

'The Neck Of The Swan'

The Battle of Wetteren Bridge

Belgium, 6th September 1944

A 'Battlefront: WWII' Scenario
By R Mark Davies

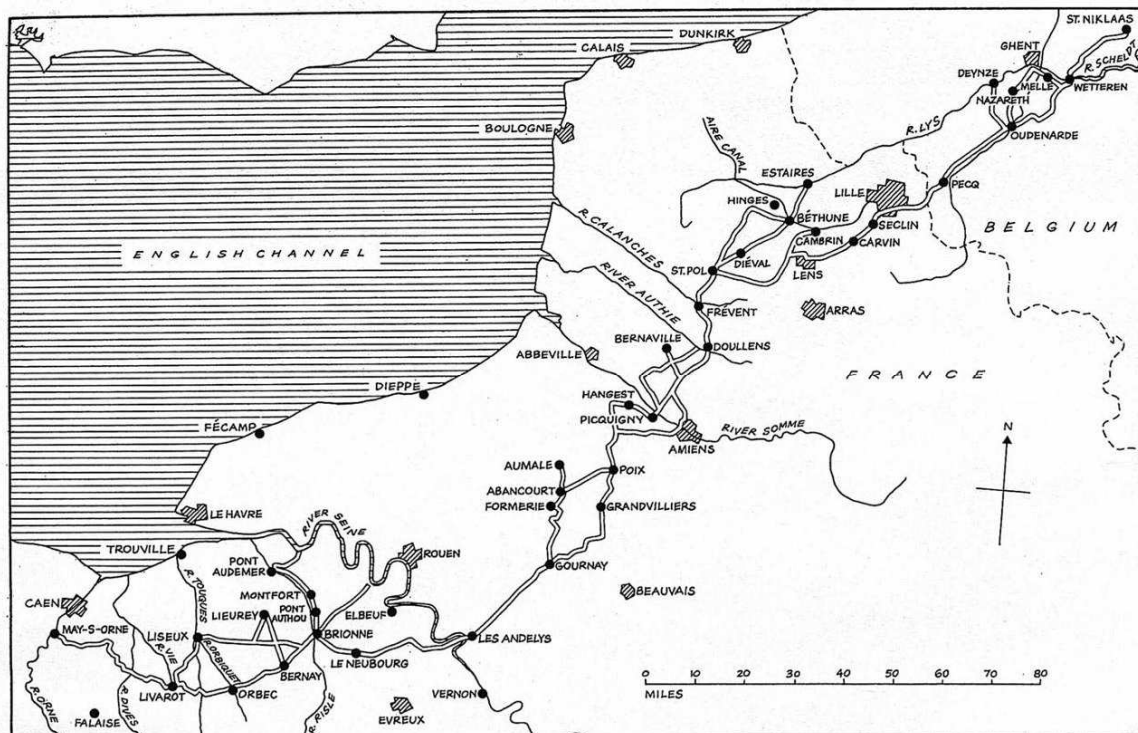


'I suppose this was our first attempt to play the "infantry game". No doubt those who served in infantry units may regard this battle as just another everyday incident, but to us, whose prime job was, after all, engineering, the Battle of Wetteren was of some significance.'

2nd Lieutenant Robert Warren MC, Second-in-Command, 4 Field Squadron, Royal Engineers, 7th Armoured Division

Scenario Background

Following the collapse of German resistance in Normandy at the end of August 1944, the 'Great Swan' began, as the British, Canadian, American, French, Polish, Czechoslovak, Belgian and Dutch armies 'swanned' across France in pursuit of the fleeing German forces.



The route of the Desert Rats' 'Great Swan' across France and Belgium to Wetteren

On 4th September, the leading elements of the famed British 7th Armoured Division, 'The Desert Rats', entered Belgium – their objective being to liberate the city of Ghent and to secure crossings on the River Schelde. One of these crossings was the wooden swing-bridge at the town of Wetteren.



Wetteren Bridge (and Church)

A little way to the east of Ghent, another British armoured vanguard, this one from the 11th Armoured Division, had already reached Wetteren. Despite the continued presence of German troops in and around the town, the Belgian civilians, ecstatic at their liberation, swamped the Cromwell tanks of 'A' Squadron 15/19th (King's Royal) Hussars. The bridge was still mostly intact, despite failed German attempts to blow it up earlier in the day. However, the Hussars were unaware of 7th Armoured Division's plans and were consequently uninterested in the bridge. They passed on eastward without making any attempt to secure the area.

