

Moonsund: An Active Armor WWII Scenario for the Recapture of Ösel Island, October 1944

I. Overview

At the end of September, 1944 the Soviets made a [push](#) to retake the Moonsund Archipelago in the East Baltic Sea near the Gulf of Riga. While strategically placed, the importance of these islands had diminished by the time the Germans were forced off of them due to events elsewhere. Ultimately, the surviving Germans ended up inside the [Kurland Pocket](#), where they were some of the last Nazi forces to surrender at the war's end.

Three Soviet Corps were involved in these actions, and elements of three German divisions were caught up in the fighting. The Germans first abandoned the two smaller islands, but fought a rearguard action on the island of Ösel (Saaremaa) as they pulled back to the defensible Sõrve Peninsula at its southern end. They defended a series of positions until they were evacuated, against Hitler's explicit orders. (For whatever reasons - party loyalty is often cited - the German commander was not punished for disobeying, as many others were.)

This scenario depicts the fighting as the Germans withdraw to their defensive lines on the Sõrve Peninsula, facing larger numbers of advancing Soviets. It is not a depiction of any specific action, but draws on various historical events, the most notable being the [Battle of Tehumardi](#), in which an isolated group of withdrawing Germans accidentally collided with surprised elements of the Soviet advance. Other features have been mixed in, including support from the German navy - the *Prinz Eugen* and *Admiral Scheer* were in the Baltic during this period, and provided fire support at points to the German forces on the island. All the units in this scenario were, however, present on the island and involved in the fighting historically, with the possible exception of the 45th Estonian Tank Regiment (this unit took part in the recovery of Tallinn in September however, alongside units of the 249th, so I have included it here), and the Soviet supply elements and elements of 3rd Air Army.

While some armor is included, this is fundamentally a clash of infantry and artillery. We tend to forget that the majority of the divisions fighting in WWII were not motorized, much less armored. The Germans had only between 10%-20% of their formations motorized, and Soviets were in similar shape - horses far outnumbered trucks in their rifle divisions. (One cool feature of the Moonsund Landing Operation, however, was the presence of the 283rd Special Purpose Truck Battalion, equipped with Lend-Lease DUK-Ws, which were used in at least one amphibious landing by the Russians in an attempt to outflank the Germans.)

II. Order of Battle

A. Soviets

249th Estonian Rifle Division

The 249th Estonian Rifle Division was one of ethnically-specific divisions of the Soviet army, and was in fact recruited from Estonians to the extent possible. At this stage in the war it was being sustained by the conscription of large numbers of Estonians, and was at almost twice the strength of most Soviet rifle divisions of the period. This is reflected in the size and quality of the infantry battalions.

- 1st Battalion, 917th Rifle Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Fair; Armor: None; Strength: 750; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- 2nd Battalion, 917th Rifle Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Fair; Armor: None; Strength: 750; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- 3rd Battalion, 917th Rifle Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Fair; Armor: None; Strength: 750; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- 1st Battalion, 921st Rifle Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Fair; Armor: None; Strength: 750; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)

- 2nd Battalion, 921st Rifle Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Fair; Armor: None; Strength: 750; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- 3rd Battalion, 921st Rifle Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Fair; Armor: None; Strength: 750; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- 1st Battalion, 925th Rifle Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Fair; Armor: None; Strength: 750; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- 2nd Battalion, 925th Rifle Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Fair; Armor: None; Strength: 750; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- 3rd Battalion, 925th Rifle Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Fair; Armor: None; Strength: 750; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- 779th Artillery Regiment (Type: Towed Medium Artillery; Quality: Average; Armor: None; Strength: 200; Smoke: Yes; AP: Medium; HE: Medium; SA: None; AA: None)
- 307th Antitank Battalion (Type: Towed Medium AntiTank; Quality: Average; Armor: None; Strength: 100; Smoke: No; AP: Medium; HE: Light; SA: None; AA: None)
- 417th Sapper Battalion (Type: Motorized Infantry; Quality: Average; Armor: None; Strength: 200; Smoke: No; AP: None; HE: None; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- Mortar Battalion (Type: Towed Medium Artillery; Quality: Average; Armor: None; Strength: 200; Smoke: Yes; AP: None; HE: Medium; SA: None; AA: None)

Attached/Supporting

- 45th Estonian Tank Regiment (Type: Medium Tank; Quality: Average; Armor: Heavy; Strength: 400; Smoke: No; AP: Medium; HE: Light; SA: MG; AA: None)
- 1st and 2nd Divisional Truck Companies, each with full supply for 3 units (Type: Supply Transport; Quality: Average; Armor: None; Strength: 100; Smoke: No; AP: None; HE: None; SA: None; AA: None)
- Airstrikes: 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Squadrons, 1st Assault Aviation Regiment (Type: Airstrike; Quality: Average; Armor: None; Strength: 100; Smoke: No; AP: Medium; HE: Heavy; SA: MG; AA: None)



T-34s of the 45th Usik Tank Polk. The inscription reads "For Soviet Estonia".

