

Imphal: The Turning Point

The First Battle of Bishenpur:

The 1/4th Gurkhas at Ningthoukong

25th April 1944

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



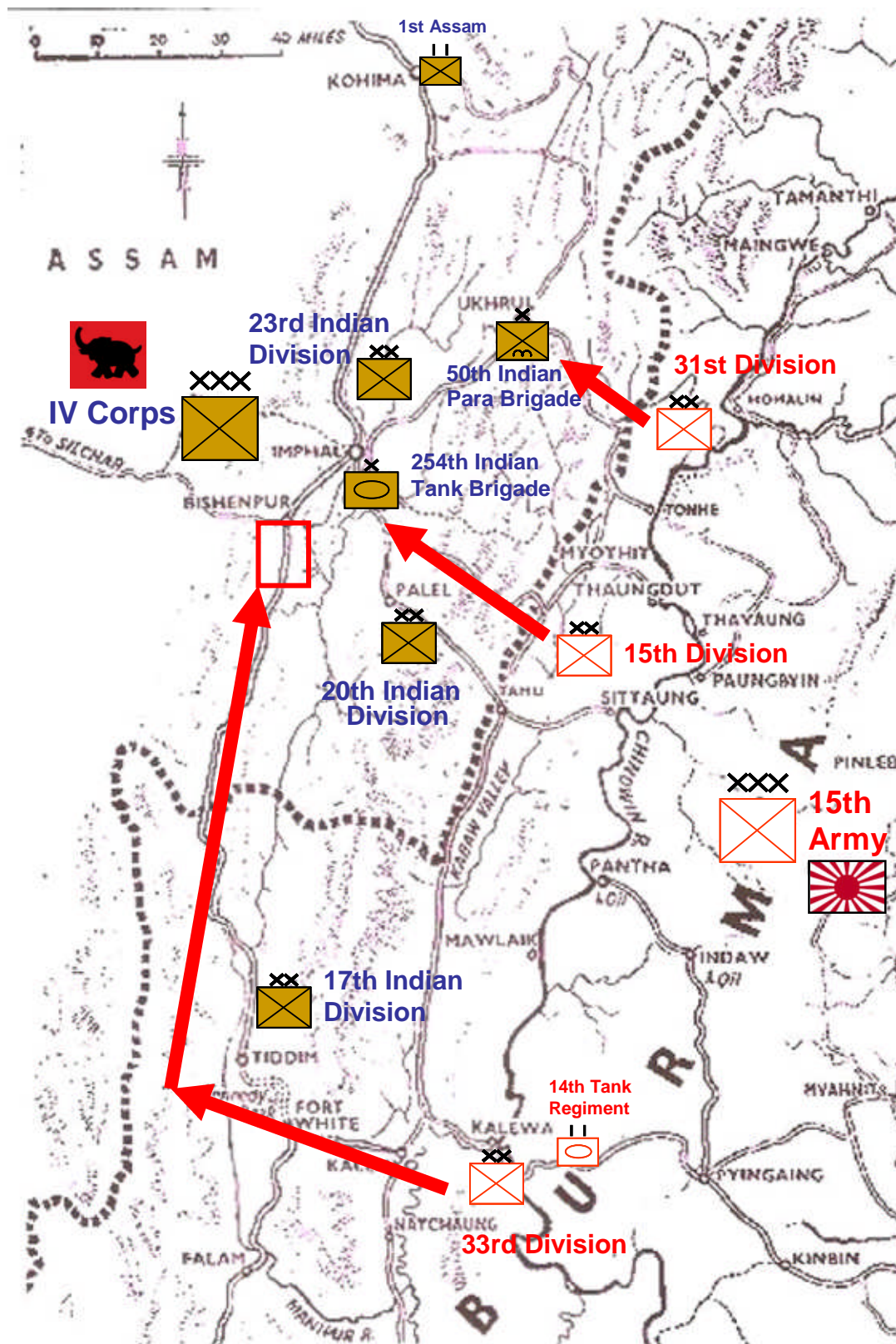
An Indian recon patrol near Bishenpur, 1944

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.



