

Highway to the Reich

A REVIEW OF SPI's MARKET-GARDEN SIMULATION
BY TONY DINSDALE

Operation Market-Garden was certainly one of, if not the, most daring large scale undertaking during wartime. The details can be found in S&T 61, though the concept was quite simple; to take and hold fourteen bridges and a long section of roadway. This would outflank the West-Wall and at the same time gain a crossing over the formidable rivers which blocked the Allied advance toward the fatherland. The Market part was the paratroops to capture the objectives, whilst the Garden part was the push by the British 30th Corps to consolidate the position. Unfortunately, one reason for the disaster, was that it was too simple. The drop-zones and geography of the area showed only too well to the Germans in which direction the enemy was coming. SPI's simulation is a just tribute to the magnificent struggle that spanned half the Netherlands.

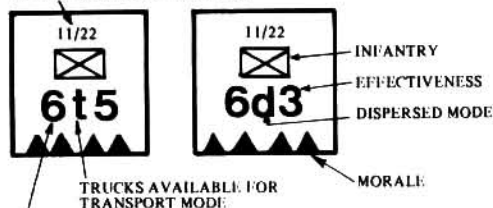
One thing that would not have occurred to Montgomery, was that the plan is also tailor-made to fit the "monster game" series, an increasing number of which are being published nowadays. The scale of 600 metres per hex gives a good tactical feel to the game, though with a map eight feet long there is still reasonable scope for strategy too. A total of well over 1,000 counters allows for the units to be given in terms of companies, tank and anti-tank units usually represent four vehicles, guns or whatever. The counters are quite adequate and packed with information, though it is the map which takes the prize for artistic merit. Rivers look the part for once, frequently being over 2 cms. in width.

The twenty-four terrain types give an accurate picture of the battlefields and differentiate between woods/forest and town/city. The only problem here is that the green (coloured) American paratroops tend to be too well-camouflaged and tend to disappear in the woods! The red British 1st looks good though, as does the inevitable black for the SS.

There are two copies of the charts and tables, which greatly aids play. There are also two unit manifests on which all the units in the game can be arranged at the start of the game, plus an "off-map movement display" for the Germans. The rule booklet is twenty pages long and the components require two game boxes.

Though the equipment is impressive and just about justifies the cost, the real appeal of the game to me is the actual system. The counters, one of which is shown below are a wealth of information, so much so, in fact, that this has led to problems with production and the die-cutting is not always as it should be.

11 BATTALION/22nd REGIMENT



STRENGTH

FRONT

BACK

Typical unit: German SS

To take the numbers in turn then. The strength factor is simply what it appears to be, a qualitative assessment, including the unit's defensive and offensive capabilities. For example, a thousand men armed with pea-shooters would have a strength of 40 but an effectiveness of 0. A single Tiger tank would have a strength of 1 but would still retain an effectiveness of 9. The morale rating speaks for itself and adjusts with casualties. The range is given in terms of hexes, most units being able to fire only into adjacent hexes. Artillery may be capable of firing nine hexes. There is a tremendous diversity of unit types, armoured car recce, tank destroyers and anti-tank guns to name but a few. Subordination does in fact affect play to quite a large extent and is handled very well.

A whole command structure exists, going through corps supply, to corps H.Q., to regimental/brigade level, then battalion level which may consist of several companies. Not only is a player concerned with this line of command/supply, he also has to make sure that his forward observers are of the same subordination to and in communications with the H.Q. controlling direct fire. All this causes the commander (the feel is very realistic), to have his units fight together as units. The good thing about this system is that the act is purely voluntary, making it more profitable to do this. Some games like Third Reich cheat by saying that one must do certain things, which is bad. Here, it is possible to split units up at any level when circumstances dictate.

