

Imphal: The Turning Point

The First Battle of Bishenpur:

The 9/14th Punjabis at Ningthoukong

22nd April 1944

A Scenario for *Battlefront: WWII*
By R Mark Davies



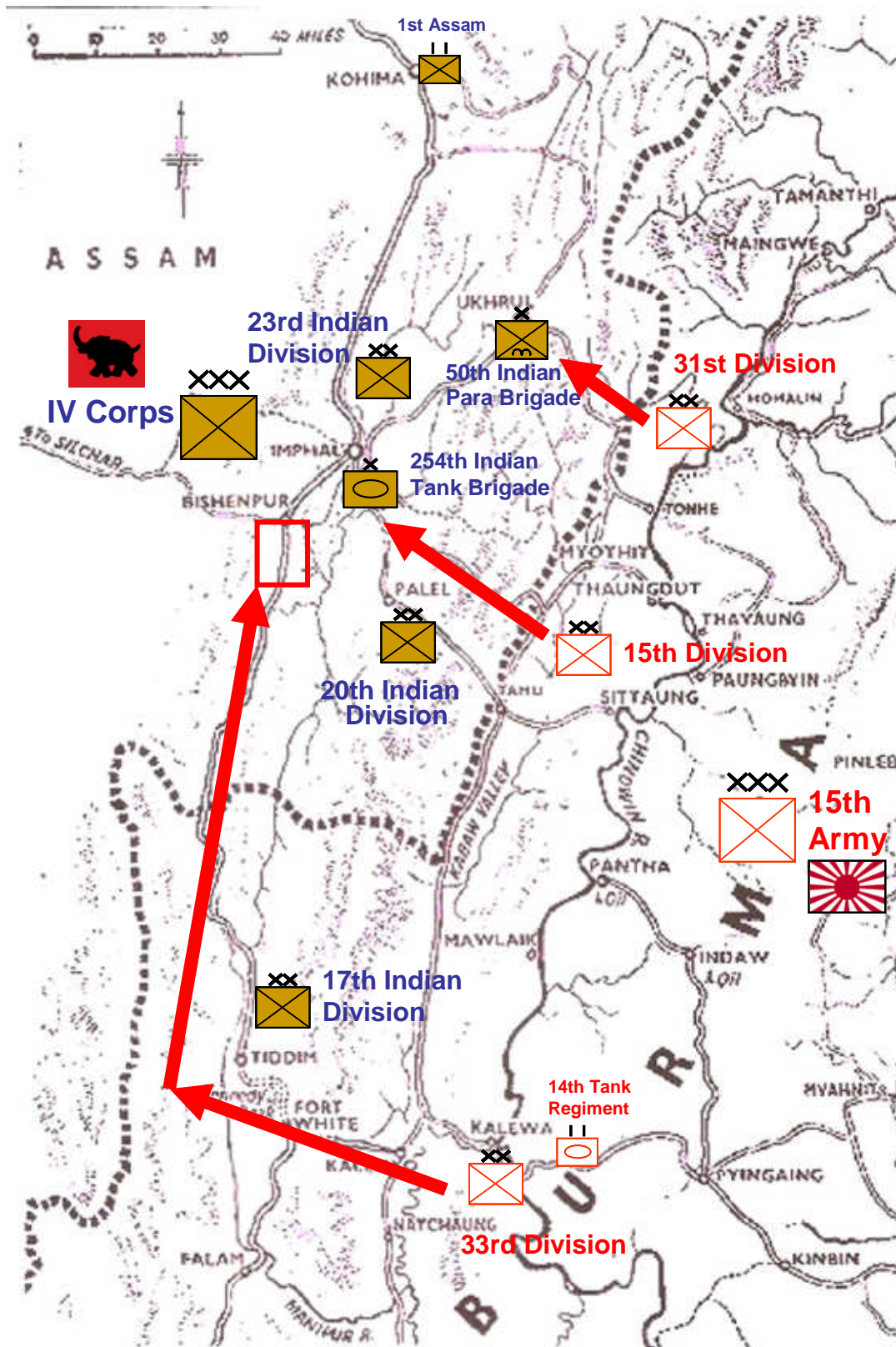
An Indian fighting patrol near Bishenpur, 1944

Historical Background

Following their distraction operation (Operation *Ha-Go*) in the Arakan coastal strip of Burma in the opening weeks of 1944, the Japanese opened their main offensive (Operation *U-Go*) against India in early March 1944. Their plan was to surround and destroy the Indian IV Corps at the city of Imphal while the rest of the Commonwealth 14th Army was still bogged down in the Arakan.

When the attack came, the 17th, 20th and 23rd Indian Infantry Divisions, along with the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade and 254th Indian Tank Brigade were still widely scattered along the border hills and were taken completely by surprise. Fighting desperate rearguard actions, the three divisions fought their way back toward Imphal. The Indian Paras meanwhile, fought to the last man at Sangshak, giving the 23rd ('Fighting Cock') Division time to form a defence line north and east of the city. Most critically, the Paras' sacrifice allowed time for other units to form a defensive 'box' at the critical depot of Kohima, mid-way along the Dimapur-Imphal road.

In the south, the 17th ('Black Cat') Division once again found itself fighting its old adversaries – the elite Japanese 33rd ('White Tigers') Infantry Division. Fighting grimly all the way, the 17th Division withdrew from the Chin Hills, through Tiddim, Singgel and back across the Indian border until they finally reached the high Imphal Plain. Here, in the flat, open paddy surrounding the marshy Logtak Lake, the British and Indian troops could bring their full combat power to bear on the Japanese. Each village on the plain was like a forested island, surrounded by a sea of flat, featureless dry paddy fields. If the villages were strongly held, the near-featureless plain between could be turned into a killing ground. Unfortunately, this could work both ways.

