

The Brittany Campaign 1944 (3)

The Brest Defences - 14 to 16 September 1944

By David Bickley

Introduction

With the successful capture of Hill 103 the Americans had a clear view over the city of Brest and its defences, but more importantly they had a post for their artillery observers. As the advance continued, on 5 September 1944 the 5th Rangers captured three fortified positions on the Bay of Brest and on 6 September the US Air Force heavily bombed the city's defences. Such was the vigour of these attacks that the Germans decided to withdraw into their secondary defensive positions. Probing infantry were dismayed to discover these were merely a few hundred yards closer to Brest. On 8 September these positions were attacked, capturing three strongpoints in the line, including the reinforced anti-aircraft position known as Fort Kerrognant. On 9 September the village of Penfeld was captured and on 11 September the assault resumed, but found itself stalled by Forts Keranroux and Montbarey, two mutually supporting positions dominating the last high ground to the north west of the walls of the city of Brest itself.

The Situation

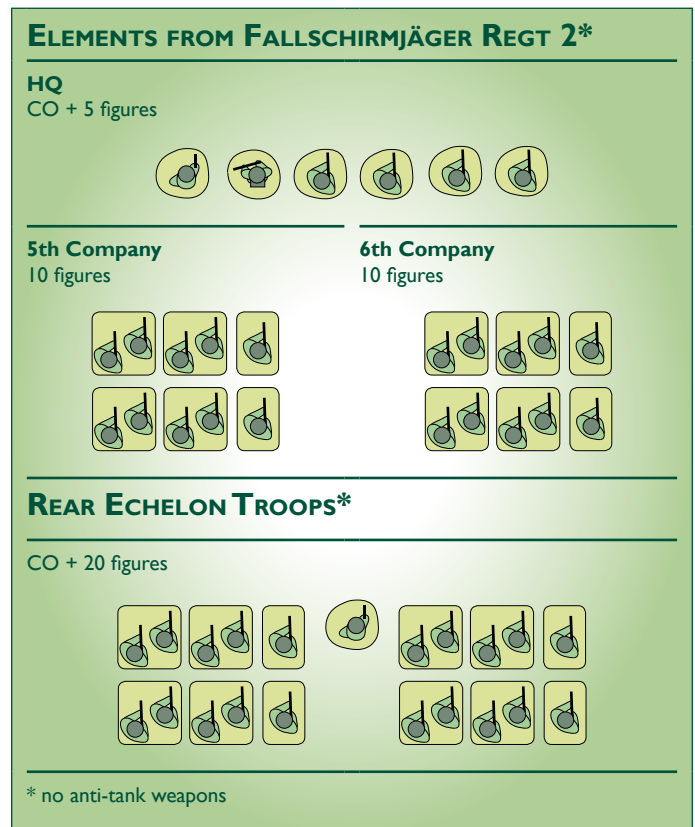
On 12/13 September the Americans made sent out patrols against these two positions and mounted a series of probing attacks. The forts were also subjected to heavy artillery bombardment. On 13 September a further two hour bombardment and the laying of an extensive smokescreen preceded another attack. In a swift advance under cover of smoke the 175 Infantry entered Fort Keranroux and mopped up the surviving members of the garrison, despite heavy German artillery fire. Ten American casualties resulted, but 107 Germans were captured. Next target of the attack was the remaining strongpoint, Fort Montbarey.

Fort Montbarey

Fort Montbarey had earth filled masonry walls some forty feet in thickness and was surrounded by a moat some 15' wide. The area to its north was covered by 20mm gun positions and rifle pits. Barbed wire entanglements dominated its front, covering a minefield which included 300lb naval shells fused to explode when stepped on! The fort's main function in the Brest defences had been to act as a signal station and store; it seemed it was never seen as a strongpoint!