There are two basic forms of combat and, whilst lobbing missiles at one another is a good way to pick off a few enemy troops, a determined attacker will use close action as the most efficient form of gaining ground and flattening the enemy. In the combat rules however, certain deficiencies do become apparent. The game system is not too simple to begin with and SPI argue that in order to keep down complexity, they have limited the rules regarding the effectiveness of units against varying opposition. As the rules stand, it is impossible to close action artillery with infantry and there are no benefits for stacking tanks with infantry, which is a bit poor. Fortunately all these points in the effectiveness ratings can be sorted out with a few simple rules such as "tanks halved in effectiveness when alone and attacked by infantry", which seems reasonable. Just a pity that it was allowed to happen.

Possibly the most important feature of the system though is the ability of units to assume a variety of modes — travel, dispersed, concentrated and disrupted. The latter is only assumed as a result of a close action. Dispersed mode is what concentrated units do when they come under fire. The men run for cover and so the effectiveness is reduced, see diagram. The strength of course does not alter, except for the Netherlands SS units which miraculously are halved when dispersed. I think that is something of a misprint though. All units have a movement allowance of four but the mode affects movement costs dramatically, so that travel mode on roads can move you 64 hexes onwards in one game-turn. Modes

HIGHWAY TO THE REICH CONTINUED



do not affect stacking restrictions which depend on terrain.

Every game system has its foundations in its sequence of play though and this is certainly a good example of that. Through a highly commendable effort to establish some form of semi-simultaneous play, without having to write down orders all the time, the only serious fault (perhaps just in my view) has occurred. A fifteen phase turn sequence takes a very long time to plough through, especially when up to seven factors have to be taken into account for a single close action attack. Besides making postal play impossible, experienced players will find that each turn takes an hour at the very least. One must therefore allow five hours bare minimum for a turn in the campaign game. With 104 turns, at five hours each.....Mmmmm.

The scenarios seem a less daunting prospect and one could always link two or more together if something large was required but not quite that long. The opportunities for multi-player games are excellent and with six scenarios there is plenty of scope. One could easily set up typical battles as the units are quite versatile.

All in all, Highway to the Reich appears to have been rushed in some respects. The high standards of care and attention provided by SPI have been allowed to relax in places. The scenarios are horribly biased though they generally produce the correct results — it just means that instead of calling what actually happened, a draw, they say that the player who achieves this wins. And it is so realistic (accurate) that he does. Minor points regarding historical timetables are also slightly invalid. There are numerous small mistakes in the charts which also need rectifying.

Even in view of these facts, I consider HWTR to be an excellent simulation, especially for the more experienced wargamer. No collection is fully complete without it since it is something of a break-

through in World War II wargaming. Much can be learned from playing the game and indeed, one could write a whole book about the systems and the tactics available. The player who likes to plan his moves with meticulous care and fool the enemy in many tactical simulations should really be at home with this. Montgomery said that in years to come it would be a great thing for a man to say "I fought at Arnhem". In time to come, it will be a great thing for a man to say "I played through a campaign game of Highway to the Reich". I doubt whether I shall be remembered for the quotation however.

HIGHWAY TO THE REICH GAME SCALE

Each hexagon on the mapsheets represents an approximate distance of 600 metres from side to side. The hexes are used to differentiate specific types of terrain: clear, mixed, broken, rough, woods, forest, city or town. In addition various other features are represented on the mapsheet: primary roads, secondary roads, trails, railways, bridges, hill-tops, streams, rivers, lakes dikes, ferries.

