

TOURNAMENT BITTER WOODS; FOUR DECEMBER DAYS IN THE ARDENNES

by John B. Grant, Jr.

I have always enjoyed Bulge games, starting with the 1965 version of *THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE* published by The AVALON HILL Game Company. The Bulge affords a classic game scenario: a slashing onslaught which must make enormous gains against an outnumbered foe before reinforcements shift the initiative to the defender. AH's 1981 version of *THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE* became my favorite game for many years, completely supplanting the 1965 version. The newest regimental level Bulge game, *BITTER WOODS*, has now captured that place. It retains the ability to portray the entire battle in a playable yet sufficiently detailed format which is the hallmark of regimental-level Bulge games. To this *BITTER WOODS* adds a finely-tuned series of concepts which come much closer than *BULGE '81* to recreating the historical situation, while enhancing both players' options. The game contains a campaign game lasting 22 turns and a tournament scenario lasting eight turns.

The game has the distinction of being the last wargame published by Avalon Hill before sale of its assets to Hasbro. The designer is Randy Heller, with significant contributions from Bruno Sinigaglio and Danny Parker. You get an unmounted, colorful map very nicely prepared by Mark Simonitch, showing the battle area from Liege in the north to Martelange in the south, the Meuse River in the west and the German assembly areas in the east. The counters are first rate, with NATO unit symbols except for armor units which use silhouettes of the predominate tank in the unit. This provides a nice graphic touch and eases play as the armor units have certain combat advantages and terrain restrictions. Counters include ten leaders (with portraits). The map contains the unit set up locations for the opening turn in a style which enhances the graphics and greatly speeds set up.

The tournament scenario focuses on the first four days of the German offensive: December 16 through 19, 1944. The Germans must achieve at least four out of eleven possible objectives to win. Eight of the objectives require controlling map locations located well behind the initial start positions on December 16th.

One objective is the capture of an Allied fuel dump. The map contains two marked locations showing the general area of the hidden fuel dumps, which can be destroyed on a die roll when the Germans are adjacent. The final two objectives are based on losses: eliminate 18 or more Allied units and lose three or fewer German mechanized units.

The tournament scenario provides a tense, exciting struggle which can be finished in approximately four hours. Both sides can win. Unlike other regimental Bulge games, excellent German results in the first turn do not doom the Allies, since almost all nonartillery combat units are backprinted with a reduced strength side. The Germans may weaken the Allied line, but it will not break on 16AM.

ATTACKER ADVANTAGES

BITTER WOODS provides certain advantages to the attacker which create a more fluid battle than most Bulge games, and add greatly to the enjoyment of the game as well as its historicity. First, the advance after combat rules contain several important differences from other Bulge games. An advancing attacker must enter the defender's hex, but is not stopped by an enemy zone of control in that hex. The common tactic of blocking advance by backing up a defensive position with another unit does not work as well in this game. Moreover, all of us *BULGE '81* enthusiasts use a familiar tactic of stationing an artillery unit immediately behind the defender, providing both final protective fire (adding the artillery unit's defense factor) and a block to German advances. In *BITTER WOODS*, artillery

still has the ability to add final protective fire within a four hex range, but has no zone of control to block advances.

The advances possible in *BITTER WOODS* are up to four hexes. The major limiting factor is terrain; units cannot advance farther than they could move through the terrain. For example, mechanized units prior to the ground freeze starting December 21 use two movement factors to move through light woods and rough terrain. Since their movement factor is four, no advance through this terrain (which predominates on the map) will be farther than two hexes. Longer advances principally occur along roads. Mechanized units have an enhanced advance if they start and stay on roads throughout the advance. The advance result is multiplied by 1.5 rounded up (making a 1 hex advance into 2, 2 into 3, etc.). The chance to make deep penetrations along roads is a key advantage the German player must maximize, both to seize terrain and surround Allied units.

