

OPERATIONAL COMBAT SERIES INTO THE GAP

A BEGINNER'S PERSPECTIVE ON OCS
By Malcolm Cameron

Eighteen months ago I would have stared at you blankly if you had asked me 'What is OCS?'. Perhaps more alarmingly 'Who is Dean Essig?' would have elicited the same response.

'What is the name of the major river running through Lithuania?' Nothing. 'Where is Courland?' An embarrassed cough at best.

Ignorance was bliss in some respects. I never had to worry about modes or (much) about supply. A Sea Cap was something that might be important on a yacht. And Trainbusting was something to be feared only if I neglected to buy a ticket before boarding.

In the games I was playing there was plenty of immediacy: *ASL* with its hex by hex, movement point by movement point tension ("Stop right there, these guys are going to shoot"); card driven games for the back and forth struggle, card by card.

I had more or less given up on hex based operational level games of the kind that had first brought me into wargaming thirty years before.

It is hard to say why. The main thing I did not like was the long lines of units butting up against each other, usually stacked two or more high. That felt cramped. And, in contrast to *ASL* (in which the movement choices every turn are difficult, varied and not without risk), I felt games of that kind were relatively lacking in their focus on manoeuvre.

That was plainly more a case of ignorance on my part than anything else, but it was where I was in my approach to operational gaming.

What I missed most, as my play of operational level games fell away, was the connection between those games and the many excellent operational level histories, particularly of the Second World War. Books about a particular

military campaign have often kindled a desire on my part to play a game about, or set in, that campaign.

So, in a funny kind of way, Amazon.com is responsible for me finding my way back into operational gaming after a hiatus of many years – cheap and plentiful operational histories had me wanting more than just the small scale, all or nothing excitement that is *ASL*.

An excellent game by another publisher set on the Eastern Front in 1914 got me excited about the operational gaming genre. That set me browsing – not with any real purpose in mind, but with open eyes for the first time in a while.

No *ASL* player can ever survive for too long without compulsively returning to the *MMP* website and it was there that the seeds for this article appeared in the form of **Baltic Gap** (*OCS #11*).

I bought **Baltic Gap** for two reasons, overcoming a couple of reservations along the way.

First, it involves a campaign in which the Red Army is on the attack in the second half of 1944. There are a lot of games – by which I mean A LOT of games – in which the forces of Germany are depicted on the attack, sweeping much before them in the early war. And for that matter in the late war – December 1944 in the Ardennes springs to mind as a reasonably common topic for wargames.

Here was a game which unashamedly depicted a campaign in which Germany's armed forces would have the stuffing kicked out of them by a Soviet military that had emerged not only intact (despite an horrific loss of life) but dramatically improved from the reverses of the first 16 months of the war.

Second, I knew almost nothing about the campaign, the historical treatment of which has suffered in comparison

to the even larger and more successful Operation Bagration which took place to the South of the **Baltic Gap** map. Maybe I would learn something from the game – even though it is just a game.

The first reservation I had to overcome was the counter art. I did not like the font. It has grown on me (and it is big and easy to read) but there it is.

The second reservation was a little more rational. Looking at the pictures posted on Boardgamegeek, I saw long lines of counters, mostly stacked two or more high, snaking from the top of the map most of the way down.

But when I looked closely, the significance of the word "most" became apparent. The German line ran out short of the board edge. There was a (Baltic) Gap.

So I decided to take the punt and see if I liked the game by actually playing it rather than making judgments based on photographs on a website. (A quick word of thanks to the Australian dollar is in order. Without its sharp ascent against the greenback over the last couple of years none of this would have been possible).

Now I am the proud owner of **Baltic Gap**, **Case Blue**, **Guderian's Blitzkrieg II**, **DAK2**, **Tunisia**, **Burma II** and **Korea: The Forgotten War**, four of which are out of print (or were when I bought them). I think that constitutes a full set of the *Operational Combat Series*, apart from **Hube's Pocket** and **Sicily: Triumph and Folly** (the old **Enemy at the Gates** having been rolled into **Case Blue**).

So why *OCS*?

The familiar...

For anyone who has played wargames for a while, a quick glance at an *OCS* game in action reveals much that is familiar.

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Headquarters units usually appear slightly to the rear of the front, spread out at intervals along the line. The front lines are staffed by combat units with two big numbers: one on the left showing combat strength and one on the right showing movement allowance.

Units are of different types, shown by the usual NATO symbols. The map will show a variety of terrain from cities to open steppe or desert, mountains, roads and railroads, ports and forests.

All of that will look (and be) similar to a host of other operational or strategic level games.

Once the casual observer asks a few questions he or she learns some more familiar things. There are ZOCs; supply lines based largely on railroads; odds ratios in combat; step losses and the like. Mountains, hills, rivers, swamps and woods are hard to move through and make for good defensive terrain. Major cities are often objectives.