An hour later, at around 1600hrs, a small German river convoy passed through the town on its way to Antwerp from Ghent. Sailors landed and managed to raise the bridge, but the convoy soon came under fire from Belgian 'White Brigade' resistance fighters and a patrol from the 1st Herefords, who had accompanied the Hussars. Then a German truck appeared on the northern end of the bridge. Troops dismounted and began setting up machine gun positions on the riverbank. Alarmed, the civilians took cover and removed signs of their previous celebrations. A local fireman was soon dispatched to catch up with the Hussars' tanks and to bring them back.

By 1830hrs, a troop of Hussars, guided by the local Fire Brigade, returned to Wetteren. A Cromwell opened fire on the German truck and there was immediately a colossal secondary explosion, demolishing a number of buildings, killing several German troops and tragically also killing and injuring several Belgian civilians. Job done, the Hussars resumed their march, once again leaving Wetteren.

The following morning, the locals once again had trouble as a large group of retreating German troops passed through the town, following in the wake of the 15/19th Hussars towards Antwerp! However, by noon, the Belgians once again came out to cheer as the advanced guard of 7th Armoured Division arrived in the form of the 11th Hussars' armoured cars. The 'Cherry-Pickers' found the bridge to be largely intact, though was in the raised position and had suffered some damage to the decking due to the first unsuccessful German attempt to blow it up. There was also the small matter of a German guard force on the opposite bank.

Following the Cherry-Pickers' report, 'B' Squadron of 5th (Royal Inniskilling) Dragoon Guards ('5th Skins') were rushed forward to deal with the German force at the bridge. A party of sappers from 4th Field Squadron, Royal Engineers was also sent forward to assess the situation and they were soon joined by their squadron commander, Major DJO Fitzgerald.

Having assessed the situation, Major Fitzgerald realised that the first priority would be to lower the bridge. Thus, while the Skins poured withering close-range fire across the river, the sappers, together with some civilians and resistance men, rushed to the bridge and climbed up the raised deck, successfully lowering it through their combined weight! Amazingly, no-one was hit by German fire and a party of sappers began renewing the planking of the damaged span.

At that moment, 'B' Company of the 6th Green Howards (69th Brigade, 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division) arrived in Wetteren. They had been dispatched to collect a large group of German prisoners that the White Brigade had reported to be in the town, but had come prepared for contingencies, with two Bren Carriers, a platoon of Carrier-mounted MMGs and a single 25pdr Field Gun. Having discussed the situation with Major Fitzgerald and Major Leavey of the Skins, the Green Howards were soon across the partially repaired bridge and were engaged in a short but sharp fight on the north bank.

With the Germans cleared out, the sappers were able to resume their work without interruption and the bridge was soon ready to take the Skins' tanks. All three squadrons were soon across, together with their attached infantry, 'A' Company of the 1st/6th Queens. The battlegroup probed northwards, continuing once more with its mission to intercept German units fleeing from Ghent towards Antwerp. The Green Howards meanwhile, returned to their division.

However, Major Fitzgerald soon had new orders. The Skins had discovered that the other bridge over the Schelde, at Melle, had been blown up by the retreating Germans, leaving the bridge at Wetteren as the division's only crossing place east of Ghent. With the division's infantry all tied up on other tasks, the job of defending the bridge against German counter-attack now fell to Fitzgerald's 4th Field Squadron – not a job that came naturally to sappers.

Undaunted, Fitzgerald called up his entire squadron and by 1600hrs they were assembled in Wetteren to receive his orders (except for one section, which was still in France). By 1900hrs the squadron was deployed north and south of the bridge and its Humber Light Recce Cars were probing northwards in search of the enemy. There was no sign of Germans, but Belgian civilians gave vague, though worrying reports of enemy forces massing to the north...

Meanwhile, as night fell on 5th September 1944, the men of Grenadier-Regiment 1020 were receiving their orders. They had been sent south from their garrison positions on the island of Walcheren, with orders to retake the bridge at Wetteren...

