



The 1944 Model

Baltic Gap

by John Kisner

Baltic Gap is the newest in the Operational Combat Series (OCS), covering the Soviet summer offensive that would trap Army Group North in Latvia's Courland region. This reworking of an old submission by Hans Mielants lays a foundation for more late-war iterations in the series; no fewer than four "1944 games" are in advanced stages of design or development. One will cover Italy, another Bagration, and the final pair will mate to simulate operations from D-Day to the Ruhr. There are also some early campaigns in the works — most significantly a France 1940 that's in the on-deck circle awaiting publication — but as the designer of **Baltic Gap** my interests have lately focused on applying the robust OCS model to the last year of the war.

The redesign of **Baltic Gap** focused initially on its size. We had hoped to make this a one-mapper — sort of the "anti-Case Blue" — but found two maps were needed to avoid some artificial constraints. Similarly, we looked at paring down to two sheets of game-specific counters, but decided a trio was needed to show every unit the game needs, as well as some hypothetical ones that explore some slightly ahistorical options. Remaining design work was detail oriented. Should that be a woods hex? Should a certain brigade have a 4 Action Rating? What turn does the 126th Division arrive? And on and on. I brought a certain rigor to this and had liberal support from Dean Essig and some crackerjack researchers, but that ground is covered in my game notes so there is no need to recap here. These elemental decisions represent the better part of my work on **Baltic Gap** (after all, I can't claim novel rules as my invention since this is a series game) but transcending such details is a system that offers a fairly sophisticated look at the hows and whys of this campaign.

Let me pause here to say that OCS games are a blast to play. Emphasizing the "game as history" angle risks underplaying the role-playing drama in which victory and defeat are seemingly balanced on every dice-roll. Beyond the visceral enjoyment we're also exploring the relationship between maneuver warfare's theory and practice, so this is *serious* fun too. Players, as did the actual commanding generals, must shape their application of this theory — as codified in the v4 series rules — to the situation and forces at hand. Every time through the **Baltic Gap** campaign it seems I gain fresh strategic insight and deepen my appreciation of the two lead actors on the historical stage. Hovhannes Bagramyan, the Soviet commander of 1st Baltic Front during the summer of 1944, conducted a textbook application of "deep battle" theory. His German co-star, Walter Model, was no longer directing Army Group North when this campaign began, but his fingerprints were all over its strategy and situation.

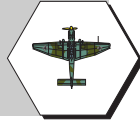
Sword and Shield

Walter Model was nicknamed "the Fuhrer's Firefighter" after moving from one crisis to the next during the twilight of WWII. In early 1944, when he briefly took command of Army Group North, the German lines in the East had never been thinner.

On both flanks huge Soviet offensives were underway that stretched defenders past the breaking point. OCS vets are well aware of the southern struggle for Ukraine, as brought to our gaming tables in **Hube's Pocket**. Meanwhile a calamity of equal urgency sent the Germans reeling back from Leningrad. With Army Group North fighting for survival, Model would develop and (partially) implement the "Shield and Sword" theory that gave German forces somewhat more tactical flexibility than they had known since Hitler's rigid "Stand Fast" defensive orders came into vogue two years previously.

The demands of a multi-front war were such that now even the massive Army Group North counted as reserves just a handful of battalions. Times have definitely changed. In early 1943, even in the collective wake of far-flung disasters at Alamein and Stalingrad, it was still possible for an SS panzer corps to shift all the way from France and deliver Manstein's famous backhand blow against Kharkov. In early 1944 this sort of strategic shuffling of reserves was a fading memory and local solutions were needed. Thus came to be born a new idea called Shield and Sword which essentially found a loop-hole in the established no-retreat rule. It was fairly simple: Hitler would sometimes sanction withdrawals designed to shorten a line and thereby create reserves with which to aggressively counterattack and possibly regain other lost territory. During the defense of Luga in February, for example, 18th Army received permission to draw back some salients and thereby reduced frontage by 50 percent. A handful of battered divisions were then free to swing around and strike Soviet troops advancing northwest of the city. Improvised attacks like this were rarely decisive, but did get the demoralized Army Group North off its heels. Equally important, the handful of generals who, like Model, had shown they would only give ground in last resort would be trusted by Hitler to decide these matters.

Chronic troop shortages and Hitler's stubbornness were only partly to blame for the departure from the early-war ideal of "mobile defense" tactics. In point of fact, mobility itself was no longer a German advantage. That famous debate prior to D-Day — whether to maintain a centralized reserve or disperse them close behind the possible invasion sites — was played out in generalized terms in every Wehrmacht headquarters. Concentration was recognized as the key to victory (per Napoleon's "never in dribbles, but in mass"), but serious shortages of fuel, trucks, and locomotives combined with the numbing effects of enemy air interdiction to make rapid deployments increasingly problematic. Dispersion tended to be the decision of choice in 1944, and the penny-packets of assault guns or tank destroyers parceled out to every infantry corps are now lynchpins in the defensive scheme. It's noteworthy that Army Group North opened Barbarossa with three panzer divisions and three years later, when **Baltic Gap** begins, only one remains. Over time the German forces in this area have been transformed by a sharp increase in Stug battalions and a corresponding drop in panzer divisions.

