Command challenge

A river crossing mini-campaign

Not content with providing us with a single battle to fight, Andrew Rolph manages to create a mini-campaign of three consecutive struggles for control of a river line. Are you up to the task?

So you open your favourite wargame magazine (why, it may even be this one!), you read the articles and they’re pretty good. None of them, however, ‘fit’ what you have – wrong period, wrong scale, wrong rules, wrong terrain. Yes, you could rework a few things but it would be nice to have something which you could just use. So with that in mind, I present the most generic scenario I think it’s possible to write and still actually produce something beyond “do what you like with whatever you’ve got”. Any rules, any period, any scale, any terrain – and I think this works. Other than air or naval, and maybe mediaeval/renaissance would be a bit difficult. Anyway...

The scenario came about following my reading about the XVth International Brigade’s actions on the Jarama River in February 1937 during the Spanish Civil War. That action took place in a confined space over several weeks and inspired me to develop a series of three linked battles across the same terrain, with casualties carrying over between the battles. Whilst not technically a campaign (so actually the title of this article is a misnomer) it nevertheless captured some key points of the battle and gave both players the opportunity to attack and to defend, to work with limited resources and to deal with the headaches of conserving forces for the next battle.

After playtesting, it occurred to me that the episodic framework – with a single map, three games, a core force for each side and a structured narrative (initial assault, high watermark, counterattack) – could be fairly easily adapted to other theatres. So it was that I created this basic set up.

PREAMBLE

Originally, this was conceived for an approximately regimental-sized WWII eastern front setting and specifically for the Spearhead rules by Arty Conliffe. However, I have made the write-up more generic than that (although sticking in the main body to WWII) so that you can use your own preferred rules at whatever scale you want. So I will refer only to ‘units’ made up of ‘stands’ and to distances in terms of turns of movement or the distance of rifle or tank fire. For example, where a stand represents a platoon, a unit will be a battalion – see the following table for more examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>的小</th>
<th>A stand represents...</th>
<th>...then a unit will be</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>an individual soldier</td>
<td>a section/squad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a section/squad</td>
<td>a company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a platoon</td>
<td>a battalion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a company</td>
<td>a regiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a battalion</td>
<td>a division</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The forces represented here make for a reasonably balanced campaign under Spearhead. Individual battles can be very unbalanced but that is, at least in part, the point. The interest for one side lies in maximising the defeat now in order to maximise the victory next time. Your own rules might have different balancing points which you will need to consider – perhaps reducing the number of counterattacking units by one, or increasing the original attacking units similarly. Certainly, some rules would be very unforgiving of some of the troop imbalances here (the last battle can easily see one side outnumbered two to one and subject to a massive artillery bombardment). So feel free to change them if you wish – the aim is to present a distinctly challenging game, not simply one where either one side or the other can make every possible mistake, yet still can’t lose.

No specific equipment is mentioned either. Much of it will be determined by your own collections and the relative value of different pieces in different theatres. If I mention a light ATG, then that means something like a PaK 35/36 in the early war. By 1944, however, it probably means a PaK 38. Similarly, if I talk of a ‘heavy’ tank, then use a KV2, a Sherman Jumbo, a Churchill or a Matilda II as is appropriate to your setting.

Similar choices abound throughout the article. Additionally, I have noted items of particular interest or quirks here and there which featured in my original playtest which you may want to consider in adapting it for your own use. Finally, although this is written with World War II in mind, I think it’s portable to other eras and I’ll offer a few notes at the end of the article in that vein.

ATTACKER’S BRIEFING

MISSION

The latest encirclement of enemy forces is coming to a close and straggling elements of the enemy are breaking out of our cordon and running for the next river line. Your task is to clear away those elements, cross the river, establish a bridgehead and defend it against the inevitable counterattack.

AVAILABLE FORCES

Two units of motorised infantry form the core of your force. Additionally, for the first battle, a reconnaissance unit, air
support and engineering assets are available. Thereafter, as the
cauldron battle in your rear comes to a close, an armoured unit,
artillery support and an anti tank unit will be released to you.

**Anticipated Enemy Forces**

Before you, on this side of the river, there will be little organised
resistance. Some two or three units are desperately trying
to escape across the river along with what material they can
salvage. On the far side of the river, three enemy units are
racing to plug the gap and beyond them there are reports of a
further, similar sized grouping, including tanks, preparing to
counterattack.

