

Operation Windsor - After Action Report

Bovington 2009 saw the "Battlefront UK" group put on the demonstration game "Operation Windsor" - the assault on Carpiquet Airfield on July 4th 1944. By sheer coincidence, the game was played out exactly 65 years later to the day! At times, it seemed that fate would prevent any of us getting there but eventually seven of us managed to thwart bad luck and meet up for an excellent weekend. The weather, in stark contrast to last year's storms, was wonderful. Hangovers on the Sunday were miraculously, and undeservedly, absent. The game was played in a very relaxed and enjoyable way - thank you to all the participants for this. Our table was in a great position and we managed, over the course of the weekend, to describe the battle and the rules to well over a hundred museum visitors.



Paddy Green took the lead with scenario design. Why Operation Windsor?

Firstly, the terrain. The size of the game table allowed us to play with 15mm figures using the 20mm ground-scale - for us, visually, this provides the ideal combination. The airfield itself meant that a large part of the battlefield would be open ground - a novel experience for battles in Normandy. In addition, it generated endless opportunities to scratch-build terrain and buildings to provide a great-looking gaming table. The Abbaye Ardennes, on a rise north-east of the airfield, gave their artillery observers a panoramic view of the battle-field.



Secondly, the forces. The Germans, naturally, would be 12SS Hitlerjugend. As well as Panzergrenadiers, Panthers and Panzer IV's (Tigers...), there was also the opportunity to get 88mm Flaks in a situation where they could use long-range fire properly. With the Canadians, we had the chance to field an entire Infantry Brigade, a Sherman Regiment and also a full selection of "funnies" from 79th Armoured Division. Overall, an irresistible combination

The basic battle plan:

The Germans were battalion strength and rated elite. They occupied a long perimeter, defending in trenches & pill-boxes behind wire and minefields. Flak 88s and Pak 40s to the rear had excellent fields of fire - some positioned at the far end of the runway, others deep in Carpiquet village north of the hangers. A small number of Panthers & Panzer IVs were, in effect, mobile AT guns. Plenty of 20mm Flaks provided defence from the inevitable "Tiffies". Artillery was plentiful but ammunition restricted.



The Canadians were brigade strength and rated experienced. They were attacking from the west, down the long axis of the airfield. The open expanse of runway was to be avoided. The main assault (the North Shore Regiment & Le Regiment de la Chaudiere with armour support from the Fort Garry Horse & 79th Armoured Division) was to attack to the north of the runway, seize the north hangers and, beyond the airfield perimeter, the village of Carpiquet/ La Motte. Once this had been secured, a third battalion was available to move forward to assault the complex of control buildings at the far end of the runway. One further battalion, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, was to make a diversionary attack on the hangers to the south of the runway, without the benefit of any armour support. Artillery was plentiful and a "cab-rank" of Typhoons circled above the airfield.



Let the battle begin...

The Canadians were advancing behind a huge barrage and to avoid lengthy preliminaries, the game started with turn 0 using an optional "Accelerated Advance to Contact" rule. This meant that the Canadians moved immediately to 5" from the German positions and the barrage (and danger-close) was resolved on both sides at that point. As the 4.2" mortars fired away, Brigadier Blackader waited impatiently in his CP for news from his Battalions.



Into turn 1 and through the smoke accompanying the end of the barrage, the Germans in their trenches and pill-boxes were greeted by the sight of scores of Shermans, Crocodiles, Flails and AVREs approaching the wire immediately in front of them. Small groups of infantry were dotted between the tanks. The Germans immediately dropped artillery on the back edge of the barrage. Honours even in the artillery duel with disruption and a few losses each - but losses that the Canadians alone could easily afford to take. German tanks, Pak 40s and Flak 88s fired away at the numerous of targets and rapidly 2 Crocodiles and 2 Shermans were up in smoke.



The Canadians brought in the terrifying medium artillery concentrations onto the front line. Fireflies started to try and pick off the German tanks without success. But the specialised armour from 79AD moved effortlessly through the minefields and started to flatten the wire of the airfield perimeter. To the south, the Winnipegs moved to secure the village of Marcelet before contemplating an assault on the wire & pillboxes without armour support.