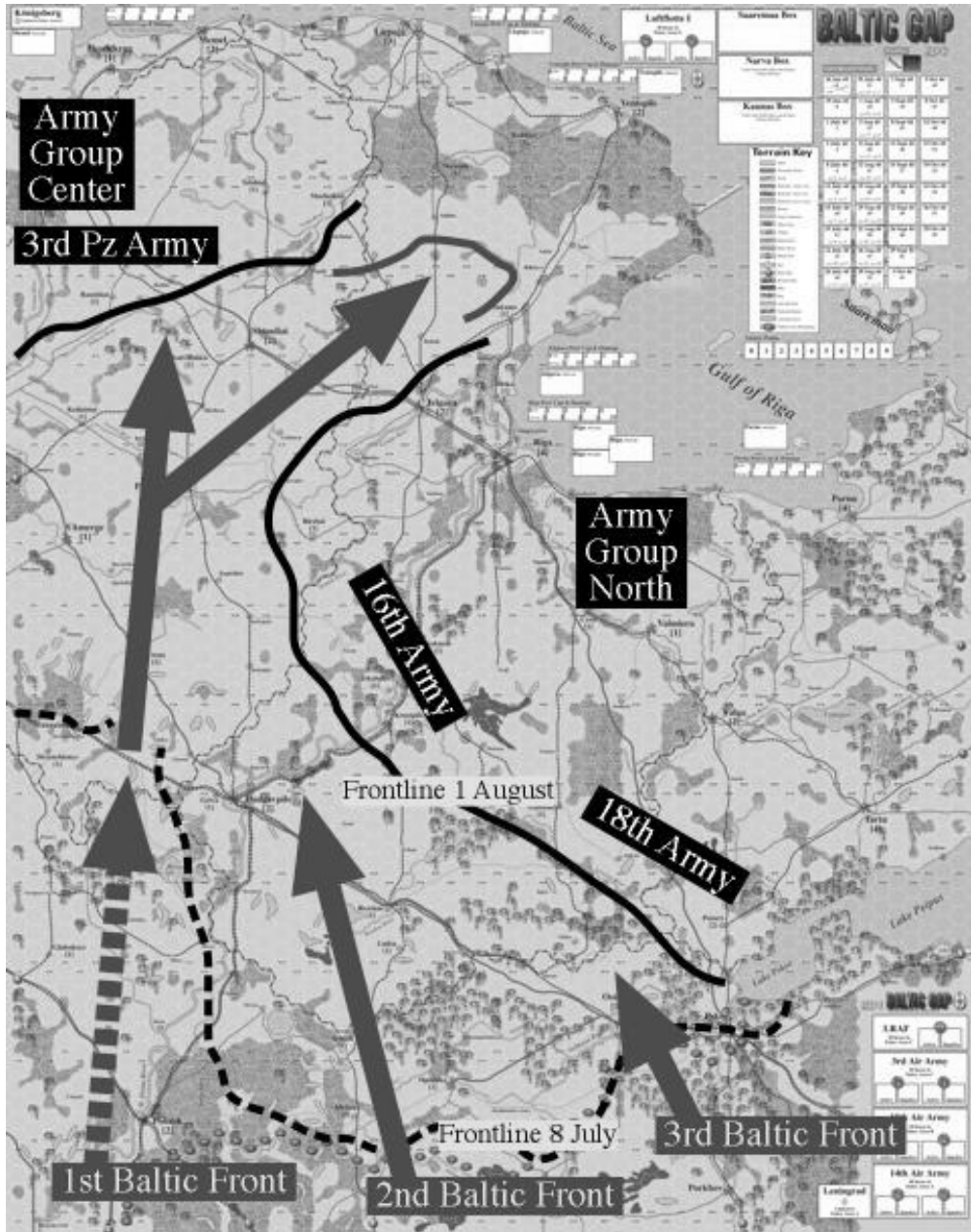


The 1944 Model - Baltic Gap (Cont.)

Model moves south to take charge of Army Group North Ukraine in Spring of 1944, replacing Manstein in a switch symbolizing the end of elegant operations. Model's June location would play a role in the opening days of the Soviet Summer Offensive, because as Hitler's new favorite the bulk of panzer forces were concentrated in Ukraine. Eighteen panzer divisions are left in the East after D-Day, aligned as follows: South Ukraine with six, North Ukraine ten, Center and North just one apiece. A colossal failure of intelligence and a tilt toward Model's dynamic personality meant the areas north of the Pripyet Marshes — the ones that were in fact attacked in late June — fielded too few panzers to effectively resist.

