

Playtesting 'Castle Hill', part of the Monte Cassino series of scenarios for the next Italy book.

Playtesting for the next 'Forgotten Battles' book, Italy 1944-45 carries on apace. Yesterday (Thursday 10th May) saw 4 playtesters doing battle, the scenario being the German Fallschirmjager counter attack from the monastery at Monte Cassino towards Castle Hill.

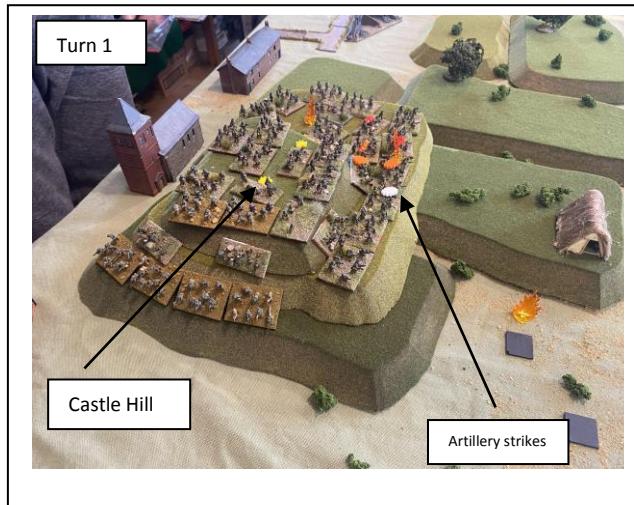
But perhaps I am getting a bit ahead of myself. A précis about the battle for Monte Casino.

The battle started against the German winter defence line across three steep sided valleys, the Gustav Line. The dominant feature of the defence line was the abbey on a promontory on Monte Cassino. The Germans left this tempting observation point unoccupied, whether as a gesture of gentlemanliness or as an opportunity for a propaganda coup is unclear, but it did become a propaganda coup for them when the abbey and its surroundings were pounded to rubble by massive Allied air raids, followed by intense artillery bombardments.

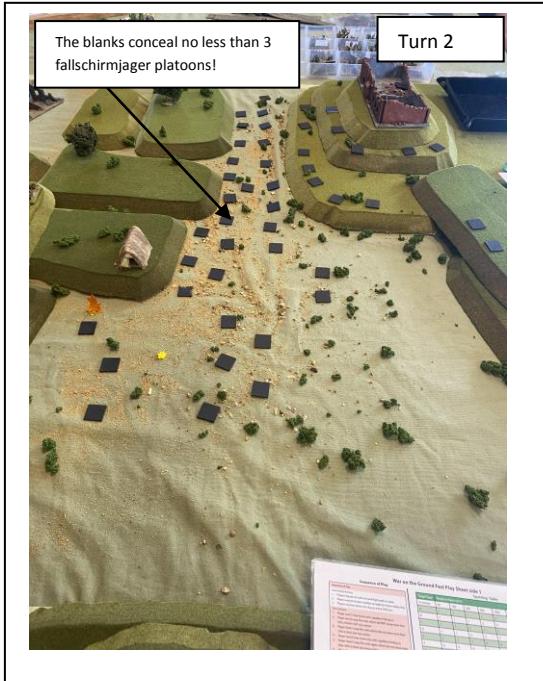
This created a very effective defensive position which was subsequently occupied by the Germans, in the form of fallschirmjager units and it, along with strongpoints in Cassino town below the abbey, the battle extended until May, longer than the fight for Stalingrad.

This playtest involved the British, starting on Castle Hill, with two weak companies of the Essex Regiment, supported by a weak company of the Rajput Rifles. The positions here were cramped and certainly not suitable for this number of troops.

The Germans took advantage of this by launching devastating artillery barrages, along with many machineguns providing suppressive fire. Some lucky dice rolls by the Germans resulted in shattered British infantry sections in their dug in positions on the forward slopes by the end of turn 1. (See photo 1) As you can see, overcrowding plus accurate artillery fire equals a nasty mess.



The first job that the British and Indian troops had to do was to spread out. Two more turns of German artillery fire like this and the game would be over. Fortunately, as the British and Indian troops sought shelter further afield, and on reverse slopes the German artillery FOOs became less focussed on their task, and dice luck also started to fail.



Though more casualties were taken from German artillery... including the loss of the Essex battalion commander to a renegade artillery round, the troops on Castle Hill managed to re-deploy, but by now artillery was the least of the defenders worries, as no less than three full strength fallschirmjager platoons, one of which was a pioneer unit with flamethrowers started moving up the steep slopes towards the British positions, their effectiveness of '2' meaning that they would be a serious threat, and would take some stopping. Now the dice luck began to swing towards the defenders, several German sections becoming shattered or killed during the next three turns, though the British supporting mortars failed almost comprehensively to slow down the German advance. It was very much 'nip and tuck' now with the slightly uncoordinated fallschirmjager platoons attempting to close with the Essex defenders in the rubble, knowing that if they could get within 5cm of the shattered British infantry elements (red stars on the bases) the British would surrender.

Unfortunately for the Germans, the first platoon as it closed on the defenders positions, was met with a wall of fire from both the front and rear trenches, firing from overhead, and terrible damage was done, causing the fallschirmjager platoon to fall back. A second platoon was moving round to the right flank, this being pioneers with flame weapons, and a close assault on the one remaining intact British infantry section in the front line seemed guaranteed to succeed, but a terrible dice roll left the Germans exposed, and the defenders still in place. Half of the pioneer platoon was destroyed by the resulting close range wall of firepower. Again the Germans fell back.

A third platoon by now was moving up but a combination of British medium machinegun fire and mortars broke up the attack barely before it got started. All that was left for the mauled fallschirmjagers was to fall back to their jumping off positions, both sides now less than 25% of their starting numbers, but Castle Hill was still in Allied hands.