The fighting to capture Fort Montbarey began on 11 September when the 2/115 moved forward. It would seem that at that point the fort was unmanned, but the attackers were driven off by a very heavy German artillery barrage. The attacking Americans estimated the strength of the German defenders at over 200,

but German sources suggest that the real defensive position at that time was a nearby Organization Todt work camp! The Germans wanted to hold up the Americans in the area for several days, as they were busy constructing a defensive line some distance in their rear. The defenders now comprised the 5th and 6th Companies of Fallschirmjäger Regiment 2, together with hastily collected non combatant elements pressed into service from rear echelon formations.

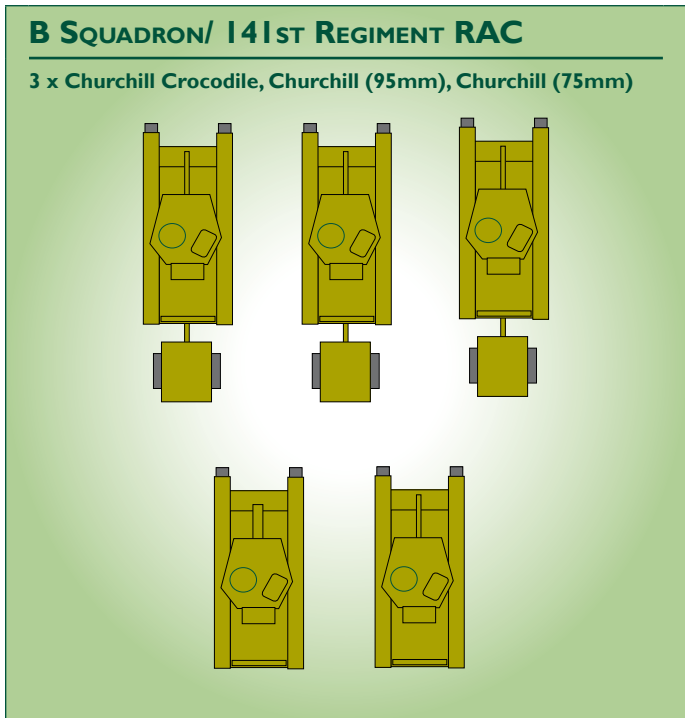


On 12 September 2/115 Infantry halted their attacks on the area so that 3/115 Infantry could pass safely through their positions and take up the attack. In the movement some 219 Germans were captured when surprised unprepared in a complex of bunkers. In total some four bunkers were cleared by surprise as Company H/115 had somehow passed unseen between two enemy outposts and penetrated the defensive ring. A gap of some 500 yards had been opened in the enemy's defences. As ever in warfare though, for totally inexplicable reasons this advantage was not immediately exploited.

On 13 September the German's fire pushed the Americans out of the ditch around the fort which they had occupied on the previous day. Supported by the newly arrived 116 Infantry in a series of local attacks the Germans were steadily pushed back on 14 September until the fort was partially surrounded. The main units involved at that stage were 116 Infantry, men from 121 Engineer Battalion, a platoon of 4.2" mortars and three tank destroyers from 821 Tank Destroyer Battalion. The British sent a tank

squadron of 19 Churchill tanks from the 29th Division at Montbary, B/141 Royal Armoured Corps. Each of the 15 Churchill Crocodile tanks was equipped as flamethrower tanks, mounting a 75mm gun, machine gun and a flamethrower device. In addition there were two 95mm armed Churchills and two command tanks. A Crocodile was equipped with a 400 gallon trailer allowing 120 seconds of fire at an effective range of 80 yards. These tanks' radios were not able to function on American frequencies; instead all communications were through the command tanks. In addition the tanks had Cullin hedgerow cutters welded to their fronts to help deal with obstacles around the fort.

