

The Brittany Campaign 1944 (1)

The Capture of Hill 154 - 22/23rd August 1944

By David Bickley

Background

Amongst World War II enthusiasts I suspect the campaign of the American VIII Corps - the 2nd, 8th and 29th Infantry Divisions - are largely ignored in favour of the better known and documented Normandy Campaign. However, the Americans in places faced elite Fallschirmjäger opposition under the command of Fallschirmjäger General Ramcke which should surely attract players to recreate scenarios from the campaign across their table top.

Brittany was the site of the largest Naval Base in France, at Brest, home to German U Boat pens: it also contained several large and relatively undamaged ports and it was these targets, each driven by a different but vital war aim, which lay behind the Allied decision to drive west into Brittany when the main theatre of operations was focused to the east. Operation Chastity allowed for the capture of Brest and the construction of an artificial port in the Quiberon Bay area to allow supplies for the American thrust eastwards into France and later Germany to be landed securely. This aim was vital to the Allied build up and breakout soon after 6 June as it soon transpired that fresh units were sitting idle in reserve simply because they could not be logistically supported in the field. So, on 25 July 1944, the American assault began and within a week the base of the Cotentin Peninsula had been reached and the way was open into Brittany.

The original plan had called for a force of three Corps to be directed into the campaign to occupy Brittany, but the success of the breakthrough resulted in two of those Corps being redirected to the destruction and/or encirclement of the Germans in Normandy. Thus, only Middleton's VIII Corps would serve in that theatre. Patton's success in Operation Cobra seems to have led the Allied command to put thoughts of Operation Chastity on the back burner. Both Generals Middleton and Wood - 4th Armored Division - seem to have lacked a clear grasp of their mission, but they were no more culpable it seems than their superiors and their planners, who simply seem to have ignored the capture of the Quiberon Bay landing sites, carried away by the unexpected euphoria of Operation Cobra's success. While the War moved rapidly eastwards towards the liberation of Paris and on into the Low Countries, it must have seemed almost perverse to some to mount a campaign in the very opposite direction! But, if the port had opened as planned, it is likely that Patton's drive on Germany would not have halted for lack of material allowing an Allied advance against Germany on a wider front, perhaps bringing the War in Europe to a swifter conclusion.

What follows, in this and subsequent articles, is a selection of scenarios of varying sizes drawn from the Campaign allowing the tabletop general to pit his/her wits against the problems the Americans encountered as they cleared Brittany of the enemy. The first scenario concerns the capture of Hill 154 by the 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry on 22 August 1944 and is a small scale scenario capable of being played out on a 6' x 4' table.

The Situation

The Americans: on 21 June 1944 Task Force B, commanded by General James A. Van Fleet, had become operational. He was tasked with clearing the enemy from the Plougastel-Daoulas Peninsula to the south east of Brest. The northern end of the Peninsula was the operational area of 38th Infantry Regiment, supported by 3/330th Infantry; B & C/705th and A/603rd Tank Destroyer Battalions; A/68th Tank Battalion; and 174th Field Artillery Battalion.

The Germans: the Germans also realized the vital nature of the Peninsula. Their defensive line ran from a strongpoint on Hill 154 down to the town of Daoulas. Most Naval and anti-aircraft guns in the area were mounted to enable them also to engage enemy ground targets. The terrain was open with good fields of fire over broken rocky ground. Hill 154 was protected by a ring of minefields and tripwire surrounding a double trench system, together with eight concrete pillboxes. At least 25 machineguns were dug in, together with high velocity guns and mortars. The defenders were mainly from the 266th Division together with elements from the 2nd Fallschirmjäger Division. The position on Hill 154 was manned also by observers from 5th Battery, 811th Naval Anti-aircraft battalion, offering it covering fire against attack.

