Burma — The Indirect Approach in Practice

by Jean Jodoin

Most of us have heard about Maneuver Warfare (MW)—The Indirect Approach, but I suspect that very few gamers have ever practiced it, most relying instead on the frontal assault to carry the day. The blame for this dismal situation can be laid squarely on game design in many cases.

For example, if essential real-life elements, such as logistics, signals, intelligence (including reconnaissance and deception), and command & control, are "abstracted" out of game designs, how can cardboard generals be expected to take advantage of the very factors necessary to disrupt and dislocate enemy forces or render them ineffective?

All too often the operational scale or the situation presented takes MW possibilities away from gamers. If the objective of MW is to ensure the defeat of one's opponent before it comes to the test of arms, then it logically follows that a confrontation between two roughly balanced forces represents failure (from a MW perspective). Yet this is the very situation that designers and gamers alike seek: a contest between balanced forces. After all, how many gamers truly enjoy one-sided affairs?

The *OCS* game series, where logistics are a vital part of the game design, presents gamers with the possibility of practicing MW to a limited degree. *OCS* hasn't conquered the challenge of "almost perfect" intelligence, nor does it present any significant C&C constraints (found in *TCS, NBS,* and *CWB* series for example) and thus offers ample room for improvements in those areas.

The Japanese Art of War

This brings us to the 1999 *OCS* release: **Burma.** Previous *OCS* games featured opposing forces possessing substantial forces enabling them to implement the direct approach, or so-called brute force approach. Operations were designed to overwhelm the opponent at a time and place of one's choosing, thereby gaining and maintaining the initiative. **Burma** presents a radical departure from this accepted modus operandi in a most pervasive manner.

To be blunt: the Japanese Army does not have the necessary firepower to defeat the Allies in open combat. The Allied forces are too numerous, defend in very advantageous terrain, and are supported by adequate air forces and artillery, all the while blessed with more supplies (although not by better logistics—more on that below).

Therefore, the Japanese must rely on the indirect approach if they are going to win. The Allies' Achilles heel must be located and exploited ruthlessly. Fortunately, it is much easier done than said (inversion intended). It is no secret that the Allies' weakness lies in its road-bound logistics net. Essentially, all major Allied operations will occur on or very near a major road, of which there are a precious few.

Japanese forces, because their logistic net can extend a reasonable distance over tracks as well as roads, and because they are blessed with the previously unheard-of forage capability, can readily exploit the Allies' road-bound supply net to disrupt and dislocate the Allies, a tenet of MW. Forage, as implemented in **Burma,** enables Japanese and Chindit troops operating on or adjacent to roads and tracks to survive an attrition roll, becoming marked as out of supply. Regaining supplied status can be achieved by either burning up SPs or by moving within throw range of a supply source or HQ. Provided the troops are of high quality, they can operate for extended periods outside a friendly supply net. Anticipating, minimizing, and accepting attrition casualties are the heart of operational planning in **Burma.**

On the Indian front, victory lies in starving the Imphal garrison out of existence, or at least keeping it at near-starvation level for most of the game. Without adequate supplies, the Allied forces will be unable to break out of Imphal and capture the victory point centers. The exact location of the roadblocks does not matter, but they should be located in mountainous terrain to assist in defeating relief attempts and foiling air raids. Use of local reserves to assist in defeating relief attempts is recommended.

Japanese commanders may be tempted to descend into the Indian plain near Dimapur. However, doing so leads away from MW towards a direct confrontation with superior Allied forces in open terrain. Such a venture is fraught with danger against a competent opponent. However, raids in that direction are worth considering, especially if losses have been made good to that point. Such a gamble can significantly influence the China front, thus representing another application of the indirect approach.

On the China front, MW against the logistics weak link pays equally handsome dividends by unhinging the entire US-Chinese advance towards Myitkyina and Bhamo. Here we have a textbook situation crying out for the indirect approach to warfare. Unless the Japanese pull out significant forces away from the Imphal Front, Chinese forces spearheaded by Merrill's Marauders can literally bludgeon the Japanese forces into headlong flight towards Myitkyina and Bhamo.