On 14 September the assault on Fort Montbary began in earnest as the crocodiles, supported by American infantry, began to move forward. German positions outside the fort's walls were without anti-tank weapons, so the infantry occupying these soon



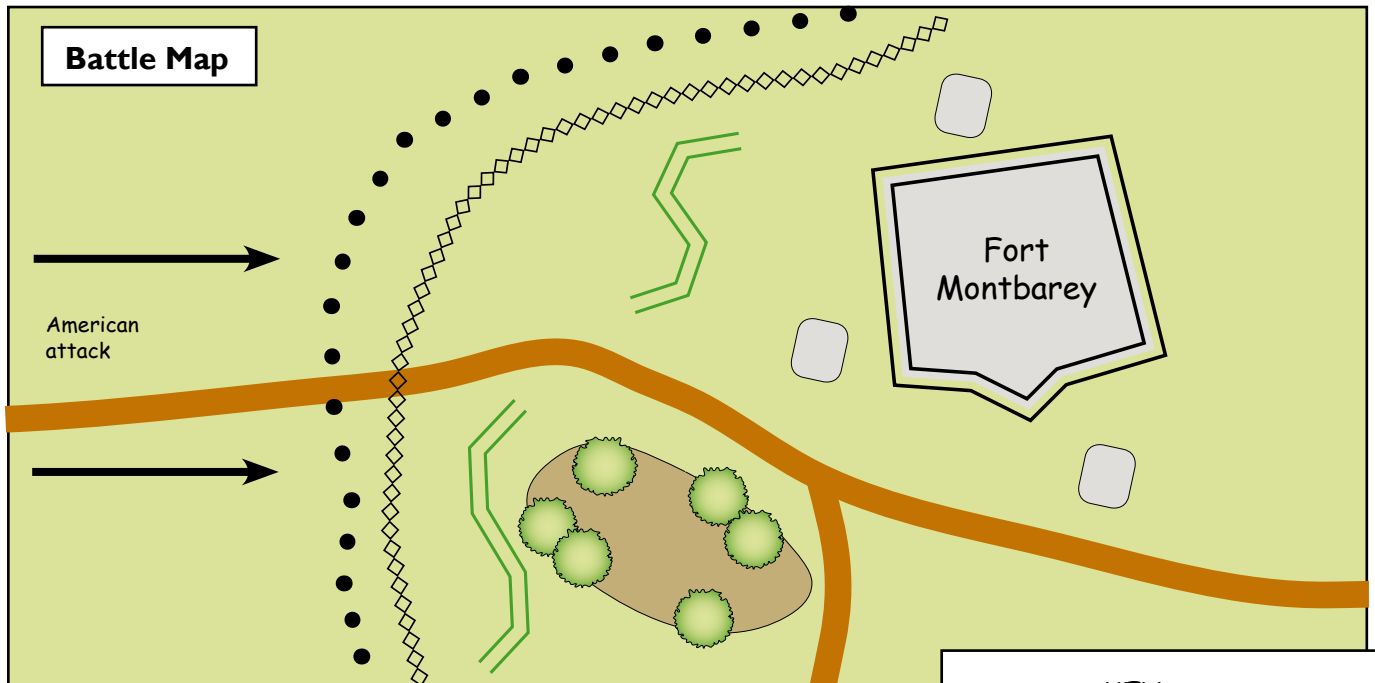
115 & 116 INFANTRY

<p>HQ CO + 5 figures, 60mm mortar</p>	<p>Rifle Company 10 figures, Bazooka</p>
<p>Rifle Company 10 figures, Bazooka</p>	<p>Rifle Company 10 figures, Bazooka</p>
<p>Heavy Weapons Company 9 figures, 50cal HMG, 30cal MMG, 81mm mortar</p>	
<p>Chemical Company 4 figures, 4.2" mortar</p>	<p>Engineer Company 10 figures, 4 x demolition charge, Bazooka</p>
<p>Tank Destroyer Platoon M10 tank destroyer (76mm)</p>	<p>4 figures, 105mm howitzer, prime mover</p>

fell back into the fort. Some 60 men safely reached the position, covered by the smoke from the flame throwing tanks! Inside the fort the communications had been destroyed, so the Garrison found itself isolated. There was no ammunition store and little water, but there was a supply of gas masks. These were to prove useful. The 60 defenders were armed with small arms, grenades and three machineguns. At 16.15 the attack on the fort itself began.