Baltic Gap begins 26 June 1944, and as the German player you step into a terrible situation. Your right flank is now unsupported, as neighboring Army Group Center, under the uninspired leadership of Field Marshal Busch, is being decimated (off-map) by Operation Bagration. Remember all that theoretical blather about shortening the lines? Well, throw that out the window, at least in the strategic sense, because the victory conditions won't allow you to just skedaddle back to Germany. It isn't too heavy-handed, but every turn's VP scoring indirectly reflects Hitler's demand that the Baltic coastline and resources be held as long as possible. So while you are forced to give ground slowly, the lightning-paced enemy is advancing through the gap to your south and creating a bulge that will fully double your defensive frontage. These are tough times, and you'll get a sense why Army Group North went through a brisk succession of commanders that summer before eventually in Ferdinand Schnörner finding the right man for the mission. Like him, you'll need to cling fanatically to every single acre but also know when to signal retreat.

Although the generic pattern I'll describe was repeated in just about every one of our play-tests, a specific application of Sword and Shield stands out. It took place in the second half of July, near that "3rd Baltic Front" arrow on our Deep Operation map. Dave Mignerey was commanding the Soviets in this area and had just started his offensive against the Panther Line near Ostrov. The opening blow was a tremendous success, blasting a hole through which reserves could be sent during the Exploit Phase. Tanks were even able to roll across the Velikaya River via a railroad bridge that the German player commanding 18th Army, Mark Veerman,



Baltic Gap features a classic implementation of deep battle theory conducted by Bagramyan's 1st Baltic Front, as illustrated above. The dashed lines represent the approximate frontline on 8 July, about two weeks into the summer offensive. The solid lines show the frontline on 1 August, when Army Group North has been isolated from Germany and is being supplied through Riga's port. First Baltic Front has advanced 300 miles in five weeks.



The 1944 Model - Baltic Gap (Cont.)

claimed to have overlooked due to poor eyesight, not foresight. Regardless, it allowed a one-armed Soviet pincer to stretch around behind the important city of Pskov to touch Lake Peipus, thus closing a pocket around approximately five German infantry divisions.

Lesser men might have asked for a do-over, but my old friend Veerman just rolled up his sleeves and adjusted the rest of his line so as to shift everything he could toward Pskov. This is the kind of battle that might not even be fought in some other OCS games, but **Baltic Gap** is different, in that the Germans cannot concede losing pocketed forces without a fight and more importantly have the right tools for this kind of job. So what Mark did was unholster a nail gun — assembling an ad hoc relief force consisting of a Tiger and three Stug battalions, maybe two divisions of infantry, some artillery, and a few miscellaneous flak and police units — and proceed to shoot nails into the thin Soviet cordon.

For the next four game turns the pair waged an incredibly intense battle for the pocket. There was initially enough supply in Pskov for the trapped units to eat off the map for a turn or so, and its airfield was usable just long enough for another vital 2T to be flown in via Ju-52 (after that the Soviet patrol zones were too formidable for transport runs). Veerman was able to clear a hole through which the pocket could be supplied on most turns, but needed to win initiative to get back-to-back player turns to escape. A winning roll eventually delivered all but a rear-guard from the trap.

This was a desperate fight, with each army scrambling to throw every available tank and rifle into the action. The lines were brittle on the back side of that pocket, and the relentless tempo of barrage-override-barrage-attack had both players on the edge of their seats the whole time. When it was over, one couldn't help noticing the game succeeded on a very emotional level. After leading his men out of the cauldron, over the course of several turns and hours, Mark's face displayed a look of relief, satisfaction, and sheer exhaustion that suggested he himself had been in that pocket. And the amazing thing is watching this common pattern repeat in one crisis after the next, with every initiative roll seeming like it might mean the difference between victory and defeat. Have a bottle handy — Maalox or something stronger, it's your choice — to get you through once the adrenaline wears off.

Baltic Gap has two distinct phases of operations. In June and July the Germans are fighting a precarious delaying action with what is essentially an infantry army — that lone panzer division gets transferred to Army Group Center and what's left is a motley array of Stugs and slugs. Clever retreats and counterattacks help evade catastrophe, but heavy losses are part of the plague that is 1944. To survive you'll need a mix of fatalism, fanaticism, and finesse.

The rather bleak situation improves fairly dramatically in August, when two panzer corps from Army Group Center enter the map. Now the German player has some thought-provoking choices concerning where to attack and whether to keep the six panzer divisions concentrated or dispersed behind the entire front. This is about a third of the overall panzer strength in the East, so strategically the Riga campaign has moved front-and-center for the game's second

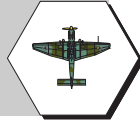
act (from early August to October's end). The main German attack, Operation Doppelpkopf, was slow to develop and met by a strong combined-arms force that had anticipated the blow. Yes, the panzers did manage to keep open a land route to Riga for another month or two, but they weren't decisive game-changers.

