two of us worked over the weekend (with your Dedicated Editor actually setting type) to right the wrongs and make the world safe for US and German armored units. David had assisted in developing the game and noticed that a number of evolutionary changes had not been incorporated into the final rules. Here he continues his labors by presenting his thoughts on how to pocket and how to avoid being pocketed in what, happily, has turned out to be a very good game. —RAS

The game mechanics of *Cobra* are subtle. There are many elements built into the game system which reflect the constantly changing tenor of the operation. The Cobra offensive goes through a number of major changes in the objectives and operations with all their inherent choices and problems during the course of the game. Both players must anticipate, orchestrate, and pre-plan just what is going to happen in the forthcoming game turns so that each can marshal his forces for the next phase of the operation. There are no fewer than six major phases in the Cobra operation. The build-up and the breakthrough; the first encirclement; the mopping up of the initial resistance; the charge down the coast; the swing east encircling the German Army; and the closing of the Falaise gap.

Cobra creates the possibility of sweeping the width and length of the map giving a full map lesson on the most dramatic type of operation in WWII — the mass pocket. Built into the game system are strong reasons to encircle the entire German Army and close the gap. The game system is an advanced development of the *PanzerGruppe Guderian* system, and it went through many forms in development. The differences are subtle and the game mechanics of building an offensive of changing objectives is what makes *Cobra* so rich on many levels. What most excited the playtesters is that this game portrays an encirclement in detail on an entire map instead of in just a few hexes as in most games. Here are some observations.

### Basic Allied Objectives

The Allied Player's objective is to eliminate German units. He must attempt to destroy the German Player's flexibility of operation so that his defense becomes brittle. Only then will the Allied superiority in numbers be effective in trapping and eliminating large numbers of German units. This can be accomplished by eliminating weak units, individual regiments of armored divisions (destroying divisional integrity), trapping Panzer divisions by overrunning weak units, and stretching the German line past its breaking point.

### Basic German Objectives

The German Player must endeavor to hold the Allies until the situation becomes untenable, at which time a fighting but orderly retreat is required. The German cannot hope to hold the Allies off forever, but he can and must control the flow of the game. Breaks in the line will occur but he can control how and when they will happen. An armored reserve and second line to control where the Allied breakthrough will head is the key to the German defense. He must conduct a cohesive retreat using the armored reserve effectively to counter attack. The Panzer divisions must be used in tandem and not committed piecemeal. Independent Panzer divisions thrown into the fray will be caught and eliminated.

It should be kept in mind that the victory conditions were patterned on the historical outcome. If one can extricate more than fifty percent of the units to defend Germany while inflicting some major divisional losses on the Allies, a German victory will result. Historically, sixty percent of the German troops were trapped and eliminated.

### General Plan of Operations

#### Game-Turns 1 through 3:

#### GERMAN:

The German Player must organize the line, create armored reserves with divisional integrity, and shift to the left-center to be ready for the U.S. build up. He should attempt on the right wing, to establish a feasible defense line against the British. He must try to cut off armored spearheads and push the British back behind the Orne River wherever possible around Caen. The right-center of the line is susceptible to overruns which can trap the German armor before it has a chance to become effective. St. Lo should be reinforced if the weather is not clear. Localized counter attacks should be made to "untrapp" German armor.

*Important Note:* Weak units using an alternate hex defense with a CRT with high retreat factors is suicidal. One must maintain a *continuous* defense line of hexes so that the Allied Player cannot overrun one point in the line and then pour through on the Mech Phase. An alternate hex defense is effective only when at least four Strength Points can be placed in each hex (preferably two units with four steps). The German Player must pull back his strongest units for replacement and refit. The regiments of the Third Parachute Division and the Three-Hundred and Fifty-Second are 4-9 units when at full strength and therefore are prime candidates

for replacements. Keep an ordered system in operation, pulling units off the line for refit because replacement steps may not be accumulated each Game-Turn.

#### ALLIES:

At the start, the British have the most armor capable of divisional integrity. There are three areas where advance is possible: to the left widening the bridgehead across the river north of Caen; to the right with the Americans to the east of St. Lo; and in the center to capture German armored regiments by overrunning and eliminating weak German units. Feinting is important. The Allied Player should move the armor to draw attention to a number of points. The German Player cannot be in all places at once. He should, therefore, be kept off balance by strikes at his weak sectors. If he is in all sectors in force British units will be drawing off strength that will be needed against the U.S.