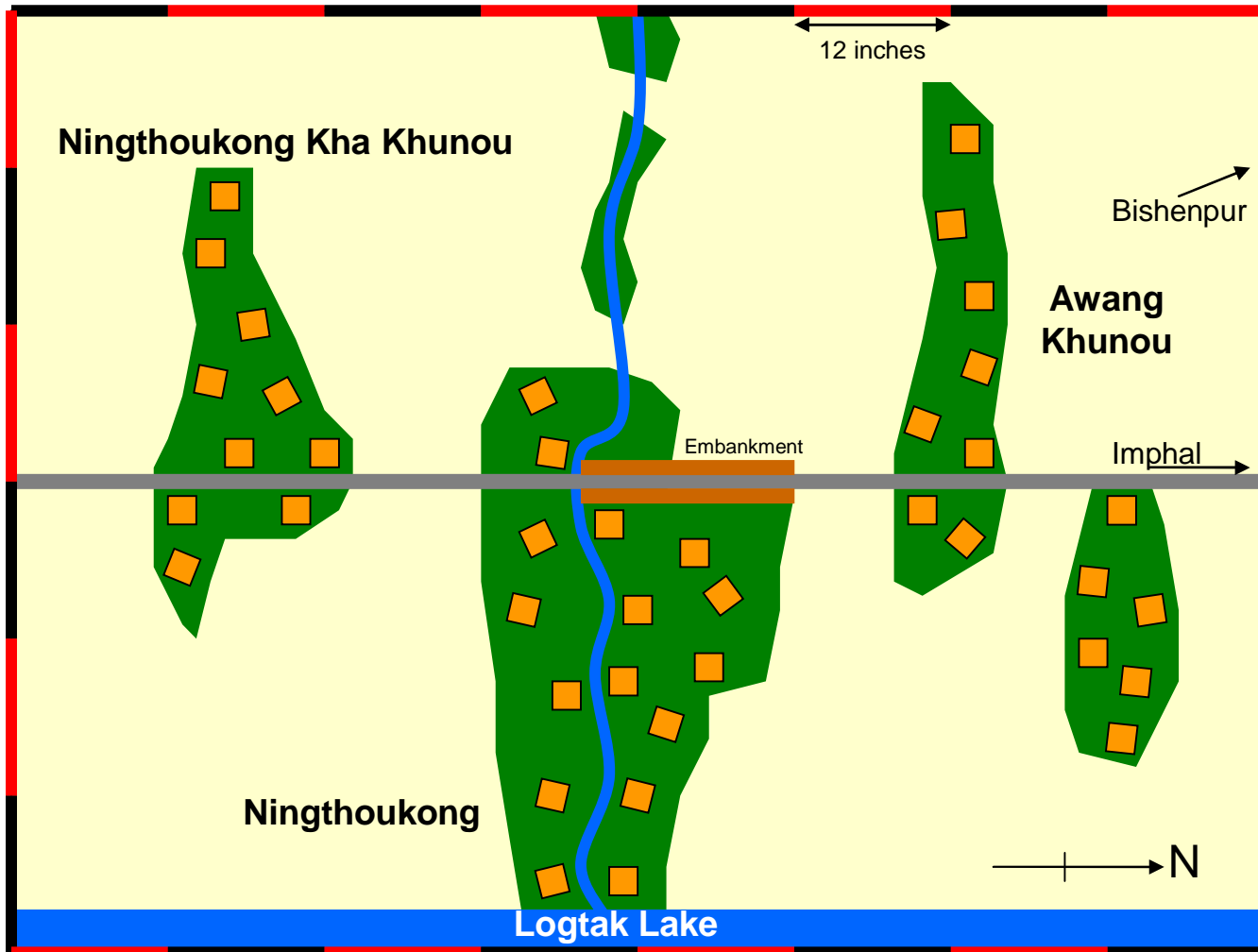


In mid-April, Brigadier MacKenzie's 32 Indian Brigade, temporarily transferred from 20th Division, was holding the plain while 17th Division regrouped following their retreat. The villages of Potsangbam and Bishenpur were strongly held, while the flanks were covered by mountains on the right and the marshy basin of Logtak Lake on the left. The village of Bishenpur was critical to the battle, as it guarded the point at which the 'Silchar Track' (the only supply route from Imphal to the west) exited the mountains to meet the plain.

However, the Japanese were making some headway in pushing back MacKenzie's outposts in villages on the plain and on the surrounding mountain tops. In the mountains, a Japanese raid also succeeded in destroying a suspension bridge on the Silchar Track, making that route unusable. However, even though the Silchar Track had been cut, the Bishenpur position was virtually the last line of defence south of Imphal and MacKenzie was ordered to hold his ground.

On 18th April, the Japanese launched their first major assault against the Bishenpur position: while two columns moved to outflank Bishenpur via the mountains, a third Japanese column was formed under one Lieutenant Colonel Taguchi, comprising Taguchi's own 4th Independent Engineer Regiment, Major Isagoda's 2nd Battalion of the 213th Infantry Regiment (less two companies), two anti-tank gun companies and most esoterically, a company of 320mm heavy spigot mortars carried by elephants. However, Taguchi failed to take Potsangbam and Bishenpur with his first assault, but succeeded in driving the Indians out of Ningthoukong, which lay a short way to the south.

With the arrival of reinforcements on the 19th, MacKenzie decided to attempt to seize the initiative back from the Japanese; on 22nd April the 9th Battalion, 14th Punjab Regiment was ordered against Ningthoukong. However, Taguchi was waiting...



Briefing for Lieutenant Colonel J R Booth, Commanding 9/14th Punjab Regt

Situation – Awang Khunou, 22nd April 1944

32 Indian Brigade, comprising the 1st Northamptonshires, 9/14th Punjabis and 2/8th Gurkhas, was until last month, manning an outpost line in the Kabaw Valley to the east. Then came the surprise Japanese attack and the brigade was forced, with the rest of 20th Indian Division, to mount a fighting retreat back to Imphal, to concentrate with the rest of IV Corps.