Doppelpkopf was a bit jinxed, but its failure was more than just a patch of bad luck. In the big picture, changing conditions have reduced the impact of the vaunted panzer divisions. Most obviously, it is a lot harder to achieve local air superiority when all you've got are a handful of fighters to contest the massive Red Air Force. Even when a couple of Stuka barrages are sneaked into a scrum, typically a clash of armor won't decisively favor either side because the gap in Action Ratings has narrowed. The familiar German quality hasn't changed much, but the difference in 1944 is the Soviet tank corps have some elite units too. Finally, the late-war German units often move like they're wearing ankle weights. Oh it's not quite as bad as being the slowmo Soviets back in 1942, but even a step slower makes it harder for fancy footwork to unsettle the enemy's numerical advantages (which are themselves becoming more and more decisive). It can be frustrating, but you're getting a feel for what was really happening in 1944.

Kurt Gillie's upcoming Bagration simulation will probably force adherence to Hitler's chaining of certain divisions to fortified places, since this contributed greatly to the rapid destruction of Army Group Center in June. Such restrictions weren't as consequential up north, so **Baltic Gap** does not have heavy-handed constraints. It is purely for military reasons then, as outlined above, that the German player will often seek refuge in positional warfare. He begins in the fortified Panther Line, throughout the game will build additional hedgehogs covering a retreat staged through a series of switch lines, and at game's (and war's) end will probably occupy fieldworks constructed across the base of the Courland peninsula. All this retreating leaves a player vulnerable to the trap of passivity, but try to remain vigilant for attack opportunities. Players are of course free to create their own narrative, but should heed the counsel of Adolph Hitler, who in August 1944 observed that "if there is not iron will power behind it, the battle will not be won."

Deep Battle

Hovhannes Bagramyan is a good counterpart to Model because both came from somewhat humble origins and by merit rose to exalted rank. Bagramyan commanded one of the three Soviet army groups that would be directly involved in the capture of Riga in 1944. Of the three, his 1st Baltic Front was the one built for a deep battle, which is essentially the Soviet name for maneuver warfare or blitzkrieg. Contrary to what one might assume, this was not a heavy mechanized force by any stretch. Initially just one tank corps — same as both 2nd and 3rd Baltic Fronts — gave major tank support to the three armies (an aggregate thirty rifle divisions) under Bagramyan. By mid-July, when Stavka has definitely decided on Riga as a major objective of the summer offensive, he has been reinforced by another three armies that bring with them another four tank or mechanized corps.



The 1944 Model - Baltic Gap (Cont.)

Those of you who've played a lot of **Hube's Pocket** are probably wondering how a player can possibly conduct a deep battle with just five mobile formations. After all, there were nineteen figuring in that game's massive tank battle. What's needed is some perspective. Remember the other big German crisis of early 1944, the one near Leningrad? It was created by an attack backed by no mobile corps at all, so the Soviet side's total of seven in **Baltic Gap** represent a balance between these extremes. Furthermore, we'll soon see that trucks (not tanks) are the fundamental requirement for sustaining any deep battle, and in these Bagramyan was as flushed as a Ford dealership with F-150's when gas is hovering around \$4 a gallon.

Maneuver warfare is dominated by a handful of core interactions that many of us learned during blitzkrieg-era games such as **DAK** and **Case Blue**. In them, we watched very mobile panzer divisions punch through an enemy line using the devastating one-two of barrage followed by overrun. The first stuns the defenders into Disorganized Mode, halving their combat strength and reducing their Action Rating (AR) by 1. This lends a pair of brass knuckles to the second punch, since AR differential is used to modify the chance for surprise in any combat. Surprise shifts are often decisive; surprise shifts the odds by a number of columns equal the roll of a die, so up to six shifts are possible. See the Sidebar "Combat Odds" for more on this.

Surprise checks are an extra step in the combat procedure, but as I've shown in that sidebar are really integral to the game's model. A couple of things stand out. First, the player with an AR advantage is wise to attack by overrun when possible. The goal is to unleash a lightning bolt that the inferior army can neither anticipate nor deflect. Also true is the converse: units with inferior AR find it safer to conduct regular attacks, and so need time to carefully arrange all the pieces before launching an offensive.

The Widening Gyre

Infantry Steps: 261 to 314.
 Mobile Formation Steps: 40 to 44.
 Independent Armor and AT Steps: 45 to 64.
 Independent Artillery Steps: 18 to 61.
 Air Steps: 24 to 124.
 Truck & Wagon Points: 18 to 34.

