Showing how 'contour boards' can be used to indicate hill levels.
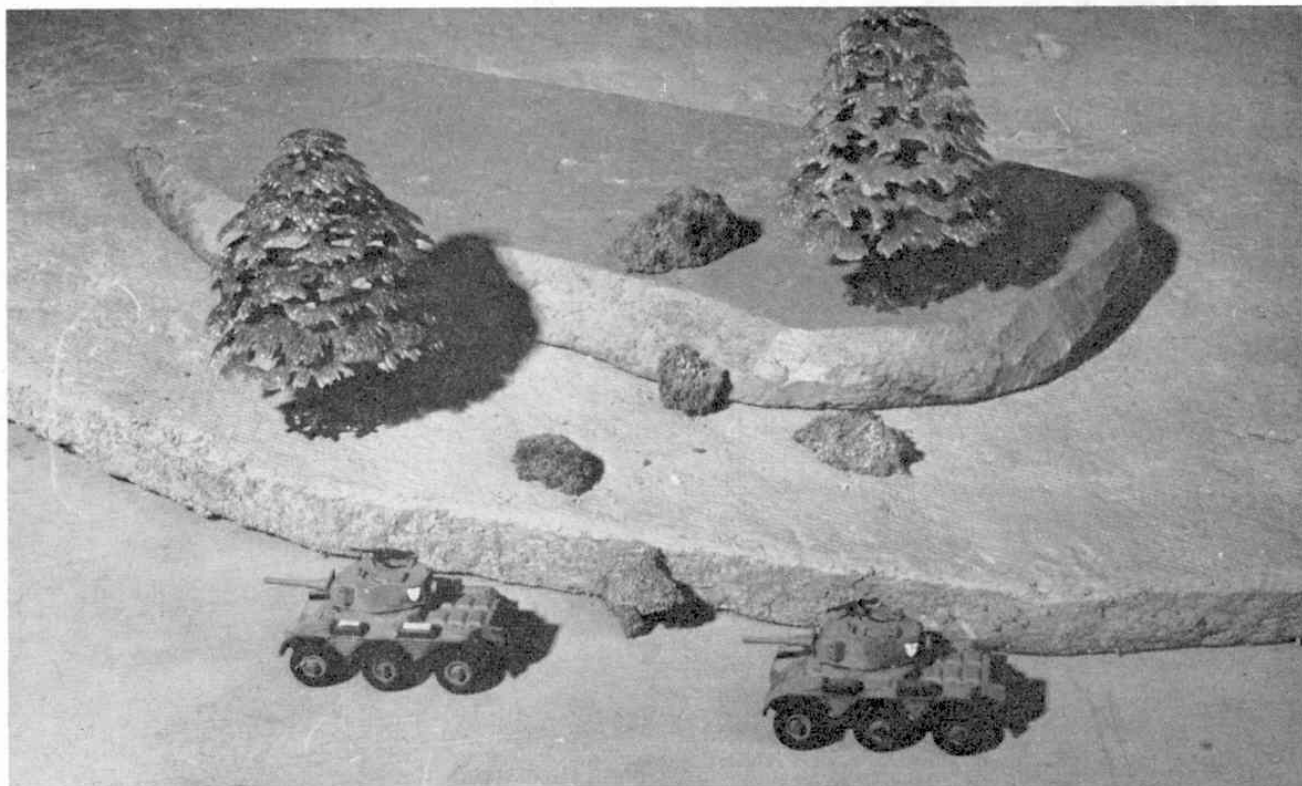
# BATTLE by Charles Grant

## Part XXVII

## The effect of Terrain

UP TO THIS POINT we have not considered the effect that different types of terrain have on movement—and consequently on tactics—other than to note the primary rule which laid down the different moves for vehicles on roads and across country. It was obvious, naturally, that movement on metalled roads was much easier than it was through scrubland, across ploughed field, through marshy ground or what have you. Now we shall have to extend our horizon somewhat by considering other sets of circumstances in which varying types of ground or terrain features will have an effect on the movement of troops and their

vehicles, for it is apparent that both the people fortunate enough to be carried about in half-trucks, trucks and so on will be just as involved as those who have to be content with getting about on 'shanks's pony'.

What we shall do, then, is to take certain prominent terrain features—the principal ones which influence tactics—and consider them from two points of view, first, the most convenient way to reproduce them on the wargame table, and second, just how rules will have to be created to cope with their presence thereon. These features are not terribly numerous and in fact we can reduce their number to but three, although I

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realise that they can be added to in many ways by the player who would like more subtle differences in his terrain. Those dealt with, however, should be sufficient to cope with most occasions when we have to reproduce some specific area of map on the table. The three are as follows: (1) hills, or any sort of rising ground; (2) woods, and (3) rivers. Here it should be stressed that what is being looked at is something pretty definite and substantial and which will have an appreciable effect on troop movement. For example, when we think of a ' hill ', we don't mean a gentle sort of rise from ground level, but something of sufficient gradient to cause some slowing down of the speed of the troops or vehicles climbing it. With this in mind we can continue with the first part of our discussion, to wit, just how it is proposed that we create the necessary pieces of equipment for our wargame, and how far we are going to go to achieve a pictorial or dioramic setup, if you like.