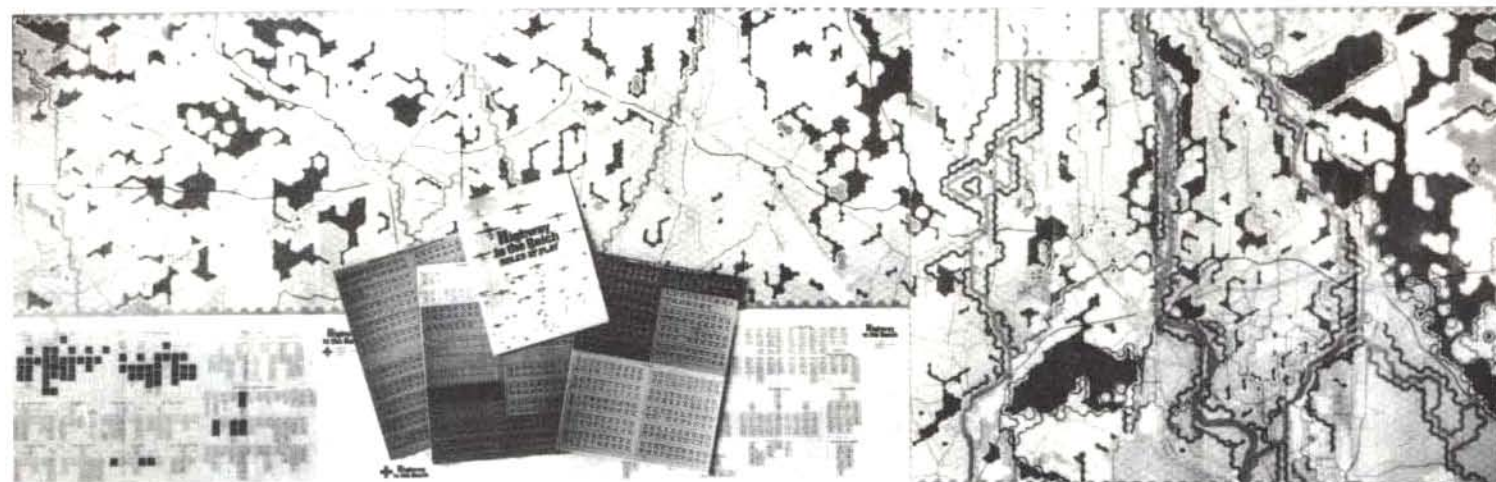
Each infantry unit represents a company with each strength point indicating 25 men. Armoured units represent platoons, troops or zugs with each strength point indicating individual vehicles. Each artillery unit represents a battery with the strength points indicating each gun.

All units have a movement factor of four. The units mode and the type of terrain it is moving into affects the expenditure of points or fractions of points.

Each Game-turn indicates the passing of two hours of real time.

HIGHWAY TO THE REICH GAME TURN PLAYING SEQUENCE

1. **Allied Command Phase:** when the Allied player assesses the supply status of his headquarters units and attempts to restore disrupted units.
2. **German Organisational Phase:** the German player may reorganise the mode of any of his units — such activity may trigger allied opportunity fire.
3. **Allied Conditional Fire Phase:** Allied player executes Fire Attacks, direct and indirect, with any eligible units. Units firing in this phase may not then move in the following phase.
4. **Allied Conditional Movement Phase:** the Allied player may move any unit, within the limits of the rules, that did not participate in Fire Attacks in the previous phase. Reinforcements arrive. Moving units may Close-Assault according to the rules. German units may have the chance to Opportunity Fire upon moving Allied units.
5. **German Conditional Fire Phase:** as phase 3.
6. **German Conditional Movement Phase:** as phase 4.
7. **Allied Free Fire Phase:** all eligible Allied units may fire.
8. **German Command Phase:** as phase 1.
9. **Allied Organisational Phase:** as phase 2.
10. **German Conditional Fire Phase:** as phase 3.
11. **German Conditional Movement Phase:** as phase 4.
12. **Allied Conditional Fire Phase:** as phase 3.
13. **Allied Conditional Movement Phase:** as phase 4.
14. **German Free Fire Phase:** as phase 7.
15. **Game-turn Record Phase:** the marker should be moved one space on the time track indicating the passing of two-hours of real time.



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).



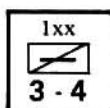
THE SCENARIO FOR Arnhem

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.



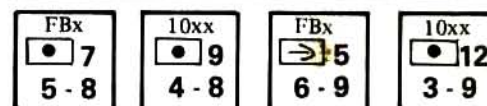
The airborne recon squadron — that's a key unit. If you can get them down more or less in one piece near to Heesum you're in with a chance. The historical plan called for this unit (25% of which never even reached the DZ) to race ahead to the bridge and hold it. I didn't even realise that it could race 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-Heesum 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 Heveadorp trail (probably also the best route for the recon 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 Heesum (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. (Thus 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!!