

RECONNAISSANCE BY COMBAT

DOING IT THE RED ARMY WAY



By Phil Yates

I've just finished reading Boris Gorbachevsky's autobiographical book, *Through the Maelstrom*. It is an excellent account of a Red Army soldier's experience. Gorbachevsky survived a human-wave attack towards Rzhev in 1942, then two reconnaissance by combat attacks to take part in the vicious fighting in Prussia at the end of the war. It's an amazing insight into the war in the East, but the thing that stood out for me was the truly callous approach adopted by the Red Army in the first half of the war.

Reading about Gorbachevsky's experiences, reminded me of another account I'd read about Vladimir Kantovski's experience of a reconnaissance by combat in a penal unit. In both cases they were ordered to make suicidal attacks, just to make the enemy open fire and reveal their firing positions. Of 240 men in Vladimir Kantovski's company, only nine escaped being severely wounded or killed in their reconnaissance by combat. Kantovski was one of the lucky ones. His wounds were severe, but he recovered and was discharged. It also made me think about how to set up a game to show people what 'reconnaissance by combat' was all about.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, it rapidly destroyed almost every prewar formation of the Red Army. They were aided by Stalin's purges over the previous three years which had eliminated many of the Red Army's officers and sent many more to the gulags.

Despite these losses, the Red Army was reformed and sent back into battle. The result was a huge army with very few officers or soldiers with much training or combat experience. They attempted to fight 'by the book' using the pre-war manuals as their guide, but lacked the skill to succeed.

The artillery is supposed to neutralise the enemy's firing positions while the infantry attacked in overwhelming force. Unfortunately, for this to work, you need to locate the enemy firing positions and to have artillery with the skill and ammunition to destroy them. Lacking this, the massed infantry attacks degenerated into

... Reconnaissance through combat was the brainstorm of the Supreme Commander [Stalin] and his generals. Depending on the task, they would send a platoon, a company, or a battalion; the size of the force didn't matter. In reality they were driving people to their slaughter, to their certain death. The point of the operation, as they considered it..., was to give the enemy a big scare, so that he might think a large-scale offensive was beginning and cause him to open fire from all of his positions, thereby revealing them to our intelligence. Subsequently, we could easily knock them out. In practice things rarely turned out that way.

—Gorbachevsky on reconnaissance by combat.

I had already heard so many tragic stories about these operations. ... How highly the commanders believed in them and valued them, and with what horror did the soldiers utter this phrase! Rare was the soldier who remained alive after such an assignment, and it was considered a success if you were just wounded and your own guys managed to drag you off the battlefield.

—Gorbachevsky on reconnaissance by combat.

It won't be easy to deal with him [the enemy], but we have tanks, and not only that, we have 34's, the best tanks in the world! Moreover, our artillery and Katyusha rockets will smash all their defences to pieces, even before we attack, and our airplanes will give us support—the Germans won't be able to withstand it, so our commanders tell us...

—Gorbachevsky's thoughts before a human wave attack.

human-wave attacks relying on sheer numbers to overcome the opposition.

While this worked on occasion, the usual result was simply mass slaughter. In the week of Gorbachevsky's regiment's first attack, the medical battalion treated over 4000 wounded soldiers (including him). On top of this, there were uncounted missing and dead.

Having barely survived this human-wave attack, Gorbachevsky was ordered to take part in two 'reconnaissance by combat' operations. These were intended to overcome the problem of locating the enemy firing positions. The concept behind a reconnaissance by combat was simple—launch a small attack to force the enemy to reveal their firing positions. Then, using this information, the artillery should be able to neutralise them ahead of the main attack.

Fortunately for Gorbachevsky, the first attack was cancelled just as his unit was about to charge. Later, as the regimental Komsomol (communist youth movement) organiser observing a reconnaissance by combat, he was ordered forward to get the stalled attack moving. He didn't get far, being wounded in the arm as he left the trench.

Reconnaissance by combat had three main failings. First, the unit conducting the reconnaissance was invariably wiped out. Second, the Red Army

I strain my lungs and shout 'Ura-a! Ura-a!' ... We are attacking head on, in echelons, and my company is advancing in the second line. Other men are hurrying in front of us and behind us... A growing destructive fire sweeps up and down the attacking lines with a storm of machine-gun fire. The hoarse coughing of mortars follows the machine-guns. Artillery starts to roar. Enormous geysers of earth toss the living and the dead high into the air. ... How can this be?! It appears that the artillery did not reconnoitre the enemy's firing positions. Did they just pound vacant space for 30 minutes?

—Gorbachevsky's experience of a human wave attack.

'As soon as we showed ourselves, the enemy opened fire. And our officers shouted "Onwards, onwards!" I don't think you can feel any patriotism when you are participating in such an attack. I think the over-riding feeling is one of bluntness—your feelings are blunted. You feel fatalistic. You know what's going to happen is unavoidable, fatal, and it's like a game of Russian roulette. Well, what is your lot going to be?' ...