Briefing For Major DJO Fitzgerald

Commanding 4th Field Squadron, Royal Engineers

Situation: Dawn, Wednesday 6th September 1944

The overall situation is terribly confused at the moment. The 7th Armoured Division, along with the rest of 21st Army Group, has spent the last week 'swanning' headlong across France at top speed, following the collapse of German resistance in Normandy. The division now finds itself in Belgium, where German resistance finally seems to be crystallising again along river and canal lines. The division is extremely strung-out along its axis of advance, with many German stragglers (some of them formed units) desperately hurrying north and often appearing in the rear of our units.

Your Squadron, having conducted a repair under fire of the Wetteren Bridge over the River Schelde (thus allowing the tanks of the 5th 'Skins' to pass through), was last night ordered to mount an all-round defence of the bridge, as the division's infantry are already fully tasked. A successful defence of the bridge is of paramount importance, as it is now the division's main axis of advance.

Your men are sappers, not infantry. Nevertheless, your men have already proved themselves to be steady under fire and are eager to follow your lead.

Ominously, the sounds of battle were close by during the last evening – it sounded as though the 'Skins' had encountered a strong enemy force. The Belgian civilians have also been very keen to tell you that a German force is approaching from the north. As if to confirm this, a strong German fighting patrol came in from the north at 0100hrs and was engaged in a sharp, close-range fire-fight with your No.1 Troop. Two sappers were wounded, but the German patrol was driven off by the .50 Calibre machine-gun mounted on one of the Troop's halftracks.

Just before dawn, your Squadron Sergeant Major orders all squadron positions to stand-to...

Mission

You are to defend Wetteren Bridge, with the intention of holding open the division's main axis, until relieved.

Execution

General Outline

At your immediate disposal you have your Squadron (less No.6 Section, which is still in France), reinforced by a section of 17pdr Antitank Guns from 65th Antitank Regiment RA. You have sufficient strength to hold the immediate bridge area, though you do not have the strength to defend the entire surrounding built-up area.

Friendly Forces

Friendly forces are many and varied: As mentioned, the 5th Skins' Battlegroup (including 'A' Company of the 1/6th Queens) has already passed through to the north. The armoured cars of 11th Hussars are operating to the north and east. Other elements of 7th Armoured Division are expected to arrive soon from the west (on the southern bank). 15/19th Hussars (11th Armoured Division) are also in the area, having passed through Wetteren on the 4th and headed away to the east (on the southern bank). Elements of 50th (Northumbrian) Division are also operating to the south and east.

Artillery & Air Support

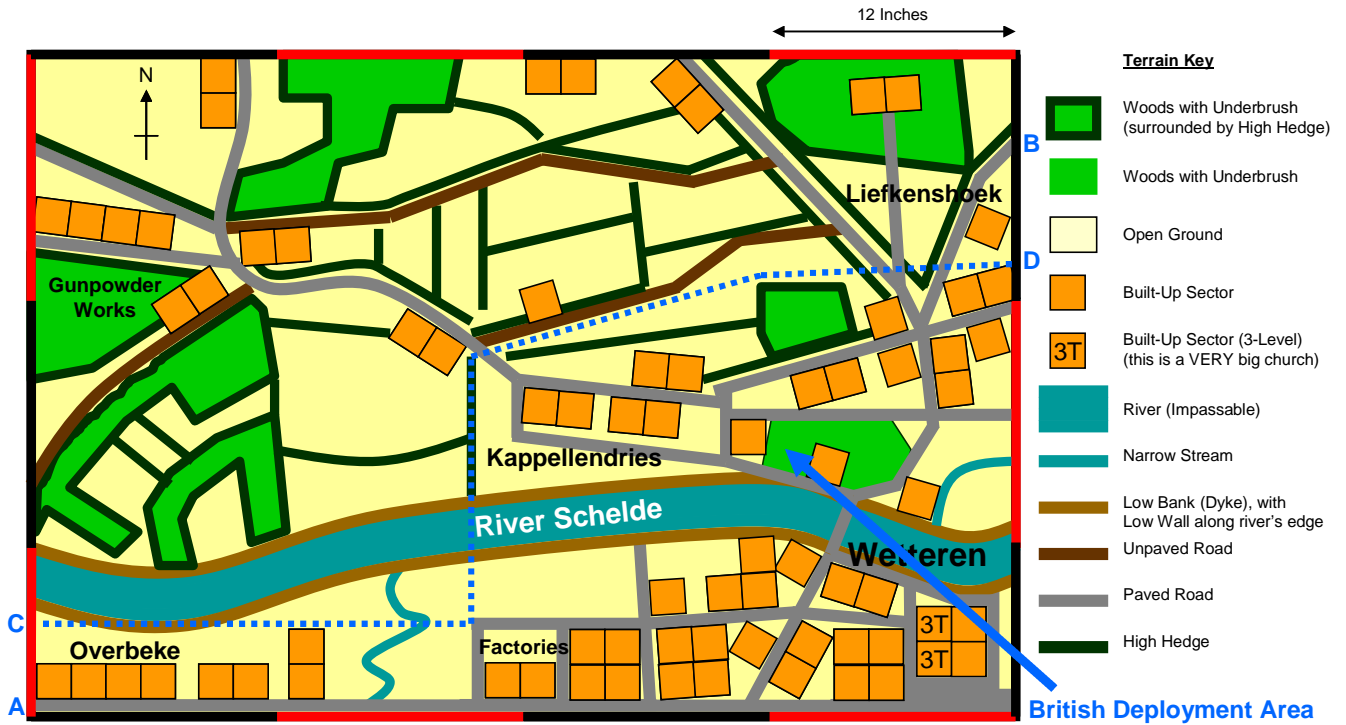
Support from artillery and air is presently unavailable and this situation is not likely to improve.

