

TCS Op Sheets: Down -n- Dirty

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One of the most novel features of the TCS games is their use of Op Sheets, small maps of the game area on which players write and graphically plot their operations for the game. The purpose of Op Sheets is to limit the "player's ability to rapidly change missions," in a manner similar to order writing in the CWB, with the added map graphic (borrowed from current US military practice). But perhaps because of their novelty, many TCS players don't seem to understand Op Sheets well. There is confusion about how detailed an Op Sheet should be, about the mechanics of Op Sheets in general, and I have especially found that very few players use the special features of Op Sheets to increase their flexibility in play. My goal in this article is to spell out some of the confusing points of Op Sheets (with Dean's help), and to offer some tips on how to improve your play through writing better Op Sheets.

Purpose of Op Sheets

Dean articulates his purpose for Op Sheets in the introduction to section 6.0 Command (here from TCS 3.1 rules):

The command rules impose realistic limits on the player's ability to rapidly change missions. Create Op Sheets to define your objectives. The units on an Op Sheet must execute the mission on that sheet until they accomplish the mission, are reassigned, or the player cancels it.

>From this we see that Op Sheets have two purposes: to restrict the flexibility of a player's forces (due to realistic command problems), and to require players to use 'operations' with missions and objectives as their main method of play. Players should A) assign objectives to their units, and B) attempt to accomplish these objectives. Op Sheets are designed to encourage players to plan what they are doing, and then execute the missions they plot, until the mission is accomplished or the player cancels the mission. This is in contrast to most other wargames, where players can 'wing it' by responding instantly to new situations with full control over their units' actions.

This dual purpose often causes confusion, partly because of what the actual TCS rules cover and what they do not cover. The mechanics of the Op Sheet rules address primarily the first purpose: limiting flexibility and response. The mission types (Attack, Hasty Defense, Prepared Defense, Move) dictate what types of activities units may undertake, and the graphic on the Op Sheet will restrict the part of the map they can operate on. This is pretty clear. But within the graphic there is a great deal of leeway, and the rules do not force players to execute their Op Sheets at any particular pace, which can lead to a certain 'mixing' of missions (i.e. the 'stalled' attack' which seems to be acting more as a blocking force than as an assault force). A unit's movement and combat abilities also do not depend very much on the mission type.

Units on Attack or Hasty Defense Op Sheets effectively function the same, so such blurring of missions can happen very easily.

So then, the TCS rules are clear on limiting flexibility, and all players should play with that spirit in mind. But the 'spirit' of the system actually goes farther, though there are not specific rules on this. To play within the actual rules, TCS players should use Op Sheets at the very least to limit the area of operations of their units (with some further guidelines from Q&A with Dean below). This should be the minimal goal of all players who tend to like things 'nailed down' (often people who like closure and in their most extreme form are called 'rules lawyers'). But the actual INTENT of Op Sheets is to develop the mindset, just as in the military, of planning operations and executing them according to this plan. Though it may bring in a bit of 'role-playing', I think this is the better way, and if you and your opponent are amenable to it, I encourage you to play according to the spirit, not just the letter.

Q& A on Op Sheets

Since a number of questions usually arise in reference to writing and executing Op Sheets, I decided to summarize some of the major ones and put them to the master himself (uh, that's Dean in case you were wondering...) His replies below are set off as blockquotes.

Defending on the Attack

Rule 6.10b states that a player is 'free to vary his operational tempo for any reason he chooses, provided he does not violate Op Sheet instructions.' What often seems to happen is that units on an attack Op Sheet run into opposing units that are trying to attack through them, and then stop the attack to defend indefinitely, in a sense operating as if they were on a Hasty Defense Op Sheet. Is this allowed, or should the player be required to declare a failure of the Attack Opsheet if he cannot make any forward progress?

The problem here is that while players should have complete freedom to vary their attack's tempo, this is not supposed to be a blank check to avoid moving forward at all. I have been on many ops where my platoon had to hold up to allow the laggards in the back of the company (or battalion) movement to catch up (it never happened that they had to hold up so that we could catch up...honest). But always, the overriding issue was that "Objective Tulip had to be attacked by 1330 hrs..."

I think perhaps the best fix would be to require (in games where players find themselves or their opponents doing a little bit more than what seems reasonable) a set time for the attack to go down. They must be attacking the actual final objective by such and such a time. That is the constraint in real life and it should be here as well. That way, the player can lolly-gag all he wants, but the clock is ticking. If he isn't actually moving on his final assault when the flares go up, he must execute his failure instructions.

Counterattacks

Can units on a defensive Op Sheet attack back onto ground they were defending on their Op Sheet but retreated from, or are they required to implement an Attack Op Sheet to get lost territory back?

Provided the defensive op sheet itself has not been called into failure, the units on the sheet can attack back into areas they were supposed to be defending. They would not need attack orders to do that. Problem is, this calls into play the requirement to be reasonable when deciding that a defense has failed...and that might be the crux of the problem, anyway.

