20 September 1944

The 4th Armored Division of George Patton's Third Army is advancing east out of the Moselle River valley. It has been overcast all morning, with the threat of rain hanging in the air. Your tank, ALF (named after Alf Landon, Republican loser in the 1936 presidential election), an M4A1 Sherman, is third in the column moving along the first paved road you've seen in two days. With hatches open, your driver "BJ," his assistant Fred, and you yourself are carefully studying the countryside through eyes trained by three months of combat experience. From below, the smell of coffee drifts up as your gunner "Oddball" and loader "Ogge" finish the last of their "lunch break." You're uneasy. Sure, G-2 reports expect only light resistance in this area, and your company's advancing fire has been successful in driving back the scattered German resistance that has shadowed so far this morning. Too successful. That copse of trees on the left, a perfect spot for... "Muzzle flash near the base of that big tree!" The lead tank exploded in a ball of fire. A swarming burst of machine gun fire and the whine of ricochetting bullets.

"Fred, somewhere around that big tree! BJ, button up fast and stop this thing!" Behind you, Tank A goes dead, and the plow plows into the soft mud on the shoulder. Ridiculous. "Got it! AT gun bearing three-four-five, range two-zero-zero."

"HE round loaded; reload ready."

"Bofors mark. Range, mark."

"FIRE!"

You know that your gun crew is good. No problem getting off that crucial second shot. The first round was a bit high. "Correct range; one-niner-eight. FIRE!"

An explosion erupts near the base of the tree. KO one AT gun.

That machine gun sounds again. This time hitting a squad as they break out of a half-felled tree. "Daze, they've got a machine gun cut to pieces!" Tanks 2 and 5 cut loose in the direction of the machine gun's bunker.

Silence... except for the cries of the wounded and the cracking flames from the twisted pile of metal that was the lead tank. At least for now, it's over. It will take another fifteen minutes to clean up before moving on. A chance to try enjoying the coffee Oddball just handed up to you; a chance to let the grating in the pit of your stomach subside. The radio crackles with the voice of the C.O., "All right, you guys, let's move out. Hey, ALF, nice shotin' there. Take the point. Oh, and now G-2's saying we can expect 'moderate' resistance up ahead.

BJ shifts ALF into gear and, with a lurch, you begin moving. There's a splat against the top of the turret. Rain has finally begun to fall.

A reminiscence of combat from the E.T.O. history? No; just a dramatized replay of an engagement on the battleboard of Avalon Hill's new tank game, PATTON'S BEST.

Morning Briefing

For those readers not familiar with the game, a brief description will set the stage for the discussions that follow. Successfully combining a role-playing game with a board game, PATTON'S BEST puts you in command of an M4 Sherman tank in Patton's Third Army. The game can be played on three levels: as a single engagement (as depicted in the opening of this article), at the level of this battalion, as a commander of an entire division, or as the entire campaign of the 4th Armored from 27 July 1944 through 18 April 1945. On each day of the campaign, there is the possibility that your tank will see action; if it does, there is the chance that conflagrations of fire and smoke will break out at any time. In case the player becomes frustrated, he may choose to play the role of one of the divisions or the entire campaign. The campaign offers a variety of responses determined through the Action Tables. The player may move in any direction, perhaps changing terrain, or he may fire at any tank or other American unit, or he may simply do nothing. Because the actions of each enemy unit are as unpredictable as the roll of the dice, the tank commander must be ready to respond to continually changing game situations. Beyond question, this is an intense game!

Clarifying Your Orders

As you may have surmised by this point, I definitely recommend PATTON'S BEST to the WWII gamer who is looking for a different approach in a wargame that is usually found in the normal board game. For the student of armored vehicles, the game's inclusion of seventeen Sherman tank variants, plus the British Firefly, presents a unique insight into the development of the M4 tank. The only area in which PATTON'S BEST does not get top marks would be in the category "Completeness of Rules." Perhaps, in the last minute haste to meet production deadlines, more than the usual errata crept in, along with two "cloudy" passages in key sections of the rules. After corresponding with Bruce Shelley, the game's designer, I offer these notes to the reader as rules clarifications:

1. Rule 4.6.5.2 Par. (a) refers to a non-existent Rule 19.4; the correct reference is Rule 20.43.
2. On the Enemy Action: Counterattack Scenario Table under "MG/LW," the distance range for "Fire—Infantry" is printed as "71-75." It should be "71-95."
3. On the Friendly Action Table, the KO range for the PzKw VI is printed as "10;" it should be "11-16."
4. On the Sherman Tank Cards, the 50-cal. AAMG is depicted only on Card #1; however, all variants used in the game carried this weapon.
5. Although not specifically mentioned in the rules, Smoke Markers are affected by Sherman tank movement in the same manner as enemy units.