Enemy Forces

Enemy forces are largely unknown. As mentioned, the Belgians report a large infantry force approaching from the north, which seems to be confirmed by the Skins and the Cherry-Pickers, though the Germans seem to have given the cavalry the slip during the night. Nevertheless, the sharp contact at 0100hrs leads you to expect an attack from that quarter. Other enemy threats include various straggler elements coming from the south and west, which require you to maintain vigilance south of the bridge.

Deployment

Your forces are deployed south of the line C-D as shown on the map below. They may be deployed in Improved Positions.



Reinforcements

The umpire will inform you of any reinforcements.

Game Length

The game lasts for 20 turns. The Germans have the first turn.

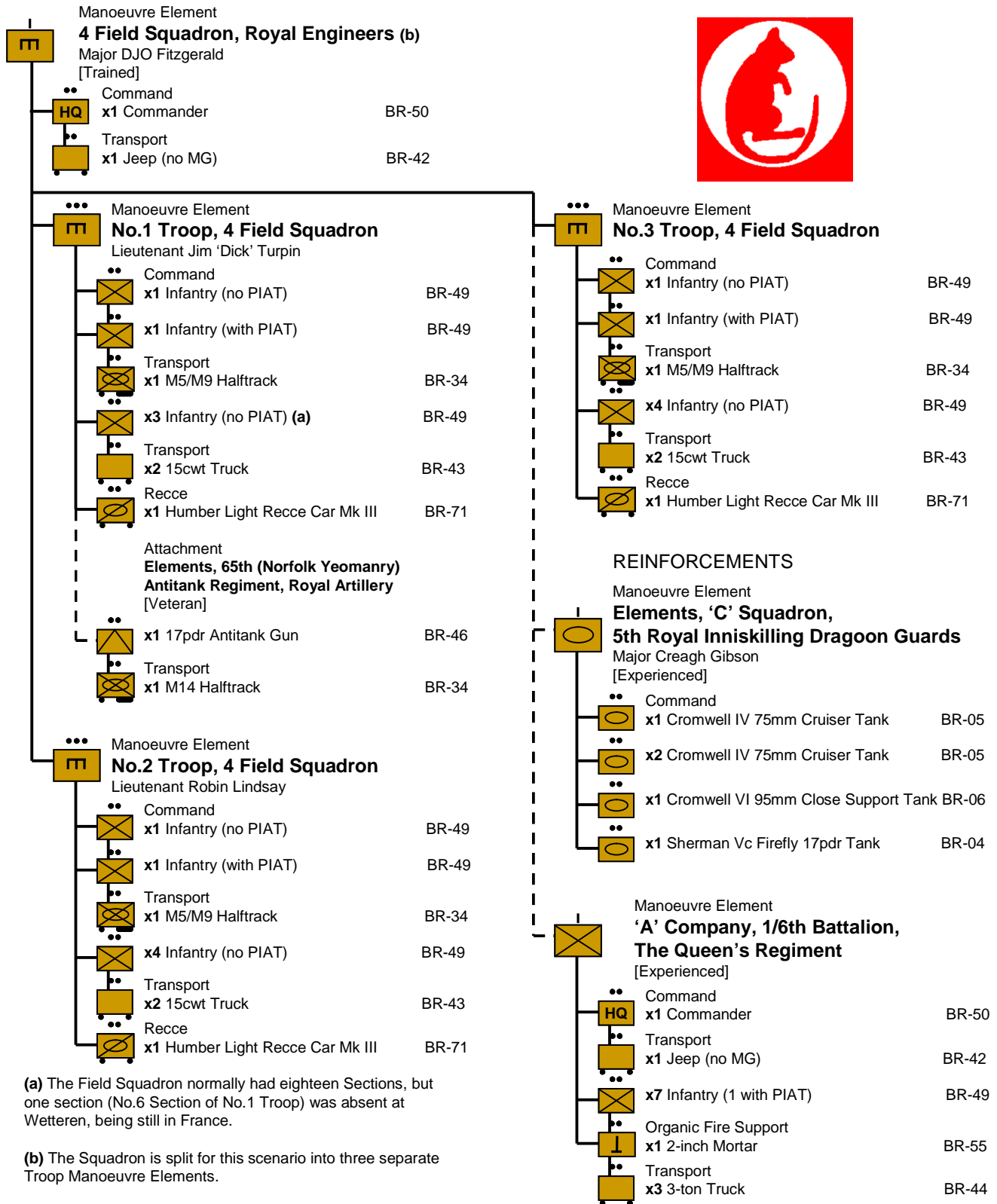
Victory Conditions

Very simply, you win if you prevent the Germans from destroying the bridge.

The Battle Of Wetteren Bridge – 6 September 1944

British Order Of Battle

Elements, 7th Armoured Division ('The Desert Rats')



Briefing For Generalmajor Walter Brühns **Temporarily Commanding Grenadier-Regiment 1020**

Situation: Dawn, Wednesday 6th September 1944

The situation for the German forces in Western Europe at present is dire. The collapse of the armies in Normandy has brought about a rout of virtually all forces in France and the Allies have reached Belgium in just a few days! However, with numerous defensible east-west river and canal lines, OKW believes that the Allied advance can be halted in Belgium.

As *Stadtkommandant* of the city of Ghent, your forces are meagre, comprising only rear-echelon, security and training units. Nevertheless, they are putting up a brave resistance against the British and 70. Infanterie-Division has sent one of its regiments (Grenadier-Regiment 1020) to help bolster the line on the River Schelde.