The quantity gap between the German and Soviet forces is summarized in the numbers above. Even without adding any hypothetical reinforcements to increase German power, I suspect that Baltic Gap's imbalance isn't quite as pronounced as you probably anticipated from a game set in summer 1944. That's mostly because in my analysis the staying power (steps) of a German infantry division is about twice that of a rifle division. Three things give the Soviets the initiative in this campaign: air superiority, an initial massive superiority concentrated against the German right flank, and the fact that much of the German striking power (its mobile formations) doesn't even join the game before August.

Likewise, there is an "extra step" demanded of players in the system's very mechanical handling of Supply Points (SP). This goes well beyond the "trace to a source" method that defines the comfort zone of many gamers. Again, the busy work has a purpose. Players spend time moving supply around the map because transportation limits — not stiffening enemy resistance — are often what made it impossible to sustain a deep operation during WWII.

Ammo, fuel, and in emergencies even food are covered by these generic SP. The supply needs of a ground army on the attack are considerable: figure about one SP for every artillery barrage or ground combat, and another per tank corps needing fuel to move. Because the numbers of SP are limited, good logistical planning is needed to maximize the power, speed, and depth of an offensive. After a big push peters out it's almost always best to restock the supply dumps before launching another offensive. Going off half-cocked limits the potential decisiveness of your operations because there isn't enough supply to feed successes.

Proper exploitation of success is critical. In a battle of attrition the limited focus is on taking the next trench, but in the age of deep battle that sort of thing is merely the precursor to a series of moves against the enemy's communications and logistics.

Consider the problem raised in **Baltic Gap** by the city of Polotsk. This is one of Hitler's "fortified places" for good reason; it's an important rail hub that the Red Army cannot ignore if they're eventually going to take Riga. Something new in warfare was needed to eliminate the strategic chokehold of a blocking position like Polotsk, what OCS calls a truck- or wagon-based "extender" of supply. Extenders can be visualized as something akin to the famous Red Ball Express: a concentration of transport assets that increases an army's operating range far beyond a traditional supply source. An extender is created by (temporarily) immobilizing five truck or wagon points in a certain hex. This keeps an HQ that has moved beyond the traditional railroad-based logistical net in trace supply, which is needed to abstractly "feed" units.

The trade-off in making transport assets into an extender is they're no longer able to serve their primary function: moving SP from one map location to another. Since an HQ in need of an extender is by definition far from a railroad, that HQ also needs lots of trucks and wagons to haul fuel and ammo for the next operational thrust. When the balance tilts too much in favor of extenders at the expense of SP-carriers, the mobile groups will grind to a halt and be ripe for counterattack.

All those lend-lease Studebakers are what allow Bagramyan to make a sustained advance of roughly 300 miles over the first six weeks of this campaign. There is really just one precedent for this tempo: the German blitz through the same area in 1941. Because the logistics kept pace, the Soviets were able to maximize another advantage of deep operations, something the great theorist Tukhachevskii called maneuver speed, to increase the impact by increasing the attack-vector's velocity. The imperative is to keep moving faster than the enemy, since any pause will give them



Combat Odds

Basic combat odds are important in OCS, but no less significant is the differential in Action Ratings that heavily tilt the combat table. This differential modifies the dice roll and determines the chance that surprise shifts the odds-column in either direction. There is an ocean of probability to navigate, but by setting our sextant on a couple of specific examples maybe we can arrive at a general understanding.

Consider two possibilities, an overrun at 2:1 with a +3 differential and a regular attack at 7:1 with a -1 differential. Which is better, after taking surprise into account? The 7:1 is five columns better on the CRT, but the AR difference of four is also big so it looks like a toss-up. But crunch the results, including surprise effects, and you might be surprised to find the overrun's expected AL 0.1 + Ao 0.5 + DL 1.1 + Do 1.6 is actually quite a bit better than the AL 0.4 + Ao 0.7 + DL 0.6 + Do 1.2 for the regular attack.

Until not that long ago, I hadn't understood that surprise mechanics are more than just an introduction of chaos. Surprise helps to model a key difference between overrun and regular combat. Overrun accelerates the advantage of high-AR attacks by further increasing the chance for getting surprise shifts in your favor. Imagine a panzer division massing against a rifle division. The various components of the panzer division are in Move Mode to maximize speed at a cost in combat values, so they might add up to 16 combat factors with a best-unit AR of 5. Meanwhile, let's say the defender is a Guards unit that is a 12 with a 3 AR. Base odds are just 1:1, which is nothing to crow about, but if we DG the division with a barrage we've now got a 16:6 attack (3:1 after rounding) with a +3 AR differential. Let's run through the attack with the same average combat roll of 7 for each of the general surprise outcomes, also assuming an average number of shifts (4) in the event of surprise:

