

400521-Wailly Scenario Design Notes and Reference

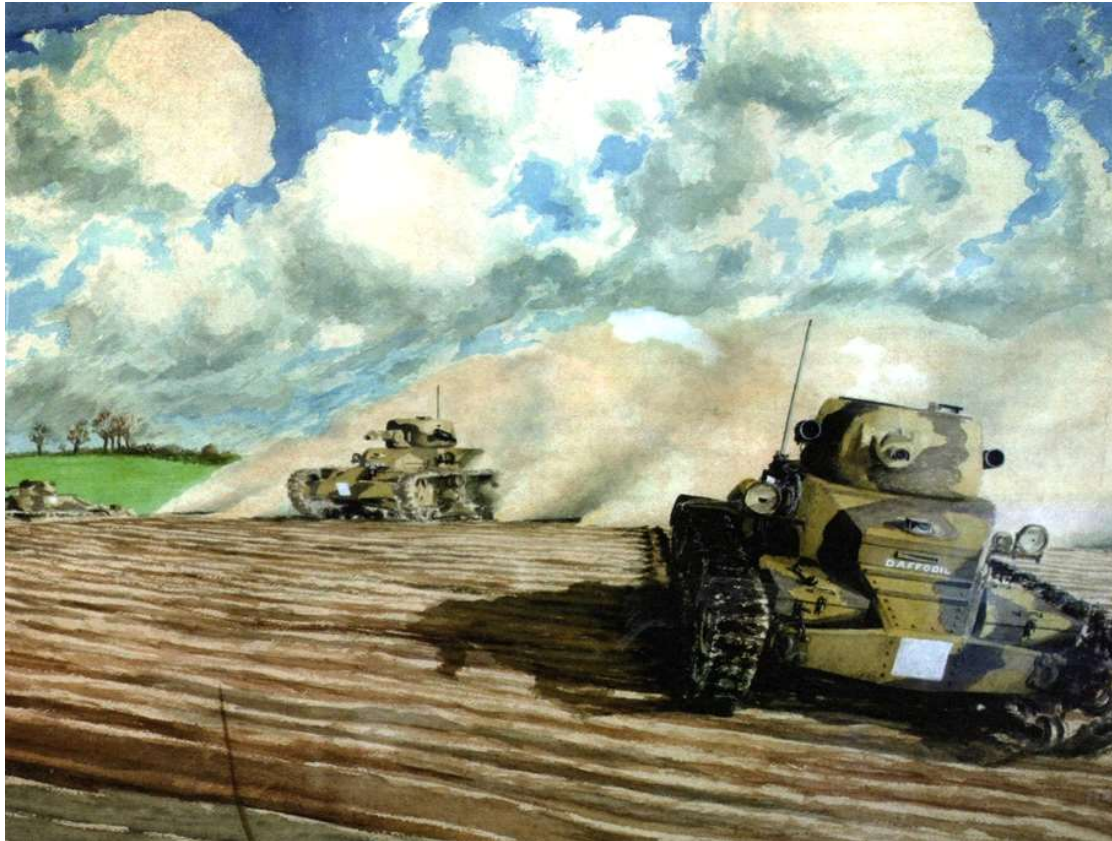
The Battle of Arras took place on 21 May 1940.

Constrained by the limited forces available to them, the Anglo-French offensive was carried out by a small mixed force of British and French tanks and infantry who advanced south from Arras. The Allies made some early gains and panicked a number of German units but after an advance of up to 6.2 mi (10 km), they were forced to withdraw after dark to avoid encirclement. The attack was a failure but had a disproportionate effect on Hitler and Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW, German armed forces high command).

Concern about more Anglo-French counter-attacks against the panzer corridor before non-motorised German infantry divisions caught up, led Hitler to order the panzer advance to stop until the situation at Arras had been restored. The Allies used the pause to reinforce the Channel Ports, prevent their rapid capture and fortify the western approaches to Dunkirk before the Germans arrived, making the evacuation of the British and French forces in Operation Dynamo possible.

My scenario starts here:

After many changes of H Hour it was settled that the Start Line would be the Arras-Doullens railway, to be crossed by the tanks at 1400 hrs and by the infantry, if they could make it, by 1430. They understood that French armour would be advancing on their flank but none was to materialise. Wireless silence was not to be lifted until sets were netted on the Start Line; any tactical benefit this might have yielded was to be far outweighed by the consequences.