The Action

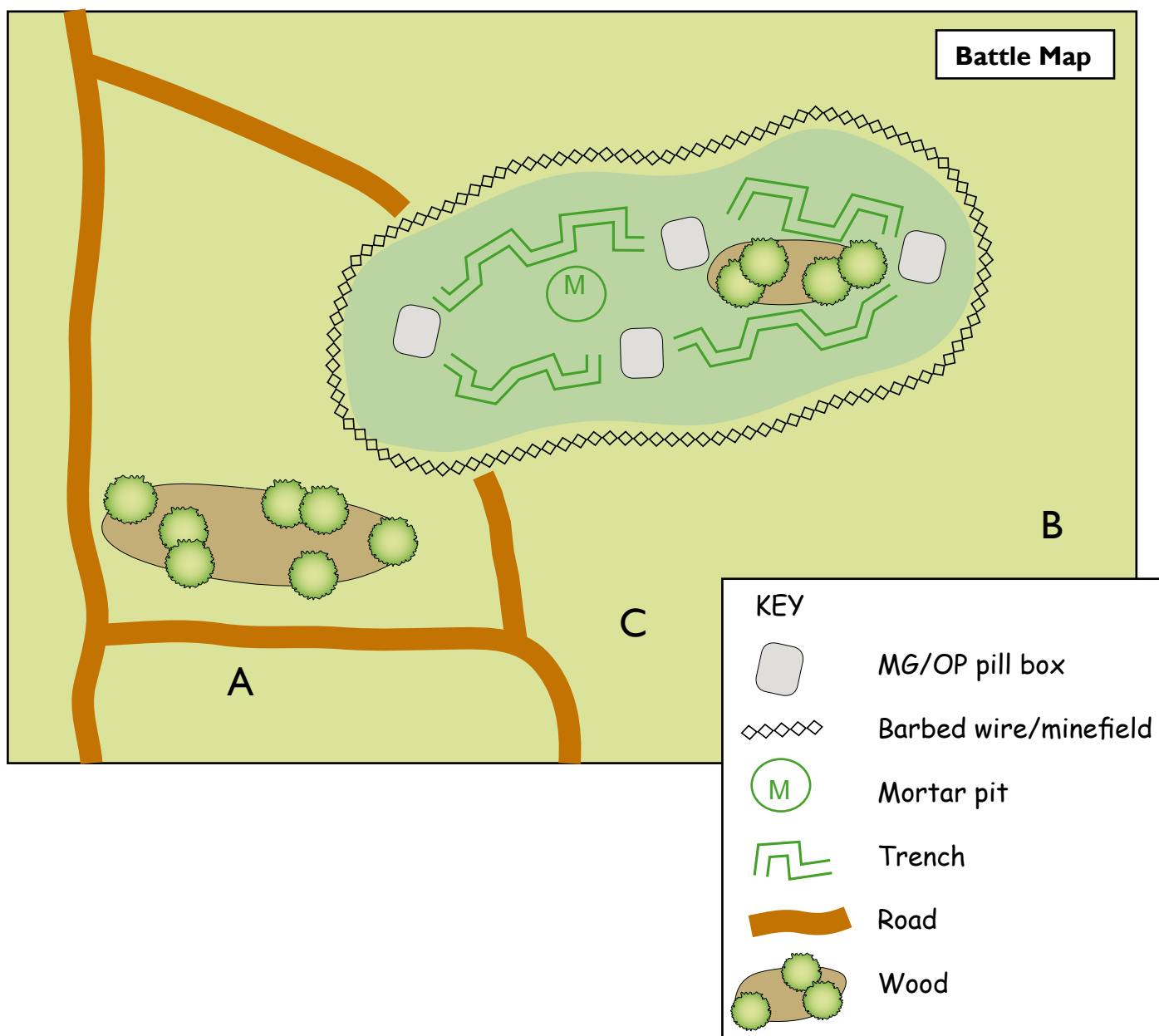
On 22 August 1944 3/38th Infantry under the command of Lt Col Barsanti attacked Hill 154; L/38th under Capt Utley to the left, I/38th under Captain Van Hoorebeke to the right, with K/38th initially held as reserve. While Utley's men, clinging to every available scrap of cover, moved forward under severe fire, Van Hoorebeke's were able to move to the north of the position around the German flank and occupy higher ground. However, this move opened up a dangerous gap in the American lines. Meanwhile, even as Van Hoorebeke's men made their move, Utley's men found himself held up near the base of Hill 154 by fire from a 75mm self propelled gun. This gun was knocked out at the second attempt by a bazooka group, allowing

Utley's men to continue their advance. Next came the problem of the pillboxes, which were attacked with three teams of flamethrowers, though only one made it into the attack safely. The fall of the pillbox meant that the supporting infantry were able to move into position on Hill 154 as night fell.