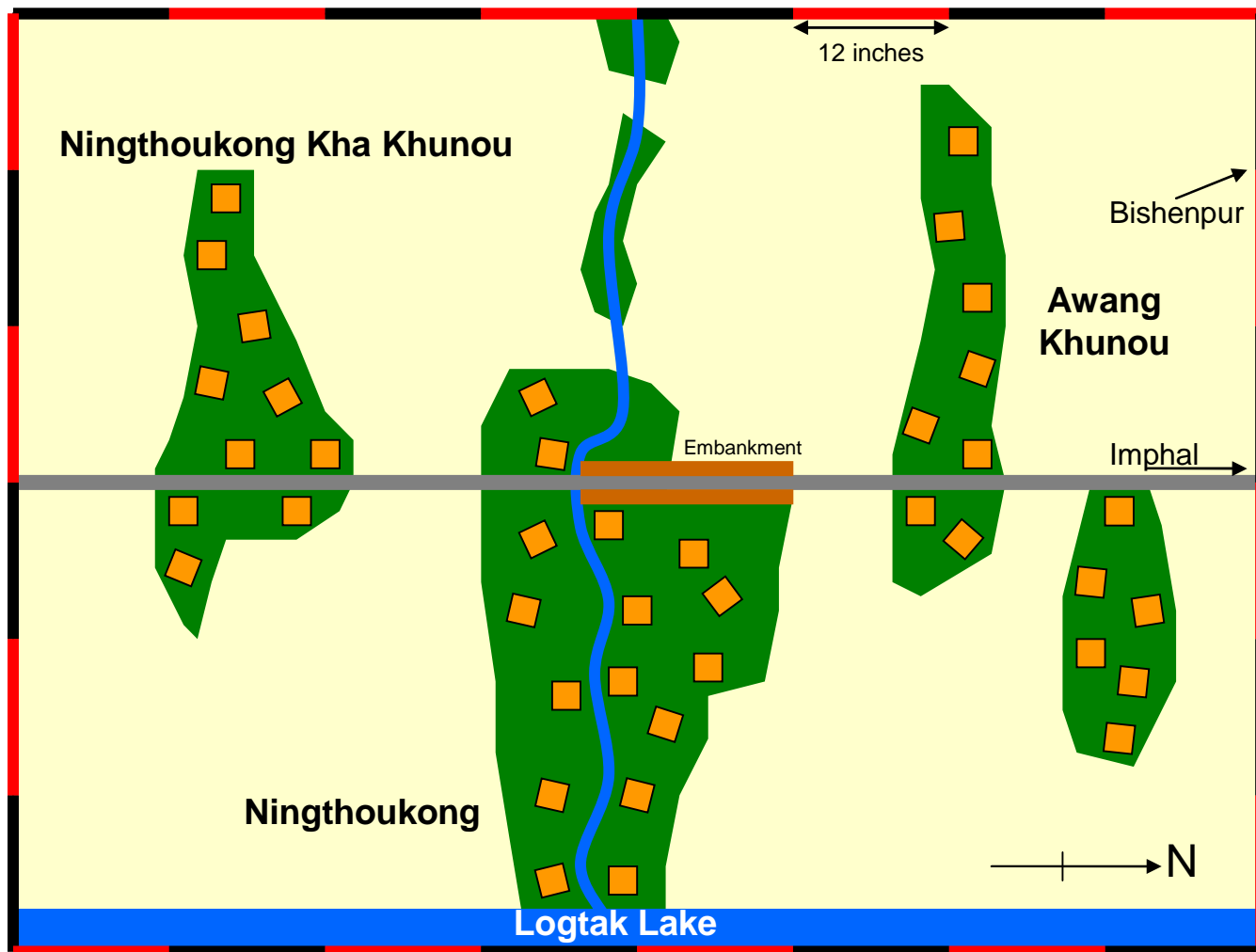
In mid-April, Brigadier MacKenzie's 32 Indian Brigade, temporarily transferred from 20th Division, was holding the plain while 17th Division regrouped following their retreat. The villages of Potsangbam and Bishenpur were strongly held, while the flanks were covered by mountains on the right and the 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 to mount a reconnaissance in force against Ningthoukong. However, the village was already strongly held by the 'Taguchi Group' (*Taguchi-Butai*) and the Punjabis suffered 85 casualties, while the 150th RAC lost one of their tanks to a direct hit from a 320mm spigot mortar.

With the reconnaissance done and despite the casualties suffered by the Punjabis, Brigadier MacKenzie ordered 1/4th Gurkhas into the attack...



Briefing for Lieutenant Colonel William H B Oldham, Commanding 1/4th (Prince of Wales' Own) Gurkha Rifles

Situation – Awang Khunou, 25th April 1944

63 (All-Gurkha) Indian Brigade, comprising the 1/3rd, 1/4th and 1/10th Gurkhas, was until last month, manning an outpost line beyond Tiddim, far to the south. Then came the surprise Japanese attack and the brigade was forced, with the rest of 17th Indian Division, to mount a fighting retreat back to Imphal, over 100 miles distant, to concentrate with the rest of IV Corps.

The retreat was hard, but nowhere near as hard as the 1,000-mile retreat of 1941. On this occasion you are certain that you have inflicted as much (possibly more) damage on the enemy as they have on you and the men remain in irrepressibly good spirits, despite their sore feet and casualties.

Upon arrival at the high Imphal Plain, 63 Brigade fell back through a defensive line at Bishenpur formed by 32 Brigade from 20th Indian Division. Having finally reached safety, your battalion was then able to have the first proper rest it has enjoyed in nearly a month of marching and fighting.