Intuitive concepts, and used in a very familiar way in *OCS* (with one or two exceptions).

But I had seen all of that before, and it hadn't been enough to keep me interested.

The different - what sets *OCS* apart?

There are five main things that made *OCS* strongly appeal to me: modes, action ratings, surprise, supply and fog of war. Well, six really. The sixth is the way in which all of the elements of the game interact to make virtually every decision a challenge.

Modes

Units can be in different modes. Most of the time you choose the mode your troops adopt: combat mode to be at their strongest combat strength and slowest movement allowance (and to exert a ZOC); movement mode to roughly halve their combat strength but increase their movement (sometimes dramatically). The counters show the combat and move values on opposite sides, so the mechanics of choosing the mode is easy (flip the counter when you come to move it).

To bring troops a long distance in a vulnerable way, put them in Strat Mode

to double their movement allowance (but don't let them get attacked).

Sometimes, your troops will become Disorganized (DG) - which is a mode of its own. Enemy action causes DG (air or artillery barrages; retreating into ZOCs). Being DG halves your strength and movement, and makes you less effective in combat.

All of that is clever - and presents decisions to the player every turn. For instance, you really need to get that unit another hex or two forward to plug a gap, but to get there it needs to be in move mode so it will be weaker and will no longer exert a ZOC. Leave it a hex or two short and more able to fight? Or stretch its move and make it more vulnerable? You choose.

But the mode that really shows off the sophistication of *OCS* is Reserve Mode. In each scenario (whether short or campaign length) each side is given a finite number of Reserve markers. Placing a Reserve marker on a stack (not in an enemy ZOC) puts it in Reserve Mode. Your reserves are your battlefield flexibility.

They can be released (take the marker off) in your opponent's turn after he or she is finished moving but before he/she attacks, to reinforce a threatened hex, or (if you have artillery being released from Reserve) to barrage an attacking stack in an attempt to inflict casualties and/or DG status on the attacker.

Or they can be released in your own turn after combat has finished, to pour through the gaps that you have (hopefully) made in your enemy's line - or to attack a second time to try to make those gaps if the first wave didn't get through.

The dilemma is that your Reserve markers can't be everywhere, and you do have to keep those guys out of the front line to use them as reserves. More tough choices but captured with great elegance via the modes.

Action Ratings

Apart from combat strength and a movement allowance, all combat units have an action rating (AR). An AR of zero represents poorly trained, poorly motivated troops who are not effective for much more than making up the numbers on the battlefield.

An AR of five (the highest) generally represents elite troops armed with highly effective weapons - relative to the others involved in the campaign in question.

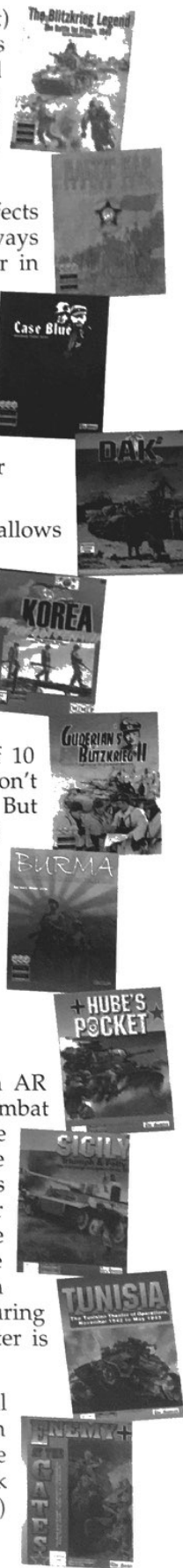
The AR differential affects combat in a couple of ways - as a dice roll modifier in favour of the better side both for surprise and for the combat roll itself. High AR units are more likely to survive being cut off and out of supply (low AR units surrender in droves once OOS).

The use of action ratings allows troop quality to be depicted without sheer size and combat power being ignored. A tank battalion with a combat factor of 3 and an AR of 5 can take on an infantry division with a combat factor of 10 and an AR of 2. It won't always win that fight. But its AR advantage makes a massive difference in most cases. Both quality and sheer size and firepower have their place, which the AR models again with real simplicity.

Surprise

The main way that an AR differential feeds into combat is via the surprise mechanism. Before every battle, surprise is rolled. On a 10 or better (17% probability) the attacker will surprise the defender. In an overrun (an attack during movement) a 9 or better is needed (28% chance).

But the defender will surprise the attacker on a 5 or less (28% of the time) in a normal attack or on a 6 or less (42%) in an overrun.



The AR differential is either added (if the attacker has the better AR) or subtracted (if it doesn't). AR differentials dramatically swing the probability of surprise on the 2d6 bell curve.