However, this regiment yesterday ran into trouble against British armour and suffered heavy losses, including the regiment's Commanding Officer. Luckily, you were on the scene to rally the situation and quickly assumed command of the regiment.

Nevertheless, the situation remains bad. The British have already outflanked your position by crossing the bridge at Wetteren, which was captured on the 4th after a failed attempt at demolition by your pioneers. A further attempt to destroy the bridge also failed yesterday and now it is down to your Kampfgruppe to finish the job.

However, a disastrous encounter with British armour yesterday evening depleted and scattered your force even further and a patrol towards the bridge at 0100hrs was beaten off by an alert guard force.

Mission

You are to capture and destroy the bridge at Wetteren, with the intention of obstructing the British axis of advance.

Execution

General Outline

Having evaded further contacts during the night, you now have a weak battalion-sized force positioned close to, and west of the bridge. You intend to assault at first light and to gain a foothold on the bridge long enough to bring up your pioneers and demolish the bridge before withdrawing. You will need to act swiftly, as the roaming British armour will undoubtedly respond to your attack. You will need to be long-gone by the time the tanks arrive.

Friendly Forces

You have organised the remnants of Grenadier-Regiment 1020 into two scratch companies for this mission. Your force also includes a platoon each of mortars, pioneers and antitank guns and should be strong enough to take and hold the bridge long enough to demolish it.

