

The purpose of this article is not simply to methodically relate the history of a game but rather to highlight some of the points and pitfalls that I came across during my very first attempt at playing the game. Hopefully readers will find it useful in helping them during their first attempts, if they have the game or are considering purchase.

I cannot claim to be very expert at playing boardgame simulations, as the following will undoubtedly reveal – lack of time prevents me fully developing my interest in the hobby. Some of the mistakes I made will make the experts laugh but they may help the less-expert players from making the same errors. Highway to the Reich is not a game for the novice but anyone with a little experience of boardgames and a good deal of perseverance will, I think, thoroughly enjoy it. I certainly did.

I would hazard a guess that in the UK the most commonly played scenario will be "28. Drop of the British 1st Airborne – 17-18th Sept 1944". Certainly it was the one that I couldn't wait to get to grips with. It is a good starter to the game, being played on a single mapsheet and in 14 Game-turns. The rules say it should take 4 hours to play – I took 4 weeks! (But then my game was a somewhat disjointed effort due to lack of time).

Whenever I first read a new set of game rules I mark the 'new' rules in pencil so as to be able to quickly backtrack and pinpoint these during play. HWTR does have a good many new rules to take in and at first read through I ground to a standstill. Not deterred I re-read them and then decided to play regardless – picking up knowledge as the game progressed.

A lot of things were done wrongly in the first few turns. This is almost inevitable with a complex game like HWTR when it's first played. But with a lot of thumbing through the rules book progress, though painfully slow, was made.



I used the historical deployment, though the Drop Zones really do seem a long way from that bridge! The scenarios are all played without the use of the rules governing weather, air-lift capacity, flight paths or German flak effects. Although this makes them less complex at the start it seems a pity since the uncertainty and excitement of the actual airborne assault is greatly lessened, though some losses and scattering do still occur. (Historically, 11% of the glider force bound for Arnhem were lost or crashed with their vital equipment and vehicles).



THE SCENARIO FOR Arnhem

A FIRST ATTEMPT BY SAM MARKS



The airlanding operation proceeded smoothly in accordance with the rules and only 3 strength points were lost. The total confusion on the Drop Zones must very closely approximate reality with stacks of 2, 3 or 4 units placed one against the other over a considerable portion of the mapsheet. This may have been the first major error in my game. In retrospect it may have been more sensible to have staggered the drop over two turns or at least over both phases of turn 1.

Some clear idea as to which units are intended to do what is also essential. In my eagerness to get started I overlooked this very basic point. I lost valuable time carefully re-grouping battalions with nary a thought for their ultimate task – to defend the DZ or head for the bridge.



The airborne recce squadron – that's a key unit. If you can get them down more or less in one piece near to Heelsum you're in with a chance. The historical plan called for this unit (25% of which never even reached the DZ) to race ahead to the bridge and hold it. I didn't even realise that it could race ahead until it was too late and I had sent it plodding up the road like infantry.

Other units that can race along are the AT companies in Travel Mode. You have to watch that they don't get caught in their Travel Mode though – they don't last long if they are!



As happened historically, the main Arnhem-Heelsum road was blocked by German units camped astride it and more valuable time was lost in attempting to force a passage. They should have been by-passed initially and cleared later. In my game it was the 3rd battalion, 1st Brigade that made the best progress – via the Hevedorp trail (probably also the best route for the recce squadron to take). It managed to take the rail bridge without it being blown and crossed over to attack the flak units defending the southern approach to the main road bridge at Arnhem. After several hours these defences were eliminated and the 3rd Battalion installed itself on the southern end of the bridge (Historically, it should have been the 2nd Battalion at the north end).

At no time in the game can I say that the north end of the road bridge was really seriously threatened. 2nd Battalion reached the city hexes of Arnhem in good time but believe me trying to assault in these hexes is very frustrating. Just when you think the opposition has been whittled down ready for a close-action assault another German Independent unit arrives to bolster the defences. And once the German's Flak Brigade arrives in the vicinity – forget it! I'd say that it's the German player's artillery that holds the key to his actions – more so than the armour. When the Flak Brigade and the 10th Panzer's artillery are concentrated even a fresh full-strength unit can be eliminated during a single fire phase.



The 10th Panzer Division arrives from the south-east edge of the map and historically tried to force the road bridge. During this game the German player decided to swing the 10th Pz round through Deelen to deploy on the open ground north-east of Wolfheze and the DZs. Historically this would have been a very unlikely approach as the Germans were anxious to force the bridge, cross the river and reinforce Nijmegen). Some infantry units were dropped off on the way near Schaarsbergen to bolster the 9th Pz in their holding actions north-east of Arnhem and the Utrecht-Arnhem highway. Though it took a good many hours to move the 10th through Deelen and deploy it the result was, to say the least, effective.

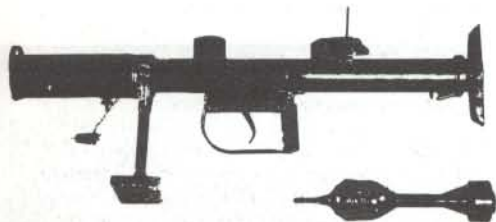
In order to protect the DZs from this threat and prepare for the incoming 4th Para Bde many units of the Glider Pilots Regt and the Airlanding Bde had to drawn back away from Arnhem itself – with disastrous results later in the game.