If you get surprised it is usually bad news. The odds column for combat shifts 1d6 against you.

There are fewer more depressing sights on the *OCS* battlefield than your 33 to 4 attack (8-1!) against a unit in close terrain shifting 6 columns to be resolved on the 1-2 column. It happens – not often, but enough to make every attack heart in mouth, particularly those with a lot of effort invested in them.

Which brings me to...

Supply

OCS is perhaps best known for the fact that supply stockpiles are represented by counters on the map: SPs or tokens (four tokens makes one SP).

Your troops burn supply points for a lot of things that you need them to do. Attacks cost 1 token (1T) for every attacking step; defending costs you 2T for the whole stack; artillery barrages cost up to 2SP (8T) for massive barrages and less for smaller attacks. So combat burns up a lot of supply, particularly when you are attacking, and all the more so when you are attacking dug in defenders in good terrain (where you want to achieve some decent odds).

Movement allowances are color coded: they are either leg (no fuel needed but slow); truck (fuel required; fast but not so good in bad terrain and can't move through ZOCs) or track (fuel required; faster than leg but not as fast as truck, but much better off road than trucked units).

Your mechanized and motorized units cost 1T each to move (although you can move a whole tank or mechanized division (corps for the Red Army) for 1SP). An HQ can "throw" fuel to an unlimited number of independent units too.

So moving your strike force of tank corps costs you SPs even if they don't fight. And if they do fight, more supply gets burned.

If troops get cut off, they can use SPs that are nearby to avoid being out of supply. (They eat the SPs – one of my favorite terms in the *OCS* rulebook).

Aircraft use SPs to refit to be available for use the turn after flying a mission.

To get your SPs where they need to be, you will be using the rail net; your shipping capacity to ship SPs to port; truck points and wagon points (mules and human porters in some games) and transport aircraft. They don't move themselves.

Sounds like a pain all that paying for stuff and shifting SPs around the map. But I think it is a major strength of *OCS*.

The key theme of *OCS* is that nothing important happens without the player making choices between competing alternatives. Having to expend supply points – which are limited – is a critical element in creating that dynamic for this (perhaps obvious) reason: if a player can move and attack with every unit in his or her order of battle every turn, they will as long as the odds are in their favor. If the players have to pay a price to move and fight, they are forced to be selective.

Resources are scarce on the real life battlefield, and they are scarce in *OCS*.

You probably have enough SPs at the start of most *OCS* scenarios to move, attack and barrage with every unit you have. Once or twice – maybe. You will get more along the way, but never enough for what you want to do.

You will find yourself making supply related choices in almost every phase of every turn. Where will I move my SPs? How will I get them there? Should I use my limited rail cap to shift troops or shift supply? Should I fly some SPs in? Do I need to neutralize the other side's fighter patrol zones before I do? Should I move those tank battalions up to attack, or let the infantry slog through and use my tanks as reserves? Do I refit that aircraft or use that 1T for something else?

The sophistication of the supply system does not begin and end with spending supply for activities of the kind mentioned. All units need abstract 'trace' supply – bread and butter to supplement the shells and gas represented by SPs.

The supply net builds out from railheads a limited distance measured in truck MPs. Rough terrain without roads severely limits the distance that trace

supply can reach beyond the rail net. HQs extend the reach of trace supply. If they are within range of the railhead their 'throw' range can be used to keep units further afield in supply.

As the action moves forward (if the enemy front line is pierced or flanked), trace supply needs to follow. HQs can move forward quickly, but the railhead advances steadily, and your forward elements do not necessarily follow the rail network as they advance. Trucks or wagons can convert from lugging SPs around (for fuel and combat supply) to an abstract role of providing intermediate supply hubs ('extenders'), to join forward HQs back to the trace supply network.

That takes time and planning. Truck or wagon extenders are often a critical element in allowing an advance to continue. If the tanks outrun their trace supply for too long they will have to stop. Players have to see that coming and get their trucks or wagons in position to make extenders at the right moment, whilst keeping them working hard moving those SPs until that moment arrives.

Smashing a hole in the enemy front is terrific – but if you can't follow up without running out of bread and butter, all those SPs spent on making the breakthrough may have been wasted.

Fog of War

The *OCS* fog of war rule is probably the simplest and possibly the most important in the rule book: no peeking at enemy stacks. You can see the top unit, but that's it.

You can arrange your stacks any way you like. You can put a high combat factor, high AR unit on top of a bunch of poor quality troops in order to discourage attack. Or you can hide that guy at the bottom of the stack to invite attack and turn a nasty surprise on the attacker when the strong unit is used for the surprise and attack roll. (You choose which unit to use for its AR at the moment of combat).

You can hide a whole tank corps under an innocent looking infantry regiment and move them up together.