Artillery & Air Support

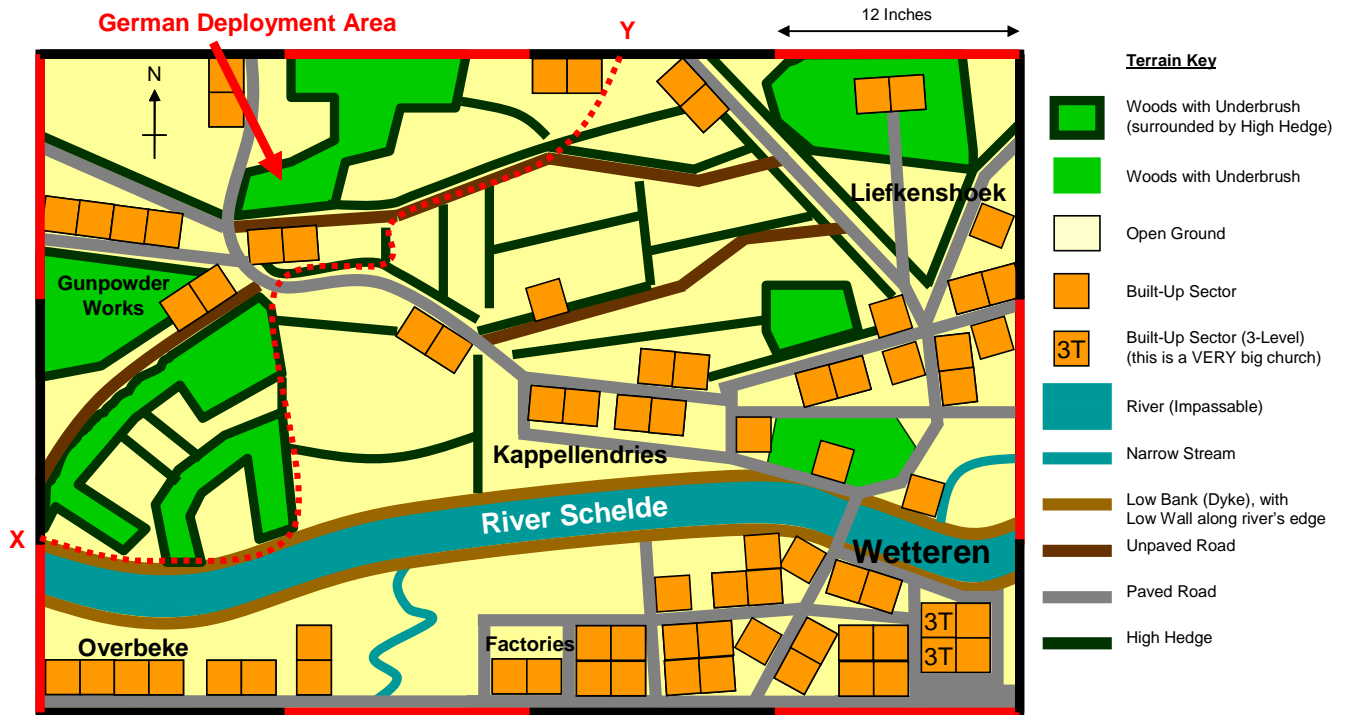
Sadly (but perhaps unsurprisingly these days), you can expect no support from artillery, armour or air.

Enemy Forces

Enemy forces at the bridge are thought to be a company of infantry or pioneers, including some light armoured vehicles and possibly some tanks. However, the bulk of the British armour seems to have moved north and east, though will undoubtedly return to protect their rear once the battle develops. British artillery was not in evidence during yesterday's encounters, so it is possible that this part of the front is still beyond British artillery range. However, air attack remains a constant possibility.

Deployment

You may deploy your forces anywhere north of the line X-Y shown on the map below. They have only just moved up during the night and may not therefore be in Improved Positions.



Reinforcements

The umpire will inform you of any reinforcements.

Game Length

The game lasts for 20 turns. You have the first turn.

Victory Conditions

Very simply, you win if you destroy the bridge.

