Skirmish Action AAR: Ruhr 1945

By Russ Lockwood

This tidy little 1945 scenario for Skirmish Action (SA) comes courtesy of Dennis Shorthouse, whose figures and terrain make for a good-looking WWII table. SA is a skirmish-level miniatures rule with 1:1 scale -- one figure equals 1 man, one model is one vehicle, and so on.

British face the first obstacle: the stream.

In this scenario, a reduced British platoon of three regular infantry squads with armor support (one Cromwell, one Comet, and two recon halftracks -- all veteran) is pushing through the Ruhr against a reduced Fallschirmjager platoon of three poorly-trained squads defending a hamlet. A shallow stream, fordable by infantry, cuts across the lightly wooded battlefield. No artillery is available for either side.

The Germans generally start behind the stream, dug-in (improved position in the parlance of SA) and hidden.

Command and Control Quick Look

SA is a card-activated game, in that each squad and vehicle get assigned a card in a deck and when that card is drawn, the squad or vehicle activates. Each figure or vehicle gets a maximum of two actions, like move, fire, spot, dig-in, go on Overwatch, and so on. I say maximum because the first one is automatic, but the second action requires a die roll to pass a "Q-test" (quality test) to perform the second action. Just about all die rolls in SA use a six-sided die (d6).

In this scenario, the Germans (poorly trained) need a 5+, the British infantry (regular) needs a 4+, and the British vehicles (veteran) need a 3+ to pass a Q-test. No pass a Q test, no second action. You start to see that better trained troops will be able to do more on the battlefield than ill-trained troops.

The one restriction on second actions is that a figure or vehicle cannot take a second fire action in a turn -- one fire action only!

That said, if a figure or vehicle is on Overwatch (other games call it Opportunity Fire), it can fire once during an enemy turn. Unlike other games, a figure, vehicle, or entire unit will revert back into Overwatch at the beginning of the next turn until it moves or is forced out of its position -- even if it fires during a turn.

Of particular note is the HQ function. Most HQs have two or three cards assigned to them, and thus, two or three cards in the activation deck. When a HQ card comes up, instead of activating the HQ squad, a player can activate any other squad or vehicle under its command -- in effect, jumping the line and making sure an important squad or vehicle goes first. Managing your HQ cards becomes an important decision in a command and control way that other skirmish games sometimes ignore.

Note that SA treats each figure and vehicle independently, so you could do one action with one figure, a different action with another, a different action with a third, and so on. Furthermore, you can see the results of one action before deciding what to do for another's action.

Take the Crossroads: Turn 1

The stream provided the first obstacle. As the British, I arrayed my troops roughly parallel, one tank on the left and the other on the right. The HQ squad with the mortar was in the center sheltered on the other side of a hill and moved up into the woods. One squad with a recon halftrack filtered into the buildings on my side of the stream next to the bridge, the tank in support, while the other halftrack and tank headed right to the ford. The second infantry squad stayed in the middle.

Like Sgt. Schultz, I saw nothing, nothing.

Finding Hidden Units

The toughest part of the rules to understand, at least for me, is the spotting of hidden units. In many scenarios, the defenders start the game hidden (and often dug-in).

At the end of turn 1, so far, so good…Brits reach the stream.

Most other rules use a spotting roll based on distance and cover. SA uses an automatic spot (no roll required) for figures and vehicles to spot enemy in any cover if within one inch (1"). Alternately, you spot enemy in the open in line of sight at any range. You always spot enemy in line of sight that fires. Once spotted, enemy units remains spotted unless they move to a different piece of terrain that acts as cover (buildings, woods, etc.). Per usual, enemy on the 'edge' of terrain can shoot out and be fired upon, while those not on the edge are effectively invisible barring your troops getting up close and personal.

Most important, your units do *NOT* automatically spot enemy that are moving within line of sight. An entire panzer division could march in the open past a figure or vehicle within line of sight, but as long as it ends up in cover, your units beyond an inch distance do NOT spot any of them, even if they end up on the edge of the cover terrain. That's the part that seems strange to me, but author Sowers asserts entering cover terrain causes enemy to lose track of actual position, as a six-inch by six-inch piece of cover terrain is like a football field's worth of woods, undulations, and so on. Commanders can always use the Recon by Fire optional rules to fire at suspected troops.

That said, if your figures and vehicles are on Overwatch and enemy is within range and line of sight, they are spotted for firing purposes. If the enemy survives and subsequently moves into cover terrain, they once again become unspotted, even if they take up positions on the edge.

With this spotting twist, Overwatch becomes a very important part of the game. As an extension, deciding when to implement an Overwatch action becomes an important decision for you as commander, especially if you have poorly-trained troops. If you gamble on a second action, you're gambling that your die roll will be high enough.

Now, here's a tricky part. If a spotted figure or vehicle moves into another patch of cover terrain, even if it is within line of sight of enemy, the spotted figure or vehicle becomes unspotted (hidden) – unless this new position is within 1" of enemy. Usually, this represents a spotted unit abandoning a forward position to pull back into some other patch of terrain.

Back to spotting…a figure or vehicle can use an action to make a spotting roll into any cover within 6".

Recon units are special -- they can make a spotting roll (Q-test) without spending an action, for enemy in cover terrain within 6" -- which is why you probably should send them into unknown areas first.

Finally, any time a figure or vehicle fires, in cover or not, it is spotted and remains spotted as long as an enemy figure or vehicle keeps it in line of sight and it does not move to a piece of cover terrain.

