

# HOLD THE LINE

by Jon Cleaves

**A**fter expressing an opinion recently on the forum about FoW tactics, I thought I'd try and back up what I was trying to say with a tactics article of my own. I chose a discussion of how to attack in the Hold the Line (HTL) scenario. Of all the possible "settings" for a dialogue on tactics, I find the HTL the most efficient to use. The tactical issues are many and relatively clean, but also reappear in more complex settings in some of the less straightforward scenarios like Cauldron and Fighting Withdrawal.

## THE BASICS OF ATTACK AND DEFENSE

One of the characteristics of all the scenarios except Free for All (FFA) is the requirement to portray an attacker in a situation where both sides have the same combat power. Note that Encounter is a different bird than FFA because the imbalance in starting on-table combat power usually makes for an immediate de facto attacker and defender relationship – even if one or more of the players doesn't realize it...lol. The most rudimentary understanding of tactics tells us that attacking at a 1:1 combat power ratio is not a good idea, one made worse when the defender is also dug in which effectively increases combat power and makes the ratio worse than 1:1. Conventional military wisdom holds that a 3:1 ratio of combat power is the minimum necessary to give the attacker just a 50% chance of winning. Some other games therefore force the players to change their force's point total up or down to permit playing an attack/defense game. BF has ingeniously solved this issue by designing their attack/defense scenarios so that due to the disposition of forces and the various reserve rules one can use his 1500 point force in any scenario and be attacker or defender.

*...attacking at a 1:1 combat power ratio is not a good idea...*

The implication, however, is that once the game has progressed a few turns, the ratio will be back to 1:1 and the attacker will be required to take an objective from a defender who only has to hold it and has as much combat power as he does. This brings us to issue #1...

### TIME

It is possible for an HTL defender with 6 platoons to have all of his forces on table at the start of his turn 2 (!) and highly likely they will all be there at the start of turn 3. An 8-platoon defender can have all of his forces on turn 3 and is likely to have them all by turn 4 or to have 7 of 8 with one very small platoon off table yet enjoying the benefits of two ambushes (which we will address later). This means the attacker has to get right to it. And what is the "it" in that sentence? The attacker's objective.

The first way an attacker employs tactics in an HTL is the placement of the near objective. This is the one that will win the game for you. You can count on a good opponent placing the defender's (far) objective 8" from the back table edge in defensible terrain. There will typically be an artillery platoon camped on it and an approach on that objective drives into the ambush(es) and the teeth of his arriving reserves. Your objective, however, is placed only 8" from the table center and in terrain of your own choosing. Where should that be? Usually in open terrain where you can approach within 10" of it and still be in concealment or

out of LOS. Your base plan is to employ Jon's Rule of 32. If the objective is 8" from the table center and your deployment zone is 12" in from your table edge, your teams begin the fight 32" from the objective. An attacker needs to be assaulting the objective no later than turn 3 and if possible, turn 2. You have 32" to traverse. Infantry need to be within 10" of the objective to assault it on the next turn, so cannot get there – normally – on turn 2 because a single double move on turn 1 still leaves 20" to go. Recon moves, Truscott trot, riding on tanks or in transport, etc. can make that delicious turn 2 assault possible, but as the typical case is a turn 3 assault, we will use that for our example.

Turn 3 still means moving out smartly. Two infantry double moves will do it. One double move and a normal + stormtrooper/avanti move will do it, but might fail on the die roll. Two moves riding on tanks/transport will do it. All of these moves require a covered avenue of approach to reduce risk and since the attacker is the one placing the objective, the only reason one might not be available is because the table simply does not allow it – which should only happen on the skimpiest of desert tables. As an HTL defender, I cannot tell you how many times I have seen my

opponent place his objective deeper on my side than 8" from the center, in defensible terrain that helps me, without a covered approach or – yikes! – all three.

Take a deep breath, look carefully at the table and place that objective 8" from the center, in an open space with a covered approach route that will permit the force you are playing today to get within assault range at the end of your second turn. That spot is there – just take a moment to find it. But wait! Why do we need to assault? Can't I just blast the enemy off the objective as I approach and waltz onto it over the corpses of his troops? Not if they are veterans....

