

DESIGN NOTES FOR BANZAI BLITZ: SURIBACHI

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Banzai Blitz: Suribachi was originally a variant article entitled “Suribachi: The Battle of Iwo Jima” for the game Panzerblitz, published in the Spartan Journal #3 back in 1972. The variant was about the battle of the island of Iwo Jima in World War II. The author was Norman Beveridge and it was part of a series of Panzerblitz articles by him for that magazine. It started off as just another scenario for the article “Banzai Blitz”, but had gotten so large that Norman made it into an article in its own right. Both articles were submitted to the Spartan Journal and Banzai Blitz was supposed to be published first. But a change in editors altered the publication schedule and Suribachi was published first and then Banzai Blitz was four year later.

Now one may ask, why make another Iwo Jima scenario for Rising Sun? There are already three other scenarios for it in the game. Well one of them deals with the first day of the battle and the other two have to do with the battle for Mount Suribachi. None of them deal with the whole battle. Besides, the scale of the maps in those scenarios is smaller (about 100 -125 meters per hex) and not the proper size for a Panzerblitz scenario. Besides, Rising Sun has the fewest scenarios in the Campaign series and is always in need of more.

The Mapsheet

The original mapsheet was about the size of two Panzerblitz mapboards placed together side by side. This encompassed the entire island of Iwo Jima at the proper Panzerblitz scale of 250 meters per hex. The terrain was rather bland, just the usual slope, hilltop, woods, village, and open terrain that one would find in Panzerblitz. New terrain was the beach hexes and the open sea hexes around the island. There was a series of two dotted lines that went across the island but these were just boundaries for the basic scenario. There were also symbols for the three airfields on the island but these did not convey any defensive advantages to the units occupying them, they showed where they are. In other words the map was suitable for an armored mobile action such as Panzerblitz was known for but not suitable for the intense infantry combat that dominated the battle of the island.

When I first made the mapsheet for the island, I made it exactly as it was in the original mapsheets. Then I added rough terrain to the northern portion of the island because it was in fact extremely rocky up there. I also made Mount Suribachi rough as well. The woods just north of Suribachi I made into light woods and fields (The Japanese did grow food in that area due to the mineral rich volcanic soil in that area.) The elevation levels of the terrain were in the standard Panzerblitz heights, 50 meters per level. However I had to give the top level of Mount Suribach a double level jump in height so it would be 150 meters in height. Granted this is still a little short of true height of 169 meters but this is the best I can do on this scale. In addition I made the hexsides of Suribachi escarpments to show the steepness of the slopes. Likewise Hills 362 and 382 will be 11 and 17 meters

shorter in height in the northern half of the mapsheet due to the scale. I made two of the airfields with hard surface runways (paved roads) while the third had soft surface runways (unpaved roads) as it was under construction when the battle took place. I also added a road network to the island consisting of unpaved roads and trails.

The Order of Battle

The order of battle for both sides went through several versions. Each will be described separately.

Japanese: The original Japanese order of battle for Suribachi was based on generic Japanese orders of battle common in the early 1970s. While the amount of infantry units was about right, the amount and type of artillery was wrong. Rather than using Norman Beveridge's order of battle for the artillery, I used official Marine Corps documents listing the types and amount of mortars and artillery found on Iwo Jima after the battle was over. I then converted them into Panzerblitz/Panzer Leader size units (Light Mortars – 3 per unit, Medium Mortars – 6 per unit, Heavy Mortars – 4 per unit, Anti-Tank Guns – 4 per unit, Infantry and Mountain Guns – 2 per unit, Light Guns and Howitzers – 6 per unit, Medium and Heavy Howitzers – 6 per unit, Coastal Guns – 4 per unit, Light Anti-Aircraft Guns – 6 per unit, Heavy Anti-Aircraft Guns – 4 per unit) Rocket artillery was at 5 per unit instead of the usual 6 because I only had a total of 40 rocket launchers (but they are big mothers). While the regular Army infantry was about right, the naval infantry was all wrong. Beveridge had early war Marine and SNLF units representing the naval troops which were all wrong. The naval troops were mostly guards, engineers, airfield personnel, and surviving gun crews after their guns were knocked out. I used Second Line infantry to represent the naval troops. One thing that players will ask is where are all the engineers that the Japanese had on the island, which came to about eight battalions. Well the naval ones are included in the naval contingent fighting as infantry. The Army ones are underground and not on the board, save for one company. These will act as replacements for depleted units in later scenarios of the battle. (The engineers largely did all of their engineering work before the invasion, after the invasion they largely fought as infantry.) As for the armor I reduced it from a full regiment of 78 tanks and armored cars to a small two-company battalion of only 23 tanks total as that is what the Japanese actually had. There were way too many trucks and wagon units in the original order of battle and I eliminated all of them. (During the battle the wagons were placed as obstacles on the battlefield with the horses being used for food. What few vehicles were on the island were parked in caves running electric generators until they ran out of fuel, although a couple were placed outside as obstacles.)

