

OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS

DESCENT ON CRETE

Surprise, Disruption, and Command Control

by Thomas G. Prutch

The first game to appear in the "rescued" *S&T*, back in the days when SPI was a collection of people's apartments scattered throughout New York, was called *Crete*. It had a crude black and white map printed on three magazine pages and about 40 or 50 crude drawings of counters to be hand colored and cut out by our faithful (and small) band of readers. The rules were "set" in reduced IBM typewriter manuscript and phrased as if re-translated from the Japanese. The crudity (and charm) of that issue (*S&T* nr. 18) was largely responsible for my re-involving myself with *S&T* as artist/copywriter, etc. And ten years later...

— RAS

Descent on Crete is a simulation of the German airborne operation against the western section of Crete in World War II. The battle was the first attempt by the Germans to execute a large scale air assault. Ironically, the Allied forces were to benefit by the lessons learned in this battle; for the Germans, Crete was the death knell of the elite Fallschirmjager outside of a conventional force ground role.

Contrary to history, *Descent on Crete* can trace its development from *Highway to the Reich*. The large scale format, rules design, and game techniques have been modified to suit the specific operation but will be easily recognized by players familiar with other "superwargames." The game is an excellent simulation of history, recreating the often confused and always intense fighting that occurred on the island. It must be said that this game is not to be recommended as a first purchase by a new gamer. It is an excellent simulation for the historian or experienced gamer who enjoys a difficult battle situation.

Physical Layout

The map is in two sections and covers the portion of Crete from Suda Bay to the Maleme Airfield. Both sections are used in three of the five scenarios and in the full battle game. The charts and tables necessary for play are printed on a separate set of sheets.

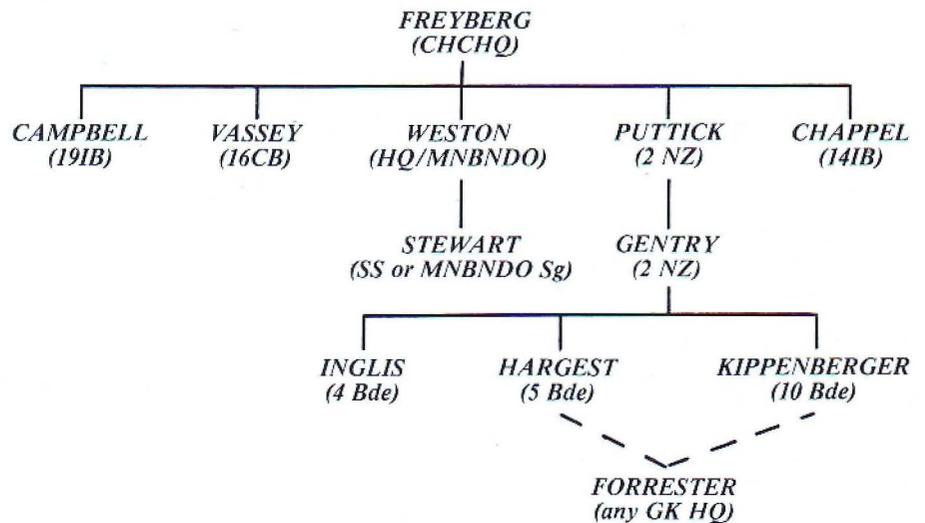
The complex command relationships in the game create some difficulty for players in interpretation. Some of the subordinations are implied rather than shown directly. I have included two charts with this article (with my special thanks to Eric Goldberg for his help) to clarify the situation. There are two notes to go with the charts. Designer Goldberg feels that Chappel and Campbell should be subordinated to Vassey, but that it

is not necessary. I believe that Heidrich should be subordinated to Suessman on the German OB for a more accurate relationship, but this is also unnecessary for game accuracy.