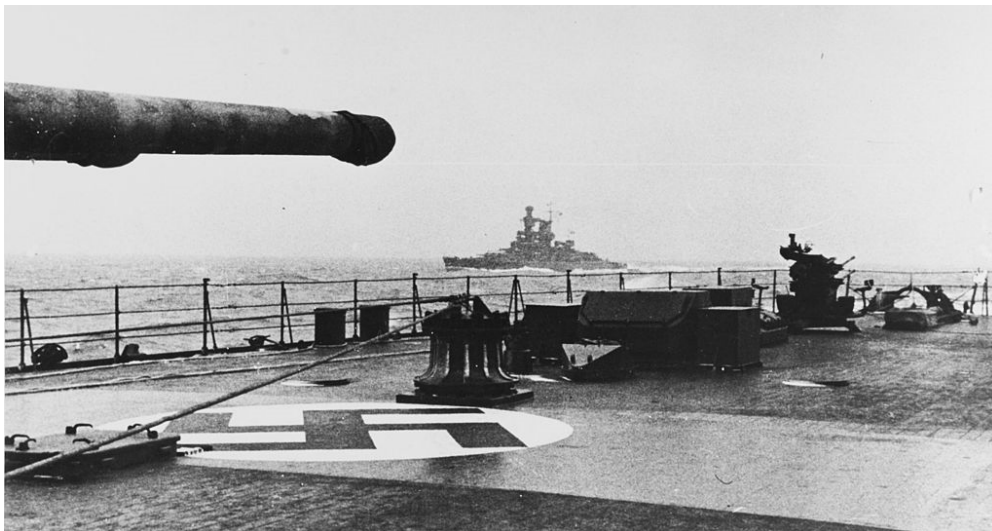
B. Germans

218th Infantry Division

- II Battalion, 323rd Grenadier Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Veteran; Armor: None; Strength: 350; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- III Battalion, 323rd Grenadier Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Veteran; Armor: None; Strength: 350; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- II Battalion, 386th Grenadier Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Veteran; Armor: None; Strength: 350; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- III Battalion, 386th Grenadier Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Veteran; Armor: None; Strength: 350; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- I Battalion, 397th Grenadier Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Veteran; Armor: None; Strength: 350; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- III Battalion, 397th Grenadier Regiment (Type: Infantry; Quality: Veteran; Armor: None; Strength: 350; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)
- 218th Artillery Regiment (Type: Towed Medium Artillery; Quality: Veteran; Armor: None; Strength: 300; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Medium; SA: None; AA: None)
- 218th Fusilier Battalion (Type: Infantry; Quality: Veteran; Armor: None; Strength: 350; Smoke: Yes; AP: Light; HE: Light; SA: Infantry; AA: None)

