

DESIGN NOTES FOR THE BATTLE OF BIR LAHFAN

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In Divided Ground there is a scenario entitled “Capture or Death”. It is about the battle of Bir Lahfan, but is a very poor scenario at best. Like most of the other original scenarios in the game it was done in a hurry in order to complete the game for a moved up release date. As a result several mistakes were made and the scenario does not really portray the battle as it really happened. So some changes were in order and I intended to make them. Therefore I have decided to divide the battle into three separate engagements, thus requiring three different scenarios.

The Mapsheet

As with the other maps of Divided Ground, this one was based on ones from the British War Office series of 1960. As we all know, most of the ones of the Sinai Peninsula were made in World War II and the ones of the Bir Lahfan area definitely show this. To begin with, the building in hex 5, 30 does not show up on maps made after the 1973 war. Was it there in 1967 when the battle occurred? No one knows for sure, but that hex was definitely the site of a radar station, hence the name the hill had acquired by then, Radar Hill. Another discrepancy is the location of airfield north of the Bir Lahfan intersection. The newer maps have the airfield located a few kilometers further north than where it is located on the old maps. Are these two different airfields or just one. I think that they are two different airfields. The Egyptians found the old airfield inadequate for the jet aircraft they were starting to fly in 1950s so instead of improving it, just built a more modern one to the north of it. The old one was destroyed. So in a way the map sheet is wrong, the airfield should be off map just to the north. But I think that the original designers of the scenario decided to compress the battle a little by using the old airfield and the forces that historically defended it. The original mapsheet has some other serious errors in it. For one thing, the map direction is wrong. The top of the mapsheet should be south, not west. Now the mapsheet matches the real terrain. Second, the labels on the roads exiting the board should be changed to reflect this. The road exiting in Hex 5, 0 should be labeled “to Abu Agheila”, the road exiting in Hex 19, 0 should be labeled “to Jebel Libni”, and the road exiting in Hex 15, 39 should be labeled “to El Arish”. After I made these corrections I realized that there was not enough room to the south to contain part of the battle so I extended the map ten hexes to the south and filled the hexes with the appropriate terrain and elevations. Now the mapsheet was ready.

The Orders of Battle

There were some errors in the orders of battle for both sides so I had to make corrections on them also.

Israelis: The Israelis started off in the original scenario with full strength units either on the board or soon to enter. This is just not right. The 7th Armored Brigade, which enters from the north, was much reduced due to losses from the previous day's battles, although some repaired vehicles had rejoined it by then. Not only that, the 79th Armored Battalion was missing one of its line companies, which was attached out to the 202nd Paratroop Brigade. I am keeping the same order of battle for the 7th that it has had in the previous scenarios that I have done involving it (Jirardi Pass, Rafah Junction, Khan Yunis). The 215th Artillery Regiment I set up as off map artillery as it was in El Arish, supporting the 7th Armored from there. The 200th Armored Brigade (Sela's Brigade) also enters the game with reduced units, not from combat losses as it spent most of the first day of the war traversing the deep desert, but from mechanical breakdowns and vehicles getting stuck in the sand during that same long trek. However, during the course of the scenarios, it seems that it is getting slightly stronger, despite losses incurred, due to these left behind vehicles eventually rejoining the brigade between the fights. The unit designations should be considered to be fairly accurate, though not totally as the Israelis have the habit of changing the historical designations of their battalions about every ten years as they still want to keep some secrets from the 1967 War.

Egyptians: The Egyptian order of battle was more problematic. First off was determining which was the actual unit that defended the junction as different historical sources state different units. I settled on what most of the sources state, that is the Egyptian 112th National Guard Brigade. Even here there is not agreement on how big the force was, different sources giving forces sizes ranging from a small company outpost to a full reinforced brigade plus. I settled for a reduced brigade force as one of its line battalions was stationed up in El Arish and one of the companies from another battalion was stationed at a road junction 20 kilometers to the east of Bir Lahfan (in fact by the time of the first scenario, it had been destroyed by the Israeli 200th Armored Brigade). The two artillery battalions that the Egyptians had in the original scenario I reduced to a single artillery detachment (more than a battery but less than a battalion). This agrees with most historical sources. Players will note the extremely low morale rating that units in the 112th have. The 112th, being a National Guard unit, was more suited to quelling civilian demonstrations and uprisings than in engaging in actual military combat. Its equipment consisted of hand-me-down weapons and equipment that was used by the regular forces in the War for Independence and the the 1956 War. It was mobilized to national service mainly to fill out the Egyptian 7th Infantry Division and the troops knew it. Because of their low combat potential, the 112th was put on what was considered at the time, rear area security operations. But the shifting tides of war would soon put them on the front lines.

