

Slouch Hats & Eggshells: After Action Report

I hope everyone enjoys this. It was a brief game but very instructive. – Vance von Borries

My gaming friend here, Richard, recently played Slouch Hats with me. It quickly did not go well for him but there are some lessons to be learned with this particular play of the game. I hope you will agree with the conclusions at the end.

I am playing the Allies and get to do most of the attacking. Richard plays the Axis (here, the Vichy French) and waits to pounce on my mistakes. Yes, I made one big one, as you will see below.

The first turn is the 1 June 1941 turn. Each turn in this game is about 10 days long and is divided into two operations, a rather obvious First Operation and then the Second Operation. These are preceded by a Strategic Segment and then wrapped up at the end with a Recovery Segment. Basically, each Operation is a move-fight sequence for both sides, so each side gets two move-fights per turn. Since the Historical scenario is six turns long, the Allies get a maximum of twelve move-fights in which to win the game. Fortunately, this is the right amount of game time and even the right amount of player time to complete a game in about one afternoon. Because this game ties in with my other game, Rommel's War, (RW), the Axis always get the first move during each operation. This means we skip the Axis First Operation of the 1 June 1941 turn because it is the Allies who begin the war in this part of the world.

We do not, however, skip the first Strategic Segment. For RW we would normally determine weather at the top of this segment but because this campaign took place entirely during the summer we skip this phase for the whole game. Next, players draw Special Events. These represent those weird events that might, or might not, take place in a campaign of this nature. The Allied player draws four event markers and the Axis player draws three. All are drawn at random from the same cup, so you know that when you have Event A, your opponent does not have Event A. And you plan your strategies accordingly.

I drew events E (Early Iraq conclusion), L (radio intercepts), M (Submarines), and N (Extra Supply). All this is useful. Richard drew events B (Active Druze), K (Saboteurs), and P (German Air Force). These are all kept hidden from view by the other player. During the Reinforcements phase Richard releases one of his eight garrison units: the Aleppo garrison unit. After he does that I play my Event L, because this is my first opportunity to play it. This event allows me to read all the units in Richard's hand. You gotta love those code breakers. Because I played Event L Richard now immediately plays his Event B to activate the Druze because he now figures he can no longer surprise me with a sudden activation and threat to my rear area. Also, he plays Event P, a bit prematurely, but again, he can't surprise me and just plain wants to get an air transport service open with Greece. Markers L and P then go back into the cup, where they could be drawn again by either side. Marker B does not because there is one activation of the Druze.

Allied Ops Segment. With the Druze active my strategy is set. I will pounce on the Druze and try to destroy them. I move all my units and then declare all combats. I declare three. Two are against Vichy units in the Jabel ed Druze area and the third is on the coast against a light cavalry unit. There is no reserve movement in this game and no air units are available just yet, so combat odds are not going to change for those reasons. In the coastal action I attempt to have my naval unit join the action but it fails to arrive; failing to arrive on a roll of 6 and sure enough, I rolled a 6. The attack goes in anyway and at 6-1 odds. I have three points of combat supplied regulars that double in strength to 6, since they are attacking a "light" unit.

The defender is surrounded but that does not figure in this combat since he is a light unit. Here, the chances of success still favor the Allies and I roll a 4. The defender dies and I capture Tyre.

Up in the Jabel ed Druze my first battle is against the Vichy-occupied town Salkhad where Vichy also has a one-point Supply Dump. Against the defenders there I pit the Indian Brigade with some support for 5-1 odds after adjusting for regulars and light units on both sides. Combat die roll is a 1, wow! Defenders all die and go to the Cadre Box. One of my units now advances after combat and now tries to capture the Dump. He gets it! Now on to the third, and final declared combat. The Slouch hats (with support) are shooting against Vichy-held Soueida with combat odds of 4-1 after the usual adjusting for mixed regulars and light units in the same combat. Also, the Vichy can no longer trace defense combat supply and so suffer an odds column shift against them (hence the 4-1). Die roll is a 2, resulting in defense loses 2 steps. Defense had only 2 steps and both go to the Cadre Box. These were two very good results for the Allies, compounded with the capture of scarce supplies. Since there is essentially nothing to do during the Recovery Segment, the full First Operation of I June is concluded.

Axis Second Operation -- The Axis player gets to do this even though he did not receive a First Operation. Richard tells me he is in somewhat of a quandary on how to defend since neither of us has played this type of opening in previous games. And add to that that I have been lucky in my opening battles. Generally, he chooses to regroup his mobile units around Damascus and not attack. He defends along the Litani River, he defends Mt. Hermon, and he screens the open ground south and southeast of Damascus. The former Aleppo garrison uses railroad movement to move to the south end of the railroad line at Rayak.