However, the good times were not to last long. The Japanese were following hard on your heels as you retreated up the Tiddim Road and they are now working their way up through the villages of the plain to the south and through the mountains on the western side of the plain.

On the 19th, your battalion was ordered along with 4/12th Frontier Force Regiment, tanks from 254th Tank Brigade and 311 Field Battery, to reinforce 32 Brigade at the village of Bishenpur, which marks the junction of the Tiddim Road with the Silchar Track. 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. However, a Japanese unit succeeded in cutting the Silchar Track by destroying a bridge on the 15th, thereby 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, the reinforced 32 Brigade has been ordered to hold its ground regardless.

Brigadier MacKenzie, encouraged by these reinforcements, decided to take the fight back to the enemy on the 22nd and ordered 9/14th Punjabis to mount a reconnaissance in force against the enemy-held village of Ningthoukong. However, the Punjabis found the village to be strongly-held and suffered 85 casualties for their pains, as well as a burnt-out tank.

With the reconnaissance done, Brigadier MacKenzie is determined to eradicate the threat and now your battalion has been allocated the task of clearing the enemy out of Ningthoukong.

Mission

- You are to assault the village of Ningthoukong, with the intention of removing the enemy fully from the village.

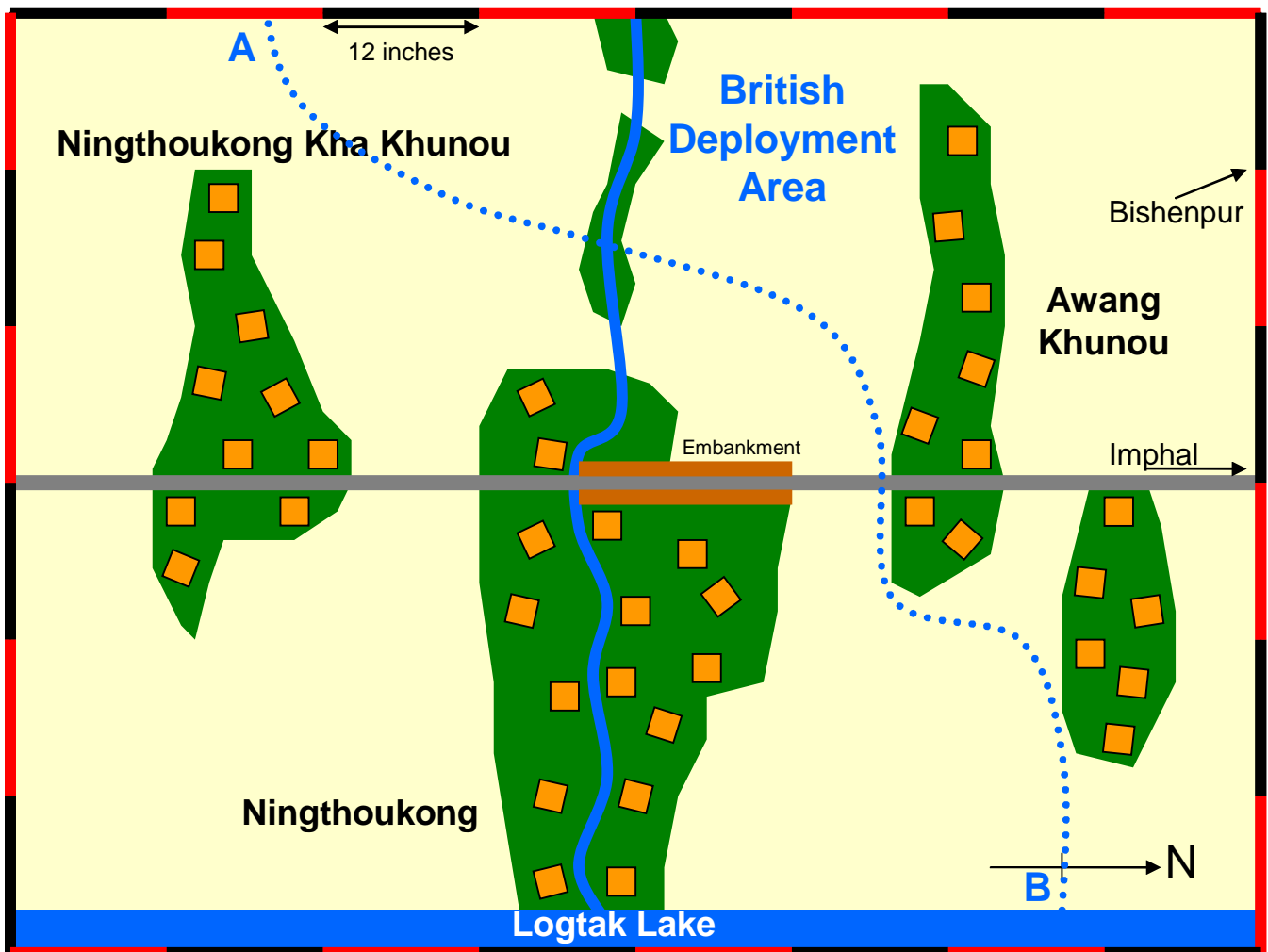
Execution

General Outline

- Your battalion, preceded by an air strike and with tanks and artillery in close support, will assault the village of Ningthoukong.
- You may deploy your forces anywhere west and north (right) of the line A-B marked on your map. However, no Vehicles or Guns may be deployed south (right) of the stream, as the only practicable crossing-point is at the bridge in Ningthoukong.
- Your units may not be deployed in improved positions, but heavy weapons may be emplaced and ready to fire.
- You would be unwise to use exactly the same approach route as 9/14th Punjab and Brigadier MacKenzie has therefore suggested flanking the position and attacking from the west (i.e. the top of the map).

Friendly Forces

- Your battlegroup is detailed at Annex A below. In addition to your own battalion, you have the support of 'C' Sqn, 150 RAC (254 Indian Tank Brigade), 7/10th Baluchs (17 Division) and the freshly-reinforced artillery group at Bishenpur.
- 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

- Enemy forces are present in Ningthoukong and Ningthoukong Kha Khunou in battalion strength. They are very well supported by MGs, mortars and anti-tank guns.
