

## Look, Sarge, the Germans Are Crossing the Meuse

Tactical engagements in France in 1940 are an often overlooked period for wargamers—like the Mexican American War. I think this is because at the operational level the campaign was so one-sided. France 1940, however, like the other early-war campaigns, makes for great gaming. This article will describe an action we played with a new set of rules, *Look, Sarge, No Charts: WWII™*.

When I was in junior high school, I began wargaming, using Airfix American Civil War figures and *Rally 'Round the Flag*, arguably still the best set of rules written for the ACW. My first convention hooked me on Napoleonic gaming, using *Empire II*. For the next ten years, I kept up with the revisions of *Empire* and built up my 25mm collection of Minifigs (which I still have), eventually penning two different sets of Napoleonic rules myself. While stationed in Europe, I discovered that it was easier to recruit gamers with a handful of mostly khaki WWII figures than the prospect of having to paint 1200 British line infantry with white cross belts. I enjoy WWII skirmish gaming quite a bit, but I have long wanted to play the larger actions of WWII. I have tried all of the well-know sets of rules in which players command battalions, but none of them seemed to capture the speed and tension of maneuver warfare, so I spent six years, the last year of which collaborating with two friends, to create a new, and we think, unique set of rules for WWII gaming.

The following article is a description of a recent participation game run at a convention here in “the colonies” designed to showcase some of the unique aspects of the game. Let me begin by saying that the game involved eight players, each player controlling a battalion, and was run to completion in under three hours. That included spending ten minutes describing the rules.

### **A Bit About the Rules:**

In designing a set of war-gaming rules, our approach is to enumerate a list of goals before beginning. We wanted to create a set of WWII rules that gave infantry a role on the battlefield and allowed for rapid play. Our objectives for this set of large-scale WWII rules were to reflect that:

- Reconnaissance is important,
- Infantry matters,
- Making large formations do what you want is hard, and
- ‘Realism’ is gained through simple mechanics that stress the players’ decision making, not intricate mechanics.

So while we went to great lengths to remove as many charts as possible, we have also spent years “reducing,” abstracting, and tuning the underlying data so that this does not become “lots of modifiers, but sixes always hit.” Hopefully all that effort to reduce lots of information to the essence of WWII maneuver warfare and reduce the number of charts needed to portray a reasonably realistic battle is apparent in the end result.

In addition to our major objectives, we wanted to ensure that these rules did not feel like skirmish rules. There are many good sets of skirmish rules on the market, but we were trying to create a set of rules that felt different from a skirmish game and provided “tactical,” rather than “skirmish,” challenges to the players. We have tried very hard to not let “skirmish” modifiers show up in our “tactical” game. In addition, we decided to mount at

least two model tanks on a base to give a visual cue to the players that the base represents a unit, not a single tank.

We actually did not set out to design a set of rules with no charts, but once we figured out how to handle some design criteria for the direct fire combat, a lot of the rest fell into place. Let's be clear: the title means that there are not chart *cards* to clutter the table and defy understanding. To compensate for this, there is a small label affixed to the rear of the platoon bases containing information about movement, defensive ratings, and offensive capabilities. As these little labels are comprehensive, there is no need for modifiers—or a card to list the modifiers. Some people on various Internet sites have objected to this notion, but the point is that the information you need is always where you are looking—at the platoons involved in the fight, not on some card that has to be found and cross-indexed. Once we decided that a game without a chart card was in our grasp, it became a driving force in some other game design decisions.

The designer of *Arc of Fire* (WWII skirmish rules) has said that designing rules for public consumption and criticism is difficult. Designing a set of rules that is easy is harder to do. Designing a set of rules that is simple, elegant, and also has some realism is very hard. There was quite a bit of statistical analysis behind the various mechanics behind *Look, Sarge*. Trying to eliminate the chart card made us really think about what was important to represent at the tactical level and helped us resist the temptation of including a lot of "skirmishy" modifiers and mechanics.