The Allied Player has his work cut out for him. He has to traverse the width and length of the map. In the first Game-Turns, the U.S. should concentrate on eliminating units and pushing an assault salient into the German line with his mech infantry divisions. He shouldn't wait for the armor to arrive. By overrunning static units, armor can be trapped. When the U.S. armor does arrive in strength it should be used to break an already over extended line and charge onto other objectives instead of wasting precious time breaking through a line that has not been stretched. At other points all along the line, the Allied objective should be to eliminate weak units so that the German will be hard pressed to extend his line later in the game. At the same time, enemy armored units should be trapped so that he will have to abandon them.

#### Game-Turns 4 through 6

#### GERMAN:

Game-Turn Five should see an irreparable break occur in the line on the left flank. Stabilize the right flank against the British. If he has established an armored salient and has been cut off, by all means finish him off, but most of the attention should be focused on setting up a second line on the left. Leave two or three Panzer divisions to deal with the British but no more. The only reason to attack a unit is to free trapped armor or to eliminate it. Partial eliminations mean nothing for victory purposes. A U.S. breakthrough cannot be prevented, but the German Player can (*and this is crucial!*) control where the break occurs. Let the U.S. Player fly past as the line is bent,

refusing the flank. If he tries to break off too big a bite of the German line he will fail, if he is prevented from getting behind the main body of the German army.

#### ALLIES:

With the British the more successful the attacks are tactically the more successful the attacks will be strategically — by tying down German units. If the British are gaining some success in their sector push forward on a wide front to keep from being cut off. If the German strips his line show no mercy!

For the U.S., Game-Turns Four through Six should be used to break the line as quickly as possible using overruns to mop up bypassed units. Overrun as much as possible up to the command limit, because overruns do not expend supply points. Look forward to Game-Turn Seven when three divisions must retire off the west map edge. The armor, cavalry, and mechanized Infantry should charge through the gap and feel a breath of fresh salty air as they break out of the bocage. Close the pocket right then and there if the German has not established his flank. Historically at this point the U.S. army was surprised that it could break the line

so quickly. The Third Army Command was created and handed over to George S. Patton who continued to sweep out of the bocage to the south.

#### Game-Turns 7 through 10

##### GERMAN:

This is the crucial point for the German Player. A staged retreat is in order if the army is still in one piece. Do not be sentimental about trapped units and if the Allied Player is overextended, craftily amass a five or six Panzer division strike force for a *coup de grace*.

##### ALLIES:

This is the time the trap must be fully formed. In the north, the addition of the Canadian and Polish armor should get Operation Goodwood unstalled and on the road to Falaise. In the south, catch everything that is left behind by the Germans and make sure to catch something new each turn. Form the trap and get ready to close it by exerting even pressure along the line pressing forward with the armor spearhead formed around Patton.

