



Vorwärts Kroatischer!

369th (Reinforced) Croatian Infantry Regiment at the Red October Factory, Stalingrad September 1942- January 1943

Introduction

History is peppered with references to martial groups who have repeatedly demonstrated their prowess as soldiers. Curiously, such mentions are in the main not from a perspective of inspired leadership, spectacular conquest or grand strategic thinking, in fact often these warrior peoples are known for their tragic failures at that level. Their fame or notoriety is frequently built around the cult of the individual. The Heroic Gaul, the Barbaric Hun, the coldly Professional Switzer, the Gallant Highlander, the Tragic Irish Soldier of Fortune or the Fearless Samurai.

Although some of these groups have had in historical terms, the equivalent of Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame, others have endured far longer and had more comebacks than the Krankies. One such, whose name crops up throughout the history of Europe are the Croats. Whether as fierce medieval irregulars fighting the Turk or as the 'wild' horsemen associated with armies of the 'Age of Reason', their flamboyant style and unfamiliar (to western European) ways have fascinated and frightened down through the centuries. Unfortunately the Croats have also been late 20th century news but history is always raw when it's happening. After the fact and as memories fade, the fascination of future generations begins. One fact is irrefutable; the Croats are no strangers to war. And so to this article which offers a glimpse not of rear echelon or inter-ethnic violence but of an entire regiment's birth and untimely death in the space of 20 months during one of history's definitive battles.

I wanted to build a scenario around a rather unique and perhaps (although I may be wrong) little known aspect of the fighting at Stalingrad. Writers have more than exhausted all available superlative adjectives whilst attempting to convey the magnitude of the horror, sacrifice and consequences of what is arguably the turning point of 20th century history. I won't attempt to add to that and will restrict the historical input to a truncated form of this particular story.

The History bit

Stalingrad from the Fascist perspective is largely portrayed as an all German affair. This is in itself rather inaccurate as many of the Divisions which fought there were Austrian. Within the 100th Jaeger Division, an Austrian formation, a large regiment of Croatian Volunteers served and died in the ruins of that city.

Their story began with Germany's invasion of Yugoslavia on 6th April 1941. Four days later, politicians in the region of Croatia (Hrvatska) declared an independent State. On the 17th, the new state declared war on Britain and became a recognised member of the Axis. On the 18th, Yugoslavia was finished.

The Croatian leadership strongly approved of Hitler's planned invasion of the Soviet Union and so pledged military assistance. When on July 2nd the authorities called for 'volunteers' the response was spectacular. They wanted around 4,000 men to form a regiment. By mid July they had over 9,000 volunteers which permitted a very high calibre intake. The regiment was a Wehrmacht unit dressed and equipped like German soldiers. Its title was **Verstärken Kroatischen Infanterie Regiment 369** (369th Reinforced Croatian Infantry Regiment). Its organisation followed that of an ordinary German Regiment with a few notable exceptions. Each of the three battalions had an attached artillery battery. I also understand that each battalion had its own anti tank company and supply company. My information is second hand and I would refer those interested to the excellent www.feldgrau.com site which goes into detail on aspects of unit organisation and history.

Suffice it to say that from its assignment to the 100th Jaeger Division on October 9th 1941 until August of 1942 the Regiment fought in numerous and bloody battles and was moving steadily eastward. It was withdrawn from the line during late August for rest and refit. On September 26th it received new orders and after a 14 hour forced march, arrived in Stalingrad. The first battalion entered the line on the very same day with the rest of the regiment joining it the next morning. By the 13th of October they were down to less than 1,000 men from an original strength of over 3,000 and operating as a reinforce battalion. Their artillery elements were by this time distributed amongst various surrounding German regiments. By November 23rd there were 191 men remaining in the front line and these were attached to the 212th German Grenadier Regiment. On January 23rd 1943, 18 wounded Croatians were the last to be flown out. The remaining handful fought till the last and it is not clear whether any returned home after the war was over.