4 RTR reached the Start Line on time and despite fears that it was electrified they crossed the railway. Two squadrons abreast they climbed a slight crest and struck the flank of both SS Totenkopf Div and 6 Rifle Regt of 7 Pz Div. Without wireless communication squadron control was very difficult; tank commanders fought almost independently. The fourth achieved significant kills as they drove through the enemy towards Telegraph Hill. WO III Armit in his Mk 1 Matilda under intense fire, and with his .50 Vickers MMG jammed, charged a light A Tk gun line. The German crews managed to extract one gun but the remainder of the crews ran off. Armit and his tp supported by Sgt Strickland drove over the remaining guns putting them out of action

7 RTR were late on the Start Line but had better communications, and made good progress Eastwards. Major King and Sergeant Doyle, (later awarded a DCM) in their Matilda Mk IIs, found and destroyed two batteries of A Tk guns plus 2 tanks and stalked and destroyed an 88 mm gun. Casualties were heavy and by 1600 hrs the COs of both Regiments were among the dead. The body of Lt Col J.G. FITZMAURICE, MC. (CO 4 RTR) and his radio operator MOORHOUSE were eventually interred in Dunkirk Town Cemetery.

The grave of Lt Col H.M. HEYLAND, DSO (CO 7 RTR) is uncertain. It is known that he was killed near Wailly South West of the town of Arras and among those buried in Wailly Communal Cemetery is "an officer known to God." who could not be positively identified. What is known is that having difficulty with communications he had climbed out of his tank to communicate with another tank commander and was killed in the open. I am indebted to his niece , Mrs Philippa Daniels, for allowing me to reproduce this rare photograph of her

uncle.

The DLI arrived at 1630; despite their fatigue both battalions fought bravely and effectively.

Lt Tom Craig (a future CO of 4 RTR) had actually entered Wailly in his Matilda Mk II and was creating havoc including destroying a command armoured car. In his diary he subsequently wrote modestly

‘In command of my one remaining Matilda, I followed SHQ. On reaching DUISANS there was the sound of firing from leading tanks and we deployed astride the road. Many German vehicles were burning, troop carriers with infantry were moving West on the road and we engaged them successfully. We were ordered to cross the main road. I followed on towards DAINVILLE: just North of the village we came under spasmodic shellfire, and I remember negotiating the HT wires which had fallen across the road on the Northern outskirts of the village. We passed through the village without opposition, turned left on the main road and then right towards ACHICOURT. Before crossing the railway we came across isolated groups of our own infantry – DLI and not the ones we were supposed to work with – and also saw and had a half-hearted battle with what turned out to be French tanks sitting in the open on the high ground 1000 yards west of ACHICOURT. Once the mistake was realised we moved on into the village and met up with some of the 4th, B Sqn of the 7th and Scout Cars of the GHQ Recce Unit (one commanded by Lt Newton Dunn). They had knocked out a German A Tk Gun, and taken a few PW on the Southern outskirts on the road to WAILLY.

After a brief halt at ACHICOURT I was ordered to move on to WAILLY and took over the lead from SHQ. I was entirely on my own as the other troops had not caught up. ‘About 500 yards from the village I was fired on by a large armoured car with a small gun in it; 20mm I suppose, with no effect on my tank. I fired back and the car burst into flames. One of the crew must have had guts, as although wounded he continued to fire as I closed in and eventually I saw him climb out and fall into the gutter, badly burned. I moved past the blazing armoured car nearly up to the cross-roads in the village which was full of German infantry. There was a lot of traffic darting across the crossroads from South to North and which we engaged with varying success. When occupied with this we were engaged at short range by a 37mm A Tk Gun, again with no effect, which had been pushed around the corner of a house by German infantry. This was followed by a shower of grenades which landed on the tank.’

Meanwhile Sgt Strickland had entered Arras near the village of Ecurie and encountered German infantry. He chased them into a cul de sac where they disappeared into a barn. He put several .50 rounds into the door and ordered them to come out. Some fifty fully armed infantrymen threw down their weapons and surrendered. Having only his driver with him this presented a problem of control, but he picked up a lone surviving DLI infantryman and sat him on the side of the tank pointing his .303 rifle menacingly. Despite being strafed and bombed he was able to keep control of the prisoners who fortunately didn’t know that his MMG was empty; he had used up his last ammunition firing into the barn. Capt Robert Cracroft, the Adjutant, told Sgt Strickland that he had submitted a recommendation to HQ I

Army Tk Bde that he be awarded an immediate Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM), but in the ensuing confusion and deliberate destruction of papers during the hasty withdrawal he heard no more. This extraordinary action was recorded in a painting commissioned by his son.

[NB. For his subsequent actions at La Bassee and his extraordinary escape to Dunkirk he was eventually awarded an MM.]

