

Operational Analysis: 'Wacht am Rhein'

THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE, 16 Dec 44 - 2 Jan 45

by Tom Oleson



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Like many wargamers, WWII has a special fascination for me. When I saw how good the 19th century macro-games were getting, I hoped they'd soon do the same thing for WWII. They have, and *Wacht Am Rhein* is a fine example. Available for \$20 from SPI, *WACHT* is a grand-tactical simulation of the Battle of the Bulge, played on four maps which together measure about 4' x 6'. There are 1600 counters, about 1/4 of which are 'informational' (e.g., improved positions, fortifications, bridges, march mode, etc.). The combat units represent for the most part battalions of armor, infantry, engineers, etc., with some companies. Air power is handled abstractly — that is, without detailed counters and rules as in *DNO*. The map-scale

is one mile per hex, and each of the turns represents half of the hours of daylight. There is also a night turn, representing 15 hours of darkness, as well as a bonus game-turn coming between the night and AM turns. This represents extra effort, and units which engage in it become fatigued. The Campaign Game covers 18 days in 55 Turns, not counting 17 optional bonus turns.

I like wargames that pose interesting, non-repetitive problems in ways that increase my understanding of an historically significant battle. Most important, I like to have fun while I'm at it. *WACHT* delivers all of this without being difficult to understand or play. As macro-games go, it seems uncommonly accessible and clear-cut. I found no serious flaws in the game, although there are a few vague spots. I was pleased with the promptness with which SPI responded to my queries on *WACHT*.

Frankly, I was skeptical when I first sat down to play *WACHT*; I don't believe a game of its scope can be play-tested in the usual sense of the word — that is, repeated play in advance of

release. To play through the Campaign game should take 200 hours. This could be cut by team-play, time-limits, and experience, but still it must be impossible to play a game like this more than a few times before it is released. What is needed to produce such a game is someone who has a very thorough knowledge of the battle and who can, in effect, play-test it mentally and mathematically. I don't know how SPI tested **WACHT**, but they certainly have such a man in Jim Dunnigan. Nearly a decade ago, under the name **KAMPF**, Jim Dunnigan published historical monographs. An excellent one covered the Battle of the Bulge in great detail. As Jim mentions in the designer's notes, this is his third effort at a Bulge game, and in my opinion the first one that really fulfills the high standard of which he is capable.

ORGANIZING THE GAME

How prophetic were the words of Oktay Oztunali when he called **War In The East** 'Not a game, but a way of life!'. There is something very different about a game of this sort, and one like Avalon Hill's **BULGE**, which is a classic in its own way. When a game like this is good, as **WACHT** is, just the one game can be a hobby in itself. Preparation is essential in playing **WACHT**. I used seven counter trays: one for the 'dead pile', one for play-aid counters I made up, three for Allied units, and two for Germans, with the informational counters fitting in the odd free spaces of these five. There are not enough informational counters provided with the game, so you'll need some blank, colored counters to supplement the counter mix. (Whenever I get a new game, I punch out the spare counters and save them, segregated by colors. Now I've got quite a collection, and they come in very handy for a game like **WACHT**.) I have yet to see the game that can't be improved by a little customizing, and **WACHT** is no exception. Before I play it again, I am going to get fresh counter sheets, and mark the units of each division with a different color or symbol. This is a lot of bother, but keeping your army organized is such a key feature of **WACHT** that it's well worth the trouble. There were times during my play of **WACHT** when I spent quite a few minutes tracking down the units of a division which the exigencies of battle had pulled to different corners of the front. Had all those units been marked with a red triangle, it would have saved a lot of time, and improved my play. I would also want to mark the optional 'green' units which are not already indicated by the letter 'g'. Green units represent another use for spare counters in **WACHT**. We used colored counters to indicate green units which had been in combat. This need only a few turns, until an entire green division has been 'blooded'. Another play-aid which seems to me not just helpful, but essential, is to make up a set of numbered counters, say 250 in all, with groups of five numbered from '1' to '50'. We used these counters to indicate artillery support, and I can't imagine playing without them.

Nor can I imagine playing without an attack sheet. Many factors influence the odds in a **WACHT** attack: not just a simple comparison of numbers. The attack sheet organizes these factors, with columns for the number of the attack, attack and defense factors, with columns for the number of the attack, attack and defense factors, the several conditions which help attacker or defender, as well as a place to list artillery fire and the conditions which halve it, both for attacker and defender. We found this an indispensable tool for rapid and organized play. As the attacker went along the front planning each combat, he would put a numbered counter on the defending hex, which could correspond to like-numbered counters on supporting artillery. He would then give this sheet to the defender, who would use it to plot his defensive artillery (Final Protective Fire), which was also delineated by numbered counters.

The time one can put into a **WACHT** turn is virtually limitless, and an excellent form of 'command control' would be to put a time-limit on each turn. My last organizational suggestion is to outline in red the towns and villages which figure in the victory conditions. The **WACHT** map and counters can better be characterized as competent and serviceable rather than outstanding.

VICTORY CONDITIONS

A popular essay theme during early September school days is 'What I Did on my Summer Vacation'. What I did was spend 105 hours getting nearly half-way through **WACHT**, my Germans against Dave Morris' Allies. (Dave is in the Air Force at Offutt Air Base, and has the kind of stamina and dedication needed for a game like **WACHT**.) When we stopped, I had reached the Meuse in the Southwest quadrant of the map, but did not cross it for fear of activating the strong British reserves on the West bank. I had surrounded a strong force in and around Bastogne, and was awaiting reinforcements to capture the town. An Allied counter-attack was threatening St. Vith in the Northeast, and a weaker push headed from the entry areas in the Southwest towards Neufchateau, a vital junction Southwest of Bastogne. As I had the equivalent of four strong divisions due, I felt certain that I could turn back these counter-attacks. I felt much less sure of renewing a drive West, and was about ready to go over to the defensive. Because of the victory conditions I had sealed in an envelope at the start of the game, I felt it would end in a marginal German victory. We didn't finish our game, not only because the outcome seemed certain enough to make me loath to invest another 105 hours, but because as so often happens in the early stages of play with a new game, we had misinterpreted a rule, allowing Allied reinforcements to reach the front sooner than they should have. More on this later.

