Guerrilla Warfare in The Operational Art of War

Mark Dabbs - February 23, 2004

In a number of scenarios designed for The Operational Art of War, players may find themselves in command of partisan forces. Drang Noch Osten, Decision in the North, Braunschweig and Goetterdammerung are some of these scenarios — major operations involving very large forces and an even greater amount of ground. It can be easy to overlook a simple partisan unit in such large engagements. They are brigade size or smaller, have low proficiencies, and are armed with light weapons. Comprised essentially of irregulars, light rifle squads, mounted squads, maybe a smattering of higher calibre infantry, their heaviest weapons are machineguns, light anti-tank weapons, mortars and perhaps some light artillery. Historically, we know partisans caused the Axis forces (primarily) all kinds of headaches — disruptions of supply, blown bridges, broken rail lines, and a general attrition of logistical capabilities.

Guerrilla units have the unique capability of moving through and out of enemy zones of control without suffering disengagement penalties beyond cost of movement. On the other hand, they only convert hex ownership of the hexes surrounding them at the end of their turn. They do not convert ownership of hexes they move through. This can be overcome, moving the guerrilla unit one hex, selecting a different unit, then switching back to the guerrilla again moving it, and repeating.¹ Some may consider this manipulation of the game system, but considered in context should be permitted. The greatest handicap of guerrilla units in TOAW is the relative ease of the enemy in finding them.² This can only be offset with a low theatre recon setting, but even then with boundaries visible, the enemy will have a really good idea of where the guerrillas are likely to be found. In this regard, their "false hex ownership conversions" can be considered part and parcel with an "uncertainty" that patrols going through the area may encounter resistance (higher MP costs). This might be reserved for partisans under the control of Player 2 — if they survive long enough to be moved, they should be permitted use of this trick, but probably should not be used in this manner by Player 1 at least until the turn after they appear. Historically, we could consider that if the Axis knew where the partisans were hiding...there would be no more partisans.

To get maximum use out of partisans, it is appropriate to consider what they can do:

1. Cut rail lines.
2. Blow bridges.
3. Force aircraft out of un-garrisoned airfields.
4. Increase cost of movement for the enemy in the hexes they convert.
5. Potentially cut off supply to enemy forces not tending to rear area security.
6. Impede the retreat of enemy units from the front.
7. Assist in the exploitation of units achieving a breakthrough.
8. Force a response from all but the most careless enemies.
9. Erode the supply and readiness of all units forced to respond to them.
10. Inflict casualties upon units forced to fight them.
11. Psychologically affect the enemy through unpredictable appearances and actions.

Each scenario is different, and each individual game may develop differently, so there is no single optimal use for guerrillas. Instead, it is necessary to evaluate the total picture. In some cases, you

¹ This exploit still works in TOAW III 3.4
² Not anymore. Since TOAW III 3.2 Guerilla units are unvisible to the enemy unless they move
may not wish to blow bridges in the hopes of eventually being able to use them. In other cases, the masses of rail lines coupled with inherent rail repair and engineers may be so pervasive that cutting rail lines, though always useful, may not be the best option. Best use considers the likely response from the enemy:

A) Experienced players hate partisans and deal with them often as brutally as they were historically treated — frequently by sending six units of any shape or size to completely surround and destroy them. They don’t want them to retreat from an attack and potentially cut another segment of rail. They don’t want to risk a failed proficiency check and let the guerrillas slip forces out of the noose. If you know that this will be the response of your opponent, have your partisans seek out the best defensive terrain possible requiring the highest MP’s to reach and dig them in as deep as you can. It is best to avoid camping next to super rivers and major escarpments as this reduces the number of units your opponent needs to guarantee containment. If he doesn’t follow you — they still remain in supply, will get replacements, and can later go out and generate havoc. If he does follow you — you’ve forced six units to engage in expensive movement decreasing their supply and readiness, and inflicted more casualties than would have been generated through offensive action.

