

OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS

FREE THE PANTHERS!

Early Disposition of Axis Units in Cobra

by Thomas W. Graveline

Purely by accident, I seem to have constructed a fugue: *Agincourt* article repeats woven into pieces about the Normandy invasion and breakout. I can remember spending a very long weekend hauling on the rope that brought *Cobra* into the dock. Dave Werden and I played tugboats with a very leaky ship of rules only days before the production deadline. The relatively light errata that followed in the game's wake was almost scary: is that the only way to get it right? Well into the barges, mugs, you've got to go pin the German armor. — RAS

This gem has been around since 12/77 and is our most popular WWII battle to be played in one sitting. The richness of the terrain, the disengagement provisions, the uncertain weather conditions plus the availability of a separate army for each of three players gives this conflict a fullness which transcends even *PGG*, (although the games rating chart does not currently reflect this opinion).

Historically, the Germans and, particularly Hitler, mismanaged this front due to three principal factors: (1), the belief by Hitler of a second landing near Calais which delayed reinforcements to Normandy, (2), an overconcentration of panzer divisions in the Caen sector which weakened the St. Lo area, and (3), some ill-timed counterattacks which were conducted piecemeal.

In this game, there is little the German player can do about factor #1. However, he can and must alter the historical consequences of factors #2 and #3 by making the optimum disposition of forces, especially during the crucial last week; it is during this time period, the first two game turns, that the German player can, to some degree dictate which course of action the Allied player is to follow.

To begin, it is helpful to divide the map into three sectors: first, the coastal sector running from the west coast to St. Lo; second, the central sector from St. Lo to Evrecy, and, third, the greater Caen sector comprising the remainder of the map. Now to avoid the historical error of factor #2, the recommendation here is to station the mechanized divisions evenly among the three sectors.

Starting with the coastal sector, 2SS & 17SS should disengage and on the mech movement phase take up positions at hex

0906 and St. Gilles. Panzer Lehr withdraws onto the St. Lo-Countances highway and, on the mech phase, 130/LHR rolls to 0609 while 901/LHR & 902/LHR arrive at Coutances.

The central sector finds the 2nd Panzer, 9SS & 10SS to be most available. Here 2nd Panzer pulls out to hex 2607 and forms a reserve at Villers Bocage on the mech move phase. 9SS rumbles along the major road toward Torigni and eventually 1707 to support the flank of the St. Lo garrison. 10SS falls back onto the same road and rolls to 2409 in a reserve capacity.

In the Caen sector, there just doesn't seem to be enough German units to go around. 1/SS at hex 3405 cannot disengage or be reinforced, and so it becomes a distressingly inviting target for the carpet bomb. To avoid this, attack the 2nd Canadian infantry division at 3405 and hope for the best, an AI retreat to 3506. In conjunction with this attack, withdraw 1/SS panzergrenadier to

3307, 2/1SS to 3406 and 1SS Panzer corps to 3506 to guard against a D2 result. In this way, 2nd infantry can only advance one hex. Afterward, regroup ISS at 3406 on the mech phase. The I2SS division should have a regiment replaced before it moves SE of Caen to back up the 16 LW static infantry division or to reinforce it directly. 21st Panzer may attack the 3rd British infantry division at 3803 with the 101st tiger battalion at 3 to 1, and then, either stay in place reinforcing 16LW infantry, or withdrawing to 3805 on the mech phase.

With regard to the disposition of infantry, in the coastal sector, the 243rd static & 353rd infantry divisions are well stationed. 91st infantry, after replacement moves to Coutances and hex 0609 to reinforce Panzer Lehr against the carpet bomb. One regiment from the 77th infantry should fall back to 0804 to keep the 77th from remaining a carpet bomb target. (Any Allied player worth his salt will carpet bomb two-half strength units on the first turn for reasons I'll explain later.) 5th infantry stations itself at Marigny, filling the gap between 2SS & 17SS.