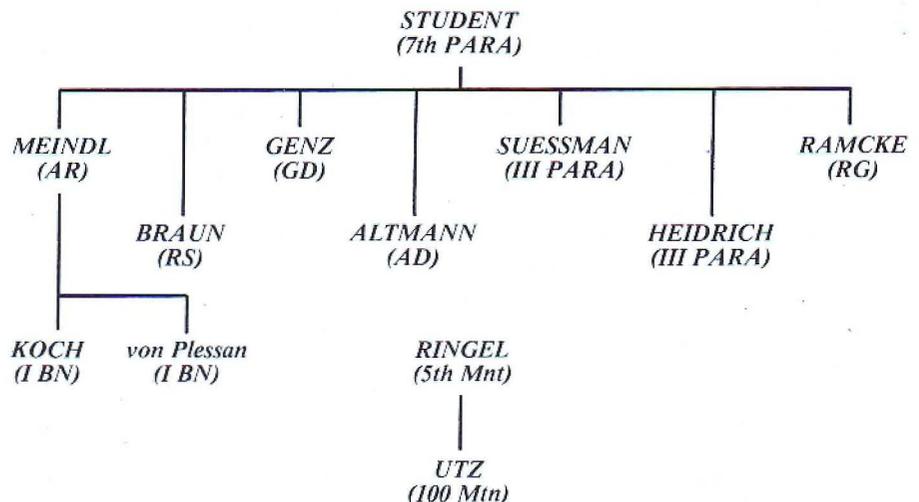
The rules support the game design well by being clearly written, although the necessary complexity will force players to reread several times. The inclusion of player's notes within the body of the rules deserves the

highest praise (and a note that this is a *de facto* SPI policy that deserves *de jure* status). The presence of the historical rationale behind a rule aids in understanding the rule. The notes also appeal greatly to the portion of a gamer that is interested in history. Lastly, how many times have you had an opponent argue, unopposed, at a critical time, that a certain rule should be eliminated because it appears for no reason?

BRITISH COMMAND RELATIONSHIP



GERMAN COMMAND RELATIONSHIP



One brief comment I have about the game components is the slip in quality control during production. None of the omissions prevent play, but they do detract from the quality of the game. Several hexes are misnumbered, some counters are incorrectly marked, and one line is missing in the General rule to the Air Landing/Assault section.

History as Simulation

The operation against the Commonwealth forces on Crete is a classic example of surprise causing paralysis in the defender. Richard Berg's observation (see F. O. column in *MOVES* #39) that very little unit movement exists overstates the situation in the game. Players on both sides are placed very accurately in the roles of the original ground commanders. The choice offered is between trying to move units to effect battle or maintaining existing battles because of a fear as to what will happen if the forces are disengaged.

The designer successfully burdens the player with the rigidity of command his historical counterparts suffered. Mr. Goldberg has also succeeded in having the tactical play follow historical ability by placing constraints that prevent the players from using the knowledge that a board game offers over actual operations.

In this latter area, the designer's success causes many players to wonder just how confused was the actual battle. *It was confused!* The Commonwealth units were scattered all over the countryside to prevent the German force from landing. Scattered units rely heavily upon communications networks if they are to be moved about or kept informed of the battle. The Commonwealth forces had no reliable communications system, except for the 2nd New Zealand Division's runner system. The units using runners were still hampered because of the time delays between sending and receiving messages. Even knowing that the Germans were going to attempt the operation against Crete didn't prevent the Commonwealth from being surprised. Allied observers were so surprised that they could not accurately record or observe the German attack. One account even mentioned

watching the German paratroops jump out of planes at 100 to 300 feet and pull their ripcords. The German troops were jumping on static lines (a line which pulls the parachute out of the pack and is attached to the plane).

Now you should see the picture the game has to show: surprised Allied troops staring up at German paratroops and everyone scattered all over a large area with poor communications. It is at this point that the game begins. The two players look at a board and try to figure out what to do.

A great deal of the game's static nature derives from the failure of players to understand the nature of this World War II operation in comparison to other operations that they have played in other games of the same era. When forces are composed of regular infantry lacking motor or mechanized means of transportation, the units can either engage in combat *or* move. Players must take the longer view and plan out the operation as a whole.