Kantovski felt bullets hit his arm and shoulder: 'I was wounded and began to bleed. You had to be heavily wounded to be pardoned, but how can you know whether you are badly wounded or not badly wounded? Until I became convinced that I was heavily enough wounded I didn't dare set off towards the first aid centre. It was hard to move—my arm was not working, so I had to crawl lying on my back.'

—Kantovski's experience of reconnaissance by combat from War of the Century.

FURTHER READING

Gorbachevsky, Boris, *Through the Maelstrom, A Red Army Soldier's War on the Eastern Front, 1942-1945*. 2008, University of Kansas Press. ISBN 978-070061605-3

Rees, Lawrence, *War of the Century*. 1999, BBC Worldwide Ltd. ISBN 0-563-34877-8



RECONNAISSANCE BY COMBAT: SCENARIO

This scenario gives players a taste of the Red Army's style of reconnaissance by combat.

TABLE

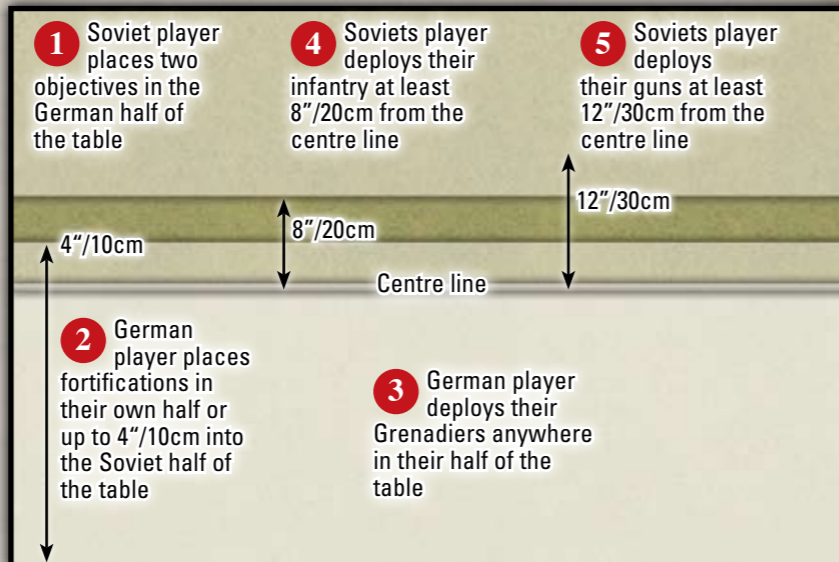
The table represents a section of the Russian Steppe. It should be largely flat with a few gullies between low rises and the odd wood or stream. It could also include a destroyed village.

OBJECTIVES

Once the table is laid out, the German player chooses one long end of the table as their table half.

The Soviet then places two Objectives on the German side of the table at least 12"/30cm from any table edge.

These objectives mark the most vulnerable points in the German front line—therefore the best to attack to provoke a response. The objectives can be marked by a crashed aircraft, a knocked out tank, a command bunker, or anything else that makes sense.



THE FORCES

The forces and fortifications used in this scenario are presented on the following four pages. For more information on the forces and their equipment see *Eastern Front, The Complete Intelligence Handbook for forces on the Eastern Front 1942-1943*.



STARTING THE GAME

The German player deploys first, placing their on-table troops and fortifications. The German force starts the game Gone to Ground, but may not be in Foxholes if they are not in the trenches.

The Soviet player then deploys their troops and has the first turn.

AMBUSHES

The German player has most of their force in ambush at the start of the game. In *Flames Of War* platoons in ambush are held off the table until the player decides to use them.

At the start of their turn, they may place them anywhere in their half of the table at least 16"/40cm from all enemy teams. If they are placed in concealment, they only need to be 4"/10cm from the enemy.

ENDING THE GAME

The game ends when the Soviet player loses all three Strelkovy Companies or when they start a turn holding any objective or a section of trench line.

The Soviet player treats each section of trench line as an objective, and holds them if they have a team within 4"/10cm of the section of trench line and the German player does not.

If the Soviet player takes an objective or trench line, they win outright.

MEASURING YOUR SUCCESS

This scenario is designed to be played twice, with each player having a go at playing both the German side and the Soviet side. The scenario winner is the general that is able to fend off the Soviet attack with the least number of platoons, thus denying intelligence from the enemy.

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YOUR FORCE IN FLAMES OF WAR

II Strelkovy Batalon:

- Battalion HQ: Command Rifle team, 2iC Rifle team, Battalion Komissar team, five Pioneer Rifle teams, and two 45mm obr 1937 guns.
- Strelkovy Company: Command Rifle team, Komissar team, and eighteen Rifle teams.
- Strelkovy Company: Command Rifle team, Komissar team, and eighteen Rifle teams.
- Strelkovy Machine-gun Company: Command Rifle team, and six Maksim HMG teams.
- Strelkovy Mortar Company: Command Rifle team, and six 82-BM-41 mortars.
- Regimental Gun Company: Command Rifle team, Observer Rifle team, and four 76mm obr 1927 guns.



SOVIET BRIEFING

Your division is planning an attack in this sector of the front. Experience has revealed that it is essential that the enemy firing points be suppressed before the attack begins. To do this, we must locate them. Once the firing points are located, the artillery will be able to suppress them before the attack.