American: The American order of battle was based on Beveridge's organizations from Banzai Blitz. While the amount of infantry units was about right, the artillery was very wrong. Using the guidelines listed above I reorganized the mortars and artillery into units as in Panzer Leader. I made one exception though, the 155mm Howitzers units I kept as a four gun unit because Beveridge made a counter for that size unit in his counter sheet. One thing that is missing from the order of battle was the Marine rocket trucks of which

there were two battalions worth. This is because Rising Sun does not have that unit in its unit inventory. One will notice that the Marines have a lot of engineer units too. Each Marine division had two engineer battalions, the Pioneer Battalion, which were infantry engineers, and the regular engineer battalion which were general engineers. All of the additional engineer battalions are construction engineer battalions, better known as the Sea Bees. I reduced the number of trucks and jeeps from the original order of battle because they were not needed and aside from towing artillery, were really used in rear area and administrative functions, not combat roles. They would just clutter up the board. While the number of Sherman tanks, both regular and flamers, were right, he had the wrong type of regular Shermans. He had the 76mm gun version, so I changes these to 75mm gun armed Shermans. As for the Buffalos (LVT(a)-4) Beveridge had way too many in the order of battle. He had 288 of them at Iwo Jima in three battalions when in fact there was only one battalion of them with 78 vehicles. I reduced them to the appropriate number. However the Buffalos may have represented more than just themselves. The Marines used a self-propelled 75mm gun, mounted on a halftrack. Each Marine regiment had a platoon of four of these. So I made sure that they had these too. The off map artillery represent various naval warships that supported the troops ashore on a day to day basis. They are located all around the island as they had certain sections of the island that they had to cover. Of course there were far more ships during the general bombardment on D-Day but I did not include these. One will note that some Marine battalions have a second commander in their ranks. These are units whose original commanders were wounded or killed during the time covered by this variant and the second commander is simply their respective successors.

The Scenarios

There are a total of thirteen scenarios in this variant, one for the day of the invasion and the twelve subsequent days after that. Why only thirteen days instead of the whole 36 days of the battle. Well there are several reasons. One, on the thirteenth day the Marines had captured the third airfield so the primary objective of taking Iwo Jima had been accomplished. Two, the Marines had broken through both main defense lines that the Japanese had set up, in fact they had possession of the first one completely and most of the second one as well. Yes there was a third secondary defense line north of the third airfield but it was not as extensive as the two main ones. It still took five more days to break through this line to reach the sea to the northeast side of the island. Fourth, the character and intensity of the combat was changing. On the American side the quality of many of the Marine units was falling due to the severe casualties that that they had suffered. Platoons were being run by privates and companies were being led by sergeants. Replacements were getting harder and harder to find as the three replacement battalions the Marines had were completely empty of troops and the culling of the rear area support units of troops was reducing their efficiency. Even the artillery units in the last days of the battle had to park their guns in containment areas and the crews became infantry. (But then by that point the guns could not be used any way because the pockets of resistance were so small that artillery fire would be causing more friendly casualties than enemy.) On the Japanese side, by the thirteenth day the supply of food, water and ammunition was

reaching critical levels. Not only that, over two thirds of the entire Japanese force on the island had been killed. Though the Japanese fought on in a fanatical fashion to the end it was obvious that the quality of their troops was also falling. Plus once the Japanese force was split in two on day eighteen, the combat changed to one of pocket reduction and mopping up. Another factor was that by the second week of March the US Navy had pulled out of the fight as it had to go prepare for the upcoming invasion of Okinawa.

That being said let's look at why the scenarios are set up the way that they are. On the Japanese side all units start the each scenario frozen in place. This was due to the historical order by the Japanese commander to fight and die in place. To be sure there were local counterattacks to recapture lost positions and night raids to try to keep the Marines off balance, but these can be simulated by the fact that frozen units once fired upon are released and can move and assault. Norman Beveridge gave the Japanese 24 Fortress counters. I used these to give the Japanese a mix of 24 Trench, Bunker, and Pillbox hexes. He also gave the Japanese 72 2-1 Minefield counters. To be sure the Japanese certainly had enough mines to set up 72 minefields but they did not exactly use them that way. Individual mines were set up all over the island, not as a barrier but as an attritional weapon to cause casualties. Yes some minefields were set up as barriers and they are so located on the game map, but the majority of the minefields I deleted because they were so spread out that even 1-1 minefields could not be set up, even in hexes occupied by Japanese unit because there were not enough in the hex to constitute one. Beveridge did not give any Blocks to the Japanese, these were my doing. While there was a shortage of wire on the island and what wire was available was used to protect the airfields, the Japanese made up for it by digging a lot of anti-vehicular ditches in the low ground and in the rocky ground using boulders to erect barriers that were so good that engineers frequently had to move them with bulldozers, usually while under fire, in order to remove the barriers. One will notice that there is nothing on the beach hexes. This was due to the historical Japanese decision to leave them empty in order to encourage the Marines to pack them with men and equipment, thus making them inviting targets for the Japanese artillery. One will also notice that I put a lot of caves on the island, many if not most of them within three hexes of each other, in order to simulate the vast underground tunnel system the Japanese had on the island.