The **WACHT** victory conditions add interest and uncertainty to the game. The German player may choose among five plans, encompassing no less than ten different levels of victory. Distinguishing meaningfully among these multiple 'shades' of victory is like trying to define the differences between good-looking, pretty, lovely, and beautiful, and must have taxed even SPI's semantic ingenuity! The least ambitious German plan is a 'Spoiling Attack', and the best they can achieve under it is a modest tactical victory. If the Germans choose this plan, I doubt that the Allies can reasonably hope for better than a draw or a marginal victory. This alternative is useful mainly for tormenting the Allied player with the horrible thought that he is going through all this effort just to stop a spoiling attack! Seriously, playing **WACHT** is just too much effort for such a modest end. At the opposite extreme, the most ambitious German plan is their historical objective: Antwerp. As in all the Bulge games I know, Antwerp is off the map. Between equal players, I believe the Germans have about as much chance to exit the map towards Antwerp as they did historically: not much! I believe that a game played under these conditions may well end in a marginal Allied victory. The Germans should be able to hold far enough West to prevent greater Allied success, but unable to do better. To achieve a substantive victory, the Germans must hold the northern town of Spa at the end of the game. This isn't easy. In the game we played, I was able to infiltrate German spearheads in this direction, but the Allies were strong enough to easily annihilate them. The town of Verviers, on the northern board edge, figures in several victory conditions. It is such a naturally strong position that it should be nearly impossible for the Germans to take it by frontal attack. My infiltrating units did briefly hold Verviers, but not in sufficient strength. The difference between what the Germans must do to achieve a strategic victory under the historical plan, or only a substantive victory, seemed to me a bit odd. For an all-out win, not a single German unit need cross the Meuse. Instead, they must exit the map in the narrow northern sector east of the Meuse, and west of the Ourthe. This is not an easy area for the Germans to reach, especially along a direct route. The terrain is too difficult and there are too many Allied units. I believe that it can only be reached, if at all, by an indirect approach. Nonetheless, there is one big advantage for the Germans in this sort of advance: they do not trigger the entry of the British reinforcements on the west bank of the Meuse. For a substantive historical victory, the Germans must put 15 units across the Meuse River. I admit

that this can be easier, especially in the southwest corner of the map, but it does trigger British divisions. The terms of a strategic victory under the conditions of the historical plan are therefore really no harder than those of a substantive victory. The point is open to dispute, and in any case, these first two alternatives probably won't be chosen: the spoiling attack is too easy, the historical plan too hard.

An unlikely alternative is Operation Liege-Aachen, a push to the Northwest. It involves attacking the northern sector, where not only do the Allies start out strong enough to attack with plentiful artillery, but where Allied reinforcements are most abundant and the terrain is best for defense, it seems to me the best the Germans could reasonably hope for here is a marginal U.S. victory.

In my opinion, only two of the five alternative plans are of interest to a German player keen on winning some sort of victory. One of them is Operation Luxembourg. Clearly the easiest of all, this is a limited hook to the south and southwest. A strategic victory in WACHT is not possible for the Germans under this plan, but that's fair enough. What the Germans can achieve with a drive on Luxembourg is a 'decisive' victory, and this seems to me quite feasible. It's not a sure thing; the Allied player does have a chance, but not as good as the Germans.

In my ignorance of the game, I chose what is in some ways the hardest German option: Operation Liege-Luxembourg, the 'double-hook'. Tough as this option is, it also has a certain challenging appeal. It allows the Germans to try for an all-out win, but if things look bad, to pull back and settle for a marginal victory. When Dave and I discussed the victory options before starting, I conceded his argument that the definition of a German marginal victory is too generous in this alternative. What would be a marginal victory in either Operation Liege-Aachen or Operation Luxembourg, is also a marginal victory in the combined plan. Obviously then, if for some reason the German player wants the maximum chance for at least a marginal victory, this seemingly difficult option is best. It leaves him the flexibility of pushing in either direction, as opportunity arises. In the game we played, I agreed in advance that if I secretly chose this plan (which I did), the Germans would have to win a median victory under the Liege or the Luxembourg plan to register a marginal victory in the combined plan. Even this leaves what amounts to an 'escape clause' for the Germans. Another advantage of this alternative is that what the Germans do under it looks to the Allies like any one of the other four plans. It's ideal to keep your opponent in mystery.

SPI devotes as much space to discussing what the various victory conditions would have meant historically as they do to defining them. I believe more space and care should've been devoted to the latter point. For example, in all four options but the Spoiling Attack, certain victory levels call for exiting units from the board 'by' or 'at' the end of the game. The latter implies on the final turn, the former, any time. Nor is there any provision for keeping the exit area in supply, which would seem to be a realistic requirement. In the game I played I would've had to exit German units off the map. I planned to do so at the very last moment, in order to use them on the board as long as possible. This does not seem to me realistic. Perhaps a certain number of units should exit per turn. These apparent short-comings by no means spoil the game, and the myriad options and victory levels do add great interest.