B) If you know your opponent has little or no rear area security – wreak havoc, split units into three and send them out as far as they can move, blowing bridges, securing airfields, cutting rail lines as they go. If his rear area security consists of HQ’s and engineers repairing bridges as they go – attacking these units is among the few worthwhile direct offensive actions of which partisans are good at. They can frequently generate automatic retreats on enemy HQs, completely evaporating them often enough to make HQ’s the primary target of opportunity, followed by Rail Engineers. I don’t know for certain, but I’ve employed guerrillas frequently enough against both HQ’s and non-armored engineers to believe they have an inherent bonus against these types of units. Bear in mind that by destroying an enemy HQ, you reduce the proficiency of ALL of the units under its command as well as reduce the potential supply bonus HQ’s provide to their adjacent units. In taking out engineers, it stands as obvious that you are not only eroding his "rear area security" but also further reducing his capacity to fix the damage your partisans are causing.

C) The breaking down of partisans into threes needs to be seriously considered relative to A and B. Breaking them down substantially diminishes their ability to withstand a right click by an enemy unit. There are cases in which you know that the partisans will be dead "regardless" of what they do, but their martyrdom can potentially decide the development of a large portion of an entire front. They may be used to assist an offensive by impeding reinforcements moving to the front, as well as slowing enemy units retreating from the front. Converting ownership of hexes along major road routes is an important component to both of these actions. Always end their turn in the most obnoxious terrain possible — in swamps, hills, mountains, and forested areas located adjacent to (but not on) a road. Make the enemy pay a cost in MP’s, supply and readiness.

Partisan activity is always best directed to the long-term and very gradual erosion of enemy logistics. The threat of partisan activity is dramatically greater than the partisan’s actual combat ability. This is especially the case when the First Player is in command of the partisans, as in GIO. Frequently, when they are in the command of the Second Player, they are already eliminated, or effectively contained before they have an opportunity to do anything. Leastwise, when you have them — look at the map, consider your opponent’s usual response (or lack thereof) and consider what they can do that would most hurt your opponent within one turn. Odds are very high that they will not last a second turn.
Figure 1
(From Braunschweig 7.1 by Daniel McBride)
A battalion-sized partisan unit after it's taken a beating from a Flak and a Brandenburg battalion. This particular partisan has survived several rounds — note the high proficiency.

Figure 2
Partisan from Figure 1, showing disposition at beginning of turn. To its right is a light screening force to the far NW of Grozny trying to hold the northern flank of an encirclement of half of Army Group A, and the left flank of a salient threatening to engulf the other half.

Figure 3
Same partisan, moving to the NW revealing its Brandenberg assailants- an attempt to put some friction on the road.
Two battalion-sized partisans, with similar composition to that shown in Figure 1. This shows their starting positions at the beginning of Turn 6. Both managed to hold their ground, impeding an escape across the Berezina and a breakout from Mogilev and enabling full encirclement and near destruction of both groups by the end of T6.

This partisan wasn’t so lucky — beneath the PanzerGrenadier Regiment are three MP Battalions. It will be dead soon.

A lucky partisan has linked up with its friends. Depending upon how the front develops, it may assist the offensive by stepping into a gap to facilitate an armored breakthrough; or be broken down into thirds and engage in converting ownership of high MP cost hexes.
Another game of GIO — showing beginning of turn. Multiplying like rabbits in Yugoslavia, they take up positions in good defensive terrain (mountains and forested hills), after cutting a rail line and blowing a bridge.

Statistics and composition of the division-sized partisans like those shown in Figure 7. Good proficiency, supply and readiness — this one is in hiding, growing in strength each turn for some reasonable combat clout.
In an other game of GIO, see the price the HQ in the upper left corner paid for trying to contain the partisan better forces could get to the scene? Partisans wreak havoc on HQ’s — this one managed to get overrun and involuntarily broken into thirds...and eliminated. But again, requiring six units to contain it.