Because the games in the series often represent quite large campaigns played

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over many turns, you will often have little or no idea about the true strength of the forces immediately opposite.

Apart from reflecting operational level surprise and misdirection in an incredibly simple way, this mechanic eliminates the ability to accurately count the optimal number of combat factors needed to attack a hex in most cases.

So declaring an attack is always somewhat nerve wracking against hexes occupied by multiple units. You need to commit troops and SPs to the attack before knowing exactly what you are attacking in most cases.

A beginner's ending

Each of the *Operational Combat Series* games that I have played has made me think hard and be creative.

The rules are easy. Now, coming from a 25 year *ASL* veteran, you might think that is a relative term, but I don't think so. *OCS* is very straightforward in terms of the rules concepts and complexity.

It is difficult at first because the system brings a number of complementary and original elements together – which takes some getting used to.

The hard thinking and creativity are (for me) the fun part. I can't just point my guys in the direction of the enemy and let them loose. If I do, they will run out of shells and gas, and maybe even outrun their bread and butter, very quickly, and my ability to achieve the victory conditions will be in shreds.

I have to work out how much I can achieve each turn, and how to get the most bang for my SP spending. I need to spend within my means, as if I am using more SPs than I am getting each turn, I will run out in a finite time. I need to plan ahead for where my extenders will go, and for how I will get SPs to my spearheads.

As I have mentioned, I started *OCS* with **Baltic Gap**.

When I set up the campaign, the situation looked appalling for the Germans – and it was. An entire Soviet army starts the game by flooding into vacant space on the German right, which is protected only by the Daugava (aka Dvina) River and a few isolated divisions.

The Red Army has dozens of artillery units, from brigades supporting each field army, to massive 144 factor Katyusha divisions. The sheer quantity of artillery firepower massed by the three Soviet Fronts in the game is enough to blast significant holes in the German fortified line (the Panther Line).

But what does the Soviet player get to do with all that artillery? Well, on most turns he or she will do nothing at all with it. For most of the game, the artillery will do very little other than threaten the German line.

The SP cost of firing all those tubes would bankrupt the Red Army in the blink of an eye – so they must (for the most part) stay silent. They will be used occasionally and in their historical role: as the precursor to a major Soviet offensive. Then the SPs will gladly be spent to fire the big guns, but those will be the exception not the rule.

The historical reality that operational commanders had to choose between competing priorities is modelled very well by *OCS*.

As is the way in which even successful offensives eventually run out of steam: the trucks find it more and more difficult to get the SPs forward to keep the tanks moving. The problem is exacerbated as some transport points are used to form extenders to keep the spearheads in trace supply. Eventually, the tanks cannot safely go on. With no fuel and no trace supply in range they just have to stop – often with strategically important objectives otherwise at their mercy.

The design struggle

All of *The Gamers* games that I have played (*OCS* is the series I have now played most) strive to give the players the historical forces to play with at the right historical time and place, with historical objectives. But with all of those forces available, the recipe is there for overuse of the forces (we got 'em; let's use 'em). So *The Gamers'* games try to limit overuse of forces by players in a variety of ways.

In *OCS* it is imposing a supply cost on critical activities, directly limiting the

scope of the forces that can be used each turn to realistic levels. In *TCS*, *LoB* and *CWBS*, the limits on player overuse of his or her forces are modelled by written order systems and built in lag effects and unreliability of order acceptance.

OCS is incredibly flexible and diverse.

In **Baltic Gap**, my Soviet tankers are driving through and around fortifications, forests and bogs to burst into open country in sweeping manoeuvres. They are followed by convoys of trucks shipping large numbers of SPs turn after turn and protected by three air armies bombing everything in their wake.

In **Burma**, Japanese battalions are living off the land as they slip through mountain passes, across mountain sides and along goat tracks to cut off the British from Burma. In their rear, Chindit columns are attempting to cut them off from their river base. Trucks are a rare sight. Tanks even rarer. There is much manoeuvre but none of it sweeping.

In **Case Blue**, my massive Red Army infantry armies are striving forward against a thin line of German infantry backed by tank divisions held in reserve, ready to counterattack at a moment's notice. Soon many will be cut off from any form of effective retreat, and great encirclement battles loom in prospect of the southern steppe.

In **DAK II**, the outnumbered battalions of the Desert Rats armoured division will try to extract a price from the huge invading Italian army, whilst planning a war of movement with which the Italians will be unable to compete. There is no front line incapable of being flanked. Fuel is at a premium.

In all of the games, the interaction between the individually simple aspects of the system creates room for difficult player decisions on every turn.

I feel constantly on a knife edge between triumph and disaster and that my choices will determine on which side I fall (although so far it has mostly been the latter).

This beginner is hooked.