Overnight, the Germans succeeded in infiltrating the gap between the two rifle companies. At dawn these Germans, about platoon strength, were counter attacked by the battalion command group, who were supported by mortars from I/38th! The Germans were driven back with serious losses. To close this dangerous gap, K/38th moved up from reserve and L/38th swung left to flank the hill. From their new positions the Americans resumed the attack, inching forward under fire. Although both I & L/38th were by now within the enemy position, they had to call for support from tank destroyers of the 705th to tackle the pillboxes they encountered. Their fire forced the Germans to take cover, allowing the Americans to resume their slow advance and preventing enemy reinforcements from moving into Hill 154.

The fighting now became fragmented, with groups of riflemen slowly clearing each enemy position in close fighting. Not until after 1500 hours on 23 August was Hill 154 in American hands. Even then, a further force of about 150 Germans were found dug in on the reverse slope of Hill 154. They were attempting to pull back into the next defensive line at Plougastel when they were spotted. Artillery fire was called down on them and after 11 full volleys of battalion fire the survivors were mopped up by the infantry! The Americans suffered 7 killed and 28 wounded in taking Hill 154, the Germans 100 killed and 143 taken prisoner in defending it, together with about 150 killed or captured on the reverse slope.

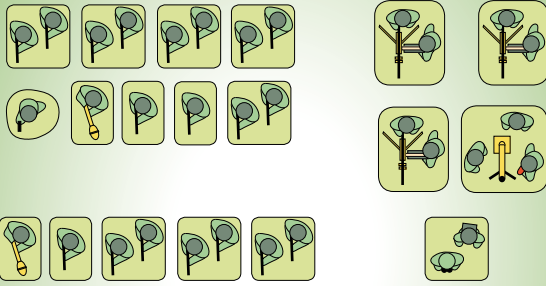
Examination of Hill 154 after its capture showed it to be one of the most heavily fortified areas of the Peninsula. The Americans were able to move their 57mm antitank guns into the position and fire into the German positions at Plougastel.



GERMAN FORCES (REGULAR - APART FROM *)

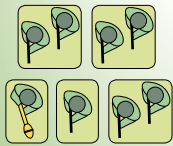
Hill 154 Strongpoint

CO + 22 figures, Panzerfaust, 6 figures, 3 x MMG (located in pill boxes), 3 figures, 81mm mortar, 8 figures (*Fallschirmjäger - Elite), Panzerfaust, 2 figure naval anti-aircraft OP team

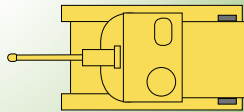


Reserve Rifle Company

8 figures, Panzerfaust



StuG III (75mm)



Off Table Artillery Support

88mm anti-aircraft gun

* HE only

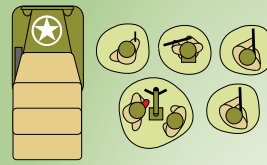
** May use Indirect Fire (p 61-63) and General Support Fire (p 89)

***Need not be placed on the table

AMERICAN FORCES (REGULAR)

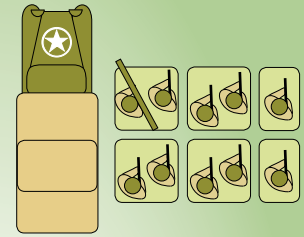
HQ

CO + 5 figures, 60mm mortar
¾ ton truck



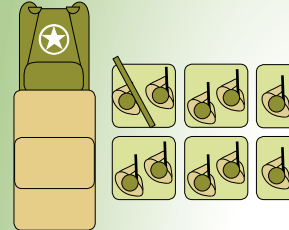
Rifle Company

10 figures, Bazooka, 2½ ton truck



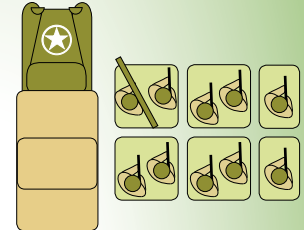
Rifle Company

10 figures, Bazooka, 2½ ton truck



Rifle Company

10 figures, Bazooka, 2½ ton truck



Heavy Weapons Company (reinforced for the assault)