6. Note 1 on the Enemy Vehicle/Gun Appearance Table states that once a Tank/SFPS/AT Gun has been identified, all subsequent Tank/SFPS/AT Gun units appearing during this engagement will be of the same type. However, even though it is already determined, the identification of these subsequent units is not "automatic" upon being spotted; the tank crew must still make a successful Identification DR on the spotted unit.

Turning to the two "cloudy" rules sections, the first is the Friendly Action Table. This table covers four distinctly different types of Allied fire: Allied aircraft and 3.5-inch advancing fire conducted by your tank and other Third Army units accompanying you; friendly fire executed in Rule 4.76 representing fire from armored and infantry units immediately engaged in combat along with your tank; friendly
Friendly Fire DRM Matrix

Air Adv 4.76 O.B. Strike Fire Fire Artillery

| Flanking Fire | N   | N   | N   | N   | N   |
| Air Strike vs Vehicle | N   | Y   | N   | Y   | N   |
| Each US/Canadian-Controlled | N   | Y   | N   | Y   | N   |
| Arty vs LW/MG/AT & Woods | Y   | N   | N   | Y   |
| Each US/German-Controlled | N   | Y   | N   | Y   | N   |
| Each German-Controlled | N   | Y   | N   | Y   | N   |
| Smoke in Target Area | Y   | Y   | Y   | Y   |
| During Fog/Snow | G   | N   | N   | N   | G   |
| Adv/Arty vs Vehicle | N   | Y   | N   | Y   | N   |

Notes: (1) Flanking fire is applicable only when generated on the Random Events Table and is conducted by friendly units on the immediate battlefield. (2) Air Strikes are not allowed during fog or falling snow conditions (Time Use Table, footnote #1).

One final note on this table. Air strikes were rarely used to lay smoke. If that result is rolled when resolving air attacks, it can be ignored. However, to improve this unit's accuracy, consider that even the presence of fighters would cause enemy units to drastically restrict their movements. Therefore, if a "Smoke" result is rolled, treat it as an aircraft interdiction. Mark the unit with a homemade "Interdiction" counter and ignore any "Move P/L/B/B" results subsequently rolled for that unit on the Enemy Action table.

The second rule section that is not clear is Rule 477.4. Following the completion of a combat round, you are directed to return to Step 4.4, "Prepare for Combat," in order to resume play. If followed exactly, this sequence returns you to steps that should only be conducted at the beginning of the scenario. The correct sequence of steps should be:

4.41 through 4.46
skip 4.47, 4.51 and 4.52
continue from 4.53.

This should eliminate any confusion in restating the combat procedure.

Tweaking the Game System

While the game system of PATTON'S BEST is complete as it stands, there are always suggestions that can enhance play. I offer the reader three such "Optional Rules" for this game.

The first concerns the point values assigned to each area on the Movement Board. I was surprised that the designer gave each area a victory point value of "1". Considering that the towns and crossroads represented by the "C" areas would have more strategic value than the open fields of the "B" areas or the farm fields of the "A" areas, it only makes sense to give the "C" area a heavier point value. This has the potential of giving the player a greater incentive for attacking these strategic areas as he moves towards his exit rather than bypass them in favor of areas with lower resistance. Similarly, because the terrain of the "D" areas would be more difficult to attack/defend, this type could also be given a heavier point value. I would suggest, then, an Optional Point Value system as follows:

Area A: farms and fields - 1 point
Area B: open fields - 1 point
Area C: towns - 3 points
Area D: woods - 2 points

My second Optional Rule involves what SL/ASL gamers refer to as the "Vehicle Cover Arc" (VCA) and the "Turret Covered Arc" (TCA) for enemy tanks and SPGs. When a German tank/SPG is activated, subsequent die rolls determine the sector in which it appears, the range, the type of terrain, and its facing relative to your tank's position at the center of the Battle Board. The game makes an assumption that, as the tank commander, you would not know the turret facing of the enemy tank. While true, it would be useful to give the German tank a "cheap" shot at your tank when its VCA is not oriented toward you. By contrast, the Sherman tank must pay a -10 per Sector DRM penalty for changing its TCA prior to firing and a +25 per Sector DRM penalty if it changes its VCA by pivoting, then your tank can only fire if the crew has been trained in the use of the gyrostabilizer! There is a +10 "First Shot" DRM penalty that is applicable to the German units, but it simply does not cover the aiming problems created by turret rotation, and it covers only the first shot. Consider this example: a PzKw IV fires at you during the Ambush Phase taking the "First Shot" penalty and misses; then, in response to your tank's movement during the subsequent U.S. Action Phase, the Mark IV rolls to change facing to a "side" orientation. During the German Action Phase, it again rolls a "Fire—Your Tank" and does so without penalty, even though the scenario rules would require to bring its gun to bear on your tank.

