

Tussle on the Tisza

Background

This battle used Scenario 14 from the BKCII rules set as its basis. Points were set at 2,950 for the defender (Romanians) and 4,155 for the attacker (Germans). The attacker has to break the defender in eight turns. We were inspired by an actual bridgehead battle of the Romanian 1st Army described in Mark Axworthy's book *Third Axis, Fourth Ally*:

"...when IV Corps' 4th and 2nd Divisions took over two other bridgeheads across the Tisza below Szolnok, the former was violently attacked on 19 October by the Hungarian 1st Infantry and 1st Cavalry Divisions. These frontal assaults were initially held, but simultaneously a major armoured assault by 24th Panzer Division; 4th SS Panzer Grenadier Division and a battalion of Tiger tanks broke out across the River Tisza behind the 4th Division's right wing at its junction with the Soviet XXVII Corps, and surrounded all three of its infantry regiments in their bridgehead on the west bank. After thirty hours of resistance most were captured on 20 October. For a while only the motorised corps artillery and a motorised battery of Vickers AA guns were left to oppose the German armour by fire and movement. They claimed four tanks for the loss of two guns and slowed its advance perceptibly."

The Table

The bridgehead deployment area was bounded by a river running down the whole length of the table edge. This was crossed in four places by bridges (one destroyed). In the centre of the table there was a small town. On the attackers side were some hills. The whole table was filled with woods and hedged fields.



The Forces

The Romanian battle group comprised a battalion of infantry with support weapons (HMGs, 75mm ATGs, 81 mm and 120mm mortars); all in trenches and gun pits and thus concealed. In addition a unit of 75mm ATGs and 100/150mm Artillery Support was used to 'beef up' the defence (also dug in), and a group of T-4s (Panzer IVs) and TAs (STUG IIIs) was kept as a mobile reserve. Finally four batteries of off-table heavy guns were selected and two command posts used to improve the chance of getting good rolls. Crucially, for the defenders survival seven minefields (only one marked) were purchased.

The Germans comprised a lot of heavy armour in three mixed groups (Tiger Is and a II, Panthers, Jagdtiger, Jagdpanthers, Jagdpanzers, and STUG III assault guns) and also a battalion of SS troops with HMGs and mortars, and an 88mm. Off-table support included a couple of Nebelwerfers and a FW190.

Plans

The Romanian player's strategy was based on trying to stay largely hidden and passive until the attacker was put into a disadvantageous position. The bridgehead force was also deployed to one side of the board; the idea behind this was to hopefully puzzle the attacker, who would probably presume the main positions were in the centre and would lose time in redeploying his troops. On the approach the two FAO's would look to bring down some fire to break-up the attacking formations.

The use of six hidden minefields across the whole front and side of the Romanian position was also meant to slow and confuse the attack. It was going to be interesting to see, after the first hidden minefield was hit, how would the attacker react? Basically the plan was to draw the attacker into the minefields, where the waiting Romanians would only then open fire (staying concealed also avoids you being the target of enemy artillery fire too and the point of the scenario was to hang on – until the Soviet 6th Tank Army could come up – Turn 9).

The defence relied partly on the attacker not purchasing engineers (go on admit it how often do you forget them?) that meant they would have to drive through the minefields to get to the still hidden bridgehead force and would surely incur crippling losses. The Romanian armoured reserve was meant to stay out of the way and only be exposed to hold a breach or to finish-off damaged German units to reach the break point. It was going to be a nervy waiting game, but hopefully it would have a better chance of success than a stand-up fight with the heavy armoured assets ranged against them.

The German player was conscious of the time limit for his 'work' and decided on a three pronged assault onto the Romanian forces. Hopefully the sheer power and strength of the heavy armour would overwhelm the defence in the time available. He split the force with three equally powerful armoured thrusts going down the centre and on each flank. The SS infantry following the centre group were placed support any opportunity the armour could force.

The Battle

Turn One

G1. The Germans moved first with each of the three groups advancing, though the left flank force only had one successful command roll, thereby compounding the slow pace of the Jagdtiger. In the centre two Tiger Is and two Jagdpanzers entered the town.

R1. The Romanian commander failed the command roll for the armoured force by the centre bridge, which meant the planned strategy, of driving them left to draw them out of the way of the heavy armour and thus pull the German armour onto the hidden minefields, was already in trouble.

Turn Two

G2. Again the Germans advanced, with the centre group clearing the town with unnerving speed. While the two flank groups trundled forwards.



