

Friday Night at the Fights. (Well... Tuesday at the fights anyway)

Introduction

A rather interesting game for the next book, 'Forgotten Battles, Russia 1941, Volume 1', (which is slated to be out towards the end of January 2023) was played today, the result being, in light of the playtest adjustments, a game which reflected the historical action and allowed for a result which differed from the original outcome... but only just.

Background

I think it is fair to say that the battles in the far Arctic during the first days of Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia, in June 1941 have not garnered much interest for the general reader of matters World War 2 based. In fact there was some heavy fighting in those early days between two German Mountain Divisions as well as SS troops and support units against, in the first instance the Russian 14th Army's 14th Rifle Division and the border troops of 23rd (Murmansk) Fortified Region, and no, in this operation, the Finns were not involved. In fact the whole German operation was launched from northern Norway.

The German objective was the Russian Arctic port of Murmansk, a mere 150 kilometres from the Norwegian border. In Berlin, this distance seemed small and plans were made based on the all conquering German army's previous performance throughout Europe. The only problem was the terrain.

Though in June it was summer in the high Arctic, the landscape was anything but beneficial for movement by an army, of whatever uniform. Mountains, marshes, scree, gorges, fast flowing rivers and streams and dense forests all combined, along with an almost total lack of roads, or people to make this one of the most inhospitable places on earth.

And then there was the almost total lack of details on the maps... and of those that were present, no surety that they were even vaguely accurate.

But as they say, orders is orders, and on the 28th June the German attack began. (Barbarossa had opened on the 22nd June, but in the far arctic the southern flank of the German attack had to wait until the Finns had mobilised and could cover the German right flank)

The Russian defenders had not been resting on their laurels. Bunkers and trench lines had been ordered to be built, but only in May 1941, which meant that the defences by the time the German attack began were not complete. In addition, the Russian Rifle Division which held the line in support of the border troops in their bunkers had a front of over 150 kilometres to cover, which guaranteed that they would be weak wherever they were located.

The Battle

In fact it was 2nd Mountain Division which launched the first attack on the Russian bunker line beside the Titovka River, and along the only paved road for 100 kilometres, which ended at Murmansk. 2nd Battalion, 137th Mountain Regiment took on the bunkers (and there are 2 scenarios covering this) whilst 1st Battalion moved up on either side of the road towards a key bridge across the river several kilometres within the Russian lines.

They brushed aside the weak defences and closed on the bridge when they were brought up short by Russian armoured vehicles, BA10s , and a couple of dug in 122mm guns. The scenario play-tested today was this action.

‘35th Reconnaissance Company makes a mark.’

The Playtest

For this scenario the German player had the entire 1st Battalion, 137th Mountain Regiment under their control... reinforced with a pioneer section with every platoon, armed with flamethrowers. This made the force an impressive weapon against enemy infantry, but it was distinctly weak against armoured opposition. And the opposition that was facing them was not prepared to be cowed by the apparently overwhelming opposition.

The first couple of turns saw two German infantry companies coming onto the table, their commander showing something of an element of over confidence in bunching his platoons and presenting a perfect target for artillery fire... but as the only two Russian artillery pieces on the table were pointing north, and the Germans were coming from the west, and there was no off table artillery to call on, the guns could only turn to face the enemy once they were spotted... which took a while.

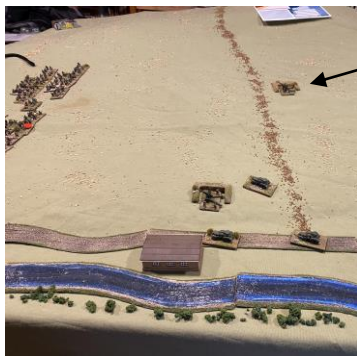
It was turn 3 (of a maximum of 24) when finally the Russian guns began to turn to the west, whilst the 3 BA10s, on the paved road, seemed to be even more optically challenged, not spotting the enemy until turn 4, in spite of facing the oncoming hoard!

Turn 4... the Barrack block contained 1 ½ section Battalion HQ. (But everything else is now facing west)



The BA10s and the 122mm gun in the valley now opened effective fire on the German 2nd Infantry Company, some 600 metres away, shattering several infantry sections, and destroying two more, which resulted in the German effectiveness check being ‘shaken’, and falling back.

Turn 5. The German infantry begin to fan out towards the left flank, and the only Russian gun on the slope towards the crest of the hill



Russian gun

A second company suffered the same fate by turn 7, and things appeared to be going well for the Russian defenders, until order was restored in the German ranks and the advance by the bulk of 2 full companies resumed, now with heavy infantry fire being concentrated on the two dug in Russian artillery pieces.

Turn 9, the full force of the German advance begins to outflank the defenders in the valley.



As the defenders beside the river Titovka were feeling the pressure, on the Russian right flank, further up the hill was increasing, and inevitably German combined infantry fire eventually brought dividends, shattering the gun crew, and forcing them to abandon their gun. The Russian flank was now entirely open.

Turn 11. The Russian right flank exposed as the artillerymen retreat.



By turn 13 a platoon of German infantry had closed with the dug in Russian gun in the valley and close assaulted it, in the face of withering machinegun fire from the Russian armoured cars. The outcome was beyond doubt, and the artillery piece was silenced.

Turn 13. The mountain troops close assault the Russian dug in 122mm gun.
(The counters are spotting counters in case you wondered)



But the game was by no means up for the Russian defenders and the three BA10s now manoeuvred to catch the German infantry as they advanced, causing heavy casualties, even though the terrain was rocky and cover plentiful. But numbers told, and by turn 16 the anti tank rifles attached to platoon HQ sections began to find their marks, the first shots bouncing off the Russian armour, at ranges of 400 metres, and the mountain troops now swept down from the north and closed off any escape route except leaving the table, which the Russians could not do voluntarily, having no superior command to change their 'defend' orders. (by now the infantry battalion HQ ½ section in the building had fallen to the Germans after a close quarters fire fight)

Turn 16. The German infantry close in on the BA10s.



Determined defence by the BA10s prolonged the action as the bridge over the river fell to the Germans, with one BA10 being destroyed by an anti tank rifle on turn 18, and the German combat engineers using flamethrowers on the remaining two, thus ending resistance by the end of turn 19.

Turn 19. The death of the last two armoured cars.



The play-test had thrown up a couple of things that required tweaking, but the game as a whole met all the parameters for being included in the next book.

Right... now on to the next scenario. ☺