DIVIDE AND CONQUER
POCKET BATTLES FOR FLAMES OF WAR

by Mike Haught

'Divide and conquer' is an age-old recipe for success over a difficult enemy. By breaking up the enemy into smaller chunks, you can tackle them individually and work your way to victory. This has been a military strategy for many centuries, even before Napoleon who made it so famous after building his empire upon it.

During World War II, the front lines were enormous and there was no way an army could actively hold the entire length. So it is not surprising that one of the most successful strategies of the war was to divide the defender's forces. By opening a gap through a weak point in the line and rushing an exploitation force through the attacker could trap the enemy in pockets. Once the defender was trapped, the attacker could conquer the enemy's forces in detail.

In World War II

Divide and conquer formed the cornerstone of the German 'Blitzkrieg' in the early years of the war. Being out numbered, and in some ways out classed in terms of technology, the Germans penetrated vulnerable gaps in the Allies' lines at such places as the Ardennes and the Low Countries to conquer France, and through Yugoslavia to take Greece. The Americans and British used the strategy in Normandy to encircle and destroy German units at Falaise.

Perhaps the most grand examples of divide and conquer occurred on the Eastern Front. German spearheads advanced deep into Soviet territory during Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. The spearheads would then turn towards each other and link up, trapping thousands of demoralised Soviet troops.

Likewise, a few years later, the Soviets returned the favour during Operation Bagration in June 1944, sweeping up large portions of German troops in Byelorussia and Poland.

Sealing the Deal

Trapping the enemy in a pocket was only the first step. The encircled enemy still needs to be conquered, and they will fight very hard. If the pockets of enemy troops were left alone, they could break out and cause serious damage behind the lines, or worse, rejoin their comrades and carry on the fight.

Isolating and containing a pocket was quite difficult for the attacker to achieve straight away, but given time, they could strengthen their hold. Thus the defender had a small window of opportunity to break out of the encirclement.

Kessel Psychosis

For the German army in 1944 and 1945, fighting out of pockets was a routine, if ever increasing problem. As the war ground on the fighting in the pockets grew more fierce and desperate, especially on the Eastern Front. Battles like Budapest, Küstrin, and Eastern Prussia drew large numbers of troops from the Soviet army, as the encircled Germans fought fiercely and without remorse. The Soviet response was equally relentless as the need to free up reinforcements was growing each day.

From Königsberg in the north to Budapest in the south, the resulting battles were bloody and brutal. Being trapped in a pocket preyed on the mind of the German soldier from the lowly private to high-ranking generals. This became known as *Kessel* (or cauldron) Psychosis. Left unattended, this condition could destroy a unit faster than actual combat.

Kessel Psychosis presented the field commander with a difficult decision: either make a last stand as Hitler expected, with little or no hope of relief, or break out and face an unforgiving *Führer*.

BREAK OUT

Despite Hitler's demands to the contrary, many field commanders countermanded the last stand orders and decided (at great peril to themselves) to break out and make it back to German lines. They felt that a stand, however brave, would mean that their sacrifice would be wasted holding some remote and strategically worthless location. They knew that their help would be needed to defend the Fatherland.

To break out, a surrounded force launched attacks against the weakest wall of the pocket. The attack was usually spearheaded by the unit's remaining armoured elements as shock troops, while the infantry and guns took up the rearguard. Once an opening was forced, the force would mount as much as they possibly could on to tanks, tractors, and transports and make for friendly lines with all due haste. Anything that would slow them down, such as heavy equipment, was destroyed and left behind.

Often they would have to fight the last few miles through the enemy's main front line, but the biggest hurdle was the initial break out. Pocket battles were hard-fought and anything could happen while fighting for survival.

POCKET BATTLES IN FLAMES OF WAR

Battles for a pocket were fierce and brutal. The defender was fighting for survival, and the attacker wanted to remove this thorn from his side.

