

IMPROVING ON PATTON'S BEST

Realism in the Solitaire Game

By Rich Jennings

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 his loader "Oge" 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 encountered 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 explodes in a ball of fire. A staccato burst of machine gun fire and the whine of ricocheting bullets.

"Fred, somewhere around that big tree! BJ, button up fast and stop this thing!" Behind you, Tank 4 goes hard left and plows into the soft mud on the shoulder. Rookies!

"Got it! AT gun bearing three-four-five, range two-zero-zero."

"HE round loaded; reload ready."

"Bearing, 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 to 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 bail out of a halftrack. "Jeeze, they're getting 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 crackling 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 gnawing in the pit of your stomach subside.

The radio crackles with the voice of the C.O., "All right youse guys, let's move out. Hey ALF, nice shootin' 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 battle board 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), as a scenario for a complete day, 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 combat engagements will break out several times during the course of this scenario. Based on the historical events encountered by the division on a particular day, a scenario can be typed as an Advance, a Battle, or a Counterattack. The Advance scenario represents the rapid drive of your division across Europe meeting only scattered resistance. In a Battle scenario, the resistance is greater as you assault prepared enemy positions. Under a Counterattack scenario, you are on the defensive attempting to repel German thrusts.

In your role as tank commander, you control the actions of the tank's crew in fighting and maneuvering your vehicle. As a solitaire game, the German infantry and armored units are controlled by dice rolls (using a pair of ten-sided dice) and several Action Tables. The number of enemy units activated during any type of engagement is determined by the expected level of resistance (Light—two units; Medium—three; Heavy—four) encountered by the 4th Armored on that day. These enemy units can be infantry, machine gun emplacements, light armored vehicles, AT guns, self-propelled guns, and tanks which take the form of the PzKw IV, V, VI "Tiger" and even—although rarely—the Vlb "King Tiger". Rounding out this impressive list of threats is enemy artillery, anti-tank mines and panzerfausts with which you must contend.

Winning at *PATTON'S BEST* is measured in very basic terms. For each of the three levels of play, if you are killed or your tank is knocked out, then you lose. If both you and your tank survive, you win. While victory points are awarded for territory captured and enemy units KO'ed (points that can lead to promotions and decorations for valor), the bottom line is still survival, which is rooted in your experience and skill in selection of tactics in each combat situation.

To understand how well *PATTON'S BEST* handles the many diverse elements of armored warfare, it will be helpful to briefly compare it with Avalon Hill's earlier popular solitaire offering, *B-17: QUEEN OF THE SKIES*. Comparing how each game handles the key areas of player involvement, the various elements of combat within the solitaire environment, and how each game captures the particular style of combat, *PATTON'S BEST* does score better than *B-17*.

In *B-17*, the "star" of the game is, as is historically correct, the Flying Fortress itself with its ability to absorb tremendous punishment and still bring its crew safely home. The aircraft commander—the player—is really "along for the ride". Formation flying, and a limited variety of adversaries attacking from fairly predictable angles, offers the commander only minimal opportunities to make offensive/defensive decisions. This situation changes only at the point when the struggle to keep the aircraft in the air has been intensified due to severe structural damage, equipment failure and/or crew casualties.

Armored combat was radically different than the air war, a fact that is readily apparent in *PATTON'S BEST*. Since the Sherman tank was never designed

to withstand heavy punishment when engaged with the enemy, survival depends upon the commander's skill in first assessing what the enemy can do to you and what you can do to him, then employing the best offensive or defensive action in order to gain an immediate tactical edge. AP, HE and Smoke ammo, machine guns, smoke grenades and movement are all available options. The enemy units also have a variety of responses determined through the Action Tables. He may move in any direction, perhaps changing terrain; he may fire at your tank or other American units; 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 than 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 4.65.2 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 dice 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 "1-10".
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/SPG/AT Gun has been identified, all subsequent Tank/SPG/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 attacks; 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

"Off Board" artillery fire. The confusion here is that the listed DRMs applicable on this table should be applied differently to each of these types of fire, but the table does not clarify these distinctions. For example, artillery fire would not be affected by the DRM for the loss of tanks or the loss of infantry squads. To better illustrate the application of these DRMs, I offer the following matrix:

Friendly Fire DRM Matrix

	Air Strike	Adv Fire	4.76 Fire	O.B. Fire
Flanking Fire	N	N	(1) N	N
Air Strike vs Vehicle	Y	N	N	N
Each US-controlled Sector	N	Y	Y	N
Arty vs LW/MG/AT in Woods	N	N	N	Y
Each Inf Sq lost vs Lw/MG	N	Y	Y	N
Each Tank lost vs Vehicle	N	Y	Y	N
Smoke in Target Zone	Y	Y	Y	N
During Fog/Snow	(2)	Y	Y	N
Adv/Arty vs Vehicle	N	Y	N	Y

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 the game'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 F/L/R/B" results subsequently rolled for that unit on the *Enemy Action* table.

The second rule section that is not clear is Rule 4.77.2. 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 restarting 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 be made to improve 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 secondary effect of giving the player more 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 acti-

vated, 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 this is a valid assumption, it does 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, and 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 "Fire—Your Tank" and does so without penalty, even though turret rotation would be required 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 dug out some old turret counters, probably from *CROSS OF IRON*. When the German tank rolls to fire at the Sherman, the turret counter is used to indicate the firing TCA. Ignoring the listed "First Shot" DRM, the German AFV is penalized with a +10 DRM for the first round fired from a side facing, a +20 DRM for the first round fired from the rear facing. Of course, the gamer must take into account that a turret hit on any German AFV which has changed its TCA must now be resolved with the "Front" To Kill values, whereas a hull hit is resolved with the appropriate "Side/Rear" To Kill values. Incidentally, the purist may want to increase the per-Sector DRM to +15 for the Tiger and King Tiger tanks 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 would need to pivot the entire vehicle to bring 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 SPG 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 SPG fires at you.

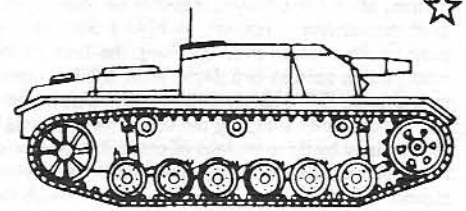
The third *Optional Rule* challenges the game's assumption that AT Guns are always activated oriented towards your tank. When an AT Gun is encountered, it is quite plausible that the gun crew could be engaging another target not in your direction, or simply be unaware of your tank's approach. To reflect this, roll to determine the facing of AT Gun(s) which are activated using the "Tank" column of the *Vehicle Facing* table. AT Guns are then subjected 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 as ALF and its combat veterans push into 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, 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 opponents' 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 re-create 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.

Frankly, I doubt that most people will embrace Gamemastered 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 simply no easy answer to the conflict 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 Pickett's Charge in the course of a game, knowing what he knows about the historic result. And 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*.