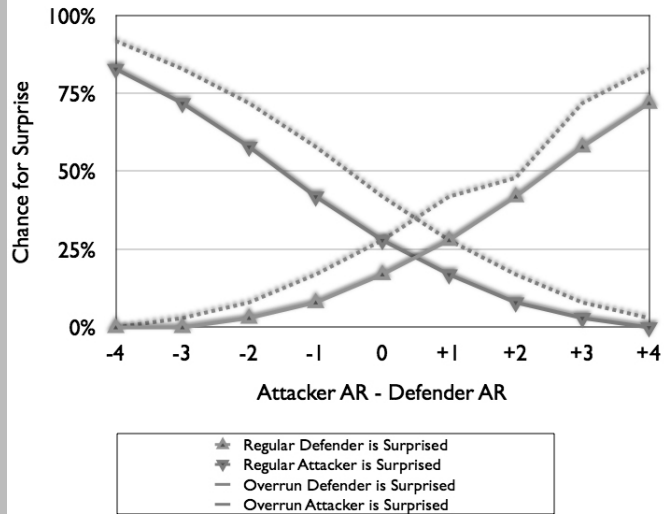
No surprise (20% chance of happening in Overrun; 39% in Regular). Even without surprise, an average combat roll is still pretty good because that +3 differential modifies the average 7 roll to a 10, so we have an Ao1/DL1o1 (one defender loss plus an exchange of "options" to either kill a step or retreat a hex). If the attackers don't retreat, they can keep moving (and possibly overrun the same hex again).

Attackers are surprised (8% chance of happening in Overrun Attack; just a 3% chance in a Regular Attack) and 4 shifts: AL1/Do1. Now it's the attacker that takes the automatic loss, and the defender just has one of those options.

Defenders are surprised (72% chance of happening in Overrun; 58% in Regular) and 4 shifts: Ae3/DL2o2DG. The attackers would switch to Exploit Mode if this wasn't an overrun, and are otherwise unaffected. Meanwhile, the defenders take two losses and the remainder must take two options and

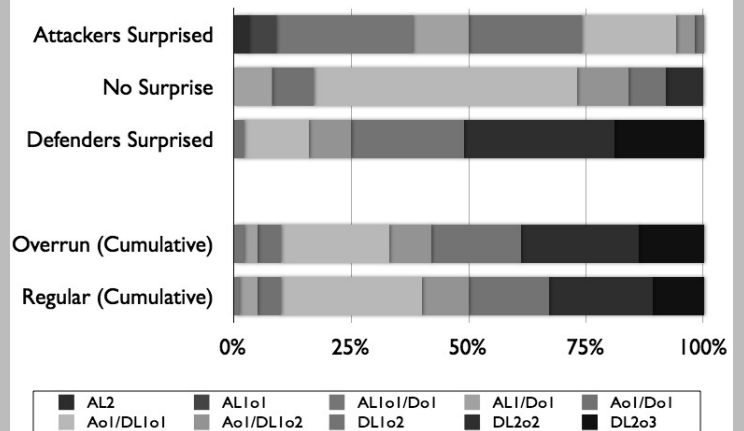
automatically become DG. The 3-step division will survive this unless forced to retreat into a ZOC.

Surprise Chances in Regular and Overrun Combats



Some players run through a couple of combats, which admittedly can feature some pretty wild swings based on the randomness of die rolls, and feel the whole thing is just a crap shoot. So let's take a deeper look at the overall chances for every combat result with the full range of die rolls averaged together. We'll base this on the same scenario, comparing an overrun with a regular attack at 3-to-1 odds with a +3 AR differential. On the summary chart I've simplified the possible results a bit by taking out the exploits and DGs, but by examining those first three bars you can see what a difference surprise makes (but keep in mind the actual disparity will widen or narrow depending on exactly how many shifts are obtained). In that chart's last two bars we look at the overall chance for any given result for overruns and regular attacks, and it's interesting that in both types of combat at these odds there is roughly a 90% chance of at least one hard loss for the defender (DL1 and better). It's really just the overall mix of results, good and bad, that are being shifted a bit — for example attacker, by a slight 58% to 50% margin, has a higher chance to avoid even suffering any negative result (option or loss) in the more wide-open overrun attacks.