Upon arrival at Imphal, 32 Brigade was ordered south, to cover the Tiddim Road and junction of the Silchar Track at Bishenpur. The Silchar Track is only a minor Jeep track to the west, but since the Japanese cut the main Imphal-Dimapur road on 28th March, the Silchar Track was IV Corps' only remaining supply route.

Over the last few days, the battered 17th Indian Division has fallen back through your positions. They have had the hardest retreat of all, fighting over 100 miles from Fort White and Tiddim. Nevertheless, they have held their own and are in good spirits. However, the Japanese are hard on their heels and are working their way up through the villages of the plain in front of you and through the mountains on your left.

On the 15th a Japanese unit succeeded in destroying a suspension bridge in the hills, thereby cutting the Silchar Track and completely cutting Imphal and IV Corps off from even that meagre source of supply. IV Corps and Imphal are now totally dependent upon supplies flown in by the RAF. Nevertheless, 32 Brigade has been ordered to hold its ground regardless and has been reinforced with the addition of 1/4th Gurkhas and 4/12th Frontier Force Regiment from 17th Division, as well as tanks from 254th Indian Tank Brigade and a growing artillery group at Bishenpur.

This defensive line proved its worth on the 18th as the first major Japanese attack was stopped short of Bishenpur and Potsangbam. However, the fighting in the hills on the right is more confused and the Japanese are now digging themselves in to villages on the plain.

Brigadier MacKenzie has now ordered a probe into the plain, to discover the strength and location of Japanese forces and your battalion has been given the honour of leading the way into Ningthoukong.

Mission

- You are to conduct a reconnaissance in force against the village of Ningthoukong, with the intention of assessing the type, strength and location of the enemy forces ensconced there.

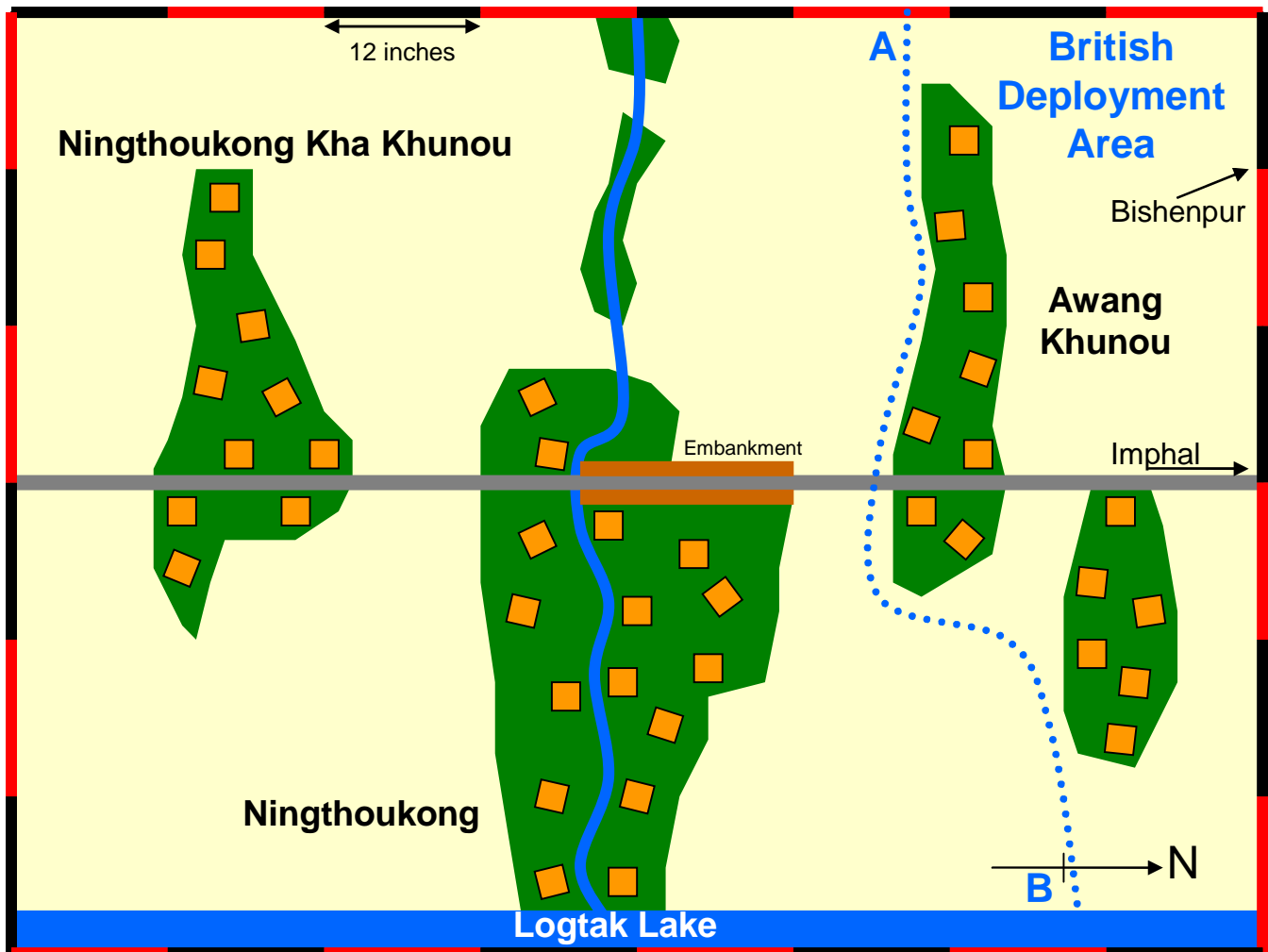
Execution

General Outline

- Your battalion, preceded by an air strike and with tanks and artillery in close support, will mount a limited attack to assess the type, strength and location of enemy forces in and around the village of Ningthoukong.
- You may deploy your forces anywhere north (right) of the line A-B marked on your map. Your units may not be deployed in improved positions, but heavy weapons may be emplaced and ready to fire.
- Your primary objective is to locate enemy units from as many different Manoeuvre Elements as possible, by Spotting or Suspecting them. Destroying enemy units would be a bonus, but this is not the primary mission. Remember that the Japanese player is unaware of your exact mission, so you would be wise to keep this quiet. A wise Japanese player will soon frustrate your reconnaissance efforts if you give the game away!