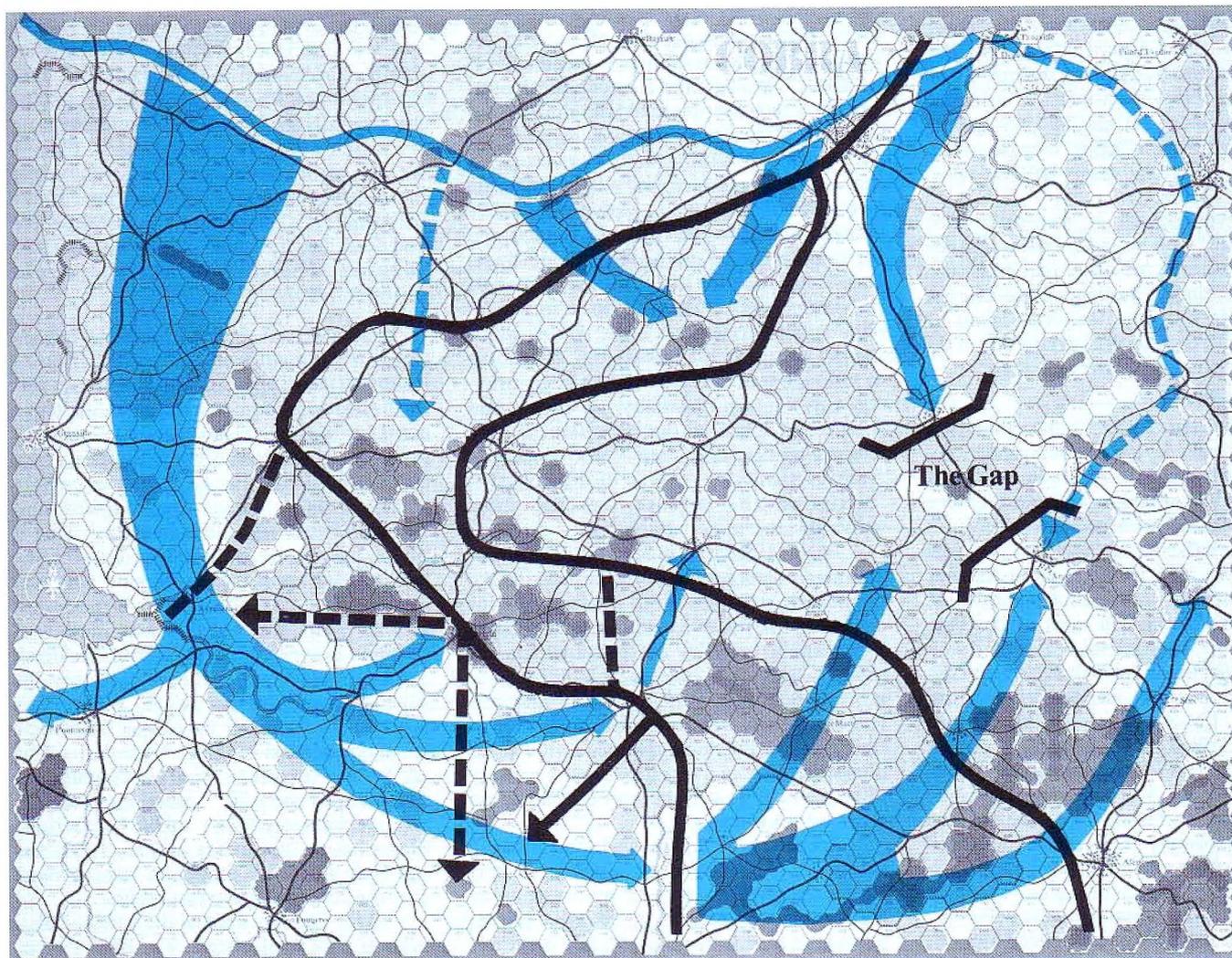
Game-Turns Ten through Thirteen will bear the fruit of the labors of both sides. If the German Player has been successful and has not been completely eliminated at this point, he will be looking at an Allied Player hampered and behind schedule historically. The Allied Player may find himself still at the starting line or charging down the coast trying to encircle the German Army before it is too late. Or then again he may close the trap by reaching the Falaise-Argentan area cutting off the German Army streaming eastward along the traffic jammed major roads, vainly trying to escape the British Operation Goodwood from the north and Cobra with George S. Patton and his charging cavalry from the south.

#### Allied Strategy

The Allied Player has three strategic options, one which is historical and two additional ones which are ahistorical. Of the latter one is conservative and the other fairly radical. The historical strategy involves the British forces attacking on the left tying down and eliminating German units while the U.S. forces on the right break through to the west of St. Lo on a grand sweep to the

*The large blue arrow on the left shows the main U.S. strategic sweep of Operation Cobra. The main U.S. thrust of the operation broke through the German lines west of St. Lo, continued on to Avranches and on to Argentan, south of the bocage. Three divisions peeled off to the west to take the much needed port of Brest. The British Operation Goodwood constituted the northern pincer in the formation of*

*the Falaise Gap. The dotted blue lines are optional lines of advance for the Allied player. Solid black lines represent the best German lines of defense, and dotted black lines illustrate optional German defense lines. Black arrows represent German counter attack options.*



south of the bocage, then sweeping east to encircle the German Army. The ahistorical-conservative option entails a British and American armored thrust up the center to the east of St. Lo cutting off a larger part of the German Army. This option slows down the sweep but if executed correctly the sweep faces much less resistance later on. The danger in this strategy is that if German units are not eliminated quickly the sweep will get bogged down.