In turn 2, the main German artillery continued to harass the Canadians (the Werfer battalion was unavailable whilst moving to a new firing position). Casualties started to mount in the North Shore's lead companies. The Flak 88s continued their steady reaping of allied armour but the Fireflies were able to take their first scalp (a Tiger????)



The Canadian field artillery was unavailable (reorganising after the barrage) but the brigade 4.2" mortars did their work and the first German Flak 88 position was taken out. At the wire, the Crocs and AVREs opened fire on the pill-boxes allowing A Company of the Chauds to get a foothold in the trenches. The North Shores (attacking to the north) had further to travel to reach the wire and started to fall behind their armour support
To the south, the Winnipegs continued to consolidate their position in Marcellet. Vickers MMGs were moved into buildings about 200 yards from the wire

In turn 3, the German artillery communication failed but several more tanks fell victim to the Flak 88s, Pak 40s and Panzer IVs. The Panzergrenadiers grimly stood fast in their trenches & pillboxes surrounded by Crocs & AVREs.



Free of the danger of flying through the barrage, the Typhoons started their regular sweeps of the airfield. But the huge volume of 20mm Flak fire kept the German armour safe. Despite efforts to screen off the Pak 88s with smoke, A Squadron of the Fort Garry Horse started to fall back. The Crocs and AVREs continued to move through the wire into the German trench & pillbox system. Panzer IVs appeared out of the north hangers and, taking up position by the control tower, started to provide support for the beleaguered defenders of the trenches & pillboxes.



To the south, the Winnipegs prepared for their assault., The Vickers and mortars tried to suppress the trench-line and put smoke down in front of the wire. Pioneer platoon, supported by a platoon from B Company, moved into the smoke to place demolitions against the wire. Carrier Platoon was deployed to exploit any breach in the wire whilst C Company moved unseen into woods a couple of hundred yards from the perimeter wire.

In turn 4, the forward move by the Winnipegs Carrier Platoon had not gone unseen by the observers in the Abbaye Ardennes and suffered under a terrifying concentration from the German artillery. The Nebelwerfer Battalion hit hard on the lead companies of the North Shores as they closed on the perimeter wire. Flak 88s continued to punch holes in the thinning ranks of Allied armour. In return, the Fireflies continued to pick off German armour as another Panzer IV and a Panzer III Beop were lost. Ominously, Panthers were seen to leave the south hangers and move past the far end of the runway to take up positions in Carpiquet village.



The Canadian medium artillery batteries were back on call and brought down a concentration around the control tower. A Panzer IV went up in flames dispelling the myth that artillery does not knock out tanks. As the Sherman squadrons hesitated in their advance, the more resilient Churchills from 79AD continued to grind their way through the German defences - Crocodiles and AVREs spitting flame and high explosive into bunkers and trenches. Amazingly the surviving Panzergrenadiers had already started to man the next line of defence around the dispersal shelters.



Having largely cleared the front-line trenches, A Company of the Chauds followed up into the smoke swirling around the control tower. In an act of outstanding bravery, Lt Stephen Uden earned the Victoria Cross; armed only with grenades and a Sten gun, he knocked out the last Panzer IV at the foot of the Control Tower.



To the south, the Winnepegs Pioneers succeeded in blowing open a breach in the wire, although the supporting platoon from B Company was virtually annihilated. Still badly shaken after the artillery barrage, only half the carriers from Carrier Platoon charged forward for the breach and even then, the Flak 88s took their toll, stopping the attack just short of the trenches beyond the blown wire.

In turn 5, the German artillery came down in strength on the recently won trenches inflicting heavy loss on B Company of the Chauds. Outside the perimeter, more artillery stalled efforts by the Sherman Squadrons to regroup. Flak 88s and Pak 40s in Carpiquet continued to pick off the Allied armour whilst the Panthers arrived alongside to bolster the deep defences.