SCENARIOS & OPTIONAL RULES

The five alternatives discussed above apply only to the campaign Game. WACHT also has three shorter scenarios, two of which may be played on a single one of the four maps. I am rather prejudiced against scenarios in games of this scope, although as learning tools they are excellent. My reasoning is this: the great attraction of macro-games is that they seem to give a deeper insight into the historically significant conflicts which, without exception, form their subject matter. Just

playing a scenario of a game like WACHT would be like being ship-wrecked alone with Farrah Fawcett and just holding hands!

Returning to the Campaign Game, there is a group of eight optional rules. We used all of these, and found that they added considerable enjoyment at the cost of little complication. One of the options (24.8., alternate set-ups) has two versions:

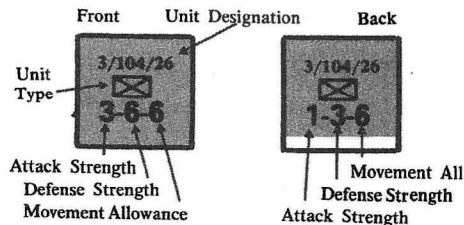
24.82 All-out German effort. The observation is made that the extra units available to the Germans with this option tilt the game in their favor. We agreed, and didn't use it. It might be an interesting exercise to use this alternative with the understanding that the Germans choose one of the two game options permitting them to go for a strategic victory.

24.81 This does not increase the forces available to the Germans nor permit them to shift from one board to another when setting up, but permits free deployment within each board (Northeast and Southeast). This, too, favors the Germans, but can be balanced in two ways: use of option 24.21, which restricts German corps artillery, and also by two ad hoc modifications we used:

1. In the historical set-up, three very strong panzer divisions (Lehr, and 1st and 12th SS), may not be committed (move or attack), until the Second Turn. There is no such restriction in the free set-up, but we used it anyway. I believe this is an excellent compromise. I would not want to play Germans with the fixed set-up, if only because it adds time to an already interminable game. Merely forcing the Germans to keep an historical North-South allocation of forces is already a considerable handicap, as the two strong SS divisions locked on the North board could be put to better use in front of Bastogne. Indeed, the Germans need an entire SS panzer division just to take Bastogne town, if the Allies defend it properly.

2. If German artillery supports an attack outside its corps, it is halved. Only German armored and panzer-grenadier divisions are allocated to corps. Moreover, infantry divisions can draw supply from any headquarters. Therefore, one might reasonably presume that these infantry divisions can also draw artillery support without penalty from any corps. We did not play this way. I assigned my infantry divisions to corps, and only changed their assignment with a day's delay. This can be a considerable pain in the neck for the Germans, whose artillery rarely operates optimum conditions. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to me. I queried SPI about this, and they responded with this modification to the rules: 'Starting Volksgrenadier divisions attached as follows: 7th Army — 212, 276, 5FJ, 352; XLVII Corps — 26; LVIII — 560; LXVI — 18, 62; ISS — 12, 3FJ, 277; LXVII — 246, 326, 272. Reinforcing VG (infantry) divisions may attach to any corps, but once attached, may not attach to another'.

TYPICAL INFANTRY UNIT



As the game develops, it becomes necessary to shift divisions about in such a fashion that units originally in the same corps become widely separated. I find the rules as written too liberal. Yet SPI's correction is too restrictive; the Germans should have some latitude in reassigning infantry divisions to corps.

TACTICS

Two elements are all-important in the tactical mastery of WACHT: efficient organization of units and understanding of terrain. The rules of WACHT assess a heavy penalty on the player who permits his army to become disorganized or is careless in taking advantage of favorable terrain.

Consider a single attack, using just illustrative combat factors: three German battalions, 6AF each, attack three U.S. battalions, 6DF each. Of course, only two of the three battalions in each stack may contribute their combat factors to the attack, but the third battalion is affected by the results, and may also contribute an 'organizational' advantage to the combat, as discussed below. Let's also presume that the Germans have 12 factors of artillery, the Americans 4 factors of final protective fire. The best artillery situation which the Germans could have is if they are firing into a broken or clear terrain hex, using artillery from a corps which is also represented in the ground attack. The worst U.S. final protective fire configuration would be if each of the 4 points comes from a different unit, each of which is halved, either because it is not of the right unit, or is unsupplied or isolated. In this case, the entire 4 points would be nullified. Under these circumstances, the attack starts out as 12 ground attack factors plus 12 artillery factors equals 24, vs. 12 ground defense factors, for a 2-1. If the attacking stack contains two infantry or mechanized infantry battalions of the same regiment, even if one of them is the third unit unable to add its factors to the combat, the attack goes up from a 2-1 to a 3-1. If, in addition, there is an armored unit, this is considered 'combined arms', and the attack gets another odds shift to the right on the CRT, to 4-1. Of course, the Allies may also have regimental integrity, and or combined arms, or an anti-tank unit, which would negate the combined arms, in which case their shifts to the left would cancel the Germans shifts to the right. Parenthetically, there is a difference between the benefit one gets from regimental integrity, and combined arms. The former is always worth one beneficial odds shift on the CRT, but the latter only benefits the defense by cancelling combined arms in the attack. That is, a combined arms defense is 'wasted' unless it is able to negate a combined arms attack.

Returning to the odds comparison, what starts out as a 2-1 for the Germans under ideal conditions is modified to a 4-1. This is like having **triple** the number of ground troops attacking, so you can see how proper organization greatly multiplies the strength of either army in WACHT. Let's take the same comparison the other way. Assume that the Allied protective fire comes from the same corps or division as at least one of the ground units, and is not subject to halving for any other reasons. Let's also assume that the German artillery is from the wrong corps, and is also halved again for one of the many considerations such as supply or range, thereby reducing its 12 factors first to 6, and then to 3. Then the attack would be for the Germans, $6+6+4=16$, or 1-2. Now if the Allies have regimental integrity and the Germans don't, they get one shift to the left, converting this attack to a 1-3, which is not even an allowable attack in three of the five terrain categories on the CRT. So, we have seen how factors just of organization (which could also be further influenced by supply), can change an attack from a 1-3 to a 4-1, using identical combat units.