The German centre group pushes through the Hungarian town

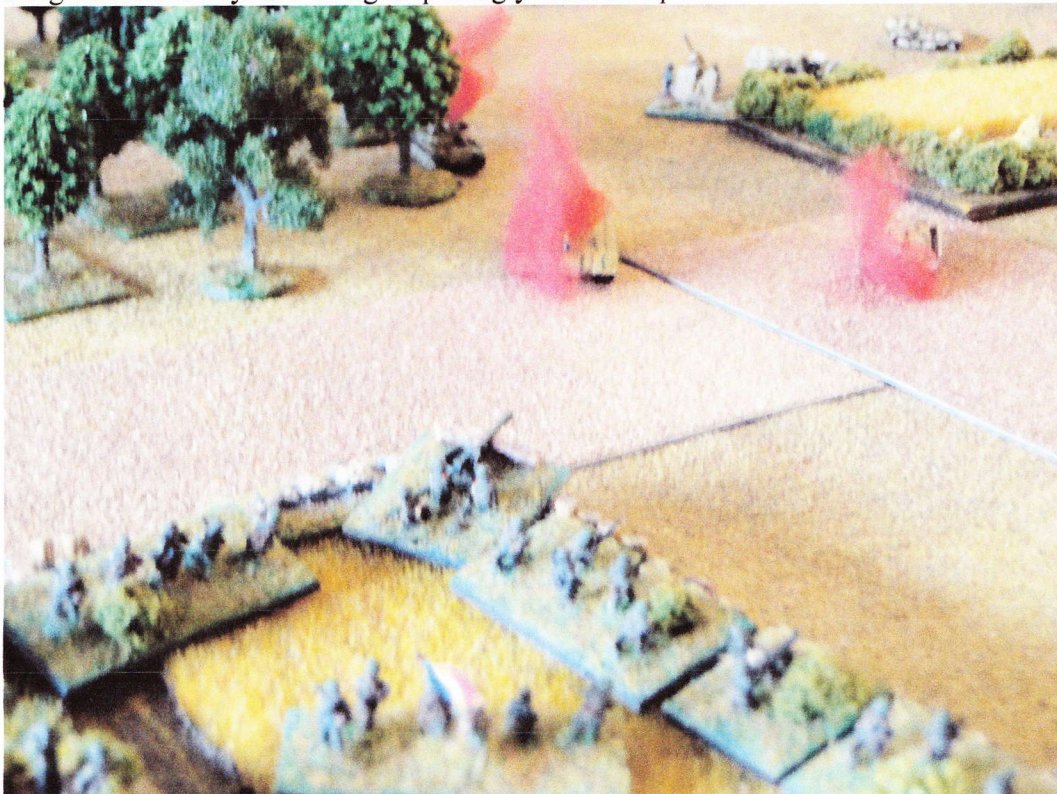
R2. Again the Romanian armour failed the command roll! Stuck and too late to redeploy they were going to have to stand and fight on the river bank. However, the

Romanian heavy artillery guns had already opened up on the German right flank; resulting in two Panthers suppressed and the advance was beginning to fragment.

Turn Three

G3. The German FAO (on the right) was frustrated by having no Romanians in sight; he knew they were somewhere, but they refused to show themselves. At this point the centre group's first Tiger I opened up on the stalled Romanian armour; result one T4 suppressed. However, a shock hit the advancing right flank group when the King Tiger, a STUG III and a Wespe rolled straight into the hidden minefields. Both the Tiger and the STUG stopped suppressed right in front of the Romanian FAOs and ATGs. While the rest of the right flank scrambled back towards cover.

R3. Bang! Romanian off-table artillery 'pounds' the King Tiger into flames and catch the Wespe too. Then the mortar teams of the Romanian infantry finish off the STUG. At last the Romanian armour remembered to turn-on their radios and blasts the first Tiger I in the centre. Four units down and already nearly half-way to the breakpoint. King Michael's boys are doing surprisingly well. The plan kicks in.



Achtung Minen!

Turn Four

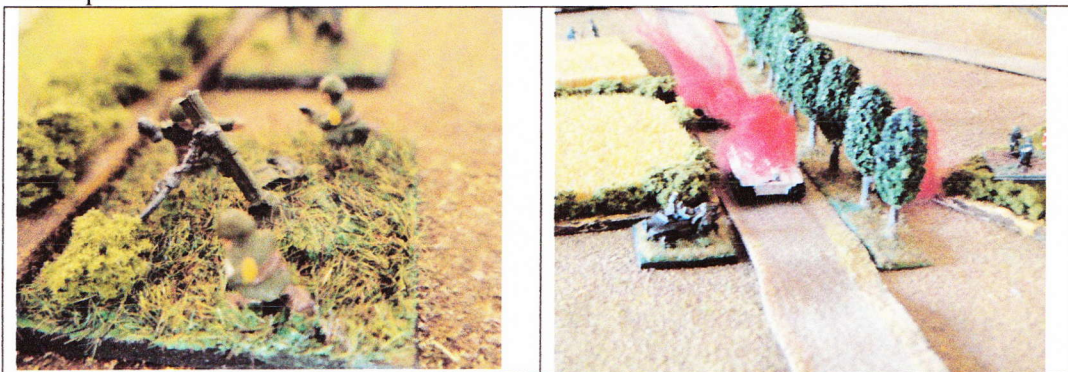
G4. The Germans are unnerved. On the right they sweep back towards the centre; still with nothing to shoot at. The centre group goes into an attack against the Romanian armour, with the SS Infantry and mortars deploying. But their efforts only result in one destroyed T4, while the remaining Tiger I and a Jagdpanzer are both suppressed by opportunity fire. The right flank finally makes an appearance and suppresses a TA.