The Egyptian 4th Armored Division was a regular army unit. It had two armored brigades (2nd and 3rd), one mechanized brigade (the 18th), one artillery brigade (the 46th), and an engineer battalion. While it was a trained unit its combat performance in the several engagements it was in during the war was inferior to the that of the Israelis. This was mainly due to the overall low quality of its leaders. The unit designations for the 112th Brigade and the 4th Division are fairly accurate only because the historical sources

of them are from the Israelis. The Egyptians to this date (2011) still refuse to release an official order of battle for the 1967 War.

The Scenarios

Scenario #1: The Approach: This scenario depicts the Israeli 200th Armored Brigade's initial arrival into the area. The short length of the scenario depicts of the amount of daylight left before nightfall. The Israelis arrive on the map via the Wadi Haridan as that was the route they took crossing the desert. I have kept the same defensive positions and minefields for the Egyptians from the original scenario. The Egyptian 112th Brigade is set up fixed in place and with all units in a disrupted state to simulate surprise. Historically the Israelis captured the radar site on the hill during this battle and set up to defend against the impending arrival of the Egyptian 4th Armored Division. They did not bother with the 112th Brigade and for some unknown reason the Egyptians did not bother with them. However in the scenario the Israelis have the option to attack some of the units of the blocking force, but will not have much time to accomplish much. The victory point levels are based on capture of objective hexes and of the destruction of enemy units. Frankly, the Israelis would be hard pressed to get a draw in this one because of the time limitations.

Scenario #2: Night Engagement: This scenario depicts the initial meeting engagement between the Israeli 200th Armored Brigade and the lead elements of the Egyptian 4th Armored Division. It is a short scenario, only ten turns, as the initial engagement only lasted an hour before the Egyptian commander decided to pull back and go into a defensive laager for the rest of the night. The Israeli 200th starts the game set up on the board but one of its armored battalions is gone due to being diverted to Abu Agheila. The Egyptian 112th National Guard Brigade starts the game still frozen in place in its defensive positions, although its units are now fully alerted and therefore not disrupted. They are short another company now that the Israelis have possession of Radar Hill. The Egyptian 4th Armored enters along the road on the south edge of the board. Only two battalions from the 4th enter the board as these were who historically fought the night engagement. The 112th National Guard Brigade historically spent the night hunkered down in its positions, essentially doing nothing, although its indirect fire units did engage in harassment fire against the Israelis through out the night. For their part, the Israelis were fully preoccupied with the 4th Armored and did not give the 112th any trouble that night either. The victory point levels seem rather low, but remember that it is the Egyptian who move first in this scenario and so have a smaller enemy force to deal with. As before the victory point levels are based on possession of objective hexes and the destruction of enemy units.

Scenario #3: Capture or Death: This scenario depicts the grand battle that should have been the original scenario in Divided Ground. It depicts the morning attack of the Egyptian 4th Armored Division and the Israelis 200th Armored Brigade's defense against it, and the Israeli 7th Armored Brigade's attack on the Egyptian 112th National Guard Brigade. The Egyptian 112th Brigade again starts the scenario with its units fixed in place.

(It is amazing that during the whole historical battle, the 112th in essence did nothing but hold its positions, thus giving the Israelis a free hand in maneuvering around the battlefield.) The Egyptians will have more artillery in this scenario, with the addition of an off board artillery battalion to the south but the Israelis will have two off board artillery battalions to the north supporting the 7th Armored Brigade. The wrecks along the road in the southern part of the map are left over from the battle of the previous night (Scenario #2). All forces from both sides will have units of reduced value to reflect losses suffered since the war began. The Egyptian 4th Armored Division enters the board from the south during the first eleven turns (ten in Middle East) to reflect its attack at the beginning of the battle. The Israeli 7th Armored Brigade enters the board from the north starting on Turn 15 to reflect its historic entry time of about 90 minutes after the battle began. The Israeli 48th Armored Battalion (from the 200th Armored Brigade) enters the board from the southeast along the road to Abu Agheila starting on Turn 25 to reflect its historic entry about two and a half hours into the battle. (This is the battalion that was missing from Scenario #2 because it had been sent to Abu Agheila.) The scenario last for forty turns as this was a four hour battle. The Israelis have twenty airstrikes to aid them in the battle. The Egyptians move first as they started the battle off. The victory point levels reflect the Egyptian battle objectives of destroying Israeli units and hold or recapturing objective hexes. All in all, the scenario is what the original scenario in game should have been, but was not due to time restraints caused by the early release of the game.

Conclusion

I hope that players enjoy these three new scenarios for Bir Lahfan which give a more accurate picture of what really happened there.