Attached Supporting

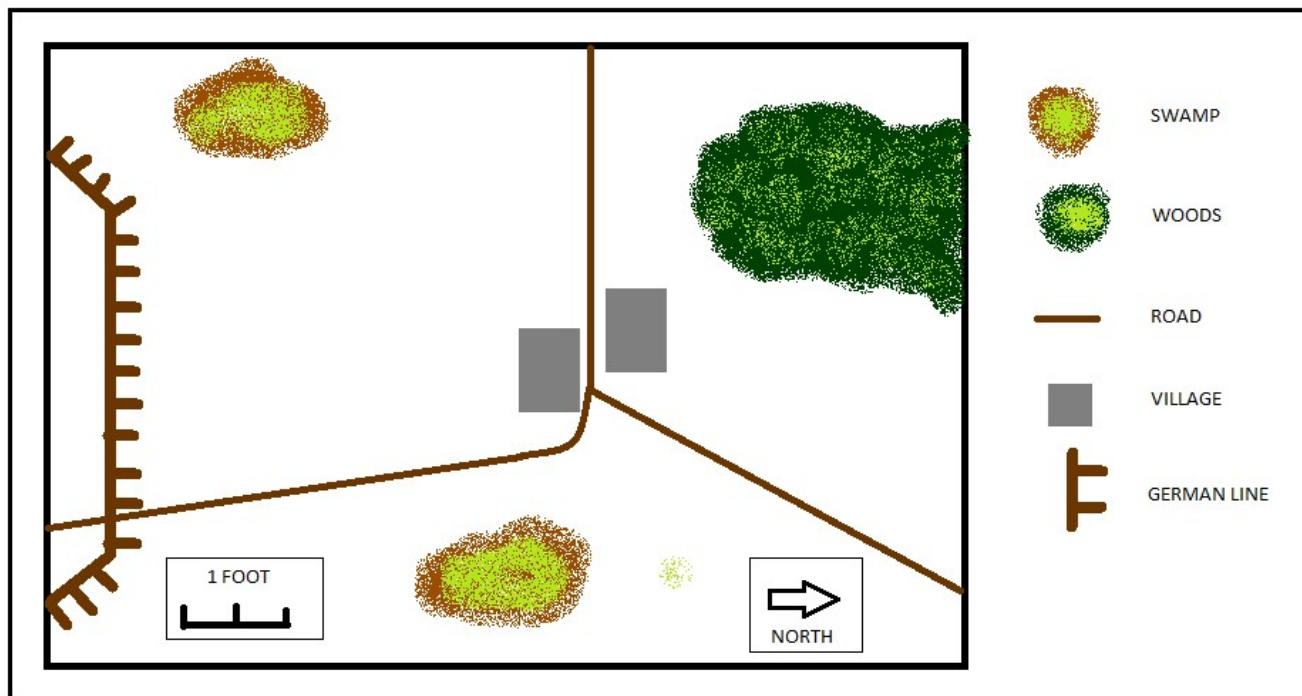
- 202nd Sturmgeschutz Brigade (SP Medium Anti-Tank; Quality: Veteran; Armor: Heavy; Strength: 200; Smoke: Yes; AP: Heavy; HE: Medium; SA: MG; AA: None)
- Admiral Scheer/Prinz Eugen (SP Extra-Heavy Artillery; Quality: Veteran; Armor: Extra-Heavy; Strength: 100; Smoke: No; AP: Extra-Heavy; HE: Extra-Heavy; SA: None; AA: Extra-Heavy) *Note that this unit cannot be attacked, but will always fire at Medium Range (the naval guns had a range of 20 miles or so, but the shallow waters near the island kept them from coming too close).*



Admiral Scheer as seen from the deck of Prinz Eugen.

III. Set-Up

Below is the tabletop, measuring 8 feet x 4 feet. North is to the right. Ösel Island is extremely flat, but has scattered plots of woodland and swampy areas. The German defensive lines were - where possible - built on the existing fortifications from fighting in 1941, and count as fortifications for game purposes.



The Soviet 307th Antitank Battalion and 1st Battalion, 917th Infantry deploy in the village. Other Soviet forces may deploy anywhere to the west of the woods and on or north of the road coming into the village from the west, or east of the wood up to half way to the village from the northern board edge, but no closer than 6 inches to the German II and III Battalion, 323rd Infantry.

The German II Battalion and III Battalion, 323rd Infantry set up half way to the village along the road from the northern table edge. All other German forces deploy on the southern part of the table, no less than 12 inches south of the east-west line running through the village.

Set-up should be blind - this may require re-positioning of some Soviet units on the eastern side of the wood at the game*s start.

IV. Game Length and Victory Conditions

The game lasts at least one full day (12 turns) - second and third days may be played. For the Soviets, the German line of fortifications must be breached, such that at the end of the game day there is a non-destroyed Soviet unit behind the lines. Germans must defend the line of fortifications for as long as possible - if they hold the line through the first day, that is a lesser German victory. If the line is held for two full days, that is a greater German victory. If the line can be held for three days, that is a massive German victory. If at any point half or more of the German units are destroyed, it is a Soviet victory, regardless of how long the Germans have held out. Germans have the option of retiring units overnight, at which point they cease to count for victory calculations as destroyed.

V. Historical Outcomes

If we use the Battle of Tehumardi as a guide, the Germans were technically victorious in immediate terms: their isolated troops made it to the Sõrve Peninsula where the main German forces had established their lines, albeit not without taking serious losses (200 out of 700 men). The fighting along the peninsula saw the Germans establish several positions, each of

which they defended until pushed back. They evacuated on 23/24 November, the Soviets having landed on the north shore of Ösel on 5 October. Tehumardi took place on the night of 8 October, marking the start of fighting down the length of the narrow peninsula itself, a process which took almost six weeks. The Soviet 8th Estonian Rifle Corps and 109th Rifle Corps had been reenforced by the 30th Guards Rifle Corps at the start of this fighting. Against them were the remains of the 23rd Infantry Division (with only one grenadier regiment), the 218th Infantry Division, and elements of 12th Luftwaffe Field Division (about a third of its strength), plus some artillery, anti-aircraft, and anti-tank detachments. The outcome was essentially a foregone conclusion, but the effectiveness of the German defense is remarkable from a purely military perspective. Fewer than 20 battalions managed to hold off a force which was likely at least three or four times their number.