The Commonwealth player needs to spend his early game-turns organizing his forces rather than engaging in a series of small conflicts with the Germans. The small number of Command Points available to him in the beginning appears to present a larger problem than exists. Very few units need be moved to form reasonable quality defensive lines around critical areas, particularly around Canea and Maleme. After all, the German forces don't land with much attack capability in the initial turn. When the Commonwealth forces are being activated careful attention should be paid to maintaining unit and (I say this with extreme emphasis) national integrity. All too often the Commonwealth units that are activated are a jumbled collection of unit types and countries, because the owning player doesn't wish to halt any of the combat actions he has going. This is exactly what perpetuated the poor communications in the original battle (and I remind you that the Allies lost that one).

The German forces arrive widely scattered and are faced with the classic problem of airborne troops: How to regroup? Rarely will the German find a concentrated group of high combat power where it can affect the

course of the battle in the first two turns. The scattered units should head towards a geographical objective *only* if the goal is easily within the unit's reach, with or without combat. Otherwise the units should try to immediately join up with other forces near to them and avoid Allied units.

Developing a Strategy

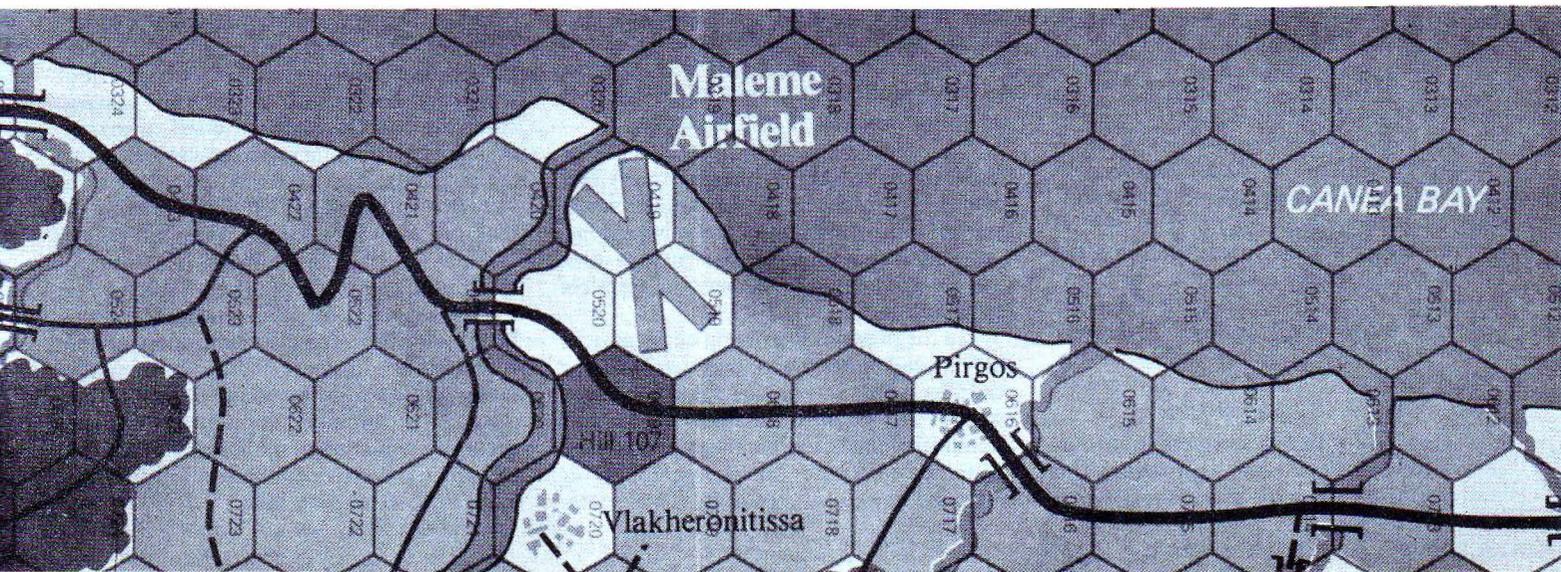
This is always the hardest part of any conflict, but it is easier in a game where the lessons from the original battle are accessible.