Friendly Forces

- Your battlegroup is detailed at Annex A below. In addition to your own battalion, you have the support of elements of 'C' Sqn, 150 RAC (254 Indian Tank Brigade), 311 Field Battery RA (17 Division) and 7/10th Baluchs (17 Division).
- There are no friendly forces on your left, as your left flank is covered by the swampy and impassable Logtak Lake. On your right, other elements of the brigade are engaged in a confused battle for the peaks of the Watershed Mountains.



Enemy Forces

- The exact composition, strength and location of enemy forces are unknown – that’s your job! However, fighting patrols have reported the enemy being present in Ningthoukong in at least company strength since 19th April.
- Enemy artillery units encountered thus far have been primarily light mortars and 105mm howitzers. The long range of the Japanese 105mm has frustrated counter-battery efforts thus far.
- Light tanks have been encountered by 23rd Division, but no enemy tanks have been reported here yet.
- The RAF, while having air superiority, has not yet won air supremacy and the Japanese Army Air Force does still mount the occasional air attack. However, these attacks do tend to be directed more at logistics and artillery positions rather than in support of the tactical battle.

Air Support

- An air-strike, comprising a squadron of **x6** Vengeance dive-bombers, will attack Ningthoukong and/or Ningthoukong Kha Khunou at H minus10 (i.e. in the Air Support Phase of British Turn 1).
- Once the Japanese player has deployed all his hidden unit markers, you are to select six targets for the dive-bombers.
- However, this air strike historically arrived forty minutes early, so the Japanese were able to recover from their shock before the Punjabis launched their attack. In game terms, this means that only outright KOs from the dive-bombers will count – ignore all Suppression and Disorder results.
- Any Japanese unit that is KO'd or conducts anti-aircraft fire will count as Suspected for Victory Point purposes.

Artillery Support

- 311 Field Battery is firing in Direct Support of the 9/14th Punjabis.
- The battery's two FOs must be attached to an on-table Manoeuvre Element or HQ Element.
- The battery may be given a pre-programmed fire plan once the Japanese player has deployed all his hidden unit markers. The fire plan may continue for a maximum of ten turns. This plan may be interrupted at any time by the Forward Observers calling for fire on spotted or suspected targets of opportunity. The fire plan may not be resumed once FOs have called for fire.
- The Punjabi company 2-inch mortars have unlimited smoke, but it always counts as dispersing smoke.
- 311 Field Battery and the Punjabi battalion 3-inch Mortar Platoon have only two rounds of smoke apiece.
- 311 Field Battery's Forward Observers may each call for a Troop fire mission (i.e. a half-battery) or for the whole battery. Obviously, if a Battery mission is being called by one FO, the other FO must cease fire.

Game Sequence

- The Commonwealth player has the first turn.
- The game lasts for 15 turns.

Commonwealth Victory Points

- **1 VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 25% casualties OR each knocked out Gun or armoured vehicle.
- **2 VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 50% casualties.
- **3VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 75% casualties.
- **½ VP** for each spotted or suspected Commander, MMG, gun, armoured vehicle or mortar larger than 80mm.
- **½ VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with 1-25% of its units spotted or suspected.
- **1 VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 25% of its units spotted or suspected.
- **2 VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 50% of its units spotted or suspected.
- **3 VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 75% of its units spotted or suspected.
- **Total Victory** – for having 11+ VPs more than the enemy.
- **Partial Victory** – for having 6-10 VPs more than the enemy.
- **Draw** – for having 0-5 VPs more (or less) than the enemy. The side with the higher number can claim a 'Winning Draw'.
- **N.B.** Count KO'd units as being spotted or suspected, even if they were not spotted or suspected prior to being KO'd (e.g. collateral damage in IDF or air strikes).
- **Remember to keep the Allied objectives and VP scoring system secret from the Japanese player!** The Japanese player will quickly work out your objectives if you count VPs as the game goes along, so be sneaky!

BATTLEGROUP
9th Battalion, 14th Punjab Regiment
 Lieutenant Colonel J R Booth (a)