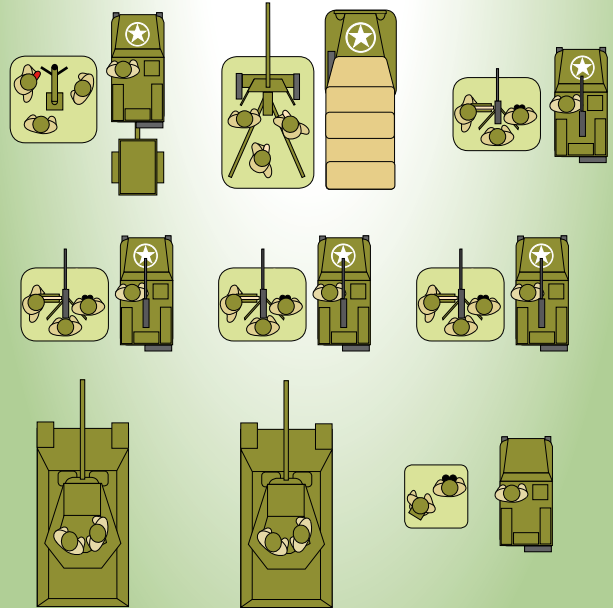
15 figures, 3 x 50cal HMG, 30cal MMG, 4 x Jeep,

3 figures, 81mm mortar, Jeep and trailer,

3 figures, 57mm AT gun, 1½ ton truck,

2 x M10 (76mm) tank destroyer,

2 figure OP team, Jeep



Off Table Artillery support

3 x 105mm howitzer

* May not fire in support of initial assault by 3/38th Infantry.

Playing the Game

The game is played on a table at least 5' x 4' and is divided into two phases of 10 turns, each phase representing one day's action. The game begins with only the garrison of Hill 154 deployed on the tabletop within the wire perimeter of the strongpoint. The Stug III is deployed beyond the wire perimeter of the strongpoint but not within two infantry move distances of the American entry point. The reserve Rifle Company must be placed outside the wire, to the rear of the strongpoint feature by at least 2 move distances. The naval observation team must be placed within one of the bunkers or trenches facing the American entry side. They must try to observe any enemy movement each turn if the player wishes to call in support fire in defending Hill 154. To simulate the rocky and broken cover the terrain provided American infantry always count as being in cover until within 6" of the perimeter wire. The tank destroyers always claim such cover within 12" of the perimeter wire. The American player enters from the points marked A and B on the map in turn 1 with two rifle companies, the HQ company enters from point C. The third rifle company may not enter until two of these three units are engaging the German strongpoint on Hill 154 - it will enter from Point C.

Only if the infantry fail to knock out the Stug III within two turns of Bazooka fire may the M10s enter the table, subject to the radio contact rule, until they are needed to tackle the pillboxes within the strongpoint. (For this second condition to be

triggered, the American player must have the figures of one company engaging the pillboxes with bazookas, small arms or grenades.) After 6 turns, the German player may try to contact his reserve rifle company, subject to the usual Radio Contact rule. If successful it may act as the player wishes in the following turn. In the same turn the American observer team enters at Point C and may act as the American player wishes from then on.

Winning the Game

If the German player remains in control of the strongpoint on Hill 154 at the end of the game, then he is the winner. If the American player occupies the strongpoint, then he is the winner. If neither case applies, then the game is a draw. Obvious really!

But, there are subdivisions in the game scenario that can also be decided. At the end of the first 10 turn phase, if the American player has no figures within the wire perimeter of the strongpoint, then the German player wins Phase 1. If the American player has at least one Rifle Company within the wire then he may claim a win in Phase 1. The winner in Phase 1 may choose to add 20% of casualties suffered during the phase back into his force, but none of them within 6" of an opposing unit. {The usual Medic Rules will still apply during the game if both players agree.}

Thus, while in the game there will be an overall result, the possibility of the result in Phase 1 influencing the outcome in Phase 2 will keep players on their toes and help them to conserve their forces - 'Gung Ho!' may not always be the best option!