One could argue that these penalties are unrealistic, that the same number of troops are not twice as effective because they represent two battalions of the same regiment, as opposed to two battalions of a different regiment. This is true, but the **result** is realistic. Many wargames have rules of this sort. In Anzio, for example, strong units attacking an isolated, weak unit, can gain additional movement greater than they could have had without combat. This is unrealistic, but the **result** is not; it **forces** you not to hold the front with units too weak for their task, just as in WACHT the player is **forced** to organize his army properly. Most wargames do not consider this type of organization, and therefore WACHT gains a superior degree of realism.

The supply rules in WACHT are also well thought-out.

I found the mental gymnastics necessary to keep the German army in WACHT in some semblance of good order fascinating! Some big games are just little games with a big map and lots of units. WACHT, on the other hand, has used its size to pose sophisticated problems impossible in a small game.

WACHT uses what SPI calls an integrated CRT, which does away with the usual cumbersome multiplication for terrain favorable to the defender, such as towns and rivers, and



permits a more subtle distinction among various types of terrain. For example, the lowest-odds attack which is certain to be in favor of the attacker is 4-1 in clear terrain, 5-1 in broken, 6-1 against a woods or a village hex, or during night combat in terrain not ordinarily this favorable to the defense, a 7-1 against a town, and finally an 8-1 when the defender is behind a river. All of these attacks, with odds ranging from 4-1 to 8-1, are rolled on the same CRT column. This seems to me an excellent system, first used elsewhere by SPI, I believe.

The WACHT player must carefully ponder the nature of each of these five terrain categories. It quickly becomes evident that defending in the open — clear terrain — is suicidal, especially near enemy artillery. Diversionary attacks against clear terrain are very 'cheap'. Odds as poor as 1-4 are permitted, and since artillery is not hampered by clear terrain, as elsewhere, cheap artillery 'soak-offs' are readily feasible. However, the reverse is the more profitable tactic: an artillery barrage against good defensive terrain, a ground attack against poor defensive terrain. Broken terrain is only marginally better for the defense. Whenever possible, it is unwise to defend there when there is an alternative.

A great deal of combat in WACHT will use the row covering 'Woods-Village-Night'. For those familiar with the Bulge terrain, the extent of the wooded area is at first confusing, until one notes in the rules that this is a simplification, also depicting 'very steep ridges, gorges, or cliffs...not suitable for armor.' Where 'woods' border broken or clear terrain, it often pays to use an artillery barrage against the woods, and hit the defender in the more open terrain on the ground.

Artillery in WACHT may be halved up to four times by various conditions (e.g., $8 = 1$), one of which is wooded terrain. This

confers an even greater defensive advantage on the woods, particularly at night, as either condition halves artillery, and the effects are cumulative. German artillery becomes nearly impotent against Allied defenders at night. After the first day, only 20 artillery factors can be used against a single defending stack. Divided once for night and once again for woods, this is equal to only five attack factors. Because a 1-2 is the minimum allowable attack in the woods or at night, an Allied stack with 11 defense factors becomes invulnerable to barrages, and this is not hard for the Allies to arrange. Note that this 20-point restriction applies **before** halving. SPI now rules that this applies only to 'pure' artillery. Rocket artillery (*Nebelwerfers*) may be applied in unlimited numbers. This will help the Germans somewhat, but the *Nebelwerfers* have such short range they take quite a while to get into position. The next terrain category in terms of ascending benefit to the defender is towns (villages are in the same category as woods and night combat). Although a 2-1 minimum allowable attack across a river is rolled on the same column as a 1-1 minimum attack against a town, there is no question that towns in **WACHT**, such as St. Vith, or Bastogne, are the strongest points on the board — veritable fortresses. This is because river lines can always be flanked, while towns, and to a lesser extent villages, can hold out as isolated strong-points as they did historically. The Allied player may be pushed around rather badly until he understands the power of a fortified town defense. It rests on the fact that defenders in a town do not have to counter-attack adjacent attackers. True, too, of a village, but less factors are needed to attack a village. One last point: both sides can use fortified towns, but they will help the Germans less since it is not uncommon for the Allies to mass more than 50 factors of artillery against a single hex. It is never too soon to construct fortifications and improved positions in **WACHT**. For this reason, don't use engineers as combat troops. In some ways, engineers are the most valuable units on the board. Not only do they blow up and build bridges, they also speed the crossing of rivers by infantry and construct entrenchments. Engineers are also invaluable when motorized infantry defends in front of a river. With an engineer, these units can retreat across the river; without it, they would be destroyed. SPI has clarified the definition of motorized infantry as 'any unit with a pure infantry (or parachute) symbol, with over 6MPs'. Some other clarifications pertinent to constructing fortifications:

1. HQ are not combat counters.
2. No unit in March Mode can ever be involved in the building of Improved Positions or Entrenchments.
3. Some German engineers can 'carry' bridges. These units may 'pick up' such a bridge from either side of the hex it spans.

WACHT is a step-reduction game, and uses the best such method devised so far: the weaker step is the reverse side of the counter, as in *Napoleon's Last Battles*. Those units with steps (all but HQ and artillery) have three stages: full-strength, inverted counter, and eliminated. Obviously, this does not permit as much flexibility as the multiple counter style of *Anzio*, or the numbered counter ('making change') method of *HTTR*, or *TSS*, but it is much easier and more playable. Take care when moving, however, not to flip over the counters!

