

THE ARRAS COUNTERATTACK ON 21 MAY 1940

THE DEFEAT THAT SAVED AN ARMY

The German invasion of Belgium on 10 May 1940 had been planned for by the Allies. Expecting a Schlieffen-style offensive, the French and British mobile forces moved up to the Koningshooikt-Wavre Line on the River Dyle to meet the predicted German advance through Belgium. Their move met a feint, for the main German attack was aimed at Sedan, through the Ardennes.

By David Davies

As the Germans moved out of the Ardennes, they cut supply lines for the Allied forces and, importantly, took control of rail lines; French tanks were transported by rail to the battlefield.

The British high command under Viscount Gort recognized that some form of counterattack was desperately needed to stop this advance – in fact there was an opportunity to cut the German advance to the sea and link the Allied forces in the Belgian pocket back to mainland France. The French high command was undergoing a reshuffle right at that moment, and a case of

bad luck, however, and several days went by without a coordinated attack. This paralysis in the French command, partly due to sheer bad luck, led uncoordinated British and French counterattacks. Many of these did initially very well, but without a coordinated effort, resupply, and reinforcements, each would eventually stall.

In the German high command, there was a growing worry that things were going too well. Hitler's commanders recognized the danger of a counterattack. Even Hitler suffered a case of doubt, but after some to-and-fro, the German advance continued as before.



Major-General Franklyn was put in charge of the proposed counterattack, which would strike south from Arras. He only had the understrength 5th and 50th infantry brigades and the 1st Armoured Division (consisting of 58 Matilda 1s and only 16 Matilda 2s). There was the promise of French cooperation from the 3rd Light Mechanized Division (3e DLM). This ad-hoc unit was called Frankforce. Air cover was promised by the French, but a failure in communications meant it did not materialize. Likewise, the British artillery at Vimy Ridge were unable to assist.

While Frankforce was theoretically strong, with the French 3e DLM providing SOMUA tanks, the British tanks were lacking. The early Matilda was only armed with a machine gun or heavy machine gun, while the later Matilda had the two-pounder but had no close support tanks.

Frankforce struck south in two main columns and directly into the 7th Panzer Division heading east. Its commander, General Rommel, had ordered his panzers forward, so they were unavailable for most of the battle.

A British tank crew make repairs to a Cruiser Mk IV in the town of Blangy in late May 1940.

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Infantry supported by a carrier and a Vickers light tank advances. Hopefully there's no PAK about!

The British right column (consisting of the 7th RTR and 8th DLI) headed towards Wailly, where it met fierce resistance. The Germans, directed by Rommel, brought up every gun and artillery piece they could find to blunt the British attack.

The left column (consisting of the 4th RTR and 6th DLI) had better luck, but the tanks soon became separated from the infantry. They shot up the Schützen-Regiment 6 at Beaurains, who were advancing towards Agny. The British tanks flattened several German 37 mm anti-tank guns. The tanks then advanced towards Mercatel and Neuville-Vitasse, where the Germans had managed to form a second defensive line of artillery. The British infantry were delayed by fighting at Beaurains against the surviving German infantry.

All the Allied attacks had been blunted, but the remaining force had fallen back in good order.

PLAYING THE ARRAS ATTACK

There are several excellent gaming possibilities around Arras, including the 'what if?' scenario – what if the Allied attack had been more

coordinated? Some of the battles were one-sided, such as the destruction of Schützen-Regiment 6, so are less playable.

The scenario chosen here is the British attack towards Neuville-Vitasse, although a similar scenario could be used for the attacks on Wailly and Mercatel.

The game is designed for *Bolt Action* and *Tank Wars* but can be easily adapt-

ed to other rule sets, such as big *Chain of Command*. Company-scale rules such as *Battlegroup Blitzkrieg* or *Rapid Fire* could also be easily used. With a little ingenuity, it could even use *What a Tanker!* by ignoring the infantry component and treating the artillery as fixed positions.



Battlefield

The battlefield consists of open fields. The crops provide no cover for vehicles but light cover for infantry.

VICTORY CONDITIONS

The British score one victory point for every German unit destroyed. They also gain two victory points for every British unit that is in the German deployment zone and three victory points for every unit that leaves the southern board edge.

The Germans score two victory points for every British unit they destroy.

The game should last for eight turns.

RECOMMENDED FORCES

The British advance onto the board in the first turn from the northern edge of the table. They are tasked with breaking through the German lines at Neuville-Vitasse, scoring victory points if they are able to break through.