The second major attack advantage is exploitation. In the Basic Game, the moving player may place any mechanized unit into reserve. The unit may not be adjacent to an enemy unit, move in the movement phase, or engage in combat. In the exploitation phase following combat, any reserve unit may move its full movement allowance. With the optional Leader rule (highly recommended), a mechanized unit in reserve must be released by a leader in its hex. This requires planning as most leaders must start the turn in the hex with the unit to be released. Only Manteuffel, Patton and Collins may move to the reserve unit during the movement phase and release that unit in the exploitation phase.

The exploitation rule is guaranteed to raise the anxiety level of the Allied player. If a successful attack opens a road with available units in reserve, the German player can run mechanized units deep behind American lines. This is an opportunity the German player must always try to create by routinely placing any mechanized units into reserve which are not needed in combat.

In practice, the available reserve each turn will be small; between one and five mechanized units. This is because the German player must use mechanized units in combat to create the holes needed for advance and exploitation. Their combat power is generally augmented by favorable die roll modifiers, due to the advantage most of the panzer divisions hold in higher endurance ratings ("ER"). (Each unit has an ER as well as a combat strength. The attacker's highest ER is compared to the defender's highest ER. The higher ER yields a favorable die roll modifier, which means the attacking Germans receive the modifier in most battles in the opening turns, except where the Americans start in improved positions which negate the attacker's ER advantage. Most of the Americans present on December 16 are rated 3 or 4, faced by five panzer divisions and two infantry divisions rated 5 (most of the German infantry is rated 3).

Several additional attack options enhance German chances of penetrating the American defenses. First is the flanking attack (optional rule). This requires three regiments of a 5 rated mechanized division participating in an attack from at least two nonadjacent hexes. This yields another -1 die roll modifier for the attacker. It is a good reason to keep all regiments of a panzer division grouped together (a 5 rated mechanized division stacked together or in adjacent hexes also benefits from a +1 in the defense).

Second, the attacker can attempt a bypass attack with an optional rule called *Angriff aus der Bewegung* (attack on the move). This is similar to *BULGE '81's* Blitz attack. It requires at least 2-1 odds, at least one armored unit with 5 ER, and infantry remaining adjacent to the defender. The attack permits mechanized units to advance without retreating the defender as long as they do not reenter the defender's zone of control ("ZOC"). (This attack is most useful either to surround another defender or where an American unit in a rough or forest hex has a ZOC blocking a key road. A normal attack requires advancing into the defender's hex, losing most of the impetus of the advance, while an *Angriff* attack could permit the mechanized unit to advance down the road if it could do so without reentering the defender's ZOC.) *Angriff* attacks will be fairly rare, but both players should be alert to any suitable opportunities which arise.

Third, the attacker can use artillery and rocket units in an optional bombardment mode rather than as support for an attack. A die is rolled against each defender's ER, causing a "shock" result if the die roll exceeds the ER. Shock lowers the defender's ER and halves its combat factors for a following regular attack. This rule is most useful against a tough target like Bastogne after the Americans have fortified it. The artillery needed (at least two units) is usually better utilized in supporting a combat by adding combat factors to raise the odds.

Fourth, the Germans have two units which can infiltrate the American lines. 150th Panzer Brigade has a 50% chance to infiltrate American ZOCs once in the game. Peiper has an infiltration rule for 17AM which deserves a more complete treatment in my discussion of 6th Panzer Army's objectives.

AMERICAN ADVANTAGES

The American player can actually stop this juggernaut by making shrewd use of the advantages he has. First and foremost is the artillery. Unlike the German artillery, the American artillery has a decent road movement rate, can move and fire in the same turn, and can fire both offensively and defensively in the same turn. The artillery can also block advances and exploitation if placed on key roads where bypass routes are not feasible due to terrain. For example, an artillery unit on the opposite side of a bridge will stop the German advance or exploitation. The artillery does not have a place on the front line; only truly desperate circumstances should ever see an artillery unit vulnerable to attack.