The CRT interrelates with the step-reduction system in several ways. You may elect to lose steps instead of retreating. This generates an interesting tactic: regardless of odds or results, you may always hold your ground, whether attacking or defending, if you have enough steps to pay the price. SPI has also confirmed to me that in a multi-stack attack, you may lose steps for one stack to stay put while voluntarily retreating another. They are also considering introducing a morale factor to influence the ability of units to spurn retreats. When a retreat of several hexes is called for, it can be advantageous to retreat only part way, and lose steps to compensate for stopping. As in *Anzio*, when a loss and/or retreat is mandated which can not be fulfilled, extra compensating movement is generated. This movement can be exploited to influence combats yet to be resolved (e.g., by advancing into the retreat path of other defenders). For this reason, in a group of attacks in a given

sector of the front, it often is best to resolve the best attacks first.

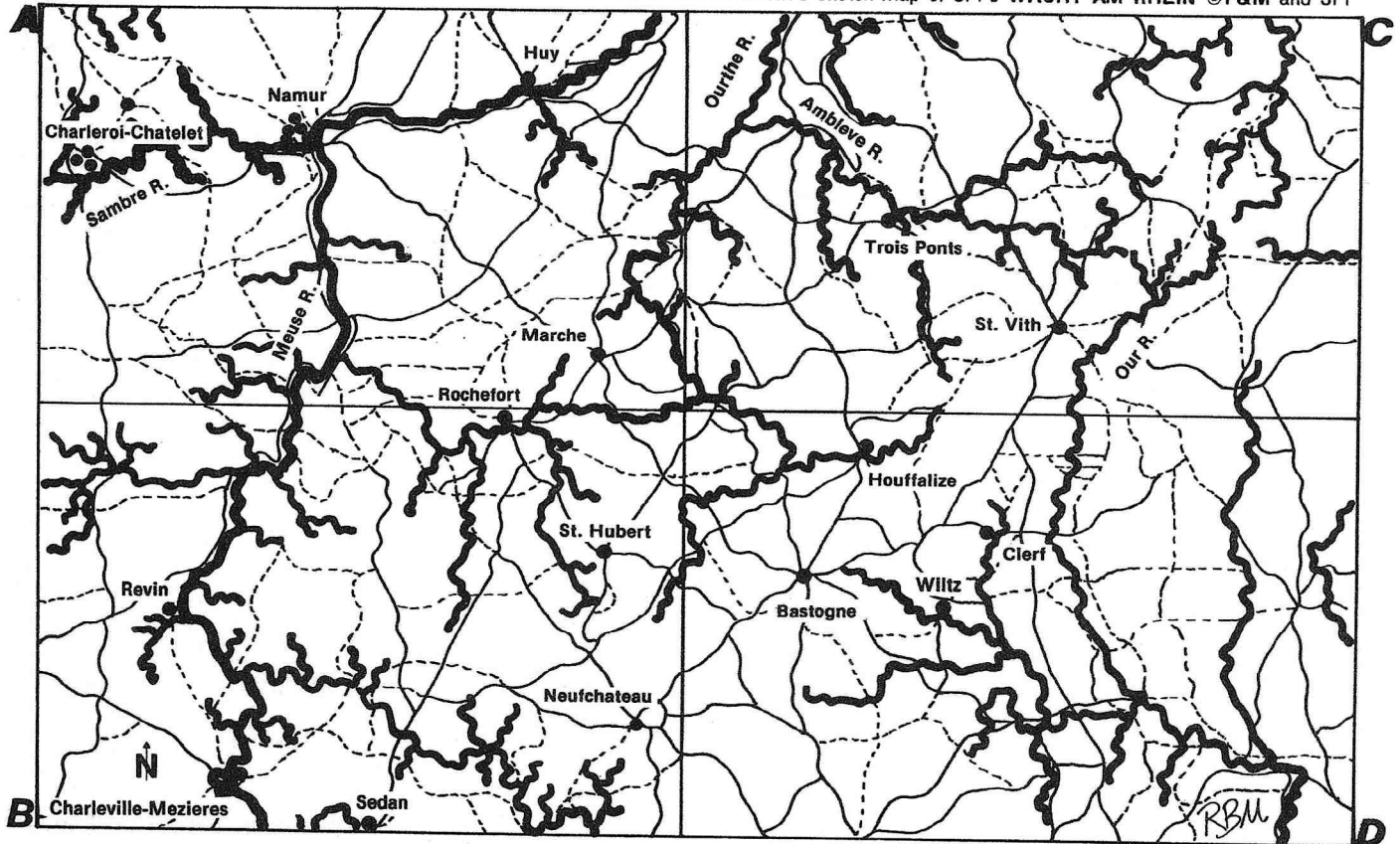
Armor, and units in march mode have more freedom in advancing after combat than do other units. It is good tactics, therefore, to have such units represented in battles likely to generate good advances. Since advancing units cannot enter a hex in advance after combat which they would be prohibited from entering in normal movement, it is also a good idea to have infantry present — to cross a river, for example. As a general rule, it is always wise to have a good mix of units present in a given sector: infantry and armor, march mode and its opposite — tactical mode.