In the central sector, 916/352 disengages to hex 1507, preventing U.S. forces from advancing after combat into 1606 and preparing to refit two turns later south of St. Lo, if possible. 5/3 airborne withdraws to 1907, a real strong point. (Remember, 9SS will be at 1707 holding the road immediately southeast of St. Lo.) 9/3 & 987/276 pullout to 2107, 986/276 to 2508, 990/277 to 2806 and the 271st infantry division advances to 3106, protecting the flank of 989/277 at Fonteney. Note at this point that the German units east of Periers cannot be eliminated due to advance after combat. However, this is only a temporary defense as the following hexes should be occupied on game turn #2 by at least four steps of units: 3206, 3007, 2808, 2609, 2409, 2209 & 2008.

The Caen sector is somewhat different as 16LW static infantry cannot disengage and so the German player must either reinforce this division with the previously mentioned mech units or let it twist slowly, slowly in the wind. 326 static infantry moves from Harcourt toward Caen. 711th static infantry should be reinforced by the 363rd division arriving from Trouville. The 275th ought to enter along the Lisieux-Caen highway. Beware of attacking the British paratroops northeast of Caen and advancing after com-

Unit Types

Front



GERMAN
STATIC INFANTRY
identifiable by Movement
Allowance of 6



BRITISH
AIRBORNE BRIGADE
(non-droppable)



GERMAN
PANZERGRENADIER
REGIMENT



US ARMORED
CAVALRY REGIMENT



ALLIED
STEP-LOSS
MARKER

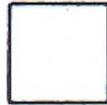
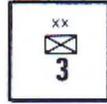


US TRUCK
(MECHANIZATION)
MARKER



GERMAN
TIGER TANK
BATTALION

Back



bat because weak German infantry will be susceptible to British overrun and concentrated attacks by mech units with divisional integrity. However, an early attack will cramp the British against the Orne river where, if the British player does attempt to overrun, many AI results will be inevitable, reducing the likelihood of an early British bridgehead across the Dives river. *Optional:* concentrate instead on setting up a defense line immediately east of the Dives using the 363rd infantry and elements of the 21st Panzer. 346th static infantry and the 503rd tiger battalion should secure hex 4004 as soon as possible.

Getting back to the 1st turn carpet bomb proposition, this would appear to be the most opportune time for the Allied player for two reasons. The first was detailed in *Moves 27* by Joe Angiollilo in his article, *Unit Game Turn Theory* which loosely translates to "trade space for time," "conserve your units as long as possible" or, conversely, destroy your opponent's forces as quickly as possible (Forgive me, Joe, you stated your case much more eloquently than I have here). The second reason is that on game turns 1 and 2, the U.S. forces, and to a lesser extent, the British forces, will be conserving their supply points for game turn 3 and beyond when the real push will occur. It is unlikely that the Allied player on game turn 1 will have six crucial attacks that will demand air point expenditures. And so a portion of the six available air points will be wasted (some by overkill) unless the carpet bomb option is exercised. Obviously it would be encouraging for the Allied player to eliminate two half-strength mech units,

such as Panzer Lehr, later in the battle, but an experienced German player will make this very difficult to occur, and, of course, the weather would have to be clear, in which case the air points might be more useful assisting the more important Allied attacks in the middle and later stages of this conflict.

On game turn 2, the German player can hope & pray for overcast or stormy weather which will increase the mobility of his troops. Should this happen, the Caen sector can all but be locked up by securing alternate hexes south-southeast of Caen with the 1SS, 12SS and 21st Panzer on 3406, 3605, and 3805, for instance. The best odds the British player can then get on these units will be two to one, with a maximum result of D1. At this time, if the 16LW infantry still exists, it should be designed to assist the 363rd, 275th, and 346th divisions, and whatever is left of the 711th infantry, in the defense of the Dives river. If these forces can hold out until the arrival of the 116th Panzer from the south on game turn and the 89th infantry from Lisieux on game turn 5, the British will have to look elsewhere for significant gains. *Caution:* watch for a heavy attrition offensive across the Dives. If this flank begins to crumble, 21st Panzer or 12SS should reinforce the defense here with the 16 LW infantry holding 3406 or 3605 for a turn or two.