**Defender's Briefing**

**Mission**

Elements of our army are escaping the latest enemy
encirclement and retreating to our next defensive river line.
Your task is to assist those elements in escaping, to establish a
defensive line on the river (incorporating survivors from the far
bank) and to prevent the enemy establishing a bridgehead over
the river. If such a bridgehead is created, you are to eliminate it.

**Available Forces**

Three units of infantry and nine lorry stands of essential
supplies, ammunition and wounded are retreating on the far
bank of the river. Your own forces consist of three units of
infantry plus some engineer and anti tank support. Initially,
artillery is available to lay down fire support for the retreating
troops. If a bridgehead is created, additional tank and infantry
units will be released to you to counterattack.

**Anticipated Enemy Forces**

You can expect three or more enemy units, including tanks,
with considerable air and artillery support to be resisting you.

**COMMON BRIEFING**

The result of the engagement will be decided at the end of the
third battle unless the attackers have already lost by the end of
the second. Victory is determined as follows:

- It will be a decisive victory for the defender if there are no
  attackers on the defender's side of the river at the end of the
  second or third battle.
- It will be a tactical victory for the defender if the attacker
  fails to establish a functional bridgehead by the end of the
  third battle.
- It will be a tactical victory for the attacker if he does establish
  a functional bridgehead by the end of the third battle.
- It will be a decisive victory for the attacker if he establishes a
  secure bridgehead by the end of the third battle.
- A functional bridgehead has at least one intact bridge wholly
  behind the attacker's front line with the attackers holding the
  majority of any terrain (hills/towns/woods) protecting that
  bridge.
- A secure bridgehead has at least one intact bridge wholly
  behind the attacker's front line with the attackers holding all
  the terrain (hills/towns/woods) protecting that bridge.

**How Do the Battles Run?**

The basic principle is that each side has a core force of troops
which proceeds from battle to battle. These are supplemented in
each battle by (different) additional reinforcements released by a
higher command for the specific task of the moment. In general,
the ratio of core troops to supplements is around 70:30.

Casualties inflicted on the non-core troops for each side are
irrelevant. Casualties inflicted on the core troops carry over
between battles. However, between battles, all core troops'
casualties are rolled for on a stand by stand basis to determine if they are recovered. A modified roll of 3+ on 1D6 sees the stand returned to fight again. The die roll is reduced by 1 if the stand is on retreat involuntarily and by 2 if it routed. Any unit which rolls for its stand, rather than just its casualties.

At the end of the first and second battles, determine the new front line, which represents the greatest distance forward (barring other battle-specific restrictions) at which troops may set up for the next battle. Some cooperation may be needed here between players unless you have an umpire. The following guidance is to cover most situations, but if you can't decide, roll a die between two alternatives. Basically, the attackers determine their front line by marking the leading edge of their units at the end of the game and joining them together with straight lines. The defender's front line is then double effective rifle fire range away from that line in the open, or up to effective rifle fire range within cover. If anyone is killed on the front line, then the opposing side may set up within double effective rifle fire range of that edge, or in cover if that's closer. The retreated side starts the next battle off-table (in that area – it may be that other parts of the front line are on the table, where the attacker had not advanced as far).

At the start of the second and third battles, all troops of both sides may start the games entrenched, unless otherwise noted. If you wish, you could restrict set-up to those areas where units finished the last game. I didn't bother. I assumed that within each player's own lines, there was enough time between battles for them to shuffle their troops as they wished.

The defenders may form a 'composite' unit where a unit, after recovering casualties, is non-playable. In the playtest I did, I determined this to be fewer than three stands. Simply bundle the stands together with another unit to form a single unit.

The attackers should generally be of a somewhat higher quality than the defenders, with the tanks and armoured infantry being perhaps as veterans. The defender's forces starting on the 'wrong' side of the river should be particularly poor (they are essentially running away), as should any composite units. Other defending troops should be fairly ordinary.

The terrain for the battle can be arranged as you see fit for your preferred rules. Some rules might not see one side or the other have any decent chance at victory without lots of (or no) terrain. Use an experienced knowledge to flesh out what makes the scenario a reasonable challenge for each player. Shown here is the terrain I used for the playtest (a six feet by four feet table, played from the ends rather than the sides). Use it or not, modify it or not, as you will. You don't even need a river – the defenders can be escaping to a mountain pass or to occupy a ridge line or some other geographical feature.

As a guide, I think the table needs to be about twelve infantry moves long and about two thirds as wide. The river or relevant geographical boundary needs to be just closer to the attacker's edge than the defender's. Finally, I would suggest something like 12 turns for each game. Again, your own rules might cause you to modify this.