Second, non-artillery combat units have two steps. This means that even a high odds attack generally will allow the American unit to take a step loss, flip the counter to its reduced side, and keep fighting. Of course, a reduced unit is brittle. Using one to hold a key road is dangerous; if destroyed an exploitation can occur.

Third, the terrain generally favors the defense. Careful positioning frequently will deny the Germans a decent attack, an advance and exploitation, all at the same time. Take the defense of Clervaux as an example. Often 16AM sees 28/110 driven back from the Our, the Germans across and a bridge built for use in 16PM. 28/110 can drop back to Clervaux which doubles its defense. But this position can be strongly attacked by 5th Panzer Army in 16PM (if the Our bridge is built). A good advance result will send 28/110 back down the road to Bastogne and gain substantial ground for the Germans. The alternative is hex 1723. This position can be reached by 9/CCR on 16AM (28/110 must move to 1522 to guard the flank). The Germans can attack 1723 only from Clervaux, and cannot advance past 1723 if they do take the low odds attack.

The American player normally must conserve his units in the early turns, falling back to avoid being surrounded and trying to avoid high odds attacks. The rivers will help. The river-crossing rules require the crossing unit to begin adjacent. An infantry unit may then cross and move its full movement; a tank unit (except certain heavies) may cross and stop. An unbridged river will force delay if the Germans do not have units adjacent. Placing a defender behind the river may actually accelerate a crossing by the Germans since a successful attack allows an advance into the defender's hex (though not farther unless the attackers started the turn adjacent to the river).

Finally, the Americans gain some comfort from the army boundary between 5th and 6th Panzer Armies. This rule precludes sending mechanized units from one army sector to the other through December 18th. The inability to shift the panzers between sectors channels the exploitation possibilities and sometimes saves American units from envelopment.

GERMAN STRATEGY

The Opening Turn: 16AM

One of the most enjoyable aspects of most Bulge games is trying to solve the puzzle of creating the most effective German opening. BITTER WOODS is particularly suited to this puzzle-solving because both the German and American units start in specific locations (helpfully marked on the map). The Germans

have the 16AM movement phase to move their forces to new attack positions, provided army sectors are observed. Here is a quick overview of my favorite opening, by army sector from south to north. These comments take into account the latest errata to the 16AM restrictions (all American artillery may move 1 MF and provide defensive support at full strength; American units not starting the game in German ZOCs move 2 MF except the 2nd Infantry which moves 3 MF; 6th Army mechanized units do not move).

7th Army

There are three target American units in 7th Army's sector. The objective is to pin as many as possible by engaged results, or reduce the Americans by firefight results, while pushing across the Our at Vianden. 7th Army has no panzer divisions and only one mechanized unit (the 5/15 regiment), but it does have 212th VG with a 5-rated ER. By using one regiment of the 212th in each battle, the 7th Army can achieve two 1-1 (-1) attacks and a 4-1 (-1) against the 28/109 in Vianden. The 16AM surprise rule may provide a column shift (automatic in the Basic game). 5/15 and Brandenburger participate in the Vianden attack and advance together across the Our. This will create the opportunity to place 5/15 into reserve in 16PM for a possible exploitation move. (The 16AM rules prevent any Germans from being placed into reserve. They also limit the movement of any American unit not starting in a German ZOC, which inhibits the American 16AM reaction. All three American units in the 7th Army sector start in a German ZOC and are free to move if not engaged).

5th Panzer Army

The major variations in where to use the German firepower in 16AM occur in this sector. 5th Panzer's striking power is its three panzer divisions: Lehr, 2nd and 116th. There are six American units in 5th Panzer Army's sector, including the 14th Armored Cavalry in the Losheim gap which is also subject to attack by 6th Panzer Army. Most of the defenders are in range of American artillery support.