Combat Result Analysis of 3:1 +3



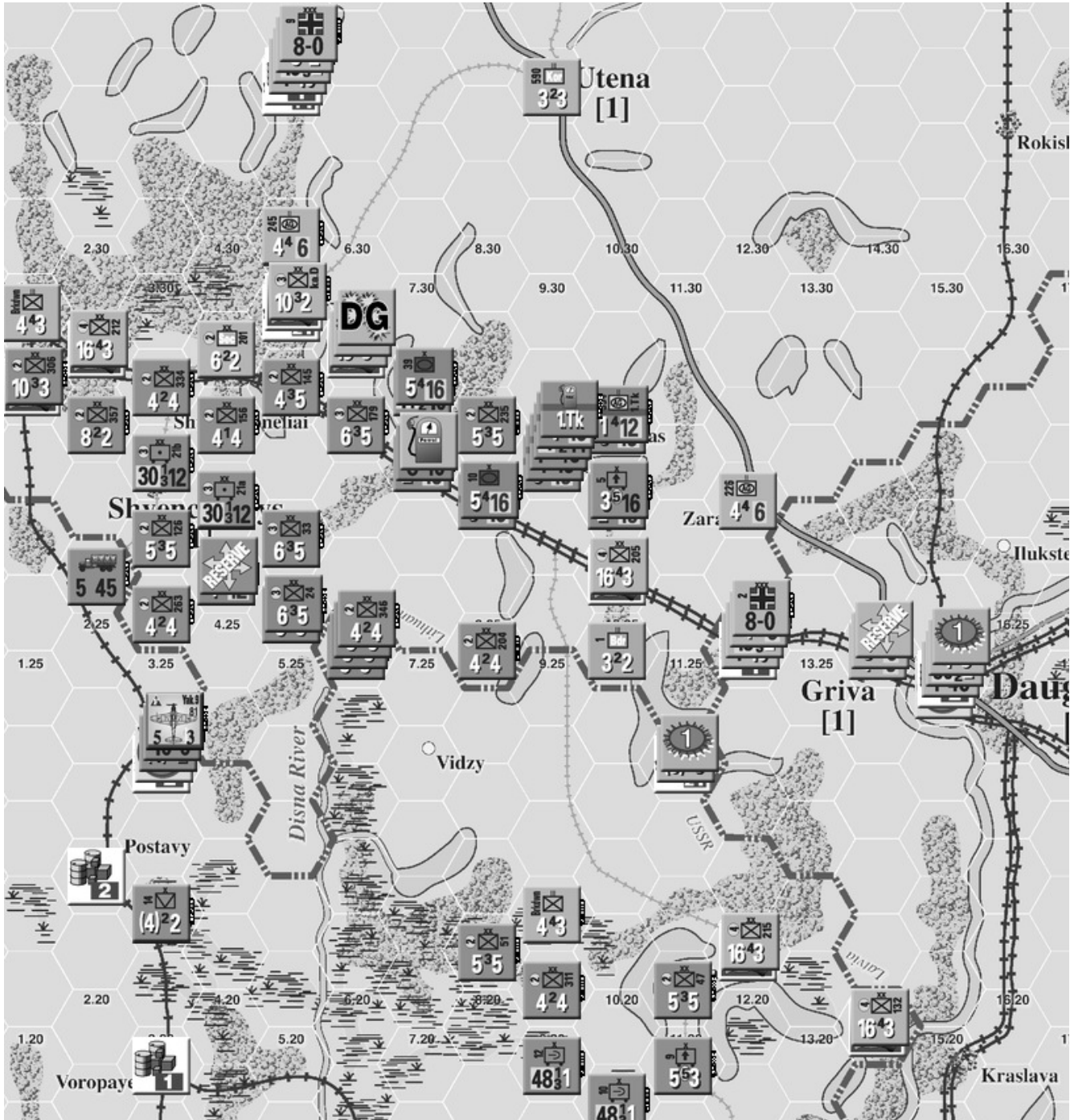


The 1944 Model - Baltic Gap (Cont.)

time to recover and deploy reinforcements along the obvious routes of advance.

One of my life's little tragedies is that while I absolutely love OCS the sad fact is that I'm not a very good player. In the heat of battle I just don't fully see maneuver speed's possibilities, and at the same time don't completely recognize the inherent vulnerabilities of fast-moving columns before they

reach the open field. Should I fan out to block retreats, make another overrun to capture an airfield off the march, or go deep to seize an important bridge? The choices are really interesting and seldom easily (or in my case, correctly) made. Even though my practical instincts are famously lacking, I still grasp the theoretical implications of time management in OCS.



It is 8 July and the Soviets are beginning to surge through the Baltic gap. Next turn this wedge will double in size: 51st Army is due to arrive right where the German right flank is currently anchored. To avoid destruction, the Germans will need to back-peddle 9th Corps westward and will probably swing 2nd Corps north, back toward Daugavpils and the protection of the major river. Fortunately for the Germans, the Soviets are having to haul their supply a long way and have to pick and choose their battles carefully.



The 1944 Model - Baltic Gap (Cont.)

Time is measured in player-turns that follow a standard move-combat-exploit sequence, with defensive reaction tossed in before the combat phase to give the non-phasing player a chance to make limited responses to developing threats. Nothing too earth-shaking, with the possible exception of allowing only a limited number of designated “reserves” to operate in the special reaction and exploitation phases.