**FIRST BATTLE - CREATING THE BRIDGEHEAD**

For the first battle, the attacker's focus is on destroying the retreating elements of the enemy on his side of the river and creating a bridgehead, on the far side – preferably by taking the bridge intact.

The defender, meanwhile, is trying to extricate his demoralised forces and get them across the river to become additional forces for the future battles. At the same time, there is a supply train to extricate, a delay on the attackers to be achieved (to allow for the timely arrival of reinforcements), and a tricky decision of when to blow the bridge.

**ATTACKER'S FORCES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENTER THE TABLE FROM THEIR EDGE</th>
<th>1st unit</th>
<th>HQ stand, 9 stands of rifles (3 in halftracks), 1 stand of machine guns, 1 medium mortar stand, 1 infantry gun stand, 1 engineer stand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd unit</td>
<td>HQ stand, 9 stands of rifles, 1 stand of machine guns, 1 medium mortar stand, 1 infantry gun stand, 1 engineer stand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HQ troops to be added to other core units</td>
<td>Command HQ, 5MG Mix Stand, 4 engineer stands (2 in halftracks), 1 infantry gun stand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional support</td>
<td>3 further engineer stands in each of the first 2 units + three dive bomber sorties</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recon unit</td>
<td>HQ, 3 light armoured car stands, 3 rifle stands of mortars, 1 infantry gun stand, 1 light ATG stand, 1 machine gun stand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DEFENDER'S FORCES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SET UP BETWEEN THE RIVER AND THE ATTACKER'S TABLE EDGE, NO CLOSER THAN THREE MOVES TO THE BRIDGE</th>
<th>1st unit</th>
<th>HQ stand, 7 rifle stands and 1 machine gun stand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd unit</td>
<td>HQ stand, 8 rifle stands and 1 light ATG stand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd unit</td>
<td>HQ stand, 6 rifle stands and 1 heavy 40mm stand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Unit</td>
<td>HQ stand, 7 rifle stands and 1 machine gun stand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th Unit</td>
<td>HQ stand, 8 rifle stands and 1 machine gun stand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th unit</td>
<td>HQ stand, 3 light ATG stands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Table Between the River and the Defender's Table Edge, No Closer Than Three Moves to the Bridge</td>
<td>Engineers</td>
<td>HQ stand, 3 engineer stands, 2 light AA stands, 2 big mortar stands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional forces for this battle only</td>
<td>10 heavy artillery strikes plotted before the start of the game at a maximum of 2 per turn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional support</td>
<td>9 fortes full of supplies, wounded, equipment etc</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*As designed for the Soviet Union in 1941, the rifle troops of these one units were generated according to a random die roll (2+1D4+4+1D2 stands – a range of 5 to 9) to represent the sorry state of Soviet rifle battalions at the time.*

The defender can attempt to blow up the bridge after he has accumulated 'demolition points'. These are earned at the rate of one for each engineer stand for each turn that it is adjacent to the bridge and does not move, fire, melee or become suppressed/pinned. No more than nine may be earned in total, regardless of the number of turns or engineers. At the end of any turn when there is at least one unsuppressed engineer stand adjacent to the bridge the defender may roll 1D10. Any roll less than or equal to the current demolition point total will destroy the bridge. If the roll fails, halve the demolition points total (round up) and another attempt may be made once at least one more demolition point has been earned.

If any of the defender's units on the far side of the river are forced to retreat, they will do so towards the bridge. After two
turns of compulsory movement, they may be halted and fed into the retreat when the player wishes (unless they suffer a further adverse morale result). Routing units on that side of the river remain on table and move to the bridge (and across) as quickly as possible, regardless of any command distance restrictions. Such routing/retreating units may well impede any orderly crossing of the bridge which the defender had planned.

At the close of the battle, the defender may not roll for the return of any stand which was killed on the other side of the river, nor may any stands which survived on the other side of the river (including those which routed or retreated but failed to cross the bridge) be incorporated into the next battle’s force i.e. only those stands surviving, destroyed on or routed to the friendly side of the river are candidates for the next battle.

The defender’s lorries have no combat capability and will be destroyed by anything which shoots them. They represent critical matériel which Headquarters insist be evacuated first. Once over the bridge, they continue off-table in any direction the defender desires. For each lorry destroyed or left on the other side of the river, the casualty recovery die roll for any single stand is reduced by 1 (in addition to any other modifiers). Finally, each lorry which successfully crosses the river and exits the table adds 1 to any one die roll for recovery. These modifiers may be used to cancel each other out.