### VETERAN MEANS ASSAULT

In your nightmares, the enemy defending the objective is a platoon of 3 Pak40s with an observer for the 10.5cm platoon (sitting on the far objective) lurking in among the guns. A Marder platoon crouches in ambush. Driving at this platoon with your force and trying to shoot it away means getting within 16" and line of sight just to have the pleasure of needing 6's to hit. Producing one kill needing a 6 to hit with a firepower 3+ weapon (such as a 75mm or 76mm gun) requires 14 shots. That's the equivalent of 7 T34s stationary at 16" from three pak40s just to get one kill. Do not try this at home, campers... Trying it with MGs would take 54 shots. That's 11 Stuarts or M14/41s at 16" from 3

Pak40s. Sure, sure, it sounds theoretically possible. You found a route that allows 11 tanks to approach unseen then come into range on your turn and blast away with 54 MG dice just to get one kill and now available for return fire from the surviving Paks, the enemy arty and the ambush. All the while you are still NOT on the objective.

Artillery doesn't do it either. Your observer still needs a 6 just to range in and the good opponent you are facing has his pak40s disposed to only have one under a template at one time. A US 105 platoon has a 5.6% chance (rounded off) of killing one pak40 even given TOT. A staff will improve that if the mission is repeated, and any arty kill is a good kill. Obviously the arty in your force is supporting this attack and well it should. But you can't blow the enemy off the objective with it before he has all his reserves on. Ok, so your objective is well placed and you are ready to move 32" in two turns and assault the heck out of the troops guarding it on turn 3. Should be an easy win, right? Wrong...

## DEALING WITH AMBUSHES

That's right – AmbuSHES, plural. The HTL scenario is still the one place a guy playing the standard set of scenarios can face – really in competition WILL face - two ambushes. This article is not about the debate over the merits of the eight platoon force. Rather look at it this way – if you train yourself to deal with two ambushes, you are highly qualified to deal with just one. Let me sum up the basic ways ambushes are mitigated with the terms: Cover, Denial, Counter and Combined Arms. Cover means using

*“Rommel, you magnificent bastard, I read your book!”*

a covered approach to the objective. This means the part of your force doing the assaulting moves to the objective through concealing terrain and/or out of LOS. Pretty basic. Remember, you're the attacker – you choose where the near objective is and the route to it is more important than what terrain it is in. Sure, you want the objective in the open so he is only concealed while dug in and can't move back slightly out of LOS and so your tanks can help assault it without risking bog. But better to take those chances than to move on it in the open.

Denial does not mean wishing away the ambush altogether... lol Denial means moving troops in such a way as to take away the best ambush locations. Recon teams are ideally suited for this, but light tanks do well here also. Identify where the ambushes could go that most interfere with your plan and place your teams in such a way that he cannot choose those spots.

Countering an ambush – or two – is the act of predicting likely ambush locations and making him pay for choosing them. This means placing your tanks, AT guns and observers in such a way to bring immediate and destructive fire on his revealed ambush. Remember that the assault on the objective is not enough versus a good opponent. He will be counterattacking you at that point and the ambush troops – especially if mobile – form the best counterattack force as they are on table already and can be brought on in range of the objective – even on it. By placing part of your force in a position to attack a deployed ambush you are preparing to resist the counterattack. Countering also includes “baiting”. I will often leave a platoon in such a place as to be an “obvious” ambush target – accessible to fire on any likely

deployed ambush but also threatening troops on the objective if the ambush ignores them. Forcing your opponent to choose between two unpleasant things isn't just good tactics, it's fun, too!

For both Denial and Countering tactics, stop and take a moment and go to his side of the table and look at the places YOU would put the ambushes in order to hurt you the most. Good ambush locations are a finite number. Find them and reduce the number. It's also ok to stand on his side of the table and nod knowingly and mutter, “Rommel, you magnificent bastard, I read your book!” Your assault on the objective should make maximum use of combined arms. The optimal assault force is usually two infantry platoons along with one-two tank platoons backed up by artillery. That way, a revealed AT ambush can shoot the tanks, but does not endanger the infantry assault and can be counterattacked by your artillery. A revealed HMG ambush may shoot up some of your infantry, but does not stop the tank assault and is also vulnerable to your artillery.

One more thing about ambushes. Don't be afraid of them. You don't have the time to be afraid. Even one turn slowed down worrying about the effect of the ambushes on your force can be death. Remember: ambushes are REACTIVE. He is reacting to your moves. Keep him reacting and take advantage of it. If he has the luxury of putting down ambushes where he wants and when he wants and not where he desperately HAS to put them because of the viciousness of your assault, then you are in trouble. Ok, assault is set to go, ambushes denied or countered. Everything seems all wrapped up. Oh, wait. There are two objectives in this game....