Now to avoid the historical error of factor #3, simply follow David Werden's prescription in *Moves 36*: "localized counterattacks to untrap German armor," and attack overextended Allied units. Tiger battalions are excellent units for the former by moving them next to flanked armored units, putting them

in supply, retreating them onto or through the battalions and disengaging during the mech move phase. Initially, have all tiger battalions available for the Caen sector until it becomes stabilized. To this end, station the 102nd tiger battalion at Aunay on game turn 1: here it is poised to assist the Caen sector or to move to the greater Vire area where entrapments are likely to occur.

Special attention should be given to Vire as this city is the most key crossroads on the map, where six major and three minor roads converge. Garrison this hex as soon as possible. On a D2 result retreat to 2317. This will offer a defensive column shift of five and still cut off the two major roads running east.

Mechanized replacement priority: refit all mech divisions to a strength of five steps before refitting to full strength. Start with 12SS and then Panzer Lehr on game turns 2 and 3. This will allow these previously brittle divisions to re-enter the battle proper, if necessary, as quickly as possible without the threat of forever losing divisional integrity due to a D2 result where no retreat is possible.

During or after game turn 2, the arrival of the 2nd and 3rd armored divisions from Collins' VII corps at either Lessay, Periers, St. Lo or even somewhere on the British flank will cause the battle to flow in one direction or another. It is not contended here that this initial disposition of Axis units will forever forestall the Allied thrust, but merely that it will give the German player a head start toward improving the historical outcome and a better than even chance at victory. ■■

MOVES In English

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reason why SPI took this course is that once any real fighting commences, the game will become very congested. Masses of counters and markers will be crammed into the front line areas, and while the ensuing slogging match will be historically accurate, it will be very very hard work keeping track of everything, never mind adding lots of extra terrain symbols to keep your eye on.

In Conclusion

There are unfortunately problems with the Orders of Battle detail, even after the quite substantial changes contained in the Addenda. For obvious reasons I am most concerned about the British units, and while the remaining problems here are mostly small, they are a bit irritating. The mess over the Royal Marine Armoured Support units is still not corrected, although I fear the counter-mix will not allow a full correction. Particularly, the 1st RM unit should be removed on AM June 22nd, while the 2nd RM unit, which is 100% British, not Canadian as shown, should leave on AM June 24th. There ought in the meantime be a small RM Centaur unit operating in the Sword Beach area. It would have been nice to have

seen some representation of the activities of 79th Armoured Division as well, but I can accept they would have caused considerable design problems.

The Germans have also suffered many little errors, most of which I suspect are not vital. However, I was interested to see in the Cherbourg scenario that, whereas in fact a proportion of the German 77th Division managed to escape to the south and continue fighting until Cobra, all the division seems to be included and hence trapped. Meanwhile, in the Epsom scenario, far far too much of 716th Division remains in the fight, even after the Addenda inverts all its infantry counters. One of the counters still remaining was in fact an Ost Battalion which even the US Official History records as breaking utterly and disintegrating on D-Day.

I was also interested to note that according to the Epsom scenario 12th SS had managed to survive right through June without a single loss, in spite of the heavy fighting they had been in. They could have built up from replacements, but I'm certain that by the start of Epsom they were far from full strength. Anyway, hopefully these things will be sorted out in further Errata, where the counter mix allows.

The problem about coming to a final conclusion about *Atlantic Wall* is that I feel

compelled to consider it as two separate games. Even if I look at the Campaign as a whole, the Invasion Game then sinks into insignificance as it lasts for only 3 of the 104 turns: it forms merely a rather long-winded introduction which you've got to go through as there is no June 7th AM set-up quoted. In spite of my objections, I can recommend the Invasion Games, especially on a solitaire basis. I am however not so sure about the rest of the package.

Unlike the Ardennes, the Normandy operation was far from a fluid battle, it was very much a war of attrition while the Allied Expeditionary Force stored up strength for 'Cobra.' While I don't doubt that Atlantic Wall is capable of covering this situation well, I do doubt that the game will be found anything like as exciting as *Wacht am Rhein* was. The extra detail added to the rules, while enhancing the realism, does increase the workload, while the map's lack of lots of important detail may be found to let down further the enjoyment of the game. There remains, however, a great deal of value and interest within the game package as a whole, so I certainly don't write the game off as a failure, it is more a case of it not being anywhere near as marvellous as I'd hoped this game on my favourite military subject would be. ■■