The attacker’s armoured cars, motorcycles and halftracks may cross the river only at the bridge. Other attacker’s infantry, machine guns and mortars may cross the river anywhere along its length under a special procedure as follows. Stands must stop at the river’s edge. They may enter the river once supported by an engineer stand. Such supporting engineer stands must be adjacent to or touching the corners of the crossing stands and may support up to three stands (so the most efficient formation is three rifle stands in front with an engineer stand behind and adjacent to the middle one). Once in the river, stands stop and become suppressed/pinned. Each turn after the first, they roll a die and if an odd number is rolled, the stand transfers to the opposite river bank with its base rear touching the river. Roll a further die for each such stand and there is a 50% chance it remains suppressed/pinned. Once all of the stands that a given engineer stand is supporting are across the river, the engineer stand appears on the original bank and is available to support further stands crossing.

SECOND BATTLE – EXPANDING THE BRIDGEHEAD

The day after the first battle sees the attacker looking to break out and consolidate his bridgehead from the day before. His engineers will have created a pontoon bridge and, if he’s lucky or skilful, he’s taken the existing bridge. Alternatively, if it all went badly yesterday, then today is about getting across the river. Either way, his parent formation has been relieved of its encirclement duties and is able to offer more assistance. The artillery has caught up and can lend its weight to the attack.

Meanwhile, the remains of the opponent’s defensive formations have arrived and consolidated their position. The requirement now is to destroy the attacker any territorial gains pending the big counterattack tomorrow. The defender needs to range in his artillery for that attack – hence the day’s delay on the counterattack.

ATTACKER’S FORCES

Add the following to the survivors of the core troops from the first battle

- Either a tank unit consisting of an HQ stand, 1 light tank stand, 6 medium/cruiser tank stands and 3 medium/infantry tank stands starting on the attacker’s side of the river
- Or an engineer unit comprising an HQ stand and 9 engineer stands (in halftracks) starting on the attacker’s side of the river
- 8 artillery strikes (4 heavy and 4 medium) at a maximum rate of 2 per turn
- 2 dive bomber sorties
- Remove the remaining non core troops/support

DEFENDER’S FORCES

Add the following to the survivors of the core troops from the first battle

- A unit of infantry consisting of an HQ stand, 9 rifle stands and 1 machine gun stand
- An anti tank unit consisting of an HQ stand and 3 light ATG stands
- An HQ unit to be spread amongst the other units consisting of a command HQ, 1 rifle stand, 1 infantry gun stand, 1 light ATG stand and 1 medium mortar stand
- (all these additions become core troops)
- Remove the off-board artillery

As long as the attacker’s front line generated after the first battle incorporates some territory on the defender’s side of the river, then the attacker’s engineers will have built a pontoon bridge overnight. This can be placed wherever the attacker chooses, as long as it’s wholly behind his front line. Alternatively, if the bridge over the river was destroyed, but it is wholly behind the attacker’s front line, then his engineers can be deemed to have repaired it rather than to have built a pontoon bridge.

If the bridge was destroyed during the first battle and no pontoon bridge was capable of being built between the first and second battles, then the attacker is limited to crossing the river in the same fashion as in the first battle (the might therefore think twice before selecting the tank unit, which will be unable to cross the river at all).

Minor fieldworks wholly behind the attacker’s front line (barbed wire, trenches, low density minefields) can be deemed to have been cleared or not at the attacker’s choosing.

THIRD BATTLE – HOLDING THE BRIDGEHEAD

If, at the end of the second battle, the attackers have not achieved at least a functional bridgehead, then the defenders have won. Otherwise, the game continues with a much
reinforced defender counterattacking as the attacker tries to hold onto his gains. This is deliberately set up as a massive counterattack and the game needs to be carefully calibrated by the number of turns allowed. The now counterattacking defender will probably have so much at his disposal that, given enough turns, he is likely to annihilate the (now defending) attacker, so ensure that he is not given all the time he needs. If you need a rationale, then within 10 or 12 turns (or whatever suits your rules) the main body of the attacker’s army is arriving to reinforce the bridgehead.