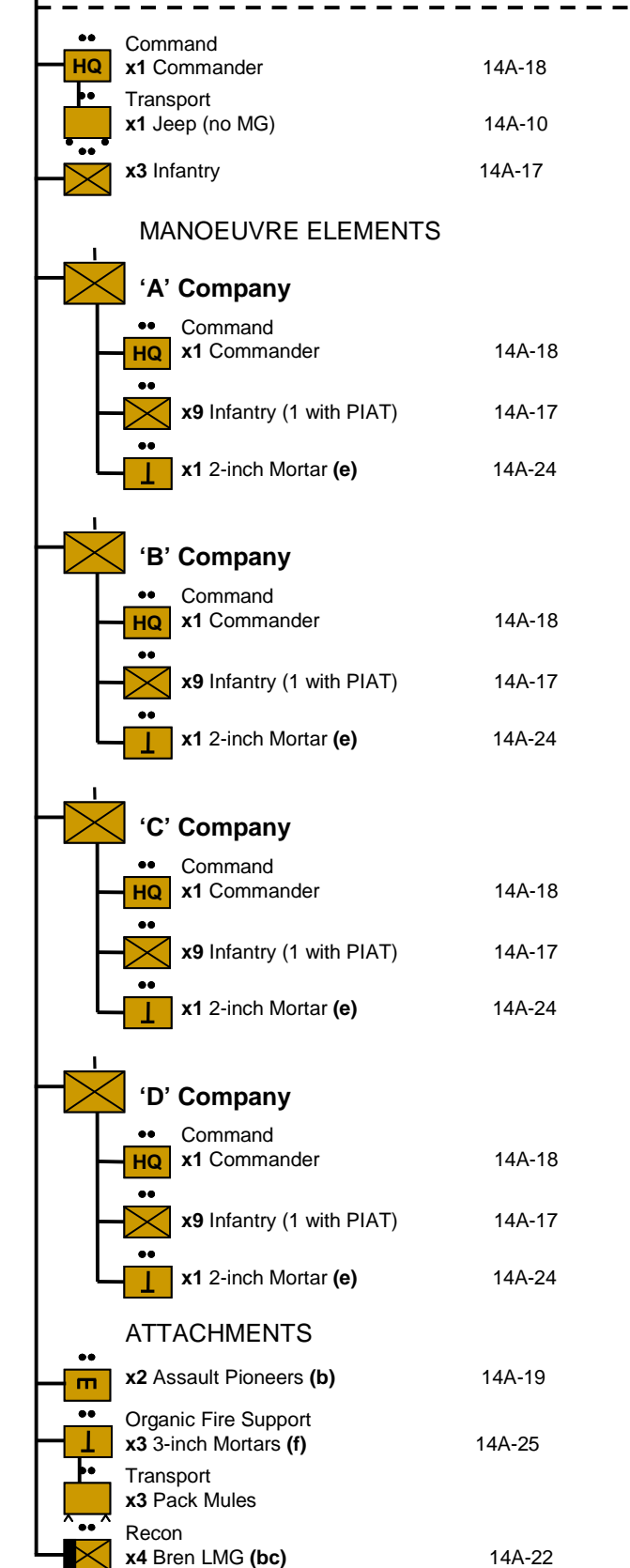
17th Indian Division



20th Indian Division

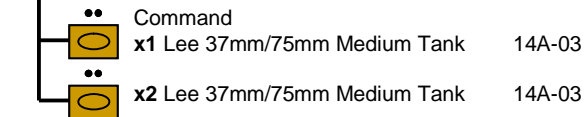


254th Indian Tank Brigade



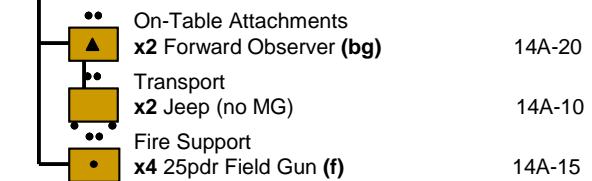
ATTACHED ELEMENTS, 254 TANK BRIGADE

MANOEUVRE ELEMENT
Half-Squadron, 'C' Squadron, 150th RAC

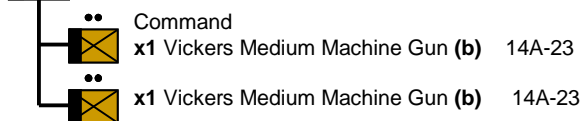


ATTACHED ELEMENTS, 17 INDIAN DIVISION

OFF-TABLE FIRE SUPPORT ELEMENT
311 Field Battery, 129 Field Regiment RA (d)



MANOEUVRE ELEMENT/ATTACHMENTS
Platoon, 7th (MG) Bn, 10th Baluch Regiment



(a) All elements of 9/14th Punjab and the attached units are rated as 'Experienced'.

(b) These elements may be directly attached to the infantry companies or to 9/14th Punjab Battalion HQ.

(c) These Bren Gun sections represent the dismounted Carrier Platoon.

(d) 311 Field Battery is firing in Direct Support of the 9/14th Punjabis. The battery may be given a preparatory fire plan once the Japanese player has deployed all his hidden unit markers. The fire plan may continue for a maximum of ten turns. This plan may be interrupted at any time by the Forward Observers calling for fire on spotted or suspected targets. The fire plan may not be resumed once FOs have called for fire.

(e) The 2-inch Mortars have unlimited smoke, but it always counts as dispersing smoke.

(f) 311 Field Battery and the Punjabi 3-inch Mortar Platoon have only two rounds of smoke.

(g) 311 Field Battery's Forward Observers may each call for a Troop fire mission (i.e. a half-battery) or for the whole battery. Obviously, if a Battery mission is being called by one FO, the other FO must cease fire.

Briefing for Lieutenant Colonel Taguchi, Commanding *Taguchi-Butai*

Situation – Ningthoukong, 22nd April 1944

Your 4th Independent Engineer Regiment has been attached to General Yanagida's 33rd Division for Operation *U-Go*: the 'March on Delhi', to provide additional engineering support. Good military engineering is vital in a region such as this with poor roads, mountainous terrain, deep gorges and few bridges or ferries.

For the last few weeks, 33rd Division has pursued the British-Indian 17th Division over 100 miles – all the way from the Kabaw Valley in Burma, through Tiddim and up the 'Tiddim Road' into Burma and up to the Imphal Plain, high in the mountains of Manipur province. The British are now at bay in the city of Imphal; they are surrounded by our victorious divisions and will soon be crushed. The road to India will then be wide-open and the Emperor's forces will liberate that oppressed country and will bring its inhabitants into the Greater Japan Co-Prosperity Sphere.

However, the British and their Indian slave-soldiers are fighting much harder than they have in previous campaigns. They are only delaying our inevitable victory, but nonetheless, they continue to fight hard and have inflicted heavy casualties on Yanagida's infantry. As a consequence, General Yanagida seems to be advancing more cautiously now than in the earlier part of the campaign, while support elements such as your own regiment, are being brought up to supplement the infantry.