- Enemy artillery units encountered thus far have been primarily mortars, 105mm howitzers and extremely powerful (but thankfully very short-ranged) 320mm spigot mortars. The long range of the Japanese 105mm had been frustrated counter-battery efforts, but IV Corps has sent up a pair of long-range 3.7-inch Heavy Anti-Aircraft Guns, which have performed extremely well in counter-battery work.
- 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 (BR-P85), will attack Ningthoukong and/or Ningthoukong Kha Khunou at H minus 10 (i.e. in the Air Support Phase of British Turn 1). These aircraft will not return to mount strafing attacks.

- Once the Japanese player has deployed all his hidden unit markers, you are to select six targets for the dive-bombers.
- Further air support may become available as the day goes on. 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)
- Once they become available, the aircraft will remain on-station until the Forward Air Controller successfully calls them in. If more than one aircraft becomes available, they will form a 'cab-rank' and will attack in the sequence in which they arrived.
- If a cab-rank has formed, successive and consecutive attacks on the same target will earn the +1 'Bracketed' Call-For-Fire modifier.
- Aircraft may return for a second (strafing only) attack on any Spotted, Suspected or Hidden units.

Artillery Support

- 311 Field Battery and an Indian Mountain Battery are firing in Direct Support of the 9/14th Punjabis.
- Each battery has two FOs, who must be attached to an on-table Manoeuvre Element or HQ Element.
- Each 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.
- 'C' Squadron, 150th RAC (or any portion of it) may also be included in the preparatory fire-plan. They may fire indirectly at any target within direct line-of-sight, regardless of range, provided each tank firing indirectly is placed within 2-inches of its neighbour – as per the rulebook.
- Tanks firing indirectly use a Small IDF template, with -1 vV and 0 vTGsV.
- The tanks must stop firing indirectly once ANY tanks start moving or engaging targets of opportunity.
- The Punjabi company 2-inch mortars have unlimited smoke, but it always counts as dispersing smoke.
- 311 Field Battery, the Mountain Battery and the Punjabi battalion 3-inch Mortar Platoon have only two rounds of smoke apiece.
- The 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.
- Multi-Battery shoots such as 'Mike Targets' are not available.

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.

- **3 VP** for having the only un-disordered troops within the northern half of Ningthoukong at the end of the game.
- **5 VP** for having the only un-disordered troops within the southern half of Ningthoukong at the end of the game.
- **3 VP** for having the only un-disordered troops within 6 inches of the bridge at the end of the game.
- **3 VP** for having the only un-disordered troops within Ningthoukong Kha Khunou at the end of the game.
- **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'.