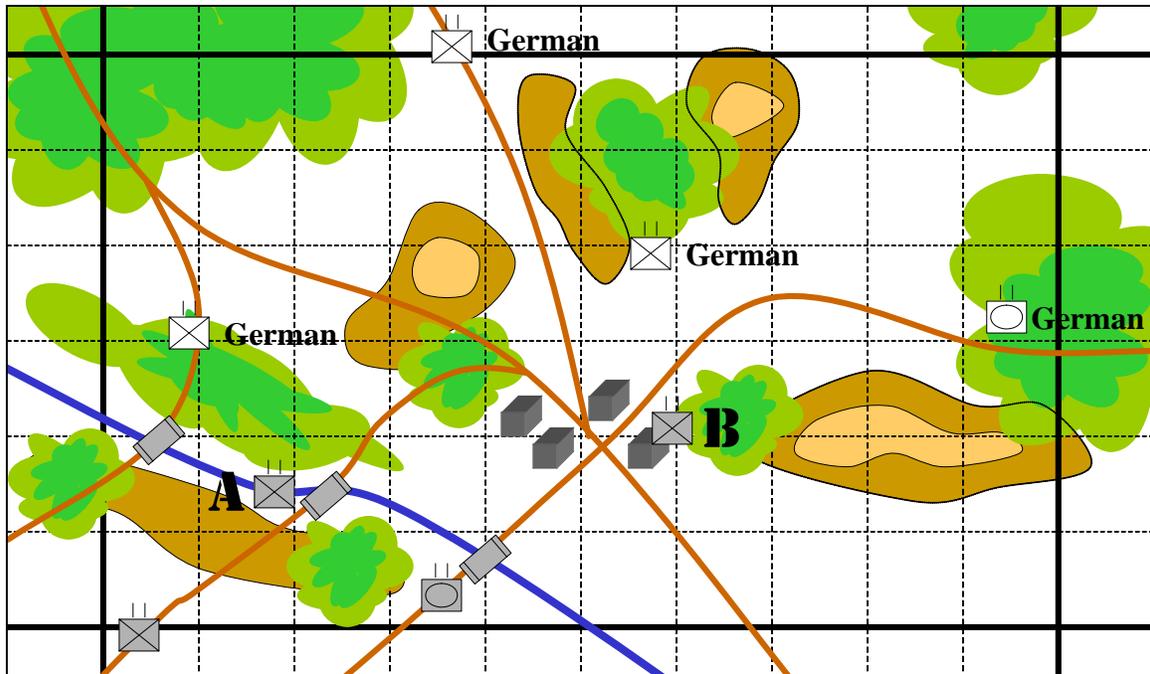
*Look, Sarge*, uses a unique card-based activation system. "Right!" you say, "Card-based systems aren't unique!" As Jim would say in the *Vicar of Dibley*, "No, no, no, no, no. Yes!" This one is. At the beginning of each turn, 1d6 is rolled for each headquarters base (company, battalion, and brigade). Then a deck of cards is shuffled that has 1-6 in red, 1-6 in black, and a reshuffle card. Cards are drawn from this deck. When a card is drawn, every headquarters that has the same number on its 1d6 as the number on the card does stuff. There are other nuances and rules, but this is basically how it works. The double randomness is quite effective. Unlike many card-based systems, however, 11 people aren't watching 1 person do stuff.

The data labels on the platoon and headquarters bases have three areas on them: movement speeds in open, on road, through woods, and through rough terrain; defensive factors in the open, light cover, medium cover, and heavy cover; and attack factors against personnel and against vehicles. Lots of analysis over several years went into the attack and defensive value numbers. This is not another set of rules based on the data values in some old Avalon Hill game. (I'm NOT bashing Avalon Hill; I have lots of those games. I'm just a little frustrated with guys who base their games on some other game rather than on analysis.) To fire at someone, you say, "This base is firing at that base" and roll 1d10. You add the appropriate attack factor, read from the data label on your firing base, to the 1d10. If the modified roll is greater than the defensive value on the enemy base's label, you get a hit.

When a base takes a hit, we place a little, green, glass bead (or other non-obtrusive marker) on that base's headquarters (e.g., the company headquarters when a platoon base takes a hit). When that headquarters next activates, it rolls two morale dice for each glass bead, applying the results. There are of course, additional details associated with morale, but it has an impact on the game, is easily computed, and doesn't require a "morale phase."

### A Bit About the Situation:

The basic situation in this scenario was that the Germans were trying to force a river crossing over the Meuse with a largely infantry force and some tank support. The French were defending the river. As this was a participation game, and I wanted the French players to see how tanks played, I gave the French side some tank reinforcements as well. The map was laid out as shown below. Each grid line represents a foot. The extra dark lines represent the table edge. Note that there are three bridges across the river. The river is not fordable and can only be crossed at the bridges.



Each German infantry battalion consisted of a headquarters, three rifle companies, and a battalion infantry gun. Each German rifle company consists of a headquarters, three rifle platoons, a machinegun section, and a mortar section. The German armored battalion contained three heterogeneous tank companies and a battalion headquarters. The tank companies were a mix of Pz. 38(t)s, Pz. Is, Pz. IIs, and Pz. IIIs. The Germans were deployed with two infantry battalions on the table as shown on the map and the armor battalion strung out along the road running toward the town so that the back of the column touched the board edge. The fourth German battalion enters on the second turn from the board edge as shown.

Each French infantry battalion consisted of a headquarters, machinegun platoon, mortar platoon, anti-tank gun platoon (either 37mm or 47mm), and three rifle companies. French rifle companies consisted of a headquarters and four rifle platoons. The French tank company, contrived for purposes of the scenario, consisted of three tank platoons, one of four Somua platoons, one of four FT-17 platoons, and one of three Char B platoons. The French were deployed so that the battalion marked "A" has two companies "south" of the river and the rest of the battalion deployed "north" of the river in the woods just "west" of the town. The battalion marked "B" was deployed with one company, the

machinegun platoon, the mortar platoon, the anti-tank gun, and the headquarters in the town and the rest of the battalion 'east' of the town. The armored battalion was on the road with the FT-17s 'north' of the river and the rest 'south' of the river.