The bridge across the Our at 28/110's position is important for 16PM. 26/78 should be held back to build the bridge, while the panzer regiments of 2nd and 116th Panzer Divisions supported by infantry, rockets and artillery attack 28/110's position at 3-1 (after the column shift for rough terrain), which the surprise roll may shift to 4-1. This attack has a reasonable chance of driving 28/110 back, which will permit the bridge to be constructed at the end of the German 16AM turn.

The other critical target is 14th Armored Cavalry. The Lehr Panzer Division can attack from 0614; adding two regiments from 18th VG and one from 12th VG gives a 4-1 (assuming American artillery support), reduced to 3-1 due to the rough terrain but possibly increased by the surprise roll. The 5th Panzer/6th Panzer army boundary will prevent Lehr from advancing north of the road through the Losheim gap, but the infantry can take advantage of a long advance to trap 99/394 and infiltrate the forest at 0913 or 1013.

The regiments of the American 106th Infantry Division in the Schnee Eifel can be surrounded by movement (106/423) or advance (106/422 and possibly 106/424). 106/422 can only move two hexes even if not surrounded since it does not start the game in a German ZOC. Although some thought can be given to an assault through this area, I believe it is better to surround these units and deal with them later.

The best odds available against 28/112 with the remaining units are 2-1 (assuming both American artillery units support the defense), with a chance of surprise shifting the odds to 3-1. The engaged or firefight results are useful, and an advance of 2 or 3 can surround 106/424. 560/1128 should infiltrate across the Our into 1322 and 26/39 should move to 1426.

6th Panzer Army

Since this army has chosen to hold back its two SS panzer divisions and 150th Panzer Brigade from the opening attack, these mechanized units cannot move in 16AM (per the errata). This is an infantry fight supported by rocket and artillery units. One reasonable opening is a 3-1 against 99/394, a 3-1 against

99/393 and a 1-1 against 102nd Armored Cavalry. Dietrich should be stacked with some unit of 12SS Panzer Division, in case reserve status is desired for this unit in 16PM. (Peiper can be released from reserve without a leader, in recognition of his initiative).

ARMY OBJECTIVES

7th Army.

This army's first objective is to block 10th Armored Division from reaching the Bastogne area on 17PM. This requires some 7th Army unit to cut the Entry D-Martelange-Bastogne road. Since the Americans likely will have only two units to spare for this sector in 16PM and 17AM, plus air interdiction, 7th Army must use its infantry to kill or push aside these units while holding 5/15 in reserve with Brandenberger ready to exploit an open road to the west. Blocking 10th Armored will pay big dividends as 5th Panzer Army should reach Bastogne before the Americans can build a fortification there. 7th Army's subsequent objectives are to threaten Neufchateau and support 5th Panzer Army against Bastogne, usually by sending the 7th Army artillery and rocket units to the Bastogne sector. 7th Army should also detail a few infantry units to block offboard Americans from entering at Entry areas B or C (A can be ignored with the Our bridges down at Echternacht).

5th Panzer Army

This army must strike for Bastogne, the bridges over the Ourthe (3732, 3023, or 3126) and Parker's crossroads (2417). The principal advances should use the roads from Clervaux to Bastogne and from St. Vith to Houffalize. One panzer division (usually the one which attacked 28/110) supported by 26th VG drives on Bastogne from Clervaux, with the intent of placing a unit adjacent to Bastogne before the Americans can build a fortification. An adjacent German unit will prevent construction. Without a fort, Bastogne cannot hold when the German artillery finally catches up. With a fort, Bastogne presents a tough choice for the Germans as long as the Americans include a leader (usually Middleton) in the garrison. Leaders can convert retreat requirements into step losses, while forts permit the garrison to ignore CA (counterattack) results. With 5 or 6 American steps and a leader, a surrounded Bastogne requires a major commitment of German panzer units to reduce, usually taking three or four turns. Since this time is not available in the tournament game, it is usually better to use the available panzers to bypass Bastogne to the north and press for the Ourthe bridges.