While, admittedly, the tank commander would not be able to determine the facing of the enemy tank's turret with certainty, I feel that this important factor should be taken into consideration. To do this, I suggest a simple change to Section 4.5 of the RULES OF IRRON. When the German tank rolls to fire at the Sherman, the turret counter is used to indicate the firing VCA. Ignoring the listed "First Shot" DRM, the German AFV is penalized with a +10 per Sector DRM penalty, if it changes facing, a +20 DRM for the first round fired from the rear facing. Of course, the German tank must take into account that a turret hit on any German AFV which has changed its facing must also be resolved with the "Front" To Hit values, whereas a hull hit is resolved with the appropriate "Side/Rear" To Hit values. Incidentally, the purist may want to increase the per-Sector DRM to +15 for the Tiger and King Tiger tanks and as they are rated "slow turret/traVERSE" AFVs. Even if the German tank subsequently moves, the new TCA is maintained until required to change by again firing at your tank.

A self-propelled gun presents a slightly different problem, as it stands on the vehicle and cannot move until it brings its gun to bear on the target. Since these units were not equipped with a German equivalent of the gyrostabilizer, in order to historically reflect the aiming problems caused by pivoting, I would recommend the following option. If "Fire—Your Tank" is rolled, the enemy SPA is allowed only to change its current side/rear facing to a front facing. In the following turn(s), if "Fire—Your Tank" is again rolled, the SPA fires at you.

The third Optional Rule challenges the game's assumption that AT Guns are always activated oriented towards your tank. When an AT Gun is encountered, it is quite plausible that the gun crew would be engaged another target not in your direction, or may simply require the tank's approach. To reflect this, roll to determine the facing of AT Gun(s) which are activated using the "Tank" column of the Vehicle Firing table. AT Guns are only subject to the same DRM penalties for firing outside their covered arc as tanks/SPGs. Because of its 360-degree mount, the German 88mm gun would use the +10 per Sector DRM; all other AT Guns would have to be manhandled into the new firing position and are subjected to the +25 per Sector DRM. Unlike SPGs, AT Guns are allowed to pivot and fire in the same turn.

The above three variant rules serve best when all are incorporated, but even individually will enrich your game.

Evening Debriefing

To bring things to a conclusion, in PATTON'S BEST Bruce Shelley has captured the feel and the intensity of armored combat in a solitaire game which is easy to learn, yet challenging to master. The "Optional Rules" offered here are intended to correct any few oversights that can be found with the game's design by purists and enhance your enjoyment.

For now... the rain has stopped and the combat veteran presses another sector over roads leading toward Bastogne and ultimately, the Rhine.

Lost... Cont'd from Page 21

strength of his own units, limited information about the positions held by other Confederate units, and only a general awareness of the location and type of the Union forces. The supreme commander would have knowledge of the location of his entire army, plus whatever information about unit strengths that the corps commanders chose to relay. The supreme commander would write general orders to the corps commanders. The corps commanders would have full command of the units in their corps, but the supreme commander would determine which units would move and attack, and send that information to the Gamemaster. The same thing would happen on the Union side, although a single player might want to take command of two or more corps. The Gamemaster would release general information about the opponent's unit strengths only when the units are attacked. Most games, from the simplest to the most complex, could be played in a similar manner to recreate the battles being simulated more completely. Of course, on a tactical level, this sort of division of command would not be as realistic as it would be in a strategic or operational game. Other factors, such as hidden units, unknown orders of battle, or terrain, could become important and could be added into the simulation.

Patrick Bobbitt's work on this project will enhance Gamemaster电力-play-by-mail as the method they play their games. The investment in terms of time and effort is probably too much for the average player who is involved in wargaming as a hobby. There is a place in the middle between realism and playability. The first wargame that I ever owned was 1914. That design, which was very innovative for its time and had a number of features that are still valid today, used inverted counters to re-create the fog of War. Things have not progressed very far from that starting point, largely because the mathematical basis of our wargames cannot reproduce the intangible facets of war. Re-creating the reality of the battlefield information gap takes a lot of work, but it can add a great deal to our understanding of the history that we are trying to examine. No wargamer would re-create Pickert's Charge in the course of a game, knowing what he knows about the historic result. Yet, on the third day of the battle of Gettysburg, having evaluated the information available to him from the previous day's fighting, Robert E. Lee chose to attack Cemetery Ridge, the center of the Union line. Perhaps a wargamer, limited to the sort of information that Robert E. Lee had available to him, would reluctantly make the same choice. After all, the information that we wargamers take for granted was, for Lee, lost in the Fog of War.