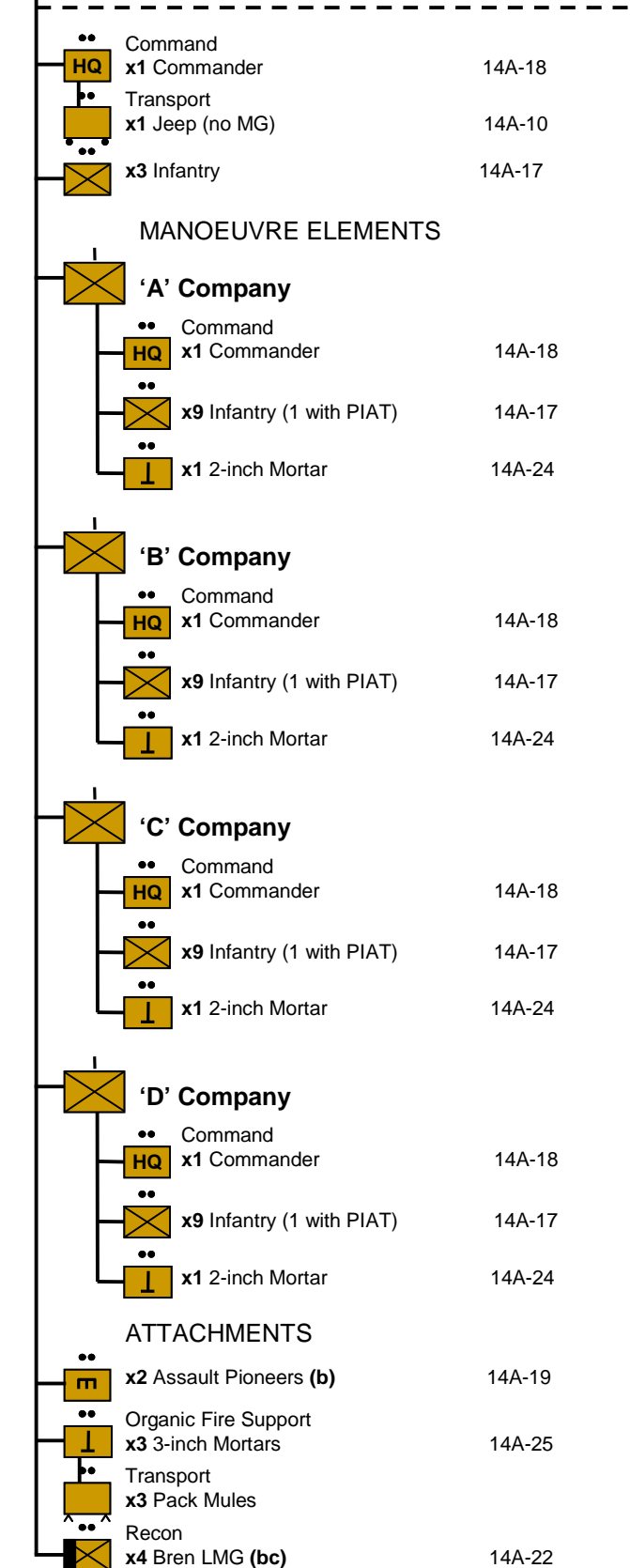
BATTLEGROUP
1st Battalion, 4th (Prince of Wales' Own) Gurkha Rifles
 Lieutenant Colonel William H B Oldham (a)



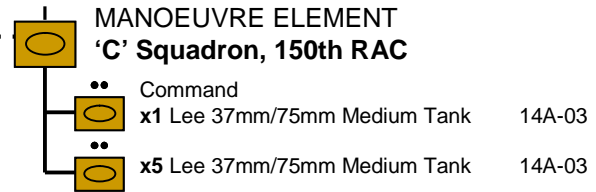
17th Indian Division



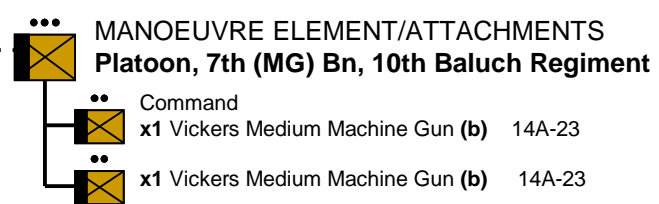
254th Indian Tank Brigade



ATTACHED ELEMENTS, 254 TANK BRIGADE



ATTACHED ELEMENTS, 17 INDIAN DIVISION



- (a) All elements of 1/4th Gurkhas are rated as 'Veteran', while the attached units are rated as 'Experienced'.
- (b) These elements may be directly attached to the infantry companies or to 1/4th Gurkhas HQ.
- (c) These Bren Gun sections represent the dismounted Carrier Platoon.

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

Situation – Ningthoukong, 25th 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 few days digging in. Major Isagoda's battalion beat off an enemy probe on the 22nd, but they seem to be gearing up for a full-blooded attack. Our Army Air Force bombed the enemy artillery positions at Bishenpur yesterday, but seemingly to no effect, as their guns have been shelling you again today.

The sound of tanks is once again clear in the morning mist and you can hear the unmistakable sound of enemy aircraft coming in...