Now that we have reached the Imphal Plain, the leading elements of the division have been split into three columns: The 214th and 215th Infantry Regiments are attacking through the mountains to the west, attempting to circumvent the enemy position at Bishenpur. They also have the task of cutting the Silchar Track, which is the last remaining open British supply route. Your own regiment meanwhile, forms the core of the third column, designated '*Taguchi-Butai*'. You have also been given command of Major Isagoda's 2nd Battalion of 213th Infantry Regiment (less two companies) and a battery of heavy mortars carried by elephants. As your column will be operating on the open plain, you have also been allocated a large contingent of anti-tank guns from 1st Independent Anti-Tank Battalion.

After numerous skirmishes on the plain, you finally came up against the main enemy defence line on the 18th. You put a strong attack in against the villages of Bishenpur and Potsangbam, but the enemy held fast. General Yanagida has therefore ordered you to hold fast while the other two columns outflank the Bishenpur position.

Your battlegroup has therefore spent the last three days digging in. There has been little activity on the plain during this period, though the battle continues to rage up in the hills to the west. However, Major Isagoda's battalion has just been hit by a squadron of enemy dive-bombers and there are the ominous sounds of tanks moving out in front.

The dust has now settled from the air attack and Major Isagoda's men are now ready and waiting for what is to come. Artillery is now starting to land among our positions. They are coming.

Mission

You are to hold the village of Ningthoukong against all enemy attacks, with the intention of retaining it as a jumping-off point for attacks against Bishenpur and Potsangbam.

Execution

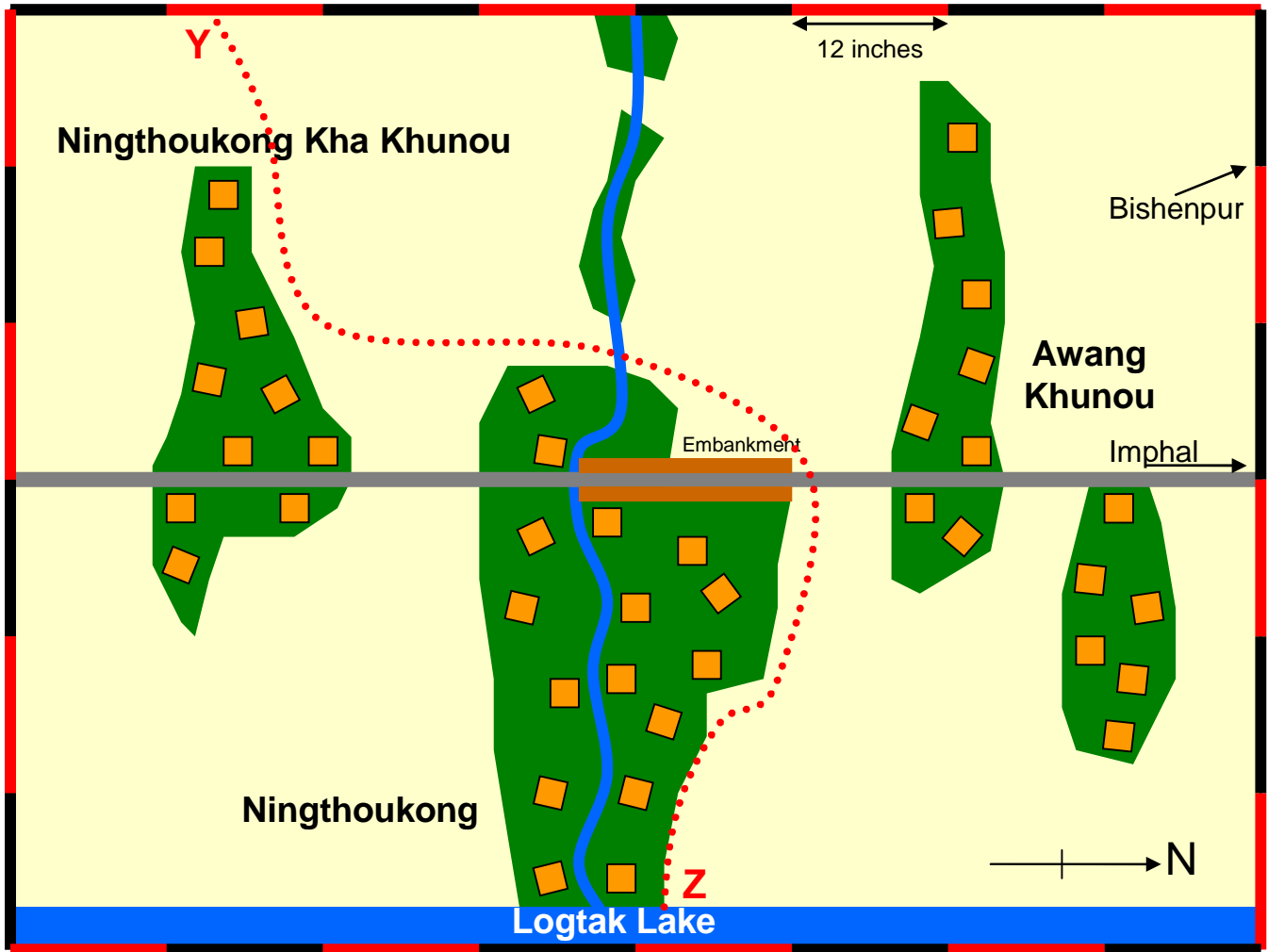
General Outline

- While your regiment rests in reserve, Major Isagoda's battalion, reinforced by the two anti-tank companies and the heavy mortar company, is digging in at Ningthoukong and Ningthoukong Kha-Khunou.
- You may deploy your forces as Hidden Unit Markers anywhere south of the line Y-Z marked on your map.
- You may also deploy 20 Dummy Unit Markers.
- The British air strike has struck too early to co-ordinate with their coming ground attack! Therefore, only count outright KOs in the initial Air Support Phase – ignore Suppression and Disorder results.
- Your HMGs may use the optional Grazing Fire rules (see website Optional Rules section).

