

The Red Ball Express

Logistics in Panzer Leader

by Elwood Carlson

Designers' notes for Avalon Hill's platoon-level WWII games (*PANZERBLITZ* and *PANZER LEADER*) suggest that the typical scenario covers from 45 minutes to an hour and a half of "combat time" because that was about as long as the armed units involved could sustain a no-holds-barred clash. In this respect, supplies of ammunition and fuel were the critical constraints. Thus, at the start of any scenario, all units are implied to be fully provisioned; by the end of an hour or so, they are running pretty low.

Consider, then, what might happen if some units began a scenario with a substantial portion of their ammunition and fuel already used!

Such a suggestion conjures up visions of stalled tanks out in the open and machine gunners emerging from bombed-out buildings, holding up empty ammo belts as they surrender. When such nightmarish scenes fade a bit, however, the veteran wargamer will undoubtedly recall that *supply* did indeed play a crucial role in more than one of the major campaigns of the Second World War.

(Remember how Rommel starved to death in that last game of *AFRIKA KORPS*? Remember how beachhead limitations choked off that last offensive in *ANZIO* or *D-DAY*?) This significance of supply has gone beyond the narrow expertise of the Pentagon or the preoccupations of the wargaming world; it has been celebrated in pop culture in movies from "*The Red Ball Express*" to "*Patton*." Just as artillery, weather (*GENERAL* 12:6) and air power add whole new dimensions to tactical play in *PANZER LEADER*, the accompanying scenario introduces another key feature that often spelled victory or defeat on the battlefields of Europe—logistic support.

The general context of the scenario (for those who are interested) places it along "Hell's Highway," the avenue of Montgomery's rapid northern thrust following the Allied breakout from the Normandy beachhead. The date is therefore late in August, 1944. (This date is given for those players who employ the weather rules noted above.) The eventual stakes of this encounter (and others) are the success of the northward drive to capture a deep-water port (Antwerp in the actual campaign) and cut off a large German force along the Calais coast, and the freeing thereby of the Allied army's dependence on the Normandy beachhead as their sole source of strategic logistic support.

In this particular scenario, a British spearhead is driving to capture a key river defense line across the route north, before the hastily-assembled German defensive contingent can be reinforced. The British have been pushing hard, without a break, and their supplies of ammo and petrol begin to give out just as they are about to assault these objectives. The situation is critical, for paralyzed by the short supplies, the British not only may fail to take the river line, but may even lose the momentum of the offensive and suffer a German counterattack.

Enter the Red Ball Express! A column of trucks, lightly convoyed and carrying fuel and ammunition has been dispatched to the front and comes racing across boards B and D in the nick of time. After the "pause that refreshes," the British can finish their assault on the vital bridges, and the Allied offensive rolls on. At least, that's the way the *Allies* plan it—however, a squadron of German armored cars has managed to slip around the British column, and they have other ideas . . .

The mapboard configuration is fairly unusual, and demands more than the conventional "punch your way across the board" in the way of tactical

thinking. (Being somewhat foot-loose myself, I prefer low unit density situations, and besides, there are four boards; why not *use* them? The beach on board B may be treated as a river or ignored at players' options.)

The German main force controls the "objective" here (Grancelles and its river line) with a motley but effective crew. The British are approaching from the heavy cover available on board C, and the real chase sequence of the piece (the armored cars after the supply trucks) is then displaced to the "wide open spaces" of boards B and D, where a lot of high-speed maneuvering is possible. Please note that the east-west juncture of boards C-A with boards B-D is staggered, so that nobody can move south from St. Athan and find water rising inside the turret of his tank.

The combat in this scenario is nothing unusual, although considerable thought and playtesting have been devoted to making it an interesting contest. For example, this is why all large AFV's have identical ranges—success in armored combat for once can be a matter of tactical skill rather than a product of the capabilities of machinery. (The only exception is the platoon of Tigers which appear in turn 12, as an encouragement to *early* capture of objectives by the British.)

One feature which somewhat balances the superior firepower of the British is an "order of appearance" for the Germans—the flexibility of play which this feature contributes to most larger-scale AH games is one thing I have missed in *PANZER LEADER*. (As, for example, when a French left hook through Nivelles keeps "discovering" more and more British popping onto the board in *WATERLOO*.) This feature also partially negates the artificial "perfect intelligence" built into the board game format.

The victory conditions are fairly straightforward, and although they were carefully drawn, neither they nor the combat *per se* are the real focus of the scenario.

The real focus is on the moment when the supply column joins hands with halted (or nearly halted) combat units.

Can the British player maneuver his forces so as to pin down and engage the German defenders short of his objectives, and *at the same time* protect his supply lines and insure that the Red Ball Express gets through? Can he choose his ground well enough to allow attacks on key objectives as well as cover for the resupplying of helpless, stalled units? Success in this ticklish matter (already assuming the column gets through!) opens the door to possible victory; failure means virtually certain defeat.

Looking south over the rooftops of Grancelles, this matter can be put quite differently. Can the German player intercept, or at least delay, the supply convoy or will they slip through his fingers? Can he "channel" the British attack on vital bridges, maneuvering them into a position where resupply becomes a desperate gamble? Can he *disrupt* that resupply while it is in progress? Above all, can he hold onto the vital river defense line, delaying the advance elements of the British armored column and giving other German forces vital time to take up defensive positions behind him?

To find the answers to these and other questions (what happens if it *rains*?) you will have to take this magazine in one hand, your copy of *PANZER LEADER*, in the other and play it for yourself.

SPECIAL RULES:

1. *Order of Appearance*. German units off board at start enter on any road(s) leading off the north board-edge or the east edge of Board A. (See German Order of Appearance.)

2. *Exhaustion of Supplies*. British units run out of supplies beginning in turn 4, 5, or 6. The first turn of exhaustion is diced for and secretly recorded by British player before game and revealed at his discretion. Units lose movement and offensive fire gradually over a four-turn period. (See Exhaustion Table.) A unit's defensive rating is unaffected by attrition of supplies.

3. *Resupply*. Each truck unit from the Red Ball Express can resupply/refuel two vehicular units or four infantry units. Their M3 escorts can each resupply one vehicular unit or two infantry units. Resupply occurs as described in the Resupply Routine.

4. *Tactical Restrictions*. No units beginning game on boards A or C or off-board may fire or move into any hexes south of or including the river flowing past S. Athan. (This keeps the big armor at the front.)

Resupply Routine

Step 1—supply unit enters hex with combat unit. Stacking limitations apply in all resupply turns. Infantry may *not* load into supply trucks for stacking purposes.

Step 2—all involved supply and combat units are inverted and considered *dispersed* at the end of the allied player segment of the contact turn and remain so during the following German player segment. (Units not being resupplied need not be dispersed.)

Step 3—involved supply and combat units remain dispersed through the following allied "fueling" turn, and at the end of that turn combat units are re-inverted with full capabilities and supply units are removed from play (unless they have supply capacity remaining.)