**Defender’s forces**

Add the following to the surviving core troops of the second battle (which should comprise the remnants of 6 units of infantry plus some other bits and pieces):

- 2 tank units, each comprising an HQ and 8 medium tank stands
- 2 infantry units, each comprising an HQ, 8 rifle stands, 1 medium mortar stand, 1 light AA stand, 1 light ATG stand and 1 engineer stand
- 1 SMG unit comprising an HQ and 9 SMG stands
- 12 heavy artillery strikes pre-ploted before the start of the game at a maximum of 2 per turn
- 4 rocket launcher strikes pre-ploted before the start of the game at a maximum of 1 every other turn
- 2 ground attack aircraft sorties available on call during the game – as determined by your rules
- Remove nothing

At the end of the third battle, assess which side has achieved its victory conditions.

**How Did it Play?**

As indicated at the start of the article, the action was relocated to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, with a Soviet army desperately escaping another encirclement and trying to prevent a bridgehead over the river defence line. In this case, the protecting terrain for the determination of victory was to be all the town/village sectors and the three westernmost hills/ridges on the eastern bank of the river. In my mind, the action was loosely based on the Soviet troops leaking out of the Smolensk encirclement in August 1941 to cross the Sozh to safety. Initially, two German motorised battalions (with an engineer battalion spread amongst them) and a reconnaissance battalion in support, plunged into three battalions of Soviet infantry with a KV2 to assist. Meanwhile, across the river, another Soviet rifle regiment raced forwards to defend the eastern bank of the river assisted by a small engineer battalion with demolition charges...

For the first battle, the German plan was a straightforward rush to the bridge by the recon in the south whilst the infantry assaulted the centre and north. The Soviet plan, a phased withdrawal, battalion by battalion, covered by multiple artillery strikes at projected German advances, was considerably more intricate, finely honed and quite frankly brilliant (guess who was playing the Soviets?). Well, it was, other than in one tiny detail – its dismal failure in practice! All three battalions across the river routed within a few turns, failing completely to cover each other's withdrawal. I was especially distraught to see the KV2 platoon (which had retreated with its parent battalion to take up a blocking station by the bridge immediately upon the game starting) become the target of a particularly effective Stuka attack. In the second battle, all of the lorries were evacuated across the river and the pre-planned artillery did hit a number of targets (most unusual for my pre-planning). Unfortunately the casualties tended to be amongst the recon battalion, rather than the Germans' core units.

By turn 5 or so, the Soviet engineers had reached the bridge and had spent two turns laying charges. The German armoured cars approached. Should I try to blow the bridge now (almost no one other than the lorries had crossed) or did I have enough time to increase the odds? I gambled with the latter and lost. The armoured cars were on the bridge in no time (despite the rest of the recon battalion breaking off because of casualties) and at the end of the next turn, all three engineer stands had been destroyed by another Stuka assault and some long-range sniping from elsewhere. The opportunity to blow the bridge was gone and the armoured cars duly entered the little village on the eastern bank.

Shortly thereafter, the German motorised troops reached the centre and northern part of the river and began to cross. Only their compulsory suppressions were holding them back. Eventually, enough of them shook themselves out sufficiently to advance to the barbed wire and the two small ridges where they sighted a retreating stream of supply lorries and the lead elements of a Soviet armoured battalion and infantry battalion which had been moving at top speed from the eastern edge of the table since the game’s start. The German player promptly shot up the lorries, which veered away behind the town. He then began to pick on the two lead Soviet battalions, which (although terminally unsuited to the task in the case of the ATG battalion) responded in kind. After a few turns of somewhat desultory fire, the battle came to a close. The Germans had established themselves on the eastern bank of the river and the Soviets were not going to be able to dislodge them with the forces at hand.

The casualty recovery rolls were largely kind to the Germans, with only one or two rifle platoon casualties permanent. For the Soviets, the results were also kind, but the raw material not. Of the three battalions from the far side of the river, only four stands had made it across (and they were routing). On this side of the river, there had only been one or two stands of casualties in all. After die rolls, the ATG battalion had lost one of its stands permanently and a new composite battalion of three rifle stands and an HQ had been formed – there being plenty of escaped lorries providing positive die roll modifiers.

The second battle was a crushing Soviet defeat, due in no small part by my complete failure to predict my opponent’s plan. The Soviet force consisted of three rifle battalions with ATG support and the small remnants battalion from the survivors crossing the river in the first battle. Anticipating assaults on the hill to the south and the town to the north, the Soviets held both of those features strongly and linked them with a single battalion in a concave arc. I felt that the assault in the north
was suited to the infantry in halftracks, whilst the thrust south presented some open ground suited to a tank/infantry assault. I expected that attack to originate either across the existing bridge or a pontoon set up somewhere near the centre of the river. I was hopelessly wrong.