Friendly Forces

- Major Isagoda's force is detailed at Annex A below.

- Your own regiment and headquarters is deployed in reserve and is therefore off-table and plays no part in this scenario.
- The bulk of Yanagida's 33rd Division is working its way up through the mountains on your left, though reinforcements, including the tanks of 14th Tank Regiment, continue to move up the Tiddim Road in your rear. Your right flank is secured by the impassable swamp of Logtak Lake.



Enemy Forces

- The enemy appear to have at least a brigade of three battalions defending the line from the mountains to Logtak Lake, with the centre of the line at Bishenpur.
- The enemy is well-supported by tanks, with at least a battalion in close support of the defence line.
- The enemy is well-supported by artillery, with at least two batteries of guns dug-in at Bishenpur. Our air force has been ordered to attack these guns and you intend to launch a raid with your engineers, under cover of darkness, to destroy at least some of them.
- The enemy air forces, while they do not have air supremacy, do certainly have air superiority. They range at will over the battlefield and our air forces seem to do little to stop them.

Air Support

- Our air forces are mainly concerned with hitting enemy logistics and artillery positions. They have shown little interest in supporting the Army in the tactical battle and so cannot be relied upon to provide support to you here.

Artillery Support

- Major Isagoda has the 105mm howitzers of 1st Battery, 18th Independent Heavy Artillery Regiment firing in Direct Support from off-table. A FO is deployed forward with Isagoda.

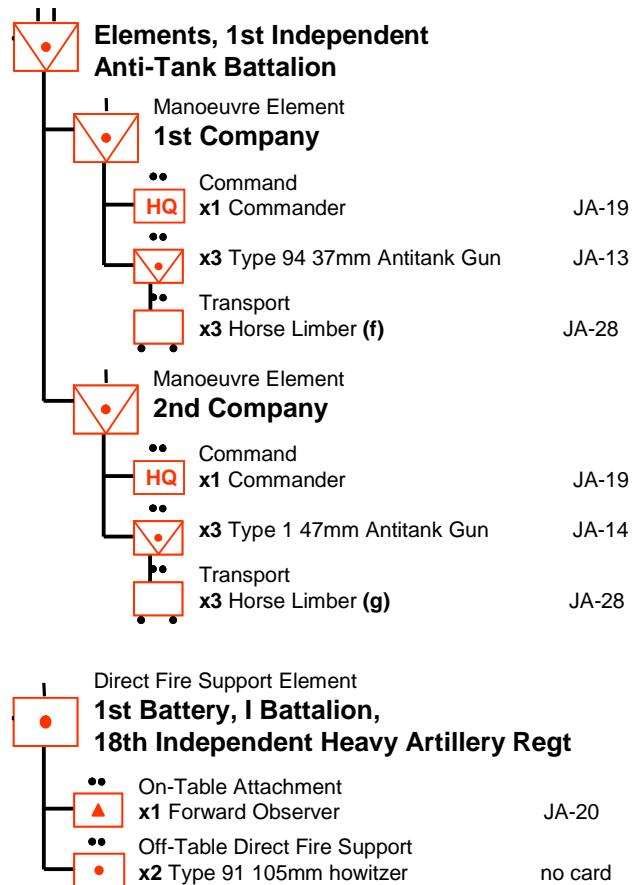
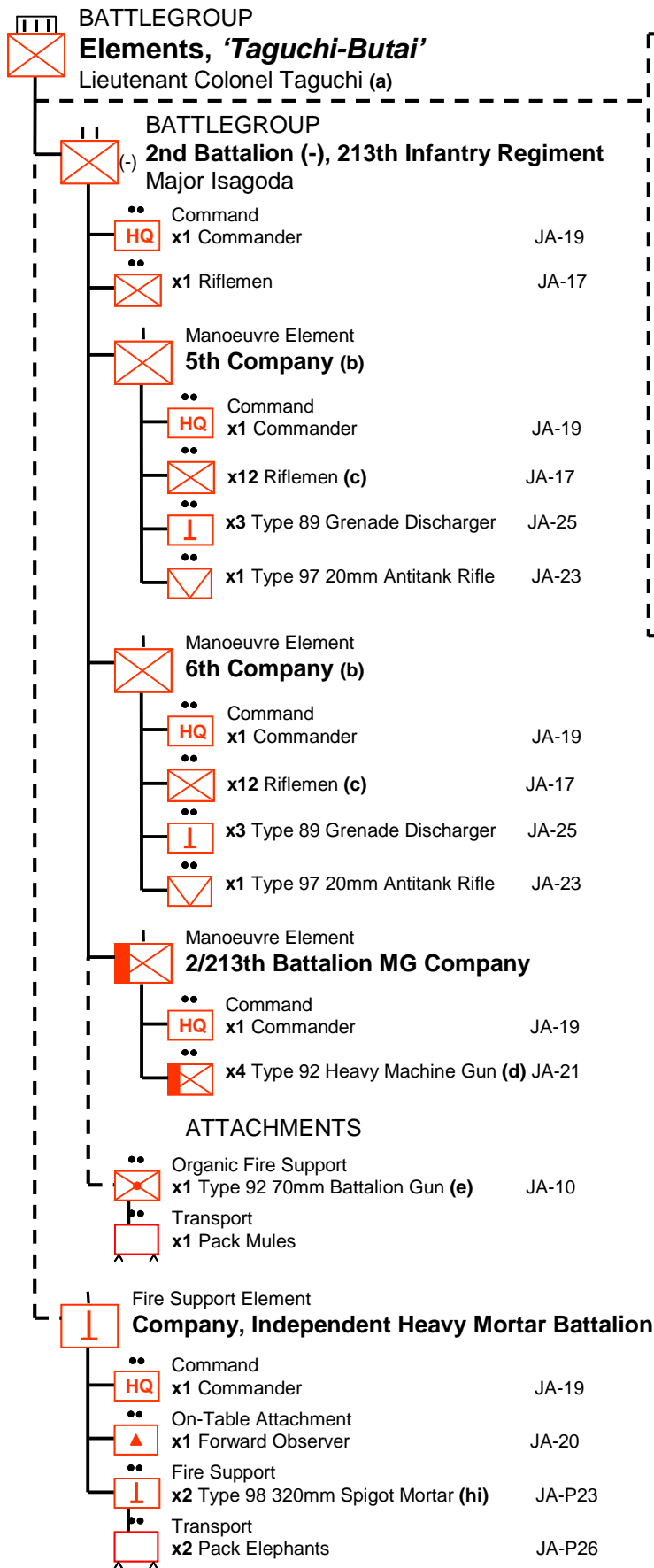
- One company of 320mm spigot mortars from an Independent Heavy Mortar Battalion is deployed forward with Major Isagoda. These weapons, while extremely powerful, have a crippling short range. However, their elephant transports give them reasonably good mobility in poor terrain.
- Major Isagoda has an organic Infantry Gun Platoon. However, he may have been equipped with 81mm mortars rather than 70mm battalion guns. The Japanese player may choose one or the other.
- Your indirect fire support elements may each pre-register a target point prior to the start of the game. Mark these pre-registered targets on your map.