The German objective was to seize two of the three bridges across the river. So that French could not just defend, their objective was to expand their bridgehead by seizing one more hill on the 'north' side of the river while holding their bridges. The beauty of this situation is that neither player can just sit in a static defense and wait for the enemy to make a mistake.

### **A Bit about the Conduct of the Game:**



**Figure 1: In the center of the table you can see the German armor breaking through the French. You can also see the French infantry company advancing "north" of the river at the "eastern" bridge.**

As the battle began, the German infantry in the center moved to assault the town, while the German tanks pushed down the road. Throughout the game the German infantry commanders complained that the German tanks were too timid. They wanted to get the German tanks to help them assault the town. The German tank commander had his hands busy with the French armor and left the infantry to fend for themselves. The infantry on the German right moved to the edge of the river to engage the French infantry with small arms fire.

While the Germans were moving forward, the French infantry remained in their defensive positions, but the French armor raced past them to engage the Germans in a swirling tank battle on the "eastern" side of the table. The French tanks initially surprised the German armor (the Somuas activated before the Pz. IIIs and Is), but the German tanks eventually got the upper hand, knocking out most of the Somuas.

During their approach to the town, the German infantry had difficulty finding good targets (they failed their spotting rolls), while the French made effective use of their artillery and mortars. By the time the Germans got close enough to see the French, they had little choice but to assault across the open to seize the town. The defensive value of infantry in buildings is quite high, and the Germans realized they could not sit in the open and trade fire with the French. When they assaulted, they were repulsed the first two times. (When conducting a close assault, the attacker must withdraw unless he inflicts more hits on the defenders than he receives. As the attacks were frontal, the French got to fire first and had the benefit of cover when fired upon. It would be a tough nut for the Germans to crack.) By the time of the third assault, the Germans had maneuvered a company of infantry around the "eastern" side of the town and attacked from two directions at once, gaining a foothold. (*Look, Sarge*, does not consider individual buildings.

Remember that this is a tactical game, not a skirmish game. Instead, built-up areas are treated as just that, an area. Once the Germans forced a toe hold into the town, they got the benefit of hard cover when the French counter attacked.) The battle lasted another hour and a half, consisting of assaults and counter assaults by both sides.



**Figure 2: View of the fight from the German side of the table. Note that the German infantry has entered the town. Also note the lack of visible markers on the table.**

The German infantry initially facing the French along the Meuse, took terrible losses from French infantry and their limited artillery support. Eventually they failed their morale and were forced to retreat. (Failed morale can result in a “pin” in which the unit can only activate on black cards, or “retreat” in which the unit must withdraw to the next covered or concealed position.) Despite having lost all their forces on the “north” side of the river during this fighting, the French were beginning to feel confident, and the battalion commander ordered one of his infantry companies across the river at the center to pursue the broken German infantry. This was a mistake, because just as the French crossed the river a couple of fresh companies from the reserve battalion arrived and drove them back, capturing the “western” bridge and occupying the woods beyond.

At the same time, the German armor broke the Somua company and destroyed the last of the FT-17s. With the Char B’s in retreat, the German Pz. II’s and 38(t)s, rushed past the last of the French armor and pushed two platoons across the “eastern” bridge. By this point the town was still hotly contested, but the French only had two partial companies and an anti-tank gun “south” of the river, not enough to mount an effective counter attack. Though they took serious casualties themselves, the Germans had pushed across the river, meeting their objectives.



**Figure 3: German infantry pushing across the Meuse**

As the game master, there were three surprising and gratifying occurrences during the game. First, the fighting around the town was quite fluid, there being several counter attacks from both sides. The players involved in this fight seemed quite pleased with the way the fight ebbed and flowed. Second, the tank battle seesawed back and forth before the final outcome was decided. As the tanks were reasonably evenly matched, I had thought that the side that got the initial upper hand would win the fight. Finally, I was taken by surprise by the sudden change of fortunes for the French in the last two turns. When the French armor broke, I fully expected the German armor to join the fighting in the town. Instead the commander, true to the objectives of the game, pushed for the bridges. The real surprise, however, was the unexpected German infantry push across the bridge. During the earlier part of the battle, the Germans lost several companies of infantry trying to soften the French defenders. The German infantry commander proved quite patient, but when his opportunity came, he seized it. A turn nominally represents thirty minutes of real time. With eight players who had never played the rules before, we completed fifteen turns in less than three hours, achieving a good result.

### **A Bit about Figures**

There are a number of manufacturers of 10mm and 12mm WWII figures. The figures used in this demonstration game were 12mm Minifigs. The tanks are quite nice, and the infantry of different countries are discernable; these are not just teeth of a comb glued to bases. My next project is going to be Poland 1939, but I'm going to have to improvise on the infantry, cavalry, and vehicles, since no one seems to make Polish in 12mm or 10mm.