The Germans elected to build their pontoon bridge far away to the north. A single battalion of infantry defended the line from the village in the south to just beyond the barbed wire in the north (he was even using my own field defences against me!). The other motorised battalion occupied about six inches in a wedge formation in the north, with halftracks to the fore. The tanks waited across the river just behind them. Clearly, there was going to be a significant assault on my right flank.

Assessing the opening set up, it was immediately obvious that the only issue to be decided here was what I could salvage from what was going to be a car wreck in slow motion. Sure enough, the motorised infantry assaulted in the north, supported by Stukas and heavy artillery. I was lucky in managing to order (on the first turn) my entire left wing to cross behind the centre to the right, where I anticipated it might arrive just in time to form a second line. Equally, I was lucky that the battalion defending here turned out to be veterans (in Spearhead, early war Soviets run away or fight to the last man – determined randomly). After three turns, most of the German armour was across the bridge and forming up. The motorised infantry had wiped out the Soviet infantry outside the town and had dispatched a company to assault the town whilst the remainder fanned out to thrust to the cornfields beyond the town and into the rear of the central Soviet battalion.

The staunch defence of the town was a short-lived affair over the next two turns or so. They inflicted some casualties on the attacking Germans, but the defenders were the survivors from yesterday and the remnants of the battalion deployed around the town. The first German assault was repulsed, but in doing so, the defenders suffered sufficient casualties that they routed. As the Germans deployed into the cornfield, the first Soviet troops from the other side of the battlefield arrived – an ATG battalion. Their AT fire caused the Germans to rapidly re-evaluate the usefulness of their halftracks and stopped their advance for the first time. The remainder of the redeployed Soviet left wing now began to arrive, but I didn’t feel I had the time (or space or, necessarily, competence) to properly form for a counterattack. As such, the battalion assaulted in company-sized dribbles and was as effective as pushing a butter pat against a hotplate. However, taking a very Soviet view of their sacrifice, at least it occupied the Germans.

Meanwhile, it was becoming clear to the German player that his Panzer battalion would not be needed in the north. His attack there might have slowed, but he occupied all the ground he needed and there was the tempting target of the hill to the south which, once heavily invested with securely dug in troops, was now entirely denuded of any defence. Rolling successfully to change orders, the Panzers impudently rolled south, right across the front of the central Soviet battalion, directly at their new objective. At extreme range, the Soviets promptly proved they still had some teeth, using their ATG and AA weapons to knock out three platoons of Panzers with shots into their flanks.

Nevertheless, it was a pointless show of bravado. The Germans took the undefended hill in the south. In the north (having routed the redeployed southern Soviet battalion), they contented themselves with sniping at the edges of the last remaining Soviet battalion. I broke off the battle with this last battalion and hoped desperately that the German player would not pursue. Luckily, he seemed happy with his gains and settled in to defend them against any counterattack which might come his way. The bridgehead was thoroughly established, with all
the key territory in his control and, after rolling for casualties, he had lost one more platoon (stand). The Soviets, after rolling for casualty recovery, could field only two weak battalions. One battalion had retreated with few casualties, but the other two and a half had routed and less than a quarter of their stands returned to the fray. Luckily, reinforcements were on the way for the counterattack.

The counterattack plan for the third battle revolved around the need to more or less take everything. Had the original bridge been destroyed, then I could have concentrated the attack on the pontoon bridge only. As it was, I would need to take back all the dominating geography around both bridges, which necessarily dissipated my attack. I opted to pummel the southern hill with two turns of artillery fire and then, as they had the furthest to travel, launch my assault there with two rifle battalions from the first turn. The pre-planned artillery would then turn its attentions north to the cornfield and its environs, with the attack by a further two infantry battalions launching out of the woods on the third turn. Meanwhile, a tank regiment of T28s would jump off just south of the centre of the line and rush directly at the original bridge. I trusted that this would be a distraction to the German player and also ensure that no support could be lent to the southern hill’s defence. Meanwhile, a further tank regiment (comprising four platoons of BT7s but also two platoons each of KV1s and T34s – hurrah!) would await developments centrally, as a reserve to be deployed as the battle developed.

Upon seeing the German set-up, it was clear he had misread my intentions in a similar way as I had his in the second game. His main anti-tank strength was placed around the cornfield in the north, along with his better battalion of infantry. The southern hill was held by a company only, with the remainder of its parent battalion in a concave arc from the hill to the northern cornfield. Additionally, his off-board artillery was attached to his northern forces. Taking the southern hill, the village by the southern bridge and the cornfield and town in the north all looked feasible – particularly since my pre-planned artillery seemed to be on the money. However, the northern ridges looked a long way away and, with Spearhead, dug-in German infantry are notoriously difficult to winkle out.