## THE FAR OBJECTIVE

We have already noted the disadvantages to going after the far objective – it's in defensible terrain, is likely occupied by an artillery platoon with decent AT and is right where the enemy reinforcements enter. The biggest issue with going after the far objective, however, is diffusion. Diffusion of combat power. The more resources used to go after the far objective, the less available for the assault on the close one. This is not to say that there aren't very viable reasons to make a move on the far objective. For me, it often has to do with what platoons I have available. In a predominantly or all infantry force, there isn't anything fast enough to make a far objective move credible. But a nice scout car platoon makes the perfect force to slink around the edges of the battlefield toward the rear. First, it is fast enough to be able to actually threaten the deep objective before the enemy has so many reinforcements on to make it silly to be back there. Also, the Recce nature of the scout car platoon both allows it to deny ambush locations along the way and to scoot out of trouble if the enemy seriously goes after them. Light tanks also work well in this role. However, the most important consideration for any move I make on the far objective is what enemy combat power I think I can draw away from the main action by making such a move. If the far objective is guarded by eight 25pdrs or 105s, sending a Sdkfz 231 or Humber platoon back there is not a credible threat to the enemy and will be ignored by the ambushes and the forces at the near objective. Motorcycle or jeep-borne infantry often make a good force to push down the secondary approach and

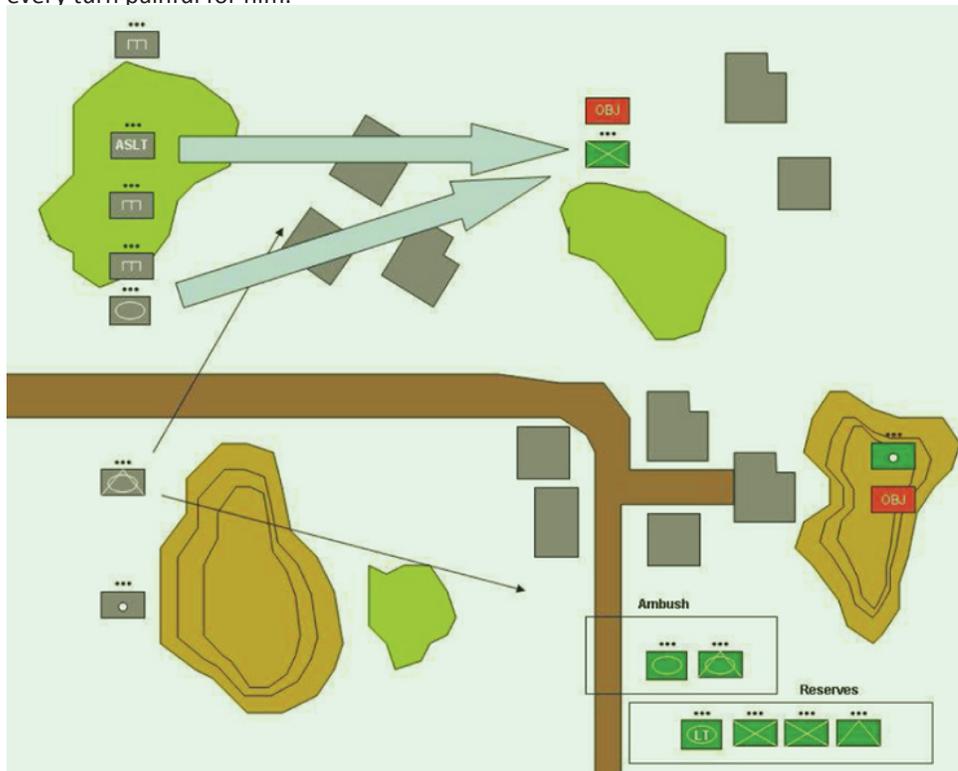
weave through the terrain to make those mortars back there call for help from some other enemy platoon. Bottom line – don't ignore it, but don't let it diffuse your attack on the main prize. Ok, so we have discussed both objectives and their role in victory. What's left?