Parker's Crossroads can be approached from Houffalize and Vielsalm. At least one panzer division and possibly Fuhrer Escort when it arrives on the 18AM turn, should be pushing for this objective.

5th Panzer Army's leader is Manteuffel, who provides this army with flexibility in planning for exploitation. Manteuffel can move to a stack of mechanized units in reserve and release them for exploitation in the same turn. Generally elements of one panzer division should be held back in reserve each turn, looking for exploitation possibilities. Exploitation down an open road can block Allied reinforcements and seize key locations, but remember that a counterattack can kill isolated exploiting units and risk losing too many mechanized units to satisfy one of the victory objectives.

6th Panzer Army

The tournament objectives in this army's sector are Stoumont, Trois Ponts, Eupen, Spa and the fuel dump near 1809. 6th Panzer Army has only two panzer divisions and faces river lines, forests and early American reinforcements. Sepp Dietrich lacks Manteuffel's flexibility in releasing reserves and must be placed with mechanized units intended for reserve status a turn in advance.

As some compensation, 6th Panzer Army has Joachim Peiper, who both self-releases for exploitation and has an optional 17AM move of great potential. Peiper can ignore American ZOCs on his 17AM move and advance after combat phases, or in the exploitation phase (if placed in reserve during

17AM and with a 50% die roll for each ZOC in exploitation). What to do with Peiper is often a difficult question, but the mere threat forces the American player to carefully place his 16PM defense in an effort to prevent an easy infiltration, frequently conceding some defensive positions which are viable but too exposed should Peiper infiltrate.

Given the army boundary which keeps the panzer units north of the St. Vith-Vielsalm road, 6th Panzer Army has one major avenue of advance into the area with most of the objectives (the fuel dump, Spa, Stoumont and Trois Ponts); through Malmedy and Stavelot. A strong attack through this area requires 1SS Panzer Division with supporting infantry and probably elements of 12SS Panzer Division as well. Dietrich and at least one mechanized unit should be in reserve each turn to take advantage of any exploitation opportunity that may arise. Infantry can advance towards Eupen from Monschau, but it likely will not fall without committing panzer units from 12SS. Even with the number of available objectives, 6th Panzer Army will not find its task easy, due to the American reinforcements which start arriving 17AM. Seizing Stavelot as early as possible is important, as it otherwise constitutes a strong roadblock position for the Americans.

American Strategy Notes

In addition to the American advantages discussed above, there are a few general strategy notes the American player should keep in mind. First, don't panic when the Germans exploit through a hole and send mechanized units into your rear. These units usually can be blocked from further mischief, and may be vulnerable to surrounded counterattacks. Second, some of the 17AM reinforcements in the north must head for Parker's Crossroads. 5th Panzer Army has the strength and relatively open terrain to force advances towards Bastogne, Houffalize and Vielsalm.

Without reinforcements available in the center by 17PM, the defenders in this area will be very hardpressed, possibly past the breaking point. 10th Armored Division will arrive at Bastogne in 17PM (unless 7th Army succeeded in cutting the road from the south), but will be needed for Bastogne's defense. The 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions will not arrive at the front until 19AM. Some units from the north must fill the gap.

Third, use the American air units available on December 17th and 18th, particularly in the center and south. Note that reliance on interdiction to stop mechanized units on roads is dangerous. The German player may challenge the interdiction and risk the step loss for the benefit of the 1/3 chance of driving through. Interdiction is best used off road to protect the flanks of otherwise surroundable units. It is also helpful to hold an air unit back for use as defensive ground support, if possible, which can be a nasty surprise to a German confidently expecting a 4-1 (-1) attack to clear a hex and finding the odds unexpectedly lowered.

CONCLUSION

I expect to see tournament play of BITTER WOODS become a staple of boardgaming conventions. The tournament game can be won by either player, usually during the last turn. This game challenges both players in a tense, exciting contest, with enough chrome to create an historical feel.

Enjoy!