The Marines all land on the beaches by simply appearing there on their scheduled turns. Because of the historical Japanese order not to fire on the Marines when they are landing, I found the use of landing craft to be superfluous so I did not use them. One will notice that not all Marine units are on the map even though they have previously landed. Iwo Jima was a very crowded island when the Marines had landed all their units, in fact more than the game system can show on the map. So in each scenario I only posted those units which would have had a direct impact on the fighting for the day in question.

Each scenario has ten turns to it, with each turn representing about one hour of time. Why one hour instead of six minutes as in a normal game? Because the type of combat being fought on the island was a very slow affair. Assaulting fortified positions takes a long time to prepare for, each time. Speaking of fortified positions, why do the Japanese only get a total of only 24 Trenches, Bunkers, and Pillboxes. Well because Beveridge only

gave them 24 Fort counters total, that's why. Yes, there were far more fortifications on the island than Beveridge gave them, but I am following his lead on this to keep the game playable. Of course I was very liberal with the Improved Positions on both sides as both sides used them constantly in the wake of the intense artillery barrages both sides gave each other on a daily basis.

The strength levels of the individual units at the start of each scenario are based on the historical casualties that each unit received the previous day and the replacements received during the night. Obviously the Marine units are only going to be at full strength on the day they arrived on the island (either initially on D-Day or as reinforcements). The Marines received their replacements from three replacement battalions plus culling the support units for troops as the battle wore on. Some units which proved to be useless on the island, like the anti-tank units and the company 60mm mortars, just placed their guns in a holding area in the rear and the men became infantry replacements. This is why these units disappear from the starting line up of each scenario after the first couple of scenarios. (Yes some companies kept their 60mm mortars during the whole battle but they were individual exceptions.) The Japanese units start each scenario in fixed positions. This is based on the historical order to die in place. In each scenario I went through the Japanese units that were destroyed the previous days and pulled some reduced strength units out of the dead pile and added them to Japanese positions. This reflects two things. One, local Japanese commanders did sometimes send men back to rearward positions when their frontline positions were about to fall. Two, the Japanese had more men hidden underground which they used as supplemental reinforcements. (These were support personnel from the airfield and naval units that are not reflected in the Japanese order of battle. They were given minimal infantry training before the battle and were used to bolster the defense.)

Players may wonder why Japanese artillery units which get blasted every day by the overwhelming US indirect fire assets always come back into play at full strength the next day. Japanese artillery units did not engage in artillery duels with the Marines. They would make their attacks and then the crews would go underground and wait out the inevitable counterbattery fire. Plus the guns, mortars, and rockets were in very well protected positions and nothing short of a direct hit would knock them out. Only when the front line moved adjacent to the artillery position did the guns and crews start to take permanent losses. The same thing applies to the Japanese coastal defense guns in located in bunkers. During the battle they were daily silenced by US Navy gunfire. But the crews would just hide in the caves when the Navy was bombarding then comeback and fire their guns later in the day at targets of opportunity. But the Navy's guns were direct fire and so over the course of the battle scored direct hits on the bunkers and permanently knock the guns out and this is reflected in the reduced daily starting strengths over the course of the battle. And of course, when a gun, mortar, or rocket was permanently knocked out, the surviving crews became available as infantry replacements.

Each scenario is its own game and the effects of the end of the game have no bearing on the next day's scenario. The victory conditions are based Objective Hexes captured by the Marines and on points earned by casualties for both sides. The daily Objective Hexes,

which are all Japanese, are based on the historical ground either taken by the Marines on that day or was expected to be taken but was not. The exception to this is the first day where the Objective Hexes are the planned limits of the advance for the Marines on D-Day (which the Marines never did accomplish that day).

Conclusion

So here is Banzai Blitz: Suribachi as Norman Beveridge would have probably like to see it in Rising Sun. In truth this battle can not really be accurately portrayed at this scale. It is better portrayed in a smaller scale as can be see in some of the other Iwo Jima scenarios in Rising Sun. But I was limited to this scale to be true to Beveridge's original work. I hope that other players will come up with some more battle scenarios for Iwo Jima in these smaller scales because this campaign certainly deserves them.