The Commonwealth player needs to establish the defense around Canea and Maleme Airfield as the first priority. Once he has a well established defensive group formed then offensive conflict can be undertaken. The attacks must be against the supply and headquarters units of the German forces. This aspect of war has often been missing in games, yet it is the true thrust of military conflict. Destruction of the "head" (or brain if you like) and "belly" of an army is how victory is achieved. The combat arms of an army are fought only when combat units block access to the HQs or supplies.

Another part of the Commonwealth plan is the need to break off combat when friendly units have been reduced below one-half their original effectiveness *or* strength. If a unit is ineffective or weak there is little to be gained from leaving an ineffective or weak unit in combat. The German units can be eliminated or reduced faster by full (or near-full) strength units. This judgment is a very difficult one, and there are historical examples of commanders who were unable to recognize this in actual units. The one-half original strength/effectiveness that is used here is strictly my personal guideline; some people use different levels. Players that follow this guideline find that they have released previously tied up Command points that can be better utilized elsewhere.

The German player has the problem of grouping his forces as stated previously. His geographic goals are the same ones that the Commonwealth player is defending, so the German forces need to disrupt the Commonwealth forces. This goal (disruption) is the classical use of airborne forces. To achieve disruption, the German player uses

Section of Descent on Crete West Map



his units which cannot reach Maleme Airfield or Canea to attack selected Commonwealth units. The selection criteria for attacking Commonwealth forces (called target unit(s) here) are:

1. Target units should be of different nationalities as much as possible. Instead of attacking two British units attack one British and one Greek (for example).

2. Attack target units of differing subordinations. This hampers the Commonwealth player from forming strong, organized forces to counterattack.

3. The priority target unit for German attacks should be Headquarters units at battalion (primary target) and divisional (secondary target) level.

To anyone who feels that this seems to be "playing the game rules," it should be pointed out that this guidance follows the normal practice of armies. Attacks along boundaries of national forces or different units have always been done when intelligence permits because it causes command problems. The destruction of headquarters units was first described by Sir B. H. Liddell Hart when he realized that the collapse of military forces started at the headquarters elements, even while the combat elements were still holding the line.

The biggest problem for the German player is handling the drop of his supply counters. There are no hard and fast rules that can guarantee none of the supplies will be lost. Generally it is better to drop the supplies so that a German unit is between the supplies and any Commonwealth units. Dropping the supplies on the German units ends up with a loss of supply capability as the Commonwealth player gains needed materials. There are situations where the German has no choice in supply drops. Once the supplies are on the ground, the divisional headquarter and divisional assets make the best collection force. Avoid giving supplies to combat units below battalion level.

Tactical Notes

Descent on Crete has a wider variety of unit types, as compared by percentage of force, than any other wargame. It therefore becomes critical that players learn to employ the different types to the best of the unit capabilities.



The German player has it relatively simple with three major types; paratroop, mountain and armor. The use of the paratroop units almost forces itself into the pattern of initial assault against the Commonwealth forces followed by a defensive perimeter around the objectives. The heavy casualties inflicted on the paratroops in the early portion of the game leave the German player unable to attack decisively.

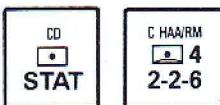
However the German player is not forced to defend only with the paratroops. The reinforcement by the 5th Mountain Division

brings a force of higher effectiveness into the game. Along with this division the German receives the elements of the 5th Armored Division. The mountain units can be utilized to expand the area held by the German forces and to launch limited distance attacks against Commonwealth units. The armored units should not be piecemealed out upon arrival. Instead they should be kept relatively close together to form an armored attack force to spearhead a drive by the German player against suitable targets.