Proper use of artillery in **WACHT** is fascinating and essential. This is usually easier for the Allies than the Germans, because the Allies have more batteries, no restrictions on ammunition or concentration, more mobility, and also because the Germans are usually advancing **into** enemy range, and **out** of friendly range. Some of the best German artillery must be left for the entire game where it sets up. If the German player has a free set-up, he should take care to place his immobile units as far forward as allowed, and/or as near the flanks as possible, so that it will retain its usefulness as long as possible. When the Allies launched their counter-attack towards St. Vith in the game I played, they came back into range of some of the immobile German batteries. The **mobile** German long-range artillery is very valuable. In the course of setting-up attacks, it is just essential to have artillery support to soak-off against woods or towns, and to provide the needed factors for other attacks. As the German ground troops are so often moving out of artillery support range, it is the longer-range batteries that are the most flexible. For this reason, the Germans should follow two rules with their artillery: mass it, don't spread it around; always mix valuable and less valuable batteries. The reason for this is that in every German attack in which artillery participates there is a 1/12th chance of losing a battery to ammunition depletion. (1/6th during the bonus form.) The smaller the number of attacks, therefore, the less chance of losing a battery (better two attacks each with 20 factors, than eight attacks each with 5 factors). And, when a battery must be lost, don't let the only choice possible have a range of 15 or 20 miles!

The optional rules can generate interesting tactics. Rule 24.1 permits mechanized infantry to move as ordinary infantry under certain circumstances. The leg can do some things in **WACHT** which the wheel and the track can't, so this rule can really be devastating in the right spot. The German commandos can be very useful, but should be kept out of harm's way until needed. The rules state that these units can only be destroyed when 'a U.S. unit in March Mode enters a hex occupied by a Truppeninheit (cdo.) unit.' I was dumb enough to lose 3 of my 4 commando units by leaving them where Dave could get to them in his turn, forcing them to 'sabotage' his units. This was exactly what he wanted, as then a table must be rolled by which the commandos may be destroyed.

I pointed out to SPI that I could not see any way in which Allied units NOT in march mode could destroy a Truppeninheit (in the woods, for example), making it the strongest German unit on the board in terrain where march mode was not permitted. They conceded the point, and ruled that whenever a Trup. unit is in an Allied rigid ZOC, its survival probability table must be rolled on the +3 column. Option rule 24.5 gives the Germans two strong units of the 150th Brigade, with special infiltrating capability. Due to their combat strength, it's tempting to use these right away, and that's fine as long as they're accompanied by other units able to absorb any loss. If not, better to save them just for that crucial spot where they may penetrate the Allied line at its most vulnerable point.

Except when really necessary, the Germans will quickly find it rather costly to attack very often at night, as the two most favorable CRT rows are not usable then (Broken and Clear). After the night turn comes the bonus turn. In the early stages of the game, my opponent was groaning with indignation as I moved entire divisions in the bonus turn. His indignation



quickly turned to pleasure as he saw the price I was paying in lost strength and mobility due to fatigued units. So great is the importance of infiltration in **WACHT** that the extra bonus move will often be well worthwhile, but so heavy is the penalty of fatigue that it should not be used indiscriminately.

Lines of supply and communication are vital in **WACHT**, and can be heavily influenced on the German side by Allied air-power when the weather clears. Supply also affects combat, sometimes with effects somewhat anomalous and a little reminiscent of the infamous supply and isolation trick of the first edition of **War In The East**. It is not always disadvantageous to be cut off from supply. 'Isolated units will have either full or halved defense strength and do not have to attack enemy units in their ZOCs, although the enemy units — assuming they are not also isolated — do have to attack. Situations arose several times in our game when an isolated unit, realistically speaking, was in a terrible spot, but survived nearly unscathed because the enemy units surrounding it had to attack it, whereas it did not have to reply. This situation arises because of the power which the CRT and the difficult terrain give to the defender. One isolated regiment surrounded by six investing regiments in the woods may only be a 3-1 on the CRT, and that gives the **attacker** only a 50% chance of a good result.

GERMAN STRATEGY

Once the German player has decided on one of the five victory conditions, and has agreed with the Allied player on the options, he starts to plan his strategy. I feel that the German plan of action will fall into three time-stages:

1. The first day, during which special rules benefit German attack. The Germans should attack as much as they possibly can this day, as the surprise attack bonus is worth hundreds of

attack factors. (Exception: most Allied units are 'frozen' the first day, **unless** attacked, therefore, there may be isolated instances in which the Germans may prefer not to attack a unit because they do not want it to be able to move, if it survives. I 'woke up' one engineer unit which slipped away in the next Allied turn to blow some key bridges!)

2. Second day, December 17th through December 19th (game-turn 13), inclusive. This is roughly the first quarter of the game. The factor that changes on the morning of December 20th is that four British divisions and two brigades take up positions Northwest of the Meuse, and may enter the game if the Germans approach too closely. It is not likely that the Germans will penetrate this far **before** these reinforcements are due, nor should they abandon plans of doing so thereafter if a favorable opportunity develops. The difference is that once these strong units are in place, everything the Germans do must be weighed with the impact they would have if provoked into the game.

3. December 20th through 28th (game turn 40), inclusive. This is the period during which the British units cannot cross the Meuse unless provoked. After turn 40, they may be used freely, and represent a considerable reinforcement to the Allies. This middle portion of the game represents the period when, if the Germans are to win big, they had better do it. Unless the Allies have completely crumbled, once the British enter, it is too late. Of course, the Germans may have selected a victory plan which does not require them even to approach the Meuse. Nonetheless, the game will take four movement stages for them: the initial overwhelming attack, the rapid advance, a period when their forward momentum stops, and the last stage, when they must stop the Allied counter-offensive in order to hold on to the best victory conditions they have been able to achieve.

Before doing anything, the players should study the map at length. The German player should first consider where he will cross the Our River. He can and must build bridges, but that takes time. Along the southern $\frac{2}{3}$ of the front there are seven intact bridges across the Our. It should be possible to capture three or even four of these before they are blown. This is the first terrain problem which the Germans must resolve, after they figure out just what is cooking in hex 3105. The **KOREA** map was full of hexes like this: two primary roads which don't connect in the hex, not to mention an intact bridge spanning the front-line Our River. SPI has clarified this as a map error: 'there is no bridge over the Our...Consider the road to stop on the German side, continue on the US side, and stop again at the Our, and continue on the North bank, all without any bridges connecting these roads, i.e. a Class B unit could not cross here'. Apart from one mis-numbered hex, this is the only terrain error we ran across.