Maj Gen Rommel, GOC 7 Pz Div, was appalled at the poor showing of the SS. His Pz Regt and its artillery were well ahead in Wailly and were being attacked by tanks of 7 RTR. Gen Rommel and his ADC, Lt Most, gripped the battery of light anti-aircraft artillery and, indicating targets personally, they and the nearby field guns brought the 7 RTR threat to a smoking halt. It had been a very close thing and Lt Most was killed in the process. He was buried with the Seventh crews in the Wailly Cemetery.

Meanwhile the Fourth, reaching the valley below Telegraph Hill, came under sustained 105mm fire. Major Hedderwick was killed in his Matilda Mk II on the same spot where he had fought in April 1917. Lt Peter Vaux, finding that he could not raise the CO (who, it will be remembered, was in one of his Recce Tp tanks), was called down into the valley by the Adjutant. He found the CO and twenty other 4 RTR crews dead in their knocked-out tanks. His moving account of this moment in the battle is attached as Annex A to this history. Having helped the Adjutant (Capt Cracroft) to destroy some of the German A Tk guns and infantry hiding in the forward edge of the wood, they withdrew under heavy fire.

At dusk "Frank Force" withdrew to rally at Achicourt with the now very depleted infantry battalions. They were subjected to dive bombing and attack by tanks from 5 Pz Div which they successfully drove off. The Seventh War Diary records that by this stage they had four officers killed, four wounded and three missing, and twenty five other ranks killed, ten wounded and sixteen missing. "Frank Force" had achieved the aim but at a heavy cost.

<http://www.4and7royaltankregiment.com/1940-1941/>

Battle of Arras: Rommel's View

By William E. Welsh

South of the crossroads of Arras in the Pas de Calais region of France, British and German troops are buried alongside each other. They were casualties of a gutsy British armored counterattack on May 21, 1940, by two British tank regiments against General-Major Erwin Rommel's 7th Panzer Division.

Rommel's division was racing west toward the Channel coast on the right flank of General-Colonel Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group A at the time of a British counterattack. The commander of the British Expeditionary Force ordered British 50th Infantry Division commander Maj. Gen. Gifford Martel to strike Rommel's division to temporarily check its advance.

Rommel's swift reaction and characteristic hands-on leadership from the front contributed greatly that day to preventing a setback from turning into a disaster. The British Matilda I and Matilda II tanks that participated in the Battle of Arras generally were meant for infantry support and not to go head to head with the German panzers. The two-pronged British attack consisted of the 7th Royal Tank Regiment with 23 Matilda Is and 16 Matilda IIs leading the right column and the 4th Royal Tank Regiment with 35 Matilda Is leading the left column.

That afternoon Rommel had ordered his 25th Panzer Regiment to attack the enemy. In the meantime, Rommel drove south to see what was holding up his 6th and 7th Rifle Regiments. He was near the village of Wailly south of Arras when struck by the British right column.

"The enemy tank fire had created chaos and confusion among our troops in the village," said Rommel. A traffic jam ensued in which German vehicles of the 7th Rifle Regiment became snarled. "It was an extremely tight spot, for there were several enemy tanks close to Wailly on its north side," said Rommel. The German commander, together with his aide, Lieutenant Most (who was mortally wounded in the battle), rounded up every available antitank and antiaircraft gun they could find and ordered them into action. "I personally gave each gun its target," said Rommel. "With the enemy tanks so perilously close, only rapid fire from every gun could save the situation."



Rommel's quick work to stabilize the situation blunted the advance of Lt. Col. H.M. Heyland's 7th Royal Tank Regiment. Unfortunately for the British tank crews, their radios were malfunctioning, and therefore tank leaders had to convey orders in an exposed position with hand signals. Because of this, Heyland was killed leading the assault.

To Rommel's right, Lt. Col. J.G. Fitzmaurice's 4th Royal Tank Regiment had burst through a thin line of antitank weapons deployed by the German 6th Rifle Regiment. "The antitank guns ... were put out of action by gunfire, together with their crews, and then overrun by the enemy tanks," said Rommel. Additionally, many of the vehicles of the two rifle

regiments were “burnt out” by the tanks, according to Rommel.

The 6th Rifle Regiment’s forward position at the village of Agny was pierced, and although the majority of the tanks were stopped at the next concentration of villages to the east, which included Mercatel and Neuville, a few doughty British tankers made it as far as Wancourt. What finally broke the back of the British attack was the use of divisional artillery and the dreaded 88mm antiaircraft guns in a tank-buster role. Rommel lost approximately 400 men, which was four times what he lost during the breakthrough into France. The British lost two-thirds of their armor, a loss they could ill afford.

<https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/2018/12/10/battle-of-arras-rommels-view/>

Scenario designed by Ash 'Ashcloud' McLeod