Let us then have a look at the question of hills, then, and before anything else is said, I have to point out that my own approach—and that is what I'm writing about—is a purely functional one. There comes a point, in relation to the realism of one's scenery, where the wargamer has to make a decision, an important one, but one which can be decided only by personal taste and inclination. This is whether to adhere to a ' functional ' type of approach—mine, in actual fact —or to ' have a go ' at a more decorative and pictorial sort of thing, something I can liken to the model railway background idea, where great efforts are made to build up a completely realistic stretch of scenery, with every detail of landscape minutely simulated. Now, I have no option but to agree that it is extremely satisfactory to wargame over terrain which has been made with this ' dioramic ' idea in mind, with tree-clad hills, waterfalls and rivers, tiny houses, all created with painstaking thoroughness so that the finished article would suffice for any film ' backdrop '. Very nice so far as it goes, BUT there are several disadvantages, of which the first is that the more realistic the ground, usually the more unwieldy it becomes, depending upon how it was constructed. What I mean is this. Once upon a time (to coin a phrase), when I was a bit of a devotee of this sort of technique, I constructed some really elaborate pieces of battlefield scenery, using the time-honoured method of having squares of hardboard of varying sizes as bases. The method of construction is well-known, and is briefly that blocks of wood of different heights are glued to the hardboard base, covered with strips of glued paper until the whole forms an irregular surface, with the paper—hardening as the glue dries—forming an uneven sort of hill. The thing is then covered with a thin layer of plaster of paris, which, when set, is painted in the appropriate colours, green, brown and so on. When a number of such pieces are placed on the wargame table, there is no question but that the result—if care has been taken— is highly spectacular and looks good from any point of view. The disadvantage—the unwieldiness I referred to—is that one tends to over-emphasise the features being created—hills are made too high and steep, and human nature what it is, there is a tendency to over-employ certain favoured pieces of terrain. I recall, during this phase, that, with much labour, I built a high mountainous affair, two peaks with a pass between them, the top rising to something like eighteen inches from ground—or table-level. When in use, this had a seemingly fatal fascination for wargamers, and possibly because it looked too good not to fight over, the most unlikely scraps took place upon it and up and down the gorge. Anyway, what with all this fighting, it rapidly

began to acquire a rather " tatty " appearance, fragments of plaster flaking off and holes being punched in the surface by over-eager fingers. There are always strong domestic reactions at the sight of powdered plaster being trodden into carpets and so on all over the house.

One other minor point might be noted is the one of storage. These plaster covered terrain pieces have to be put away with some care and take up a fair bit of room, this not always being a practicable proposition.

Furthermore, if you have, for example, a square of 18 in. sides covered by some particular type of hilly ground, this can be used for no other purpose than the one applicable to its specific construction.

It is for these reasons given above, and probably others, that for some time I have used another method of making up battlefield terrain from the point of view of hills, this being one which oodles of practice suggest is by far the best proposition. As a matter of fact, it will be found, too, that a little attention can ensure that it is not without scenic merit itself. Fundamentally, what we do is this. We take an ordnance survey map, or any other type whereon heights are shown by contour lines, and with this as a kind of inspiration, we bring the contours to life, as it were, by reproducing them on our wargame table by showing them as corresponding shapes cut from some suitable material. This can be inch-thick insulation board (half-inch will suffice, although this thickness can be doubled for use quite easily). This material can be readily cut to any desired shape—round, oval or indeed any irregular form (hills are not always perfect circles in area) and these can be used over and over again in many different ways. The photograph shows how these shapes appear—note that a little " chamfering " of the edges does enhance their appearance somewhat, and one ' shape ' can be placed upon another to represent increases in height in exactly the same manner as do the contours of a map (each contour usually represents an increase in height of 50 metres over its outer neighbour).

The ' contour shape ', it is apparent, gets full marks for convenience—both from the actual wargaming point of view and for its ease of storage between games. Certainly, as I hope to show, they are functionally highly suitable for any sort of wargame. Anyway, there you are—the choice is with the reader. You can either have the very dioramic and pictorially very attractive pieces of terrain I have referred to above (they can now, of course, be made by the simpler process of using commercially produced plaster-impregnated material to cover the blocks of wood on the hardboard), or to use the more convenient, and not necessarily ill-looking-contour shapes, which are more than adequate in use, are convenient for storage and for adapting the table terrain to the requirements of any particular engagement which might be on hand. Naturally, the more ' shapes ' one has, and the greater variety that might be available, the easier it is to set up an interesting game or to reproduce on one's table a section of an actual map over which to fight. There are all sorts of ways by which one can add to or alter one's contour shapes. Should they have been cut from one piece of insulation board, two or more can be fitted together to provide a large area of rising ground, and, as can be seen from the photograph, the judicious addition of pieces of lichen—representing low bushes —as well as trees, can result in a very realistic sort of appearance. It is with the subject of trees—and then with rivers—that we shall presently deal.