The radical strategy is effective if the German Player has decisively shifted his armor to the west while effectively retreating into a smaller perimeter during the early game. If the German Player has pulled back into a tight defense allowing the three U.S. divisions off the south-west edge of the board with little or no resistance, the U.S. Player heads "Hell-bent-for-leather" to the eastern most part of the British line. While this is happening the British must break through to the north of Caen directly east across both major rivers. If the British Player does this alone he will usually be cut off because it is such a narrow front. But if, and this is a big if, if it is timed perfectly with the German Player overshifted and the U.S. forces able to cross the double set of rivers north of Caen they will have a much shorter distance to go to cut off the entire German Army. There are many risks inherent in this strategy. The biggest problem being that U.S. and British units cannot attack together. If the German Player has the perfectly planned overshifted defense by all means throw this wrench into the well-oiled German machinery. It can be very disconcerting to the German Player, when as in soccer by faking right and going left, the Allies go in for a big score.

Whichever option is chosen by the Allied Player if he is not acutely aware of the changing nature of his objectives each turn he will find himself resting on his laurels, proud that he's doing "so well" when he should have already tooled up and begun executing the next phase of the operation.

#### **German Strategy**

The German Player must anticipate where the breaks in his line will occur, appropriately placing his armored reserves. A main second line of resistance from Villedieu through Avranches or Mortain to Domfront and off the south edge of the board is crucial in any defense. If he is able to set up this line he can then begin to effectively shrink the frontage towards the two main roads going east from Vire to Argentan. If this line is ready when the breakthrough occurs the German Player will not be surrounded just south of St. Lo. Strategically a lot depends on what the Allied Player is trying to pull. If the German Player is sensitive enough he can ascertain the next Allied objectives and be there in force, adjusting the strength along his line accordingly. Other than localized counter attacks to untrap armor it may be advisable never to counter attack. Major counter attacks are usually useless unless the Allied Player has truly overextended himself. If he has, and if the German Player can mass

a counter attack in one turn it can be devastatingly effective. But if — as happened historically — a major counter attack of sound strategic value is tactically conducted in a piecemeal fashion it will only serve to help the Allies.

#### **Allied Tactics**

As the Allied Player there are many attacks to make, and many kilometers to go before you sleep. All of this is stretched out on a very precarious command and supply situation that is portrayed in the game. No single attack should be wasted. Attacks should be very selective. Exactly why the allocation of supply points to specific attacks (in effect staff planning, ammunition, and gasoline) has taken place must be fully justified. If the weather is clear making six air points available, and there are nine attacks, don't attack from one side of the line to the other and be upset that there are no more air points for the final three attacks. The operation must be completely planned. Overruns should be conducted up to the command limit for both the British and the U.S. forces each turn. It is a crime not to utilize a single overrun because they may not be saved and they do not cost supply points. Overruns can only occur in the first movement phase and can be conducted twice by armored divisions and once by mechanized infantry with divisional integrity. To be effective one portion of the line should be overrun by a number of units. If the units capable of overrun are spread up and down the line, no headway will be made. Cavalry units are not able to overrun but if they are poised behind the line they are very effective in charging through the gaps made by the first units to overrun. In that way they can surround a unit which can be overrun by a fresh unit. Attacks should be choreographed to press through the line and surround units. If the Air Points are there, fine; if not then the attacks must be pressed on, regardless. Overruns are effective in eliminating surrounded units. Units which are out of supply are halved and susceptible to multiple overrun. U.S. mechanized infantry with overrun capability are fragile and should not be placed out on a limb. If their overrun attack fails their truck marker is removed signifying the loss of divisional integrity on the defense, making them vulnerable to counter attack.

For the British, much of their armor operated in independent brigades lacking the command structure and heavy weapons necessary for full divisional integrity. These independent brigades are effective for the same tasks as the U.S. Cavalry units but with a bit more punch. British infantry divisions (except for the airborne) were fully motorized and can move on the mech movement phase. Because of their mobility they are very effective in following up and expanding an armored spearhead.

Tactically the British need some room to maneuver. This can be obtained by getting across the river in force or by overrunning the German center. In either case getting across the river in force eventually is the objective. Either push the German back to the

north of Caen, or eliminate the weaker German units in the center. Be careful for the German can take the British out in a couple of punches if he is not paid careful attention.