Game Sequence

- The Commonwealth player has the first turn.
- The game lasts for 15 turns.

Japanese Victory Points

- **1 VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 25% casualties.
- **2 VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 50% casualties.
- **3VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 75% casualties.
- **1 VP** for each additional knocked out armoured vehicle or gun.
- **Total Victory** – for having 11+ VPs more than the enemy.
- **Partial Victory** – for having 6-10 VPs more than the enemy.
- **Draw** – for having 0-5 VPs more (or less) than the enemy. The side with the higher number can claim a 'Winning Draw'.



- (a) All elements of *Taguchi-Butai* are classed as 'Veteran'.
- (b) There is no record as to exactly which two companies were detached from 2/213th, so the numbering shown here is a guess.
- (c) The Rifle Section strength was increased for this operation, so I have added x3 Sections over and above the normal establishment.
- (d) The normal strength would be x6 MG Sections, though two MG Sections would probably have been detached with the two detached companies. Note that an MG Section may be directly attached to each Infantry Company, leaving the MG Company as only x2 MG sections strong.
- (e) The 70mm Battalion Gun may be replaced with:
 Type 97/99 81mm Mortar JA-26
- (f) May replace limbers for 37mm guns with:
 Pack Mule
- (g) May replace limbers for 47mm guns with:
 Type 94 Ko-Otsu Medium Truck JA-P06
- (h) I have no information on how Heavy Mortar Companies equipped with 320mm Spigot Mortars were organised. It is highly likely that they had fewer weapons than those equipped with the far more typical Type 94/97 90mm Mortar, but the figure given here of x2 weapons is simply a semi-educated guess.
- (i) The fire of the two spigot mortars may not be concentrated.

Terrain Effects

- Dry Paddy** - This was mainly Open terrain, with very little cover, despite the densely-packed paddy fields. However, there might be occasional Low Banks dividing some paddy fields from the next (half speed for Troops, Breach for Tracked Vehicles and Breach/Bog Check for Guns & Wheeled Vehicles). Low Banks also provide Soft Cover and Sparse Edge Concealment to units conformed to them.
- Village/Wood** - The villages were scattered affairs, with each family farmstead surrounded by earth banks, hedges, orchards and spice trees. Rather than make these terrain areas very complicated, it is easier to class the whole area as one terrain type: Dense Area Concealment. Soft Cover. Full speed for Troops. Half speed & Bog Check for all Vehicles and Guns. No Rapid Advance permitted within villages.
- Road** - The Tiddim-Imphal Road is Paved – double Road speed for all unit types.
- Banked Road** - Classed as High Embankments. Dense Edge concealment. Hard Cover. Troops must Breach to cross. Breach & Bog Check for all other unit types.
- Gully/Stream** - Sparse Edge Concealment. Hard Cover. Breach and Bog Check for Troops to enter or exit. Impassable to all other unit types, except at bridge. Half Speed for Troops to move along.
- B.U.S.** - Wooden buildings, often built of very flimsy materials, but the locals would often surround them with banks and hedges and even air raid shelters. These are rambling settlements, so there is no 'Street' terrain type in between them.
- Logtak Lake** - Although it is actually more of a swamp than a lake, it is impassable to all units.

Special Rules

Heavy MG Grazing Fire

- See website optional rules

Light Mortar Targeting

- Through play-testing, we have found that light mortars and grenade dischargers such as the British 2-inch Mortar and the Japanese 50mm Grenade Discharger, don't really inflict their historical effect in close terrain, due to the requirement to have line of sight on a target. Therefore, we have devised the following alternative rule, which seems to work rather well:
 - Light Mortars or Grenade Dischargers organic to an ME may fire indirectly without calling for fire at targets that have been Spotted by units of the same ME.
 - Units performing such fire automatically apply the modifier for Random Shelling.

Scenario Balancing Options

Favouring the Commonwealth

- Add a Forward Air Controller (14A-20). Roll a D10 in each air support phase. On a roll of 8, 9 or 0 a close support aircraft becomes available. Roll again to determine the type of air support:
 - 1-4 = Hurricane Mk IIc fighter-bomber armed with bombs (card 14A-26)
 - 5-8 = Vengeance Mk I dive-bomber armed with bombs (website prototype card BR-P85)
 - 9-0 = Vengeance Mk II dive-bomber armed with bombs (website prototype card BR-P85)

Favouring the Japanese

- The rest of I Battalion, 18th Independent Artillery Regiment, consisting of two more weak batteries, each with **x1** 105mm howitzer, becomes available in General Support.
- HMGs and/or anti-tank guns may be deployed in log bunkers.