In return, the Canadian artillery rained down on the German anti-tank defences but, deeply dug-in, they survived the onslaught to carry in their task of neutralising the Allied armour. One Sherman Squadron managed to resume its advance. The Chauds continued to consolidate their hold on the trenches and Control Tower with the north hangers now within reach. North of them, A Company of the North Shores assisted in mopping up in the trenches whilst B Company moved forward with the few surviving Crocs & AVREs towards the second German line of defence around the dispersal shelter complex.



To the south, Panzergrenadiers emerged from the south hangers to reinforce the trenches. The Winnipeg's Carrier Platoon failed to resume their advance and it fell to the lead platoon of C Company to break cover from the woods and storm forwards through the breach in the wire into the trench complex, just getting there ahead of the German reinforcements.



In turn 6, German artillery whittled away the Canadian follow-up companies. But the hangers were finally screening the surviving Allied armour from the Flak 88s at the far end of the runway bringing a moment of respite from the highly effective long-range anti-tank fire. Typhoons again screamed down on the German positions but one crashed into the hangers close to the Wirbelwind that had brought it down.



The Canadian artillery, after repeatedly failing to find its mark, finally destroyed one of the Flak 88s at the far end of the runway. The surviving Shermans of the Fort Garry Horse struggled to move forwards with the follow-up companies as the men of the North Shores started to clear the Panzergrenadiers from the dispersal shelters north of the hangers. To the south, the Winnipegs struggled to get men across the open ground to reinforce their tenuous hold in the trenches. But with large numbers of fresh infantry approaching the perimeter wire, the Canadians were poised to push the door wide open.



In turn 7, the German artillery smashed any hopes of an immediate breakthrough. To the north, Nebelwerfers screamed out the sky and one follow-up company of the North Shores ceased to be a threat. To the south, a battalion concentration shredded the remaining 2 platoons of the Winnipeg's C Company as it was moving across the open ground to reinforce the survivors in the trenches. However the Winnipegs in the trench just managed to maintain a toe-hold after a strong counter-attack.



Canadian artillery continued to rain down on German tanks and guns in Carpiquet village, steadily weakening the defences. The Chauds A Company moved steadily down the line of the north hangers whilst the surviving armour assisted the North Shores in clearing the dispersal shelters. The Typhoons were running short of armour targets and swooped down to make a strafing run on the trench that the Winnipegs were battling to clear. Many Panzergrenadiers fell victim to its canons but amazingly the sole surviving section from Winnipegs C Company at the end of the trench came through unscathed.



In turn 8, the German artillery continued to take its toll among the men of the North Shores. The Panthers, lurking in Carpiquet Village, picked off the final survivors of the 79 AD tanks. With both hangar complexes effectively in Canadian hands, outflanked to the north and south, the shattered remnants of III and IV (heavy weapons) Kompanies started to pull back from their positions at the end of the runway. However they were easy targets for the remaining Shermans and the Typhoons.



A Company from the Chauds was mopping up in the north hangers whilst Carrier Platoon from the North Shores mopped up around the final dispersal shelters. With the Winnepegs securing the south hangers, the western half of the airfield was secure. But...



At this point we decided to bring the game to a close. Two victory locations were in Canadian hands (north and south hangers) and three remained in German hands (Carpiquet, La Motte and the Airfield Control Buildings). Speculation if we had had longer to play? Panthers still lurked behind the wire amongst the strong-points in Carpiquet village. The follow-up companies probably could have secured Carpiquet & La Motte. But whether a fresh battalion supported by a single squadron of Shermans would have had enough punch to reach and clear the Airfield Control Buildings is doubtful.



The cast from left to right:

Mark Davies (Canadian Armour), Gary Loosen (North Shores), Paddy Green (umpire favouring 12SS), Tom Mahoney (German aide-de-camp), Chris Ginn (German northern defences), Richard de Ferrars (umpire favouring the Canadians and i/c the Winnipegs), Simon Alderton (German southern defences). Absent at the raffle Stephen Uden (The Chauds)!