#### **German Tactics**

Avoid stacking two weakened regiments of an armored division together (Panzer Lehr for instance) leaving them open to an Allied carpet bombing attack. The most common result in a carpet bombing is a two step loss. Leave weakened armor in separate hexes to make them less appetizing targets for the Allied Player. The Allied Player will hesitate to use his one carpet bombing attack on one regiment. Systematic replacement might bring the Panzer Lehr back up to strength. Be well aware that if the Allied Player saves his carpet bombing attack he can blow a hole in the German line at any time. A defense line deployed on alternate hexes must consist of two full strength units per hex or it will be susceptible to overruns and Allied carpet bombing. The German Player should disperse his weakened Armored divisions to make them as hard to kill as possible until they can be refitted.

At the start of the game the German Player should shift to counter the U.S. units on his left flank. If the weather is overcast or stormy, St. Lo can be reinforced in the first turn. Armor should be massed behind the line to avoid being trapped and held in reserve to mend breaks in the line.

The U.S. forces are limited in their overrunning capabilities in the early game. One of the German Player's advantages is that he can generally see what the Allied Player is up to. Watch where he is overrunning. Even in the later game one can spot the flow by where the most overrunning is occurring. If the overrunning is happening up and down the line don't be confused — relax he won't get anywhere. If he is overrunning in one area he can be countered.

The German Player's greatest advantages are the victory conditions and his own intelligent play. The Allied Player must better the historical outcome to gain more than a marginal victory. This involves the entrapment and elimination of more than sixty percent of the German army. This can only be achieved by a major encirclement and envelopment of the German Army. This is where the second advantage comes to the forefront — careful play. Sloppy play and misplacement of German units is the easiest way to keep the Allied Player ahead of schedule historically. Careful and intelligent defensive play can effectively stymie the Allied Player. If the Allied Player gets behind he will not get the chance to encircle the major portion of the German Army. The easiest way to ensure victory is to make the Allied Player pay a little something in time or position for everything he gets. The German Player has the advantage in that there is tremendous room for command improvement over the historical stand fast orders.

In the German arsenal the armored divisions are not weak sisters. The First SS consists of an 8-12 armored regiment and two

er springs for) until Our Hero, some bright young Scientist, Peter Graves or Gene Barry probably, invents the Electronic Frammistan which turns the 12-foot catmen into pillars of salt. Earth is saved and "THE END?" flashes on the screen. Now, a lot of these flicks are fun to watch. Some passable SF has been written on alien invasion themes, though not much lately. But how the hell can you do this as a game? Any invader with technology capable of interstellar travel should be able to conquer this mudball without a moment's distress. Why they'd want to is another matter and largely irrelevant. How do you balance this game?

Two ways. You can have an Electronic Frammistan table and roll every turn until the Pillar-of-salt machine enters the game. Dumb. Or you can say the aliens didn't invent their FTL drive, they found it or stole it or discovered it accidentally. The rest of their technology isn't up to that level, their weapons are primitive, and there's something we have that they want. (What this is is up to the designer. The traditional loot is energy or women.) Given some such out, you could design a game. I would use the entire planet. Units would represent alien spacecraft, atmosphere craft, and land forces, Terran army units and aircraft. Industry and disruption of production would be key. The alien's big asset would be mobility, and we can make them as weak or as powerful as we like. That's the best part of designing SF games, the freedom. Nobody can call your title unrealistic. Unlikely, outlandish, stupid, but not unrealistic. So you can get around the seeming unlikelihood of a Terran invasion. It's only a game.

Matter of fact, Joe Angiolillo and I came close to putting an alien invasion scenario into *Objective: Moscow*, since the damn map covers most of Eurasia. He was tempted, but I talked him out of it as too far afield for the game subject, as well as unlikely, outlandish, and stupid. I kind of regret it now. I just might do the scenario someday, unless one of you guys beats me to it.

### They Are Not Alone

Another thing that hasn't been done much is alien combat *without* humans. *Chitin* has both Players directing giant insects, and in role-playing games you can play anything. Many, many more titles could be done with nothing to do with humans or human warfare. The problem is marketing. Dunnigan has always wanted to do an insect warfare game, but would you buy *Strike Force: Aphid*? Funny, but some people have trouble identifying with aliens. Imagination could produce *any* kind of game. Would a creature composed of thought, or noncorporeal energy fight? And (as they say) if so, how? Personal combat between colony creatures. Even traditional space opera with different motivations and methodology for different races. *StarForce* took the obvious route, making one race xenophobic and psychopathic. Much subtler differences in racial psychology are possible. In FanTac's *Space Marines* rule book, one race is described that, because of overpopulation trouble,

tries to win its battles with maximum casualties. Try that in any game. It's different.