It's getting warm for the Romanian armour, but at the moment nothing they can't handle.



Gun line: Romanian medium armour deals with the 'heavies' one after another

R4. From bad to worse for the Germans, Romanian artillery and mortars pulverise the remains of the German right flank force (88mm, Jagdpanther and SS HMG team all go, only one Panther sits stunned); plus the command and FAOs are running straight for another minefield, one FAO will go. At the same time the Romanian armour successfully roll three orders in succession and open a sustained fire. The stalled Tiger I and Jagdpanzer are eliminated. It is becoming critical as the Germans nudge past the breakpoint.



Concentrated Hate: Romanian 120mm Mortar team and their victims

Turn Five

G5. A break roll is successful, but unless there is a miracle breakthrough soon the attack will have failed. The German right is basically gone except for one Panther and some confused command. The left weighs in to help the centre, but again Romanian opportunity fire stalls the attack and the mighty Jagdtiger is suppressed by the combined TA fire. The German infantry press forward into the cover of some fields, while the remaining Jagdpanzer of the centre group fails to score any hits, and

promptly gets suppressed. The only good news is when a Panther and SS 81mm mortar fire kill off a TA (only the second Romanian unit to fall).

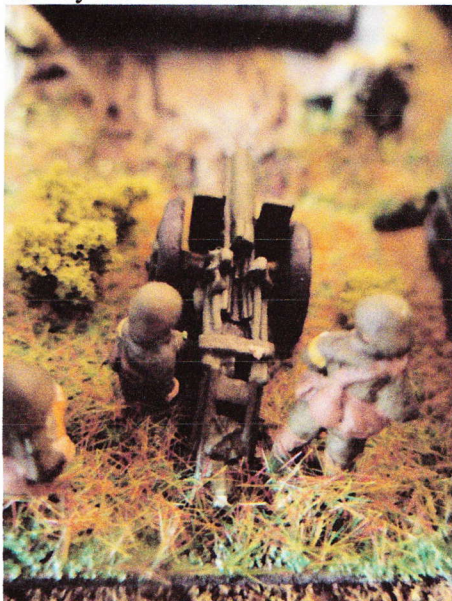


Jagdpanzer tries to make a breakthrough with SS support

R5. All is going well, but when the Romanian artillery tries to finish off the right flank Panther a double-six results in an artillery blunder that hits the CO, the FAO that called in the barrage (serves him right) and a truck. Luckily none are destroyed or suppressed. The Romanian armour (down to four tanks now) finish-off the Jagdtiger and, with machine guns and shells, pushes some SS infantry into a retreat. They are then promptly mortared for their pains and eliminated.

Turn Six

G6. It's all over, the Germans fail their breakpoint throw and what is left of the battle group withdraws; followed by the gleeful shelling of the Romanian Artillery. A major victory for the defenders!



The 'Levellers': Romanian 150mm Howitzer at work

Reflections

The game was a good example of how difficult it is to break into a well defended position. With the Romanian infantry and ATGs waiting until the Germans came across the minefields, they simply stayed hidden and there was nothing for the German big guns to fire at. Even the FAO, who was in position, could not get any support from the Nebelwerfers at any point owing to a lack of visible enemy. Reconnaissance units and engineer/pioneer units in the force would have helped, but we felt that even with them they would probably be annihilated by indirect fire before they cleared enough of the minefields to allow the armour to breakthrough.

In the end it was largely one-way, but there were problems for the Romanian player when the armour (meant be the 'rabbit' and then the reserve) stalled and got caught in a fire fight with the German 'heavies'. However, the German player could only bring his units into line in 'penny packets' which meant at some stages one German tank was being repeatedly hit by four or five 75mm guns at close range. Probably the Germans would have done better here by deploying the tanks out of the travelling 'line-ahead' formation.

In the end the layered defence was not seriously tested; it simply stumped the attack from round three. Clearly such well planned and entrenched dispositions would require intensive artillery bombardment and more time to dislodge them; and probably even more of the horrendous casualties seen here. Eventually most of the defending force did not open fire at all and it seemed to the players that dug-in troops and hidden minefields are simply too hard to overcome with the extra 50% assets or the time available in this scenario.



The victorious Romanian Brigadier General