Standing up to the US-Chinese forces will only result in high casualties and the risk of breakthrough. Better to fall upon the Chinese Achilles heel: the Ledo Road. Astute gamers will readily observe that the Kumon Range roughly parallels the Ledo Road, is crossed by two tracks, and therefore affords infiltration possibilities to Japanese units. Such raiders, supported by a few mules and elephants, can threaten deep behind Chinese lines, requiring the commitment of numerous garrison forces to secure the Ledo Road. Without firing a shot, a few units can divert entire divisions from the advance towards Myitkyina and Bhamo.

This approach is readily apparent. Another less apparent approach lies between the Irrawaddy River and the Kumon Range. Japanese raiders can penetrate up to the Ledo Road, following one of two tracks. The first one leads from Lonton, through Lonkin, and cuts the Ledo Road near Maingkwan. The other track leads away from Homalin, a secondary road terminal, along the Tanai River, all the way to hex A35.35.

Both supply axes are long and perilous, necessitating the use of numerous mules and elephants in support of far-flung forces. However tenuous, they are nonetheless daggers pointed straight at the Chinese Army's jugular vein. Because of the presence of the Chindits near the Mandalay Railroad, the Homalin track is considered the more secure, albeit longer, track.

This MW approach to defeating the Chinese Army is cost

A US Air Transport CommandC-46 operating in the CBI theater flies the "hump" between China and India.

effective and very hard to defend against. At the least, the Chinese Army will be committed to self-defense and will be diverted from its Myitkyina and Bhamo Offensive.

Allied Operational Nuances

Lest the readers imagine that only the Japanese Army can benefit from MW, let us examine Allied forces opportunities.

The Allies do possess an especially effective MW tool: the Chindit raiders. Their forage capability, combined with Allied air drops, affords such a force unparalleled operational mobility. Whereas out-of-supply Japanese forces must move back towards their logistic net, bring SPs forward over traitorous terrain, or face eventual attrition, Chindits can receive much-needed air drops to keep them in the field, seemingly forever. Chindit columns containing pack mules, resupplied by air drops, can and should be used to disrupt Japanese plans by threatening the Japanese logistic apparatus, such as the Mandalay Railroad.

Flying columns can pose a threat to Japanese operations based upon Lonkin or Homalin. Although Japanese forces can live off the land for extended periods of time, they eventually will suffer grievous attrition losses if not resupplied. The situation resembles two fighters, each grasping at the opponent's windpipe, fearful to relax his grip first, lest he lose the fight.

The Chindits need not be the only troops receiving air drops. Any Allied forces penetrating behind enemy lines can be supported in this manner. Because of the scarcity of transport planes, this capability must be husbanded carefully, lest some force be deprived of aerial resupply at a critical juncture, especially as the bad weather season approaches. Used wisely, however, such capability can allow the outflanking of otherwise troublesome Japanese positions.

The Allies possess the capability to practice a limited form of vertical envelopment by dropping Chindit troops behind enemy lines (the term "lines" is used loosely as there are no such things as well-defined lines in Burma, save perhaps near Imphal and Myitkyina). This necessitates the creation of an airstrip, a task facilitated by the presence of the 823 Engineer unit. This capability enables the Chindit to suddenly change the focus of their operations from the Mandalay Railroad to a nearby area. Gliders should be acquired in anticipation of such a move to speed up the buildup of forces around the newly built base, dislocating the Japanese cordoning-off efforts.

Experienced *OCS* gamers must learn to forego paradigms previously learned on the Russian steppe or in North Africa where overruns, vast sweeping movements, and a deliberate campaign of annihilation are masterfully orchestrated, supported by an extensive logistic network. Burma is a game that focuses on new paradigms: infiltration tactics, foraging, aerial resupply, and the ever-present threat of starvation in jungle and mountainous terrain. Independent columns roam the countryside seeking to disrupt and dislocate the enemy supply network. Losses to attrition are the norm and can approach or surpass combat losses in certain cases.