The second German strategic problem is to ponder where the terrain west of the Our favors their advance. There are four 'passes' through the Eastern Ardennes (northeast of Bastogne), in the North-Center from St. Vith to North of Houffalize, and last, a line from Eisenborn Northwest towards Verviers. This is really too generous an appraisal of the terrain. Although there are inviting patches of clear and broken terrain in the far north of the map, not only are they bordered and broken by woods, but the OOB is anything but favorable to the Germans here. Pushing west of St. Vith is at first glance inviting for several reasons: no initial river barrier, good road net, easiest way to keep pressure on the North, and there is little room to deploy the two big SS divisions elsewhere. Such a push must be done, but it is very unlikely to carry onto the two Western maps. The Allies probably can stop it once it reaches the thick band of woods along the Ourthe River, which divides the map roughly in two from north to south; perhaps not stop it dead, but cripple its momentum. This same belt of good defensive terrain also extends halfway down between the southern maps, west of Bastogne, providing a barrier to the two central routes through the Ardennes.

The only really good terrain for the Germans is in the far South, heading first to the key road junction of Neufchateau, Southwest of Bastogne. As everywhere on the map, there are creeks, rivers, and woods, but they fail to interlock effectively as they do elsewhere. Not only is the terrain favorable here, but the OOB as well, both in terms of starting forces, and reinforcements. I captured Neufchateau in our game in an unorthodox way. During my turn, I had put a dozen artillery units into march mode because they had fallen behind the advance, and become disorganized in relation to their corps and divisions. Then, during the Allied move, they were unable to block the road to Neufchateau, so I fanned out my artillery to, beyond, and around it. In march mode their strength was negligible, but the Allies had nothing with which to attack them. This proved to be the most important German breakthrough of the game, which eventually carried briefly to the Meuse. Of course, how much better if I had had a panzer division in reserve! Keeping a tactical and strategic reserve is vital in **WACHT**.

The Germans have too many divisions to mass them all at one point, but it does seem to me that the strongest and best units should execute a sweeping 'left hook' towards, and to the south of, Bastogne, while keeping up pressure all along the front. This is a key point. The Germans in **WACHT** can profit by watching O.J. Simpson run: starting out according to a pre-conceived play in a certain direction, but ever alert to 'run for daylight' when a hole opens up. The terrain is difficult for both players. The Allies are short of units during the early stages, and many of them have a fluid **ZOC** through which the Germans can slip, or they may pull a trick with the 150th, the commandos, or the paratroops. It's important, therefore, to keep up pressure all along the front, for both sides when on the attack. The slightest error by the defense may leave a gap through which Neufchateau may be captured. 'Targets of opportunity' are a vital element of **WACHT**. Don't be

complacent about the sectors where terrain makes a frontal push inadvisable. Although there is a relatively easy path to the Meuse along the southern third of the map, this is too narrow a channel on which to base the German advance. The Germans must hope therefore to capture at least a few Ourthe crossings, particularly by using infantry to slip across rivers and through weak points in the Allied lines.

The flanks played a crucial element in the game I played. In the North, the Allies held their flank, and therefore were able to easily exert pressure in the German rear which could not be ignored. In the South, I made a special effort to clear the flanks, which paid off in a secure advance West of Neufchateau and faltered only at the point where the German left flank no longer rested on the southern board-edge. Some rules confusion arose concerning Allied reinforcements entering along the flanks. It became apparent early in our game that if the Allies had to lose a turn for each entry point blocked, as the delayed reinforcements shifted West to an entry point still in Allied hands, it would impose on them an unrealistically harsh penalty. So I conceded, perhaps too generously, that the Allies could enter at the next unblocked point with only a one-turn delay — however distant. In our game, had the Allies not been able to do this, the German advance would have been considerably freer. Then SPI confirmed to me that there **should** be a one-turn delay for **each** blocked entry road. We halted our game because my German spearheads were facing Allied blocks that should still have been creeping along the board edge looking for somewhere to get in! I took this up again with SPI, also pointing out that as the rules stand, the **Germans** in effect controlled Allied reinforcements. Not only could they force an unrealistic delay by blocking entry points, but they could force an unrealistic **entry** by setting up 'entry traps'. The rules oblige delayed Allied reinforcements to enter at the 'next road entering the map to the WEST'. But suppose this road leads to a tiny one or two hex bridgehead ringed with German fortifications!? Surely the Allies would not languish there, with the Germans rampaging West? SPI replied as follows: 'Regarding U.S. reinforcements, admittedly this rule is an abstraction. I would say that your solution is fine — giving the U.S. player the option at all times to shift one entry hex to the West, but they must state this fact one Game-Turn beforehand. Also, I'd say it would be realistic to allow them to shift up to two entry hexes to the West for each Game-Turn'. This does away with the entry traps, by permitting the U.S. player to shift West to the point where **he** wants to enter, not where the rules force him to enter. In my opinion, a shift of 3 entry points per Game-Turn is more consistent with the distances represented on the map.

One last unrealistic point remains along the flanks. If the Germans completely clear them, they can hold the single-hex entry points with very weak units. At one point I was holding dozens of miles of southern flank with a few stepped-down regiments! I do believe, however, that by holding onto entry bridgeheads, now that SPI has ruled that such bridgeheads are not also death-traps, the Allies can correct this anomaly.

I would sum up the German strategy as follows:

1. Always push in the direction of least resistance, both on a small scale and on a grand scale.
2. Secure the flanks.
3. Start to prepare a fall-back line even in the very early stages of the game.
4. Advance nearly recklessly until you see that you can no longer safely do so, then start to give ground grudgingly in order to hold onto the best victory conditions possible.