The last resource of the German player is the airstrike. Close-in use by the German player against targets to be attacked by ground units is not recommended unless no other recourse is available. Joint air-ground operations were not as well coordinated in 1941 as most people imagine them to be at that time. (The vaunted *blitzkrieg* use of air was actually against targets well separated from ground forces.) The air strikes are best used against future ground attack targets. As with ground forces, headquarters units are the priority target for attacks.

The Commonwealth commander has a more difficult situation than his German counterpart. There are six different national forces under Freyberg. The New Zealanders represent the best fighting force for the Commonwealth both in terms of unit strengths and organization. A secondary advantage of the New Zealand units is their ability to work with the Greek forces. The Greek forces are important for their "inexpensive" cost of activation under the command rules and by Cpt. Forrester.

In activating units, attention needs to be paid to keeping the strongest anti-personnel force possible. Avoid wasting points on anti-armor artillery and armor units. Certain special units are worth noting for their unique abilities.



Static artillery units are generally not worth activating unless they fit into a defensive position which will be maintained for a protracted number of turns. These units are relatively inflexible for supporting different units. Flak units are another artillery type that should be activated only when they can be utilized for a specific defense. Their use will be around the Maleme Airfield or highly apparent sites of German air assault.

Pioneer units and engineer units can be used interchangeably. The engineers are best utilized on main defensive positions where their greater combat influence is important. The pioneers are used for construction work in areas that are not immediately susceptible to enemy attacks.

In the previous discussion about attacks against headquarter units, the question in the reader's mind was what could be done against the German combat units. The Cretan Irregular forces are the answer. By using these forces, the Commonwealth player can avoid having isolated units cut off com-

pletely from other forces. Care must be taken to avoid using the Irregulars on the turn prior to a German massive attack, because of the increase in German paratroop morale. Attacks are best against German artillery support units.

General Comments

Descent on Crete has some items that are worth commenting about that do not readily fall into any specific area. The Commonwealth Support Groups are described as being important to the Commonwealth forces. Other than representing easily lost strength points, these units do nothing for the Commonwealth side. The easiest option for the owning player is to evacuate them as early in the game as possible. Personally, I would like to determine a method of incorporating these units within the supply rules.

The inclusion of a rule on fatigue is praiseworthy. In the past, unit counters have been able to operate as "super military" forces capable of extended combat without regard to the fact that the counter represents a group of men. The rule, as written in the game, forces the German player to "rest" his paratroops. While the rule is somewhat limited in application the intent is to avoid an incredibly difficult exercise in bookkeeping.

Rules Changes

Those gamers who own the game undoubtedly had some of the same questions I had about portions of the game. So here are the answers (courtesy of Eric Goldberg):

1. The contradiction between rule (12.74) and (19.31) in supply range is resolved at 8 hexes (Rule 19.31).

2. The mysterious unit on the island of Ay Theodoroi is the 234 MB/RA artillery battery originally marked for deployment as t81A. This company is a British unit on the top OB track.

3. If a leader unit is in a stack which is eliminated by enemy direct or indirect fire (not as a result of close assault) the owning player rolls two dice once for each strength point in the enemy force (only those strength points used in the attack). If a two is rolled, the leader is eliminated.

In closing, I would like to draw attention to my original comment about the game not being one for a novice. The actual battle for Crete convinced Hitler that there was no place for airborne troops in any role other than special small missions. This conclusion was made because of the extremely heavy casualties the Germans suffered in taking the island. The battle was a see-saw battle for the airfield and could easily have gone as a victory to either side. Victory was a cause of the Commonwealth forces making a few mistakes more than the Germans. The same is true in the game. There is very little leeway for tactical errors by either player. This combined with inherent disorganization of the forces seems to cause unhappiness in the novice interested in grandiose sweeps across a map. The newcomer that is interested in an accurate simulation of the problems faced by the original force commanders will find the game richly rewarding. ■■