Odd German Independent formations kept popping up all over the place but apart from one incursion into Heelsum (which took several hours to eliminate) the real threat to the DZs was from 10th Pz.

In the event it proved impossible to protect 4th Brigade's DZ but a very effective defensive perimeter was drawn in an arc through the forests north of Wolfheze. When the 4th Bde dropped it came down on top of a number of Independent units but losses were not heavy in spite of this. But by the time the brigade had sorted itself and made the cover of the forest hexes it had accumulated a good many more losses – almost entirely from 10th Pz artillery firing from north-east of the highway.

THE ARNHEM SCENARIO CONTINUED

All this activity to the north of Wolfheze had distracted my attention from two vital areas. Firstly, the 3rd Battalion had been all but wiped out by artillery firing from east of Arnhem. Secondly, armoured units from 1/10th had overrun para units defending the highway north-east of Oosterbeek, threatening the supply line to all units fighting in Arnhem city. It is virtually impossible to hold a position if it's subjected to the kind of massed artillery fire that the German player can muster (especially if it is positioned around the OBW unit).



P.I.A.T. — the paras anti-tank weapon

It's also very difficult for the airborne infantry to stop armour. One hex gap and they're through! — and all the Opportunity Fire you can muster does little to stop them.

A point worth noting for the re-play — if there's armour about keep a continuous hex front. Also fire your artillery first so that gaps created can be exploited by units that do not have to fire and can then move in the subsequent phase.



I found myself rushing Travel Mode AT units all over the place just to plug gaps (they can deploy out of Travel Mode at the end of their movement by expending one movement point). I was caught out, though, on many occasions both by the Subordination rules (which reduce the effectiveness of multi-formation attacks drastically) and more often by the fact that once committed these AT units are difficult to pull out. They have to change to Travel Mode (being subjected to Opportunity Fire usually) and then have to sit there — often through an enemy Fire phase and a movement phase. Units in Travel Mode are very vulnerable to close-action and incoming fire. More often than not the unit did not survive to be removed.

Units like these that are in danger of being surrounded seem, frankly, to be better off sitting there and doing nothing — thereby obliging the German player to commit units to reduce them. If cut off think twice about firing since to do so risks Depletion — once depleted the end is nigh!

Having now lost the south approach to the road bridge (and the entire 3rd Battalion) I decided to try to hold the road at Elden.

Historically, this would be important since it would slow down German reinforcements moving south against the US 82nd at Nijmegen. Not that there were any in this game as they were all swarming over the DZs to the north-west. Since things were now getting decidedly shaky on the north bank of the river I could not find more than a few Glider Pilot AT units to do this.

I only just managed to stabilise the armoured incursion towards Oosterbeek and began to withdraw 4th Bde back towards Wolfheze. That open ground north of Wolfheze was very tricky to cross especially since 10th Pz had finally broken through the forest perimeter line and were able to spot for their artillery. Several units were caught in the open in concentrated mode and took considerable losses as a result. Once the armour had broken that perimeter at hex 2716 it was vital to pull everything back into the forests around the Supply DZ to prevent this from being overrun and thereby putting the entire Division out of supply!



The Div AT units with their 2 hex range and ZOC were positioned in wooded hexes overlooking the clear terrain around Wolfheze. Their fire really started to have effect on the armour. I think that these units are about the only ones that the Airborne player has that are capable of dealing effectively with armour. They need to be carefully deployed and husbanded.

So preoccupied was I with the actions around the Supply DZ that I made yet another error of deployment. This time south of the river. I had some AT units positioned in wooded hexes covering the approach to the rail bridge and reinforced these with a full-strength GP infantry unit. However in my enthusiasm to repulse a German unit approaching along the river bank I moved this unit one hex too far from the rail bridge end. A single hex gap was created — and lo and behold an Independent armoured unit rushed the bridge and sat on the south end. This not only gave the south approach to the German but it placed every unit south of the river out of supply with no route back to safety. Worse still, it meant that the Airborne Div Artillery was overlooked and soon the German artillery began to systematically reduce it. (This was lost the most effective units I had to deploy against infantry). Total disaster was but a die throw away at this point because the Div HQ was also spotted and began to take losses. By quickly withdrawing this unit back into Oosterbeek disaster was delayed for a few turns more.

By now the airborne perimeter had taken on almost the exact shape of the historical one. A 'thumb' with its base on the river and its tip just above the Supply DZ.

You will have noticed that I have not given any indication of the time scale of these events. I'm too embarrassed!! Arnhem was a glorious disaster — my re-enactment was an ignominious one! The time was 08.00 Sept 19th (Game turn 18) just 36 hours after the initial assault. In our enthusiasm we had overrun the scenario time length and carried on into the next scenario entitled "The Destruction of the British 1st". An apt title. This scenario is scheduled to last until turn 44 but there is no chance that my shattered remnants will last that long. I'll carry on to the end (when ever that may be) and then I'll start again. This time I'll take into account the lessons learned during this first attempt.

It's a pity that the real thing couldn't have had a practise run! But even so they still did a lot better than me!

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