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

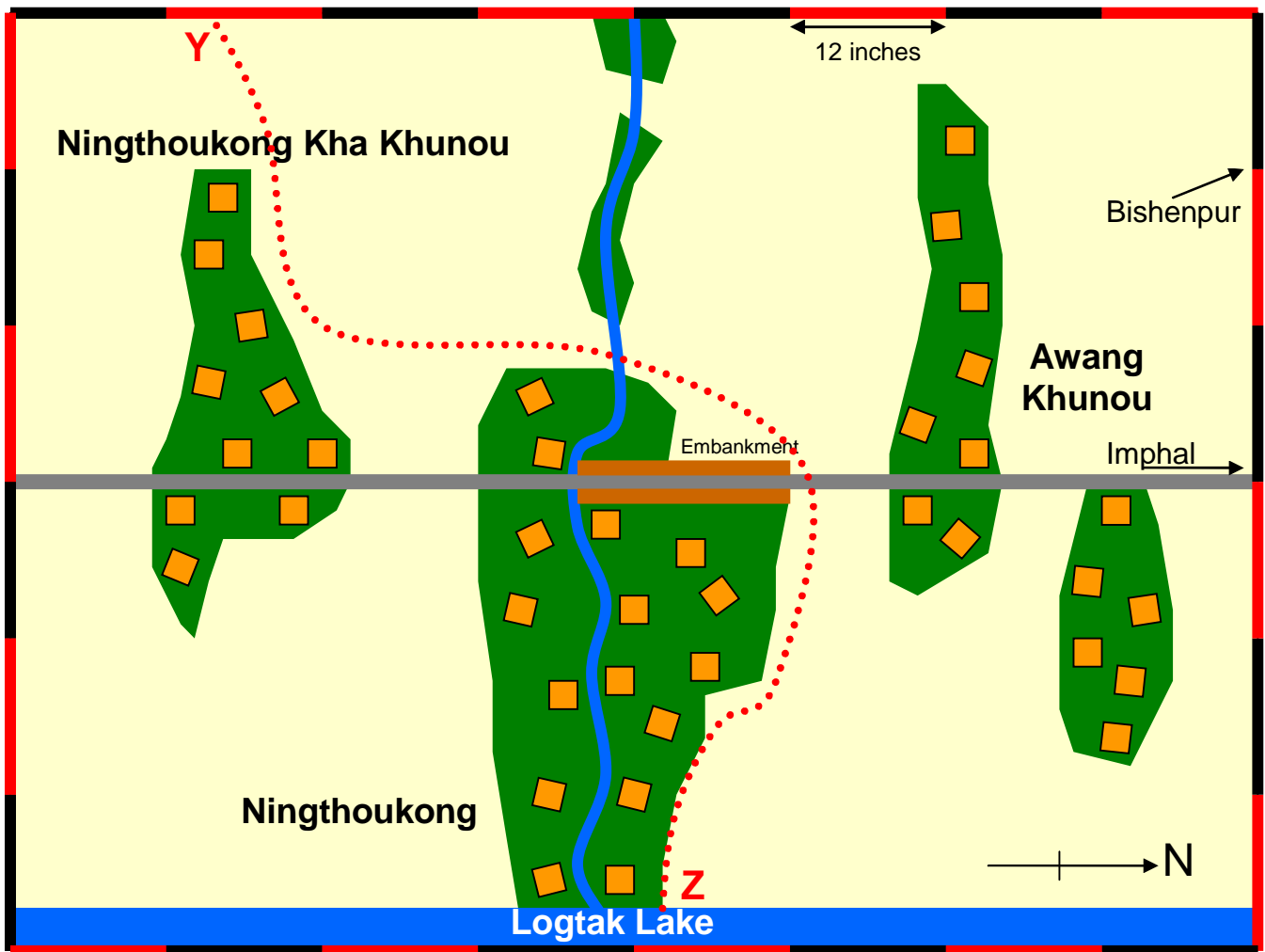
General Outline

- Major Isagoda's battalion, reinforced by the heavy mortar company, is dug in at Ningthoukong. In the meantime, you have brought up your headquarters and two Engineer companies and are digging in at Ningthoukong Kha-Khunou. Your two anti-tank companies are dug-in, in support of the battlegroup.
- 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 – 10 in each of the two villages held by your battlegroup.
- Your HMGs and Commanders may be deployed in log bunkers.
- Your HMGs may use the optional Grazing Fire rules (see website Optional Rules section).

Friendly Forces

- Your forces are detailed at Annex A below.