Allied Second Operation – Having knocked out the threat to my rear it is time to double back to push directly at Damascus. I do not have sufficient strength in the west to attack across the Litani or attack Mt. Hermon but my units are able to surround and attack the Moroccan battalion that forms part of the Vichy eastern defensive screen. This battle is at maximum odds and Allied success is guaranteed. The Moroccans go to the Eliminated Box. I also make an unsupplied attack against a Vichy light unit that is also part of the screen. Odds are 5-1 and I roll a 2; the Vichy light unit is destroyed. In both cases Allied units occupy the defender hex. During the Recover phase the only activity is a slight victory point adjustment. The Vichy get 1 point for not yet being forced to Surrender and the Allies get 1 point for the capture of Soueida.

The II June Turn – Both sides now draw Special Events. This time, and for the rest of the game, players draw only one event apiece. I did not draw Event L again and so cannot read his hand, and likewise he did not draw Spies to be able to read mine. I get reinforcements and Richard gets to release one more garrison. He chooses one unit of the two units in the Tripoli garrison (yes, Lebanon has a “Tripoli” and it is a port as well!).

Axis First Operation – Now I see what Richard was up to when he massed his mobile forces around Damascus. I failed to adequately guard my center and that is where he is now focusing an attack. He hopes to blow away the Free French brigade defending there (near Kuneitra, the site of the historical Vichy counter-attack) and push on in an exploitation move to capture the large British Dump sitting just inside Palestine. Somehow, he managed to find enough troops to mass a 12-2 (6-1 odds) battle, both sides are combat supplied) and then rolls a 4. This is just enough to knock out both Australian steps and we see a big hole open up. He exploits with his two armor units and an armored car unit. He thereby cuts off two Allied units and succeeds in capturing the Supply Dump, in its entirety, and then promptly destroys the supplies (to make sure I can't recapture them) at the end of his operation.

Allied First Operation – As might be expected, Allied morale just about tanked. Let's first cover the one bright spot. I play Event E to get Habforce onto the map a full turn early. Hab storms out of Iraq and goes up the road towards Deir ez Zor to attack a French detachment in front of that VP location. It makes an unsupplied attack at a net 5-1 odds. Roll is a 4 which puts that unit into the Cadre Box (no Allied loss).

The British 6th Division comes to the rescue in Palestine arriving as a reinforcement to attack the French tanks that had captured the Supply Dump. The French are surrounded and can't trace combat supply at the instant of combat (the British do, in fact, make a supplied attack) and with combat odds netting at 6-1 they are sent to the Cadre Box.

The force that had come out of the Jabel ed Druze and gone up the road towards Damascus now spreads out to cover their western flank and to belly-up to the Vichy French covering their attack. One group of my units now attacks the Vichy-held hill position near Damascus. They are combat supplied and odds are 8-1. The Vichy there go to the Eliminated Box. The other Allied movement proved decisive. A single light Allied unit positions itself adjacent to Damascus and one Australian brigade (they are infiltration-capable) slipped onto Mt. Hermon (which had been abandoned by Richard so he could get his high odds attack). Neither of us had quite recognized it at the time but that infiltration was decisive. It effectively cut off the whole to the Vichy offensive force. They could not move and few could attack out and then at potentially ruinous odds.

During the Recovery Segment there is no engineering and I convert my 1-point Dump in Middle East Holding Box into a 1-point MSU.

Richard concedes the game. As already pointed out, practically his entire maneuver force is locked up in a pocket south of Damascus leaving little to oppose my roving Habforce and the force that now threatens to take Damascus at 6-1 odds in my next operation. Once I take Damascus I will score VPs for it each turn and be able to accumulate enough to guarantee a French Surrender by the end of the game.

The lessons here cut both ways. I needed to watch my center, in particular my supplies, and not overly commit to my flanks. I cannot afford to be over-confident. A Vichy counterattack could be devastating. Richard said he would still make that attack but it was the lure of the Supply Dump that drew him on, fatally as it turned out. If he had watched his flanks just a bit better, he could have pulled out of that cordon to cover Damascus. In other game play we had witnessed how the Vichy French could pin a British attack in the center, or isolate a British attack along the coast. The Vichy French also have a way to practically lock the fields in front of Damascus. But these plans do not always work and can be broken by attrition and in this game the early arrival of Habforce might have provided an earlier tipping point. Regardless of its brevity, we both enjoyed the game and discovered that it still teaches new lessons even after all that playtesting.