British forces

4th Royal Tank Regiment

- 2x Matilda 2 (regular)
- 2x Matilda 1 (regular)



© Rocio Espin



The British attack has finally managed to reach the outposts of the German line at Arras.



attack from the south, the Battle of Arras in 1940 might have had a different story. As it was, it was a lesson on why combined arms are important. The British army had a lot to learn about how to combine tanks with infantry, artillery, and air support. These lessons would be learned the hard way over the coming years.

With the failure at Arras, it became obvious to Gort that the British army needed to retreat to the coast, which he ordered on the 23rd. London sent additional forces to seize and fortify vital ports in preparation for a possible evacuation. Meanwhile, the Ger-

man forces stopped for two days – Hitler ordered a halt on the evening of 21 May so the situation could be assessed. This delay infuriated commanders on the ground, who had a better idea of the situation. Had the advance been allowed to continue, Guderian would have been able to enter Boulogne with the 2nd Panzer, Calais with the 1st Panzer, and Dunkirk with the 10th Panzer. By the time the German army was allowed to move again, it was 23 May. The defeated counterattack delayed the German army, saving the ports and made the miracle of Dunkirk possible. **WS&S**

- 1x Vickers Mark VI light tanks (regular)

Reinforcements: 6th Durham Light Infantry

The British reinforcements have a -2 penalty and are available from turn 2. All are regulars and arrive on-board carried in trucks.

- 1st Lieutenant plus a runner
- Vickers MMG team
- Antitank rifle team
- 2" mortar team
- 3x sections of eight regulars with rifles and Bren LMG
- Five trucks (Morris CS8)

German forces

The Germans start deployed on the crest line, but not dug-in. German reinforcements may enter from the southern board edge. They have to prevent the Allies from breaking through and must destroy the Allied advance. The Germans can place two roadblocks on the road up to 24" in. Each roadblock provides hard cover to infantry sheltering behind it and can only be cleared with a tank (tanks count it as difficult terrain when crossed).

1st Company, 87th artillery battery

- 1st Leutnant and Platoon HQ (regulars, three men)
- 2x sections of eight German regulars with rifles, LMG, and an SMG
 - 2x leFH 18 105 mm howitzers with Sdkfz 6 tows (regular)
- 1x sFH 18 150 mm howitzer with Sdkfz 7 tow (regular)



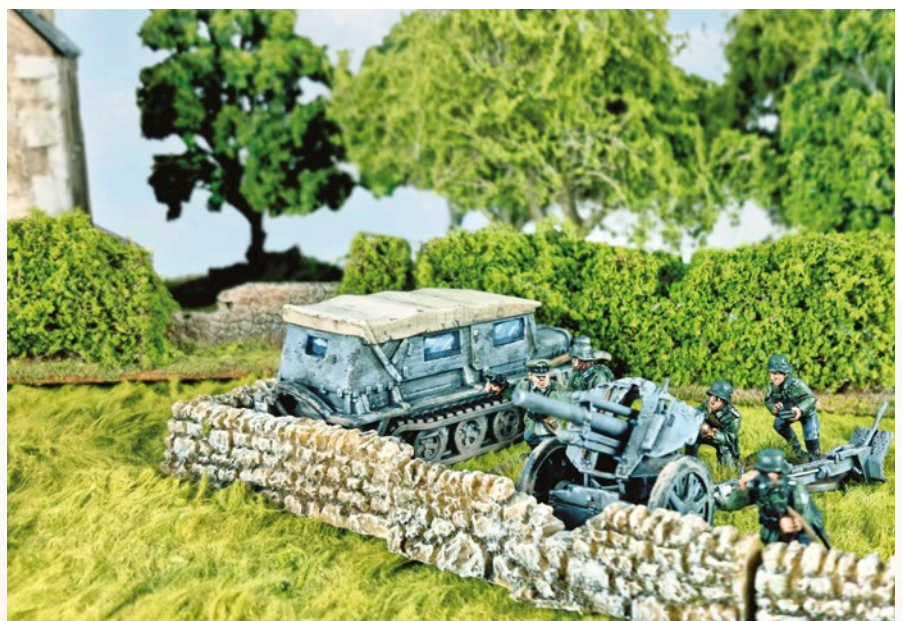
Reinforcements

Reinforcements have the standard -1 penalty and are available from turn 3.

- Flak 36 with Sd.Kfz. 7 tow (regular)
- 2 cm Flak 38 and Sd.Kfz. 10 tow (regular)
- Mg34 on Tripod MMG
- 1x AT rifle team
- Kfz 15 car (for support weapons)
- Luftwaffe air observer in Kfz. 15 Funkkraftwagen (The Luftwaffe observer can call in two planes during the game).

CONCLUSION

Had the attack at Arras been coordinated and supported by a French



A German light howitzer and its halftrack towing vehicle stand ready to receive the British assault.