- Your third engineer company 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

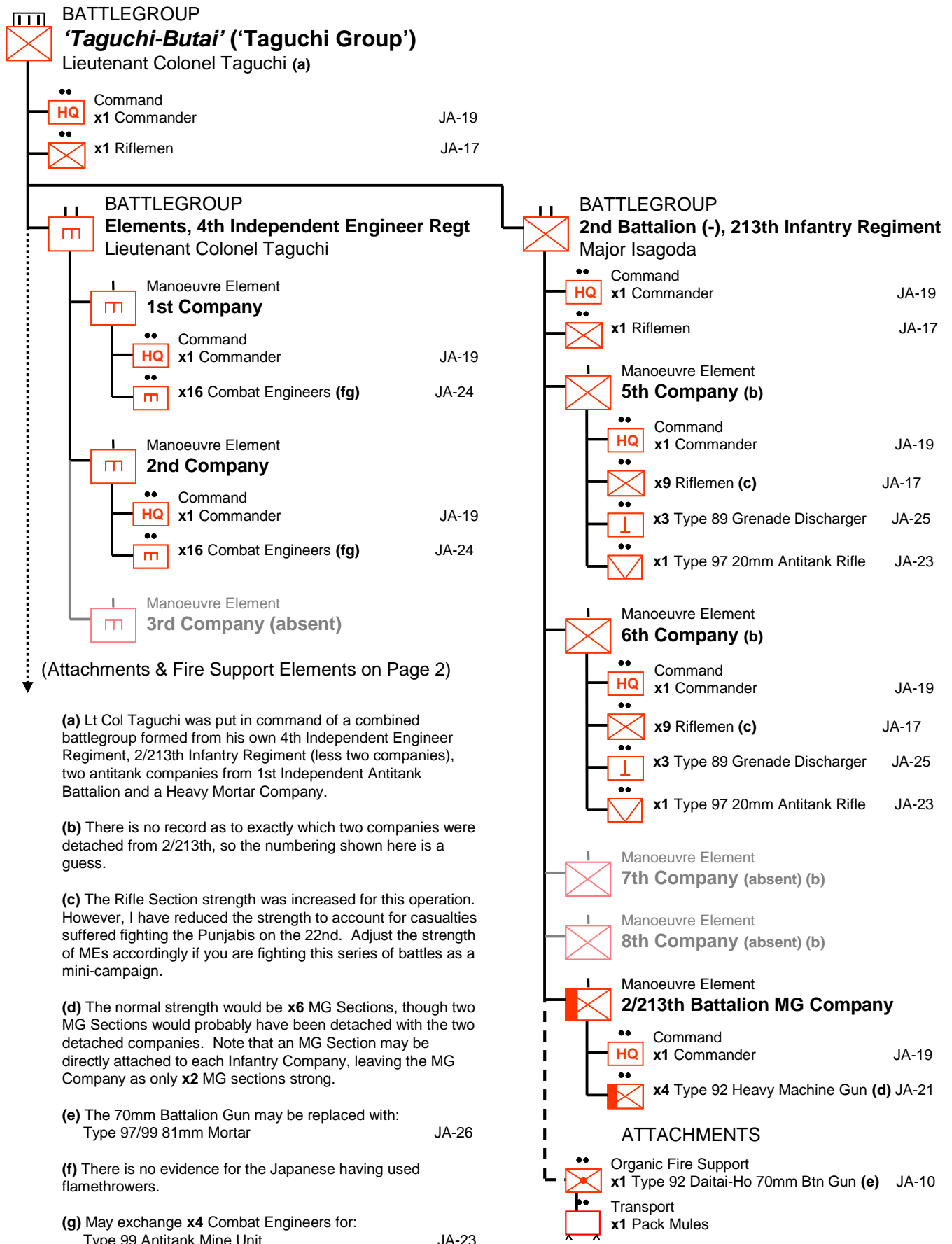
- You have the 105mm howitzers of 1st Battery, 18th Independent Heavy Artillery Regiment firing in Direct Support from off-table, while the rest of the battalion is available in General Support. A FO is deployed forward with Isagoda.
- One company of 320mm spigot mortars from an Independent Heavy Mortar 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

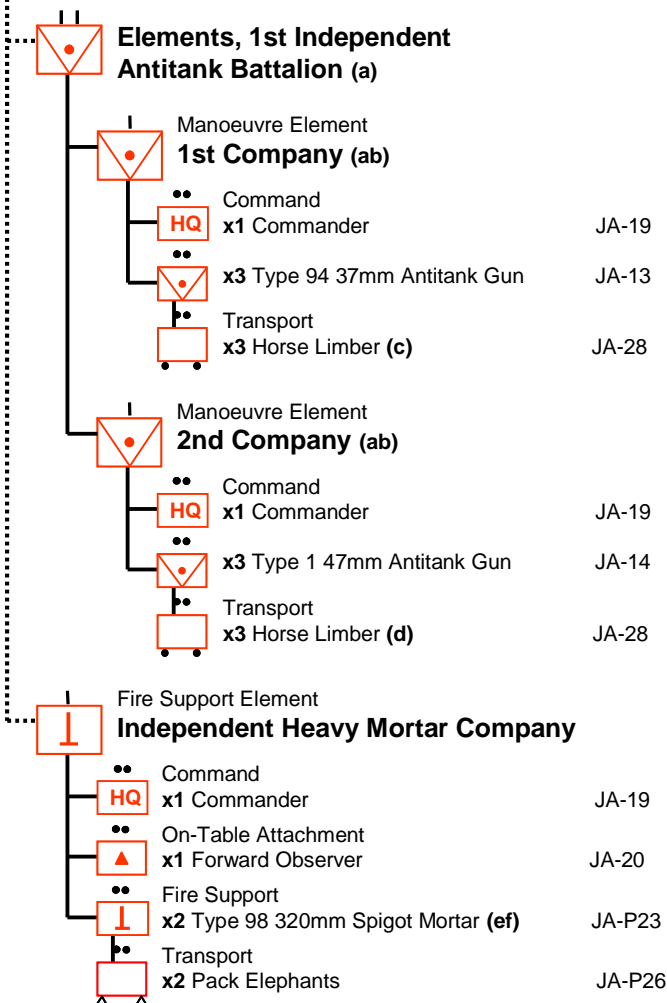
- The Commonwealth player has the first turn.
- The game lasts for 15 turns.