As it was, the pre-planned artillery got off to both a fine and an ignominious start. The first turn’s fire wiped out all the defenders bar a lonely ATG platoon on the southern hill. The two battalion advance hinged forward to what was essentially a defenceless piece of real estate. Nevertheless, ignominy followed on the third turn, when one of the battalions marched a little too boldly forward and was the primary target of a Katyusha strike. Of the ten stands thus encompassed in the off-board template, one was the PaK 35/6 and nine were Soviet rifles, SMGs and the like. Most of the ten were eliminated in the strike and, irritatingly, the German was amongst the few survivors. Shortly thereafter, that particular Soviet battalion routed. My German opponent, meanwhile, played a canny game, refusing his southern flank by dropping back towards the bridge on his extreme right and trying to stay out of range of the advancing Soviets. The regiment of T28s did their job, however, and ensured that no assistance was going to be rendered to the south from the centre.

In the north, the next stage of the Soviet assault got underway with another very successful artillery strike on the cornfields, as the first Soviet infantry battalion debouched from the woods. Unfortunately, I hadn’t really left enough room for myself to deploy effectively and it was only thanks to some punishingly bad German die rolling that this first battalion survived its deployment more or less unscathed. It took another couple of turns before the second rifle battalion was able to assist in developing some serious pressure. This pressure was much enhanced by the successful calling in of the Sturmoviks on a couple of occasions. However, despite being shredded, the German line in the cornfield and to the north of the table maintained an obstinate three or four stands blocking my way forward. And, in the meantime, his StuGs had crossed the pontoon bridge and taken up residence on the small ridges protecting that feature.

Around turn 5, it seems clear to me that everywhere on the battlefield the Soviet advance would succeed… but not quickly enough. The infantry battalion in the south was working its way forward across the hill and around the south of the AT ditch against two or three stands of German rifles. The T28s were doing a valiant (and surprisingly effective) job of winking Germans out of their foxholes directly east of the original bridge crossing. The German line here had held initially with a couple of AT guns and the 20mm PaK, but that had now been destroyed and the Germans were toothless as long as they were kept at range. The southern bridge and village were only two to three turns worth of movement away, so if the Soviets could rout the Germans in the next turn or two, then the bridge could be taken. In the north, the Soviets were four or five moves away, so things were far tighter. Ah well, perhaps the tank reserve could swing it for me…

No time for subtlety. T34s to the front, charge directly ahead, just south of the northern cornfield, towards the ridgeline protecting the pontoon bridge… Just where a company of veteran German combat engineers are dug in, with StuGs behind them. However, this was the only route to that part of the battlefield, which I didn’t have a hope of reaching otherwise. Actually, it wasn’t too bad. Losses were fairly small and a couple of the StuGs were destroyed. The engineers, however, remained resolutely in my way. Still the German line wouldn’t break.

On turn 8, the Soviets in the north and south assaulted the Germans in an effort to finally be rid of them. In the south, they
were successful and caused that German battalion (which was now only a company of infantry strong—a few mortars and infantry guns and so forth to the rear) to check its morale. It passed. In the north, the close assaults uniformly failed, including a critical three to one effort from which my Soviet platoons meekly retreated. We had earlier determined randomly how long the game was to last for (10 turns) and, the hour being late, I resigned on the basis of a German tactical victory.

The German forces were a complete wreck (15 or 16 stands remaining from the 50 odd which started), but they remained in a very thin line north to south. Both infantry battalions and the StuGs would need to check their morale in the next turn or two and, on average, the Germans could expect one only to survive. However, by then, time would be up and the best I could expect to do would be to take the village and bridge in the south and the town and cornfield in the north. I couldn’t have approached anywhere near the ridges and pontoon bridge in the north. Additionally, every one of the Soviet battalions was one stand away from a morale check. If all three German battalions broke, then it would be a decisive victory (in Spearhead, routing troops simply disappear) but the chance of that was around 30% at best, so a tactical German victory seemed the finest (and most likely) outcome.