Pocket battles can be recreated in *Flames Of War* using many of the missions in the rulebook or the Missions Pack. Below is an easy reference diagram showing the relevant missions and their locations within the pocket. I've assumed that the defender is the Axis and the attacker is the Allies. However, this need not be the case, as the Germans often encircled the enemy in the early campaigns in France, Russia, and more.

HOLDING THE CORRIDOR

Holding open an escape corridor is vital for the troops inside the pocket. The attackers are equally motivated because closing this narrow corridor is the first major step toward defeating the enemy.

If you would like to play a mission representing holding or closing the corridor, I suggest that you play either the **Encirclement** on page 21 of the *Missions Pack* or **Bridgehead** mission found on page 111 of the *Flames Of War* rulebook, with the Axis player defending and the Allied player attacking.

WIDENING THE CORRIDOR

The corridor is the life line for the defender. If it gets too narrow, the defender can't move through it without coming under fire from both sides. So the defender attacks to widen the corridor. Of course, the enemy will counterattack from the edges.

If you would like to recreate this situation, play the **Valley of Death** mission found on page 45 of the *Missions Pack*, with the Allied player defending and the Axis player attacking.

REAR GUARD ACTIONS

As the defending forces escape, the rear-guard engages in a fighting withdrawal to delay the enemy and give the most amount of time to their comrades as possible.

If you would like to recreate this situation, use the **Fighting Withdrawal** mission found on page 27 of the *Missions Pack*, with the Axis player defending and the Allied player attacking.

HOLDING THE FLANKS

For the defender, it is important that the pocket shrinks on their terms and not on the attacker's. It was therefore essential that the defenders hold the line for as long as possible.

If you would like to recreate this situation, play either the **No Retreat** mission found on page 110 of the *Flames Of War* rulebook or **Dogfight** mission on pages 17 of the *Missions Pack*, with the Axis player defending and the Allied player attacking.

BREAK OUT

If the way is closed, one option available to the defender is to break out and reach the safety of their lines.

If you would like to recreate this situation, play either the **Breakthrough** mission found on page 110 of the *Flames Of War* rulebook or the **Escape** mission on page 25 of the *Missions Pack*, with the Allied player defending and the Axis player attacking.

REACHING SAFETY

Breaking out of an encirclement is one thing, reaching the defender's front line is another. The attacker's front line must be breached in order to finally reach safety. The attacker will certainly attempt to stop the defender from slipping through.

If you would like to recreate this situation, try playing the **Counterattack** mission found on page 107 of the *Flames Of War* rulebook or the **Spearpoint** mission page 43 of the *Missions Pack*, with the Axis player attacking and the Allied player defending.

STAND FAST

If the defender is surrounded and cut off, the alternative to breaking out is to hold your ground.

If you would like to recreate this situation, I would suggest that you play the **Gauntlet** or **Valley of Death** mission found on pages 31 and 45 of the *Missions Pack*, with the Axis player defending and the Allied player attacking.

POCKET WARGAMING

These are a few suggestions to help you set up your battle in a larger context. You can pick one that you'd like to play and go for it, or you can select a few and play out a small axis-of-attack campaign. For example, you may want to play one of each in a certain order tell the full story of your pocket.

POCKET BATTLES USING FLAMES OF WAR MISSIONS

- **A** HOLDING THE CORRIDOR
- **B** WIDENING THE CORRIDOR
- **C** REAR GUARD ACTIONS
- **D** HOLDING THE FLANKS
- **E** BREAK OUT
- **F** REACHING SAFETY
- **G** STAND FAST

➤ ALLIED ATTACK
➤ AXIS ATTACK

THE POCKET

D NO RETREAT OR DOGFIGHT

C FIGHTING WITHDRAWAL

G VALLEY OF DEATH OR GAUNTLET

VALLEY OF DEATH

B

ESCAPE CORRIDOR

A

BRIDGEHEAD OR ENCIRCLEMENT

E ESCAPE OR BREAKTHROUGH

F

COUNTERATTACK OR SPEARPOINT

MAIN BATTLE LINE