First the American Engineers had to clear a path through the minefield under cover of a smoke screen. When that task had been accomplished three Churchill Crocodile Tanks moved forward supported by B/116. The attack was supported by fire from the tank destroyers, focused on likely gun positions. One tank exhausted its supply of fuel and fell into an anti-tank ditch, the second was blown up by a mine, while the third made it close to the walls but could find no opening through which to flame the fort's interior! One command tank hit a mine and two other Crocodiles, only to be stuck in a crater and an anti-tank ditch in turn. However, despite this unpromising showing, the cover it provided had allowed the infantry to eliminate all defences except those with the fort itself.

The German defenders had only survived the attack because the supply of gas masks had enabled them to breathe despite the smoke and fumes. Now they set about blocking the burnt out doorway with a stone barricade. During the night of 14/15 September American engineers cleared another path for the tanks and at 0830 another attack was launched, this time with engineers constructing a causeway across the anti-tank ditch. This attack almost completed the surrounding of the fort, with only a narrow gap open to its southeast. By 1030 the Crocodiles had used up all their fuel in flaming the fort's walls without causing a single casualty or effecting an entry. An armoured bulldozer was deployed to try to clear the fort's entry, but the driver was killed by sniper fire.



Determined to defend their position to the 'last cartridge', if not to the 'last man', the defenders refused two requests to surrender, so, on 16 September the final attack began. Three Crocodiles moved up to flame the fort while the tank destroyers fired some 200 rounds of HE against the fort's doorway at a range of less than 200 yards. The defenders were forced by the flaming to leave their positions on the walls while the Americans, under covering fire, penetrated a tunnel under the moat and entered the passageways under the fort. Now a 105mm howitzer was brought up and the barricade destroyed by some 20 rounds of HE. The enemy were discouraged from targeting the gun crew by infantry fire in support. Now three further Crocodiles moved forward to flame the fort. A further Churchill moved up to replace the howitzer and continued to fire HE into the fort's gateway while engineers beneath the fort prepared a massive charge. However, realising the position was now hopeless, the Germans decided to surrender! Some 80 Falschirmjagers were captured, the defenders having suffered only one wounded man in the entire attack!

Winning the game.

I would suggest playing the game on an 8' x 4' table in two separate stages on the tabletop. The fort should occupy the centre of the table and not be too large. There are some nice fortifications available, which, while not necessarily historically accurate, should look nice in a WW II game.

The first stage is the American infantry attack to clear out the Germans from around the fort. The defenders should be deployed within six inches of the fort's moat at the start of the game. The American infantry enter from the west. In some 12 turns the Americans must drive the defenders into the fort to claim a win. {They may not deploy their tanks destroyers or howitzer in this phase, nor may

the British tanks be used.} If the Americans do not achieve this objective, then the German player wins phase one.

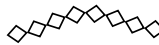



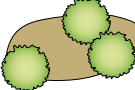

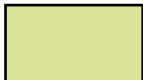
In the second stage of the game, lasting no more than ten turns, the Americans may deploy all their forces and the British tanks; even if they did not win the first phase.

The German player gets no reinforcements, but gets to hold any positions outside the moat still in his hands at the end of the first phase of the game or may remove all his force into the fort itself. To win the game the Americans must capture the fort and/or force the Germans to surrender. Any other outcome is a German victory!

Afterword

Well, there you are, I hope this scenario has got you interested in something other than a 'Panzer Parade' as the basis of a game. Most players should have access to the vehicles and figures requires, though the fort, moat and ditches may need to be built or bought specially. If you've no crocodiles then use ordinary Churchills to stand in for them, though I'm sure there are models available on the market.e. In the meantime, as Major Dallas said, "Blow them all up!"

KEY

-  Barbed wire
-  Trench
-  Minefield
-  Road
-  Wood
-  Pillbox
-  Fields with hedgerows