In retrospect, perhaps the tank reserve should have gone in a little earlier. The artillery could hardly have been better—from 16 planned bombardments, nine found a German target and they inflicted perhaps 40% of the total German casualties (about 17% of the Soviet). Perhaps close assaulting a turn earlier would have helped—but that tends to be very make or break with Spearhead. It could easily have led to a quicker defeat. The German player held his positions well and made only a couple of tactical errors—the StuGs were placed in such a fashion that they didn’t all have targets and he advanced his vulnerable FlAK within range of the T28s. Strategically, he might have been better served pursuing the Soviets in the second game and advancing way beyond the cornfield to the woods and possibly even the hills further to the east. This would have presented an even tougher challenge for the Soviet in the third game—with an even greater distance to travel. On the other hand... He won anyway.

OTHER LOCATIONS/SETTINGS
As I said at the start of the article, I think this format can be ported to most other settings. Here are a few:

- The Romans landing in Britain in the first century AD were faced with an immediate battle on the beaches. Perhaps the first battle could be a straightforward beach assault. The second might then be a delaying action through a forest inland by the Ancients Britons to allow time for the tribes further away to respond to the defence call.
- In the Dark Ages, a raiding party returns to its fortified base. Perhaps it went one raid too far and was caught by the enemy lord and, now laden with booty, it is desperately trying to reach safety. The raiding party has sent word ahead to its overlords and promised a greater share of the profit if he will come to its aid. Sounds like a big skirmish to me with a chase, then a siege type affair followed by a relief and sally.
- This also seems to be adaptable to the hundred years war when a dourachette crosses back to Aquitaine. It may even be a deliberate trap. The English have provoked the local French lords into a retaliation, which the English can then punish with a bigger force than the French had bargained for.
- During WWI, the 1914 fighting withdrawal by the BEF might offer some scope. Alternatively, the other end of the war offers the August (and onwards) attacks and tanks—although I am not sure a major German counterattack would have been possible at the time.
- This campaign originally started with the actions of the XVth International Brigade in February 1937. That Brigade held a plateau protecting the main communications route between Valencia and Madrid. If you want to see the original mechanisms for the campaign and a write up of how it went, then may I suggest you subscribe to The Journal, house magazine of the Society of Twentieth Century Wargamers, where an article covering this first version will be appearing in the next 6 to 12 months (http://www.20thww.org.uk).
- WWII seems to offer the greatest number of possibilities. Rommel/Guderian crossing the Meuse in 1940? Again probably no need for a retreating, snarling army in the first battle—just move straight to the river crossing, then onto the expansion and then the counterattack. The French certainly moved an armoured division into position to counterattack but then, in the confusion of the times, the counterattack never happened. The action is easily transposed to the later war as well with any number of fictional but plausible scenarios revolving around a Soviet mechanised brigade’s assaults during 43/44 or perhaps the Americans crossing the Seine in August 1944. Strategically, the Germans barely defended the Seine, but I am sure there were some stiff regimental/brigade actions around the initial bridgeheads with locally organised Kampfgruppen leading counterattacks.

Finally, I suppose the really interesting thing to do would be to play a number of these from different eras. If you had three or four different sets of figures/rules and an agreeable opponent, you could run a dynasty of campaigns through the ages—with blood feuds running down through history!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of force</th>
<th>Ancients equivalent</th>
<th>Dark Ages equivalent</th>
<th>Horse and Musket equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motorised Infantry</td>
<td>Mediums preferably</td>
<td>A Shieldwall</td>
<td>Dragoons or elite light infantry, rifle armed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineers</td>
<td>Civilian conscripts/</td>
<td>A Shieldwall</td>
<td>Snipers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconnaissance</td>
<td>Light Cavalry</td>
<td>A Shieldwall</td>
<td>Light cavalry/lanzcers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Support</td>
<td>Bolt Throwers</td>
<td>A Shieldwall</td>
<td>Hawtowers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanks</td>
<td>Heavy Chariots or</td>
<td>A Shieldwall</td>
<td>Heavy Cavalry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infantery</td>
<td>Levy or auxiliaries</td>
<td>A Shieldwall</td>
<td>Conscription infantry, musket armed</td>
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<tr>
<td>A heavy tank</td>
<td>An appropriate</td>
<td>A Shieldwall</td>
<td>A prized big gun</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATGs</td>
<td>Archers or other</td>
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<td>Light or battalion artillery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cannons</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lorries of Material</td>
<td>Wagons of booty</td>
<td>A Shieldwall</td>
<td>The coaches with the officers’ wires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMGs</td>
<td>Heavy infantry,</td>
<td>A Shieldwall</td>
<td>A ‘Forlorn Hope’ of picked men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* I confess that I’m a bit hazy on the detail of the Dark Ages... But then again, by definition, who isn’t?