Movement

Movement (the Move action) is pretty standard -- look on the Army List and find the movement rate of the figure or vehicle. Terrain can increase (roads) or decrease (woods, etc.) the rate. You perform movement of a figure or vehicle one at a time. Your opponent might interrupt it with an Overwatch fire, but that's one way to find out the position of the enemy, or at least part of them.

Take the Crossroads: Turn 2

I later learned I had made a slight error when moving the halftrack into the woods. In SA, tracked vehicles may move into and out of woods without a problem, but wheeled and half-tracked vehicles need to make a Q-test to enter safely, otherwise, they get damaged.

On my left flank, I sent the infantry squad across the stream, where it promptly ran into Overwatch fire from the German HMG in the building at the crossroads, and then from mortar fire. By the end of the turn, the halftrack burned, two men of seven were dead, one wounded, and two suppressed.

Firing

Each weapon gets a line on the Army List with range, number of hit dice, attack and defense strength, and so on. SA uses opposing die rolls. The attacker rolls a d6, adds the attack strength and compares the total to the defender's d6 + defense strength. The difference is cross-referenced on a damage chart.

The wrinkle is that if the defender rolls a natural 6, all attacking fire is an automatic miss. If, however, the defender rolls a natural 1, the damage level goes up by one level.

If the attacker rolls a natural 1, the shot is an automatic miss. If the attacker rolls a natural 6, the attacker rolls a second d6 and adds the result to the total. Note that some weapons (marked with an asterisk on the Army List charts) are so underwhelming, if a natural 6 is rolled, you do not roll a second d6, but add only 1 to the total.

This little '6-and-1' mechanic represents the bizarre luck that can occur on a battlefield. Yes, it *IS* frustrating when a sure kill becomes a miss, but I will say that both sides profit -- or lose -- from this mechanic as it adds tension into the game.

Back to the Crossroads: Turn 2

Once the HMG fired, it became spotted. Now I had a target for the tank. HE shell on the way -- roll a Q-test: success means the shell is on target and all troops under the template get hit. Failure means the round has no effect.

End of Turn 2: Uh-oh. Found the Germans. First squad gets hammered on my left flank as they advance up the road to the crossroads at left.

My shot was on target, with about a third of the Germans KIA, a third wounded or suppressed, and the other third ready for more action. Then I hosed them down with MG

fire from the co-axial and hull MGs for more losses.

The Marder shot and pinged my tank, forcing it back.

In the center, my British infantry squad crossed the stream and reached the hedge, rolled and received a second action, and dug-in (improved cover gives a +1 when rolling a defense d6).

On my right, the Cromwell tank crossed the ford and came within 1 inch of a wood, spotting a quartet of German infantry. It failed its Q-Test for a second action, lucky Germans...

Fog of War

Since this was a learning game, or in our case, a re-learning game, we put all troops on the board, including a Marder III in a hill-top woods in the center of the German line. Like any good 200-foot-tall general, I made sure that I was not going to allow it an Overwatch shot, and so I picked my way behind hills and woods.

It would be cooler if the defender merely kept troops and vehicles off board until spotted. Then you could get some real surprise...

Back to the Crossroads: Turn 3

I continued to push the remnants of my infantry squad along the road towards the crossroads, eventually getting one figure in to one of the buildings, but losing most of the others. The Comet tank advanced up the road, only to be blown up by the Marder on an Overwatch shot.

The center British infantry squad feels the heat…

In the center, I advanced one rifleman straight at the hilltop woods. The Germans Overwatch fired at him, which was enough to chop him down, and the German proceeded to fire at the Brits in the hedgerow, killing one and suppressing all but one of the rest.

The Cromwell tank's activation card came up and I laid HE into that quartet of Germans, killing two, driving back one suppressed, and leaving one untouched (cursed rolling of natural 1!).

Rifle and mortar fire poured into the central Germans on the hill, killing one, driving a couple back, and leaving the rest intact. They left in their activation and pulled back behind the hill -- smart move since in the next turn, it would be HE rain all over their parade.

Spotted: half a squad of soon to be blasted Germans.

Back to the Crossroads: Turn 4

Damaged as they were, the Germans still nominally held the crossroad and leaving the British short of troops to make any realistic push. That's where the game ended. We played it as a four-turn game.

Order of Battle

Germans:

HQ Squad (Q-test 5+): 1 Lt, 3-man HMG, 2-man 80mm mortar, 1 rifleman
Squad 1 (Q-test 5+): 1 NCO, 2-man LMG, 4 riflemen
Squad 2 (Q-test 5+): 1 NCO, 2-man LMG, 4 riflemen
Marder III with 76mm gun (Q-test 4+)

British:

HQ Squad (Q-test 4+): 1 Lt, 2-man Bren team, 2-man 60mm mortar, 2 rifleman
Squad 1 (Q-test 4+): 1 NCO, 2-man Bren team, 4 riflemen
Squad 2 (Q-test 4+): 1 NCO, 2-man Bren team, 4 riflemen
Two Recon halftracks (Q-test 4+)
Cromwell tank with 95mm gun (Q-test 3+)
Comet tank (Q-test 3+)

Play Balance Suggestions:

Alter Q-tests up or down by 1
Add 3rd British or German infantry squad
Add one German 75mm AT gun
Add one 105mm artillery barrage