ORDERS

Your battalion will conduct a reconnaissance by combat. You are to attack until every enemy firing point has been located.

OWN FORCES

You command the regiment's second *Strelkovy Batalon* (rifle battalion) and attached support as follows:

II Strelkovy Batalon:

- Battalion HQ
- 4th Company
- 5th Company
- 6th Company
- 2nd Machine-gun Company
- 2nd Mortar Company
- Regimental Gun Company.

All Soviet companies are rated as *Fearless Conscript*.

RELUCTANT

CONSCRIPT

CONFIDENT

TRAINED

FEARLESS

VETERAN

DEPLOYMENT

Your entire Battalion HQ and Strelkovy Companies are deployed in your half of the table, at least 8"/20cm from the centre of the table. You can mark their line of departure with a trench line across the table, but as you are ordered to attack, you are not permitted to use their trenches during the game, nor retreat across them. Your komissars will ensure that this order is carried out.

The rest of your force is deployed at least 12"/30cm from the centre of the table. Your Gun teams are all in Gun Pits and cannot move.

You will have the first turn.

OBJECTIVE

Your goal is to end the game with as many Victory Points as possible. You gain a Victory Point for each platoon that you force the German player to reveal from Ambush, and two Victory Points for each German platoon that you Destroy.

If you start any turn in possession of any objective or trench line, the game is over and you win an outstanding victory, irrespective of Victory Points.



REGIMENTAL GUN COMPANY

MACHINE-GUN COMPANY

MORTAR COMPANY

BATTALION HQ

STRELKOVY COMPANY

STRELKOVY COMPANY

STRELKOVY COMPANY

YOUR FORCE IN FLAMES OF WAR

ON TABLE AT THE START OF GAME

7. Grenadierkompanie:

- Company HQ:
Company Command SMG team,
2iC SMG team.

- Grenadier Platoon:
Command SMG team, and
four Rifle/MG teams.

- Grenadier Platoon:
Command SMG team, and
four Rifle/MG teams.

IN AMBUSH AT THE START OF GAME

8. MG Kompanie:

- Machine-gun Platoon:
Command SMG team, and
two MG42 HMG teams.

- Machine-gun Platoon:
Command SMG team, and
two MG42 HMG teams.

- Mortar Platoon:
Command SMG team,
Observer Rifle team, and
four 8cm GW34 mortars.

13. IG Kompanie:

- Infantry Gun Platoon:
Command SMG team,
Observer Rifle team, and
two 7.5cm leIG18 guns.

14. PaK Kompanie:

- Anti-tank Gun Platoon:
Command SMG team, and
two 3.7cm PaK36 guns.

5. Artillerie Batterie:

- Artillery Battery:
Command SMG team,
Staff team,
Observer Rifle team, and
four 10.5cm leFH18 howitzers.

GERMAN BRIEFING

After the losses of last winter, your lines are very thinly stretched and under-manned, so stopping a major attack will rely on your machine-guns, mortars and artillery. Your section of the front has been quiet lately, but Ivan is up to something. So it's vital that you don't reveal their whereabouts unless absolutely essential. The Russians have plenty of artillery and pound every gun position they have located just before attacking.

ORDERS

You must hold your positions at any cost. Do not reveal the location of your supporting weapons unless you have to.

OWN FORCES

You command the regiment's seventh *Grenadierkompanie* (infantry company) and attached support as follows:

7. Grenadierkompanie:

- Company HQ
- 1st Platoon
- 2nd Platoon

8. MG Kompanie (in support):

- 1st Machine-gun Platoon
- 2nd Machine-gun Platoon
- 4th Mortar Platoon

13. IG Kompanie:

- 3rd Infantry Gun Platoon

14. PaK Kompanie (in support):

- 2nd Anti-tank Gun Platoon

5. Artillerie Batterie (in support):

- 5th Artillery Battery

All German platoons are rated as *Confident Veteran*.

RELUCTANT	CONSCRIPT
CONFIDENT	TRAINED
FEARLESS	VETERAN

DEPLOYMENT

The Company HQ and two Grenadier Platoons from 7. Kompanie start the game anywhere in your half of the table.

You can fortify your positions with up to eight sections of trench lines, each 8"/20cm long, and eight sections of barbed wire each 8"/20cm by 2"/5cm. These can be positioned anywhere in your half of the table, or up to 4"/10cm into the Soviet half of the table.

It may be a good idea to set up a hedgehog around each objective and link them with communications trenches to allow you to counterattack any breaches of your positions.

All other forces are held in Ambush, or order any of our ranges on-line, please visit us at www.FlamesOfWar.com

are depicted at the start with the infantry.

When placed on table, the ambushing guns will be in Gun Pits and the command teams in Foxholes or in the Trench Lines already placed.

OBJECTIVE

Your goal is to destroy the Soviet force while minimising the number of Victory Points you give to the Soviet player.

You must hold all objectives at any cost. If you lose any objective or the Soviet player captures any section of trench line, the game is over and the Soviet player wins.