They are mentioned briefly on a couple of occasions in Anthony Beevor's book about Stalingrad. The unit was highly rated by the German's both at management level and in the field by their infantry counterparts. Their reputation appears to be in a different league from other 'Allied' contingents. The key point to make is that the original 369 Regiment was a frontline combat unit and not an anti-partizan, rear echelon or semi political formation. Cadres evacuated from Stalingrad as wounded between their arrival in late September 1942 and January 1943 were used as a 'core' for subsequent recruitments but never again did the Croatians march into Soviet Russia.

The Scenario - The Marshalling Yards at Red October, 28th September 1942

This scenario is a composite. It is a credible situation based on the early experiences of the 369th during their ordeal at Stalingrad. It sees them freshly arrived and on the offensive in the rail yards around the Red October factory. They have artillery, air and armour support as at this date the Germans were ascendant. According to contemporary accounts the Croatians were not averse to engaging in close quarter combat and were much admired by their German counterparts for this. This scenario offers plenty of opportunity for infantry close assaults. They are attacking an area which was to account for thousands of casualties during September 1942-January 1943. Their opponents are half starved, low on ammunition but very high in morale.

The Croatian objective is to pass the railway embankment in strength by the end of the game. They should leave no Soviet positions intact west of the embankment. They should minimise (if possible) their own casualties to less than 40%. A greater casualty total will result in the level of victory being reduced to marginal. Any other result will be considered a Soviet victory. The Volga is only a few hundred metres east of the embankment (off map).

Notes on the Table and Terrain

The scenario is designed to be played in 20mm or 28mm. Using the modified GHQ MicroArmour rules as we do; no distinction is made between these two scales in terms of ranges or movement. The big difference on a table this size is of course that using 28mm figures and vehicles, the feeling will be much more claustrophobic for the German player. 20mm will perhaps give an illusion of manoeuvre room!

The German attack is coming from the west on a 'long' table edge. All of the hollow oblongs on the map represent semi intact or ruined buildings. The solid black oblongs represent buildings of strategic importance to the Soviets in this scenario. All buildings are classed as 'Medium' cover (under GHQ rules – Medium Buildings). These offer significant protection to both infantry and equipment. Area of base colour on the map are treated as 'Light Cover' or under GHQ MicroArmour – Light Buildings. The presumption here is that after weeks of bombing and fighting, even open streets would offer enough debris for some cover. The only semi open area on the map is the Marshalling Yards themselves. These can either be represented as a flat open space or if you have any, lay down some lengths of railway track parallel to the embankment. Occasional light cover can be provided by wrecked or overturned railway wagons and debris. This should not be over done. Visibility in all built up areas is 6 inches (300 metres). In the Marshalling Yards it is line of sight visibility with penetration depth of 6 inches into built up areas. Units within built up areas must be within 6 inches of the Marshalling Yards to see into them.

The Railway embankment should be a raised area which offers cover to defenders behind it, blocks line of sight and counts as a linear obstacle to tracked vehicles and infantry. It is impassable to wheeled vehicles.

In summary the table should be heavily urbanised with the exception of the Marshalling Yards area.

Deployment

The Soviet player has the option to deploy his forces anywhere up to the blue broken line on the map. He must however occupy both of the Red October Buildings and the Freight Station with at least a platoon of some description. A 'Battalion' (as detailed in the OoB) must remain on or behind the Railway Embankment as a permanent 'Last Ditch'. The Soviet player is also allowed two additional 'strong-points'. These bunkers or pillboxes will count as 'Medium Improved' positions and can accommodate a platoon of any description. They are best deployed either in the yards or streets as they would offer no additional cover if placed within Medium Buildings areas. The Soviet Player should mark all dispositions on a map before the game begins including the positions of his strong-points. These are only placed on the table once the German Player has deployed.

The German Player can deploy his infantry battalions and Sturm Gruppe anywhere behind the red broken line on the map. The armour will appear either at Point A or B (on a 50% die roll). As it is a reinforcement, roll 1 x D6 before the game to determine its arrival turn.

Targeting

Use of an Umpire would allow concealed movement and placement of units as and when visible. If you are not using an Umpire then the following restrictions should apply to targeting. Artillery cannot deliberately target what they cannot see from an FOO position. Infantry which haven't fired before should be treated as a camouflaged. Under the GHQ rules this makes it more difficult to pass a 'Cohesion Test' to fire at them. Whatever rules you use, ensure that concealed and unengaged platoons have this advantage.