Reserve is one of the options a player has for which “mode” to assign a unit as it begins its movement phase. A player has just a handful of reserve markers available, so usually it comes down to a toss between Move or Combat. I tend to think of the latter as being a unit’s normal mode, and what changes in Move Mode is the speed goes up and the combat goes down, both by roughly a factor of two. Modes cannot be changed until your next movement phase, so a unit remains in a weakened state during the enemy turn if it chooses Move Mode. There’s the rub. Your inner Hamlet will have a tough time deciding whether ‘tis nobler to choose agility or power, prudence or audacity. Conscience makes cowards of us all.

Time management is centered on a couple of mechanics that shift the normal order of events. An overrun is combat moved forward in time. It can clear an enemy-held hex to allow units to immediately penetrate a defensive line and attack from the flank or rear. A time-shift also happens when a player creates a Reserve Mode stack, in that he can essentially “save” its normal movement and combat opportunity for later. Within a turn some fairly complicated time-shifts are available, and their possible combinations represent the tactical advantages of maneuver speed.

The game’s higher-level rhythm is managed by an initiative system that determines which player goes first in the player-turn sequence. This can change from one turn to the next. Going first has obvious situational advantages, like to save your bacon when one of your HQs is about to be fried. It’s when going second that things really start to sizzle, because you’re setting up the possibility of going twice in a row. Ideally, you open a new offensive when going second, use all those time-shifting tricks I mentioned above to create a massive breakthrough, and then start the next turn knowing you might get another one of those complex moves in before your poor opponent can respond. A player cannot really control this higher-level time management, since the “who gets choice” initiative rolls are random things, but he can use the powerful threat of a double-turn to hamstring the other enemy’s flexibility by making him constantly feel like he needs to always “go first” to avoid disaster.

Clash of Models

An old-school gamer raised a stink awhile back about all the needless complexities in his initial exposure to OCS, Rod Miller’s outstanding **Korea**. His question was why not just play the old SPI game of the same name? For him, “maneuver speed” is something measuring the hours needed to complete a game and he’s getting all the history he needs — a campaign’s order of battle and general flow — from traditional games with modest time and table requirements.

I’m not trying to change anyone’s viewpoint here, because it’s great for the hobby to publish a range of games serving a full spectrum of interests. But every once in a while I think it is important to step back and explain that the “monster games” of the OCS family do not seek out complexity as an end in itself.

Dean Essig has tailored his mechanics with great care to present a unified thesis that brings to tabletops the essential elements of maneuver warfare. In OCS a unit can be put into several modes (combat, move, reserve, strat) because these are useful as a shorthand “orders system” and as a way to express the trade-off between things like speed and concentration. Supply points are physically moved around the map because in a modern war logistics strain to keep pace with a blitzkrieg; if they don’t the moving columns crash to a halt. There is also a modest degree of “fog of war” in these games because, with very little muss or fuss, the simple prohibition against peeking at enemy stacks produces blunders and surprises like those that fill our history books. Appreciating that OCS is a great simulation is part of our intellectual fun, of course, but Dean’s been equally mindful that the mechanics themselves must add up to a great playing experience — something that’s doubly important given that these games take a great deal of time to complete.

Case Blue combines with **Guderian’s Blitzkrieg II** to give operational perspective to the massive campaign in the East from late 1941 to early 1943. Moscow and Stalingrad were the turning points of the war in Russia, so this is the war’s critical period. The games are physically divided into three distinct campaign areas (each roughly corresponding to a 4’x6’ table) and about the same number of discrete operational periods (winter 1941-42, summer 1942, and winter 1942-43). Each of these sub-divisions is a monster game in its own right. Combined, they are the king of beasts, an awe-inspiring design achievement of the highest, and largest order. Size, just as complexity, is not an end in itself. This was a gigantic struggle, and the maps and counters in these games are a reflection, not a magnification.

Baltic Gap is smaller than these giants, but steps outside their shadow to tell a unique story of similar drama. At saga’s end an entire German army group will be trapped in Latvia, but miraculously it never falls apart. **Hube’s Pocket** brought us to the brink of this ill-fated summer, but here the weather, force mix, and terrain are completely different, so this is not merely a second coming. Or is it? As in the famous Yeatsian dirge, the center cannot hold and the worst are full of passionate intensity. The defensive scenario sounds dismal at first, but you’ll be delighted by how enjoyable it is to test that iron will of yours while commanding doomed Army Group North in its fight for survival. And you’ll also find the Soviet advantages in things like maneuver speed, although considerable, do not make this a cake-walk. Stalin and Hitler are pushing both players to achieve the impossible, and to satisfy those demands its players must put to practice some very lofty theories of war.

Its hour come round at last, **Baltic Gap** bids welcome to summer 1944.