## THE MANLY WAY TO WIN

While it is often possible to shock a newer or less skilled player with a thunderous turn 2 or 3 assault on the near objective, cagier opponents will not go down so easy. Yes, you want to try and win by taking the near objective and holding it through the start of your turn. But the more likely result is to force the enemy to fight on your terms until you have caused him to fail a company morale test. The single most important characteristic of effective tactics is the initiative. If the enemy is reacting to you, you have it. If you are responding to his moves, you have lost it. A fierce assault on the close objective forces the enemy to respond to what you are doing – he cannot just let you take it and sit there, he has to \*do\* something about it. He has to deploy his ambushes to make your

### *The clock is running...*

capture of the objective risky and he has to move those ambushes and his reinforcements to the near objective to support the platoon or platoons guarding it or take it back from you. Use this information to force his platoons into vulnerable positions and then kill them. The more aggressive you are about taking that objective, the more he has to feed platoons into the fight without the time to set up an effective, coordinated counterattack. Think "hurry up offense" in American football. Know what you are about, come up to the line and keep hammering him with plays before the defense can set and stabilize. The clock is running, if time runs out and you don't have the objective and he has not failed a company morale test – you lose. Make every step of every turn painful for him.



## AN EXAMPLE

One of the objections I have to some tactics discussions is that they include how you are deploying and how you are acting in some sort of standard set without making any basic assumptions about or depicting the enemy's deployment and counter-actions. To fix this, I am offering one out of a nearly infinite set of possible combinations. I chose the attacking force from one of those I played this year at a tournament. I chose the enemy force from among those that poses me the most problems. This is certainly no be all – end all of tactics examples. Nor does it contain all the possibilities one may face attacking in an HTL. But it does give a start point for specific discussion of the key issues attacking in an HTL creates.

### THE ATTACKER - GERMAN MIDWAR PIONEERS

- Pioneer HQ
- 3xPioneer Platoons
- 1xAssault troop with Wolf-Schmidt
- 1xMarder II platoon
- 1xBrummbaer platoon
- 1xNebelwerfer Platoon

### THE DEFENDER - U.S. MIDWAR RIFLE

- Rifle HQ
- 3xrRifle Platoons
- 1x57mm Platoon
- 1xM10 Platoon
- 1xM5 Platoon
- 1xM4 Platoon
- 1x105 Platoon

The terrain shown (see map on following page) is taken from the Nov 9 Strelkovy tactics article from the FoW website, figuring if it was considered good enough for publication in that venue, its good enough for my example.

The terrain is fairly symmetrical but the defender chooses to defend the right half because the woods between the towns would have provided too good an approach to an attacker coming from the right. He places his objective in an excellent spot on the far hill. I place the near objective on the top half of the board 8" from the center in open terrain where guns defending the far objective cannot influence the fight at the near one with direct fire.

The defender deploys with an infantry platoon on the close objective and the 105s with the far objective. The M4s and M10s are in ambush. Back in the day (v1), one might have found the 57mm platoon on the objective or in the woods near it.

Yet now with no HE and not being able to kill a Brummbaer from the front, it is no threat to its likely assaulters. Sure, it can kill a marder, but the marders are not assaulting. This shows that you HAVE to take into account what the enemy will likely \*do\* with his forces, not just simply what he has. Yes, it's true the M10s have a pseudo-ambush of their own. However, just because you \*can\* use a special rule does not mean you \*must\*. By keeping them in ambush, I don't know where they are and the ambush rules are less restrictive than the tank destroyer rules and do not expose the carbine teams to an early kill. The defender's infantry is exposed, true. But they are concealed and gtg and dug in. Being in the woods means having to counterattack to retake the objective from me. Being on the objective forces me to assault and undergo defensive fire and takes more time.

My deployment has the infantry and brummbaers ready to

move as quickly as possible using the town for cover and assaulting the objective on turn three. The rockets are prepared to engage his artillery or ambushers. I am not concerned about using the artillery to pin enemy infantry in this case as all my infantry platoons are equipped with flamethrowers and the assault troop is armed with SMGs. The marders are my ambush counter. I do not have the right type of troops for a credible move on the far objective, so he can have it.

This example fight could be done any number of other ways and I am not offering this as some sort of "solution". I am showing it to illustrate the point that one must take into account the enemy's likely disposition and moves in any discussion of tactics and the key elements in deciding what to do with your force when attacking in an HTL and why. I hope this helps.

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