I remember a series that ran in *Analog* a few years ago. It dealt with a planet where two intelligent races developed simultaneously and fought constantly. One, flying reptiles, resembled dragons but were human-sized. They used hot air balloons as support platforms. The other race, small humanoids, developed biplanes and machine guns — the whole parallel-evolution-with-Earth bit, with excitement over developing a gun that would fire through the propeller arc and other obvious comparisons. A lot of twists on historical games are possible using SF variations. In this example, you could alter *Richthofen's War* so the planes would fight flying dragonmen and hot-air balloons. The important element is *design freedom*. People play fantasy PRESTAGS games of Tolkien battles, adding magic elements. With SF (or quasi-SF) variants you can do anything at all with a game. (*Anything*. You could have Superman intervene in a game of *Search & Destroy*, as one classic '60's comic had him taking on the NVA.) Remember that SF does not need to take place in the future.

One popular branch of SF is the historical alternate world. *Bring the Jubilee* by Ward Moore produces a Confederate victory in the Civil War. *Dixie* follows up in game form. *Operation Olympic*, *Seelowe*, and *Missile Crisis* concern invasions which almost took place. (For that matter, *all* wargames are alternate worlds unless the moves work out exactly as historically. But I'm obviously talking about games with different historical postulates.) I don't know how many dozens of stories have been written in which Hitler wins the war. I imagine a *Global War* variant could deal with final war between Germany and Japan, or we could even have a whole new game showing their meeting in India or the US Midwest. If the British had won the War of 1812, they planned to form a large Indian nation in the Midwest under Tecumseh. What effect would that have had on western expansion, or a game of Indian war? What if the USA had never expanded to the Pacific? The effect on history would have been astounding; who would have faced Japan in the Pacific? Spain? By altering history, by tampering with what was, we can produce any sort of starting point for hypothetical wars. Some can be done as variants, some could be full-fledged games. Design *flexibility*. That's what writing SF is all about. There's room for a little of everything, from silly space opera to serious SF literature in game form, with plenty of middle ground; RAS calls *BattleFleet Mars* serious space opera. And there is a lot that hasn't been done yet. All I've done this issue is discuss some things that could be. It's up to you, and the designers, to branch out more from the remakes of *Stellar Conquest* and *Alien Space*. Your comments are appreciated.

Anyone for *Space: 1889*?

## Cobra

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6-12 Panzergrenadier regiments. This makes a twenty Strength Point stack which when operating with divisional integrity is doubled to forty strength points. However, for German armor to be effective it must be deployed in groups of at least three or four divisions. Two pairs of two or three divisions each attacking an Allied unit have chances of success. German armor must hit hard because the Allied replacement rate is unlimited — he can afford to stay in place and take step losses against haphazard attacks while he proceeds to surround and capture the German armor. The German armor is very effective but is always operating out on a limb, so to speak, because its flanks are usually protected at best, by numbers of 2-9 and 3-9 infantry units.

German leaders must be fully utilized for help on both offense and defense by shifting one odds column for the German Player. Although Tiger tanks shift one column on offense only, a Tiger tank battalion within a leadership radius is a two column shift.

A pair of Tiger tank battalions cannot shift one attack two columns and therefore should be allocated to different sectors. Don't forget that Tiger tanks are just as effective with pure infantry attacks.

A two-unit, full strength stack consisting of one 3-9 and one 2-9 infantry unit is a good place to be on defense. Fractions for the defender are rounded up. If this stack is surrounded putting it out of supply it would be worth two and one half rounded up to three strength points on the defense. If it takes a step loss the stack would now consist of two 2-9 units and would defend at two strength if it were still surrounded. If it takes one more step loss it will still be worth two points on the defense because a 1-9 and a 2-9 out of supply are still rounded up to two. It took a step loss and remained the same strength on the defense.

When the U.S. exits three units off the west edge of the map around Game-Turn Seven, clear weather is treated as overcast and overcast is treated as stormy to simulate the lengthening distance from the Allied air umbrella and the German high command's realization that the German Army must have the option to retreat. Make sure to use this mobility to execute your staged retreat back to Germany.