German Order of Battle

100. Jaeger Division, 4th Arme (elements)

369th (Reinforced) Croatian Infantry Regiment

1 x Regimental HQ, 1 x Recon Infantry Platoon

1st Battalion 369th (Reinforced) Croatian Infantry Regiment

1 x HQ platoon

3 Companies each of 3 x Rifle platoons and 1 Support platoon

Heavy Company of 1 x support platoon & 1 x 81mm mortar platoon

1 x 75mm IG platoon, 1 x 150mm sIG platoon

2nd Battalion 369th (Reinforced) Croatian Infantry Regiment

1 x HQ platoon

3 Companies each of 3 x Rifle platoons and 1 Support platoon

Heavy Company of 1 x support platoon & 1 x 81mm mortar platoon

1 x 75mm IG platoon, 1 x 150mm sIG platoon

16th Panzer Division (elements attached to 100 JD)

3 x PzIII (Long 50mm) platoons (including HQ)

Sturm Gruppe (composite)

1 x StuG (Short 75mm) platoon

1 x StuG (Long 75mm) platoon

4 x Combat Engineer platoons (including HQ)

Divisional Artillery (elements)

3 x 105mm Howitzer Batteries (off table)

*Any platoon above can be nominated as an FOO for off table artillery or indirect fire from the 369th's mortars and 150mm sIG. Alternatively use a separate FOO platoon.

Luftwaffe Support

3 x Ju87 Dive Bomber strikes

Soviet Order of Battle

Elements of 62nd Army (all independent unit designations lost due to amalgamation)

1 GHQ

4 under strength battalions each of 1x HQ platoon 3 x Rifle platoons, 1 support/HMG platoon

3 x Factory Militia platoons

2 x SMG platoons

3 x 45mm AT guns platoons

1 x 82mm mortar

1 x 120mm mortar

1 x 76.2mm AT/Field gun

2 x T34/76 platoons

2 x BM13 Katyusha Batteries (off table)

1 x 152mm Howitzer Battery (off table)

*Any platoon above can be nominated as an FOO for off table artillery or indirect fire from the mortars and 76.2mm field gun. Alternatively use a separate FOO platoon.

Cohesion / Morale Rating

In a situation like this one the morale rating mechanisms of wargames rules are questionable. It could be argued that Soviet morale at Stalingrad is *the* benchmark on which to measure all others. The men of the 62nd Army were starving, sometimes weaponless and under relentless and merciless attack from perhaps the most professional modern army whose self belief was to this point, unshakeable. I therefore suggest that the Soviets are classed as Elite and the German Regular if your rules use such classification. GHQ rules use a 'Cohesion number' principle which is in itself a measure of ability to respond to orders. As a differentiator and to make the distinction between collective ability and individual motivation I suggest the following.

Overall Cohesion used to determine initiative should be set at 16 for the Germans and 14 for the Russians. Individual platoon cohesion for passing morale and fire tests should be set at 15 for the Germans and 16 for the Russians. The result should be better overall coordination for the Germans but greater ability to 'hang on' in desperate straits for the Russians. No one will ever be able to realistically simulate the emotion of such an event in a game.

Special Rules

The German Player has the opportunity to call in two air strikes during the game. These cannot arrive in the same turn as each other. The procedure is simple. At the beginning of the turn in which he wishes the Stukas to appear he declares. He then needs to roll a 5 or 6 on a d6 to get the strike to arrive. If he fails, he tries again next turn on a 4, 5 or 6 if he fails again the 'strike' has been recalled. When the planes arrive they do so from the German table edge and move at the speed specified in your chosen rule set. All mechanics for bombing should be as per your rules. Planes can be over the table for no more than two moves.

Conclusion

This is a very challenging game for both players and is a microcosm of similar struggles over a front of nearly 40 kilometres. It is still one of the most fascinating and terrible episodes of modern times.

References

Stalingrad, Anthony Beevor (Penguin 1999)

www.feldgrau.com

GHQ MicroArmour The Rules, John Fernandez Jr.