ALLIED STRATEGY

When the Allies plan their strategy in **WACHT**, they might consider what Patton said at the time, which I paraphrase: 'Let 'em advance to Paris, and we'll pinch off the flanks at the base!'. This suggestion was greeted with horror. It was outrageous, like the man himself, but made sense. Unless the Allied player is incompetent, he should be able to prevent the Germans from approaching the Meuse until the British are in



place behind it. This force, the equivalent of five divisions, is not an insuperable opponent for the Germans, but will certainly give them pause. And while the Germans send their elite armor racing Westwards, the Allies should do the following:

1. Build fortifications in as many towns, villages, and cross-roads as possible. These strong-points are very difficult to reduce, if they have an HQ present. Obviously, the Allies don't have enough HQs for all potential strong-points, but they surely can spare enough for points like Bastogne. Cut-off Allied units which can trace a supply line to a friendly HQ can not be isolated. They are out of communications and can become unsupplied, losing half their attack strength, but their defense remains at full strength. If, for example, the Allies have in Bastogne two infantry regiments, an armored unit, and an HQ, that can be 15 defense factors or more, doubled if fortified. The Allies receive two shifts on the CRT for this stack (one for regimental integrity, one for combined arms). Also, German artillery will be halved when firing into a town.

In the game I played, I surrounded Bastogne quite early, and had earmarked the 15th Panzergrenadier division to capture it. Let's suppose that I had thrown the 12 strongest units of this division, one of the better German units, against Bastogne. This would be the maximum force which could attack from the six surrounding hexes. Together with 20 factors of artillery (divided by $2 = 10$), this would be 70 attack factors, against 30 defense factors, good only for a 2-1. A 2-1 against a town has just 1/6th chance of costing the defenders one step, which would not even reduce their defensive strength, as it could be taken from the 'tag-along' third unit. Against such a position, the Germans would have to use one of their entire SS panzer divisions to get even a 3-1 (1/3rd chance of costing the defenders 1 step). SPI's new ruling that rocket artillery is not subject to the 20 factor maximum will help somewhat, but probably not to the point that the Germans will get a 4-1 on Bastogne. Even this is only a 50-50 attack against a town.

I made quite a few mistakes in my first **WACHT**, but one that I believe my opponent made was in permitting large forces to become isolated. One-hex isolated strong-points for the Allies are the number one priority, or perhaps number two, behind blown bridges, but multi-hex pockets present too many tempting targets for the Germans to chew on, and cost too many units. The single hexes accomplish more.

2. Hold the flanks as far east as possible. Obviously, this will also often make use of the isolated fort tactic. If the Allies hold the flanks strongly, it presents a frustrating dilemma to the Germans. On the one hand, this is the golden moment to hurl the blitzkrieg west, but on the other hand, these same **strong** units are needed to reduce pockets and clear the flanks. The southern Allied flank will definitely be just strong-points, but to the North, not only may they hold the flank, but they may halt and even reverse the German attack entirely. During our game, both of us were continually uncertain as to whether Dave had left too much strength in the North. Dave remarked that one of the fascinations of **WACHT** was that pressure could be applied at one point to influence another point far distant, and this was what he did in the North. At the cost of yielding more terrain in the South and South-Center, he held so strongly in the North that, several times, had I not fed in reinforcements rapidly, the Allies would've made a game-breaking penetration. The question of what the Allies should do on the North flank — weaken it to march reinforcements South; or use those units instead to counterattack — deserves further exploration.

To sum up Allied strategy, they should try to convert a breakthrough into a box-like trap. Let the Germans come west, but not so fast that they can over-run the British behind the Meuse. Then shut the box behind them with the help of isolated strong-points.

SUMMING UP

Not long before I got **WACHT**, I also received the game with which it inevitably will be compared, **Highway to the Reich**. I might well have spent my 105 hours on the latter, had not the counters been mis-printed. **HTTR** has several advantages over **WACHT**: the map is beautiful, the sexiest thing since the **Playboy** center-fold. The situation also offers great scope for the players to experiment. The disadvantages are what seem to me a much dirtier game-system. I'm sure that **WACHT works**; I'm not quite so sure about **HTTR** from friends who are starting to get into it. Fred Helfferich summed up my feelings when he said he preferred the **HTTR** map and the **WACHT** system. SPI in their introduction to **WACHT** say that it 'is not a simple game. There are a great many rules and concepts that will at first be unfamiliar...' I think this warning is considerably overdone. If I can make the distinction, I believe that **WACHT** is sophisticated, but not complicated, not 'dirty'. Before the game mentioned here, I got a few turns into another game of **WACHT** with another player. We didn't proceed, but we were able to absorb the new system much quicker than games of comparable scope. There really is only one crucial drawback to **WACHT**. The Campaign Game covers 18 days, and that many or more real-time days will be needed to play it. The game is ideal for team-play, but that doesn't always save time. It seems to me that the only convenient way to play **WACHT** is to leave it set-up so that you can play a few hours every weekend. As for PBM, not only does the sheer scope of the game argue against it, but the system is ill-suited to it, because the defender has important decisions to make regarding retreats.

If you **had** to be seven feet tall to play basketball, it would not be a game — just a curiosity. The same could be said of **WACHT** if it were not for the fact that its system seems ideally suited for any number of WWII topics. What I would really like to see the **WACHT** system used for would be a game like **PanzerBlitz**, with a dozen scenarios using the same counter-mix in different situations. After all the ifs, ands, and buts are spoken, it remains a distinct pleasure to say with admiration and gratitude: here is a great game!●●