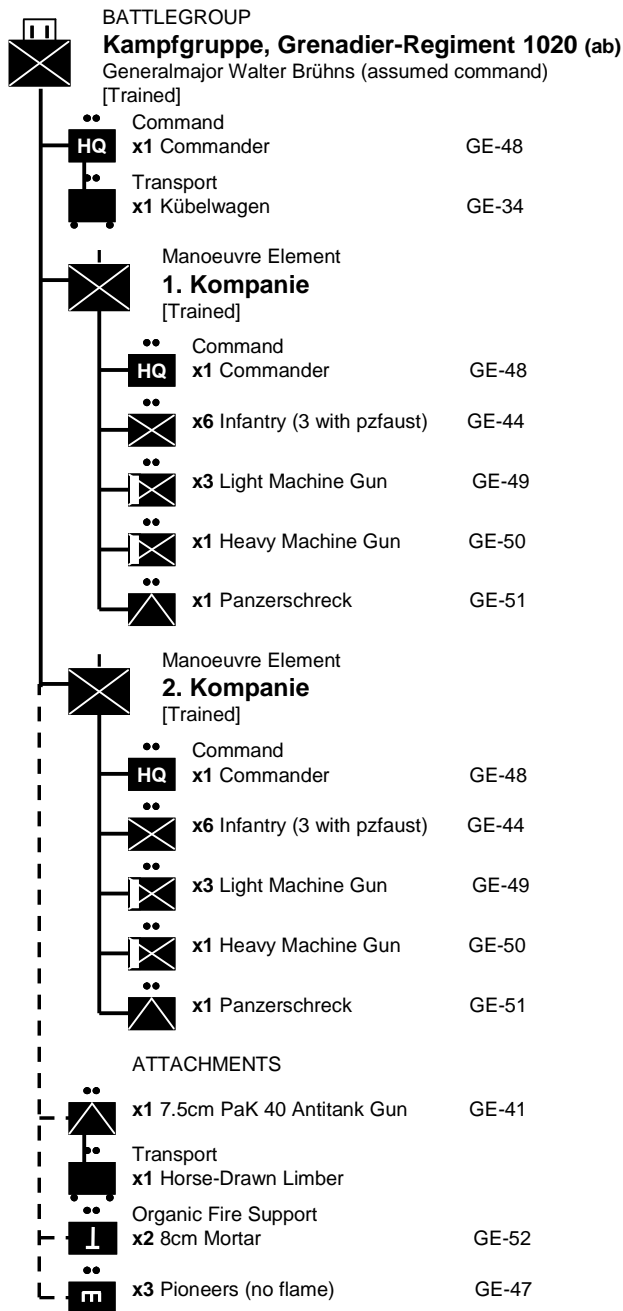
Demolishing The Bridge

- Once a Pioneer unit gets within 1 inch of the bridge, it may conduct Engineering Actions. Use exactly the same procedure as for Improving Position.
- As with Improving Position, a unit may make only one Engineering Action in a single turn and it may not conduct any other actions during the turn – this includes actions taken to rally from Suppression or Disorder.
- Each Pioneer unit present may attempt to conduct an Engineering Action, which means that additional Pioneers will increase the chance of success.
- A Pioneer unit may always fire in the Defensive/Opportunity Fire Phase.
- The bridge will be primed for demolition once the Engineering Action/Improve Position is successfully completed. To blow the bridge, the German player rolls one D10 on the FOLLOWING Offensive Fire Phase. A roll of '1' means that the charges fail to blow (see below). Any other die roll results in a successful demolition attempt.
- Once the bridge is primed for demolition, only ONE die roll may be made for detonation, irrespective of how many Pioneer units were involved in preparing the bridge for demolition.
- If the charges fail to blow, the Pioneers must conduct further Engineering Actions, automatically applying the maximum +4 modifier to the Improve Position roll, in order to check the detonators and firing circuits. Once a successful Improve Position roll is made, repeat the demolition procedure.
- Any unit with at least one Aiming Point on the bridge model is immediately Knocked Out when the bridge is demolished.
- If all Pioneer units are eliminated, Infantry units may also attempt to demolish the bridge, but with a -1 die roll modifier to their 'Improve Position' (i.e. Engineering) die roll and a -3 die roll modifier to the Demolition die roll.

The Battle Of Wetteren Bridge – 6 September 1944

German Order Of Battle

Elements, 70. ('Weissbrot') Infanterie-Division



(a) It is impossible to gauge with certainty what the exact composition of the German force was. What is certain is that a large battlegroup from Grenadier-Regiment 1020 was sent inland from the island fortress of Walcheren to hold the line of the River Schelde, east of Ghent. This battlegroup tangled with A & B Squadrons of the 5th Skins (who had crossed the bridge at Wetteren) on the 5th and suffered heavy casualties, including the regimental commander. Generalmajor Brühns, Stadtkommandant of Ghent, then took command and a portion of the group then got through to Wetteren. There was definitely at least one section of antitank guns present and a mortar platoon. Some accounts describe SS and it is possible that some SS stragglers were also present.