Japanese Victory Points

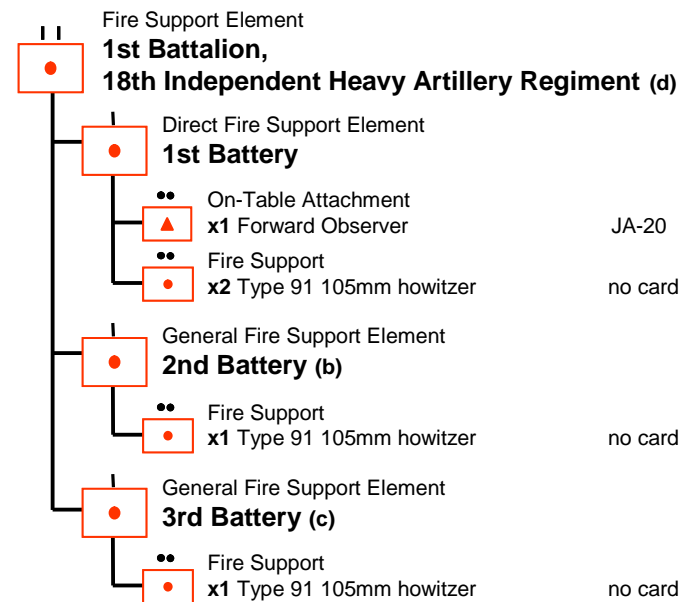
- **1 VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 25% casualties.
- **2 VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 50% casualties.
- **3VP** for each enemy Manoeuvre Element with greater than 75% casualties.
- **1 VP** for each additional knocked out armoured vehicle or gun.
- **5 VP** for having the only un-disordered troops within the southern half of Ningthoukong at the end of the game.
- **3 VP** for having the only un-disordered troops within 6 inches of the bridge at the end of the game.
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Fire Support Elements Assigned to Taguchi



(a) The 1st & 3rd Battalions of 18th Independent Heavy Artillery Regiment were supporting 33rd Division, with 2nd Battalion (minus 4th Battery) joining the regiment on 1st June. Only one battery from 1st & 3rd Battalions was at full-strength (I have arbitrarily designated this as 1st Battery), though all batteries of 2nd Battalion were at full strength (which possibly explains why they were so late arriving). Taguchi's Group at Bishenpur received very strong support from 105mm guns, so I have allocated a full battalion here.

(b) The full battalion is available in General support.

(a) There is no record as to exactly which two companies were present from 1st Antitank Battalion, so I have arbitrarily given them 1st & 2nd Company designations.

(b) The Antitank Companies may alternatively be split up as individual attachments to the battalion's Rifle Companies or Headquarters Element.

(c) May replace limbers for 37mm guns with:
Pack Mule

(d) May replace limbers for 47mm guns with:
Type 94 Ko-Otsu Medium Truck JA-P06

(e) 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.

(f) The fire of the 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 **x1** 5.5-inch Medium Gun (Large template +1 vV & +2 vTGsV) available in General Support.
- Make air support available on a roll of 6, 7, 8, 9 or 0.

Favouring the Japanese

- Anti-tank guns and a proportion of the Riflemen squads may also be deployed in log bunkers.
- Add **x2** Anti-Aircraft machine guns.

Playing The First Battle of Bishenpur as a Mini-Campaign

This scenario may be played as part of a mini-campaign, as it follows directly on from the scenario '9/14th Punjabis at Ningthoukong'. If this is the case, the Japanese player must remove elements that were lost by Major Isagoda's group during the first scenario and the British player must remove any tanks that were lost by 'C' Squadron, 150th

RAC prior to the start of this scenario. If Commanders have been lost, another element within that ME must be replaced with a Commander (or Command Tank in the case of 150th RAC).