(b) If you want to give the Germans more of a chance, you could add a third company, or a weak company of SS veterans (which may have been present, as mentioned above), or perhaps a battery of **x2** 10.5cm howitzers in direct support (Wetteren was shelled by the Germans immediately after the battle). There was no armour present, though an entertaining option might be to exchange the two antitank guns for a single piece of heavy armour: King Tigers from Schwere-Panzer-Abteilung 503 and Schwere-SS-Panzer-Abteilung 101 did fight lone rearguard actions elsewhere in Belgium (a new King Tiger company had been en route to each of these battalions in Normandy when the German collapse occurred) and the Jagdpanthers of Schwere-Panzer-Jäger-Abteilung 559 were not too far away, at Geel.

(c) 70. Infanterie-Division was a coastal garrison formation, known as the *Weissbrot* ('White Bread') Division as most of its men suffered from stomach disorders. They were consequently massed together into one formation so that they could all receive a diet that was somewhat better than that normally experienced by the average *Landser*. Nevertheless, as the bloody fighting on Walcheren was to prove in November 1944, the division was not lacking in fighting spirit, whatever their medical ailments.

Umpire's Information

Terrain



Victory

- Very simply, the German player wins a Total Victory by successfully demolishing the bridge, while the British player wins a Total Victory by frustrating the German objective. This is a do-or-die scenario and there is no room for a partial victory.

Demolishing The Bridge

- Once a Pioneer unit gets within 1 inch of the bridge, it may conduct Engineering Actions. Use exactly the same procedure as for Improving Position.
- As with Improving Position, a unit may make only one Engineering Action in a single turn and it may not conduct any other actions during the turn – this includes actions taken to rally from Suppression or Disorder.
- Each Pioneer unit present may attempt to conduct an Engineering Action, which means that additional Pioneers will increase the chance of success.
- A Pioneer unit may always fire in the Defensive/Opportunity Fire Phase.
- The bridge will be primed for demolition once the Engineering Action/Improve Position is successfully completed. To blow the bridge, the German player rolls one D10 on the FOLLOWING Offensive Fire Phase. A roll of '1' means that the charges fail to blow (see below). Any other die roll results in a successful demolition attempt.
- Once the bridge is primed for demolition, only ONE die roll may be made for detonation, irrespective of how many Pioneer units were involved in preparing the bridge for demolition.

- If the charges fail to blow, the Pioneers must conduct further Engineering Actions, automatically applying the maximum +4 modifier to the Improve Position roll, in order to check the detonators and firing circuits. Once a successful Improve Position roll is made, repeat the demolition procedure.
- Any unit with at least one Aiming Point on the bridge model is immediately Knocked Out when the bridge is demolished.
- If all Pioneer units are eliminated, Infantry units may also attempt to demolish the bridge, but with a -1 die roll modifier to their 'Improve Position' (i.e. Engineering) die roll and a -3 die roll modifier to the Demolition die roll.

British Reinforcements (Not To Be Revealed To Either Player!)

- Note that due to the long duration of the battle, the normal time scale (one turn = ten minutes) is heavily condensed. As in most battles, there were long periods of relative inactivity, which are not normally represented in wargames.
- Turn 6: The divisional CRE (Commander Royal Engineers), Lieutenant Colonel AD Hunter, arrives at Point A (represented by x1 Humber Light Recce Car [BR-71] or a similar scout car type of vehicle). He will proceed to Major Fitzgerald's location and will remain there (within 1 inch) for one full turn, while he gains an appreciation of the situation. He will then head straight to Point B, exiting the table as he heads off to find the 5th Skins. Lieutenant Colonel Hunter will remain fully under the umpire's control and will make every effort to avoid contact with the enemy. He may not dismount and his transport may only fire in the Defensive/Opportunity Fire Phase. If his transport is destroyed, he is removed from the game and no British reinforcements will be forthcoming.
- If Lieutenant Colonel Hunter survives his journey across the table, the leading elements of 'C' Squadron, 5th Skins will arrive at Point B two turns later. These elements will comprise Major Gibson's command Cromwell, plus two other tanks of the player's choice from the order of battle.
- The remaining 'C' Squadron tanks will arrive at Point B, four turns after the leading elements, along with 'A' Company of 1/6th Queens.

German Reinforcements (Not To Be Revealed To Either Player!)

- Historically speaking, there are no reinforcements for the Germans, though if the British player is having too easy a time of it, the umpire could punish him by infiltrating the odd platoon of German stragglers into Wetteren town from the south. However, keep this intervention small and try not to let it interfere with Lieutenant Colonel Hunter.