Unit frontages

Do you have any guidelines on unit frontages, both on the offense and defense? Sometimes it seems that players design Op Sheets with a 25-hex wide axis of advance for a company or battalion, in order to give them maximum flexibility. Is this allowed?

No, that is excessive. WW2 frontages were tiny compared to modern doctrine (I wouldn't even want to think about WW1 frontages). A company Axis of Advance would be large if drawn as a five hex wide swath (with 2-3 being more reasonable). A Battalion might have one 5-8 hexes wide. On the defense, while a modern platoon might deploy over 300 meters (I once had to set out a platoon to cover 1.6 km...it was one weak position, luckily it was in some pretty rugged terrain so the outpost nature of my line didn't come back to haunt me--luckily for me, the enemy proved lazy and ran right into one of my prearranged killing zones--it was way cool!), a WW2 one would be confined to 100 meters or less. Given normal practices, that would give a about a two hex frontage for a company with perhaps another two hexes of leeway on either side--for a four hex zone. A battalion (2 up, 1 back) would get about 8 hexes, but probably less.

Not only is it a matter of interlocking fires and the capability of the higher formation's support weapons to reach the entire area held its line units, but remember the lack of good communications at the lower levels--TV shows like Combat aside, radio comms was limited at best in WW2 at this level. Wire is better, but takes time to employ, doesn't move, can be cut easily, and restricts the location of leaders. The wire my guys have run in the past has been pretty much limited to a couple of hundred meters--too much wire weight to go any further, etc.

This is a really difficult area of game design--how to keep the players from side stepping the restrictions of the system and do something completely a-historical because they can get away with it. It is dreadfully hard to convince a gamer out for blood to be "reasonable" and just about impossible to legislate it--no matter how many holes are patched up, these guys will find some more things they can take advantage of...

Graphic Symbols

The back of the rulebook has a list of common graphic symbols and their use. Lateral Boundaries, Lines of Departure and Phase Lines are described, but their use is not mentioned in the rules. Should players be using these in Op Sheets? If so, how?

These should be used and (unfortunately) their use is specified in standard NATO symbol terminology (not rules per se). Lateral boundaries should be used to carefully define the positions of battalions and sometimes companies (depending on the operation) according to the notes in 3) above. Phase lines are a control mechanic that players can use to apply timing to their operations (1st Battalion begins its attack when 2nd Battalion gets to PL Fish). This can be worked into the op sheet so that maneuver planning is done before the operation (as

opposed to thrown together during it)--while the latter is much more reactive to actual circumstances, which is unfortunately rewarded in game play, the former is actually more fun. "I love it when a plan comes together..."

Timing

In many 'real life' orders I've seen, set times are mentioned. Why? Should players be using definite times for their Op Sheets too, or is this too restrictive?

Set times would be perfect except for the uncertainty we built into op sheet acceptance. Its hard to say "fire the barrage at 1815" if you're not sure when the operation will actually kick-off. There are two ways to handle this. Either the player can specify times a long way in the future (in the hopes of getting what he wants), or he can give times as "N+1 turn" and so on.

The latter method allows players to plan out the mechanics of the operation in nice detail, ties in their failure times as I mentioned last time, AND allows any start time to be correct.

Application to Play

Based on Dean's comments, here are a few recommendations for players who want to go beyond the letter of the law and try to play according to Dean's intent:

1. Try to use start/stop times as much as possible in your orders, since that is so common in actual practice. I don't recommend any punishment for failing to do so - just do your best!
2. Draw (lateral) unit boundaries at the battalion level, and perhaps company level if defending a wide area. Do not allow units to cross unit boundaries unless they are retreating (i.e. executing failure instructions). For those who want to go further, do not allow units to fire across unit boundaries unless returning overwatch fire that was fired at their side of the boundary. Or a slightly looser version, only allow other fire across boundaries (i.e. SFAs, movement-based overwatch and fire-based overwatch at another unit) if that battalion can make a roll vs. its prep rating, to represent its ability to communicate with other units and avoid friendly fire. These additions will add some of the weaknesses to unit boundaries that make them ideal targets for attack.

Allow support units to operate freely within their respective areas (battalion, regiment, division, etc.) For armor, they may share an area with an infantry formations only if both are on the same Op Sheet. And for the very daring, try using some combined arms restrictions. Allow armor and infantry to stack together or combine in a single SFA only when the units in question demonstrated combined arms capability in the actual battle. Off the top of my head, I would prohibit the following forces from combined arms: French in GD '40, US in Omaha (the US didn't really get the combined arms thing down at Normandy for a few weeks), and the Japanese at Matanikau. Not allowing the French to stack with tanks would really change the nature of that game, so this is recommended mainly for history buffs.

Since unit boundaries are really separate from Op Sheets (they function for the whole force), allow them to be changed by writing down the change and then rolling vs. your Prep Rating during the Prep Phase (like committing reserves). Keep the boundary lines fairly straight, using easily recognized terrain. Flexible forces, like good German units

and US units in '44 on could change direction if necessary, but the typical Russian unit was closely controlled and needed to stay with the 'plan'. Units that find themselves on the wrong side of a boundary should not be able to SFA (because of lack of fire coordination and possible friendlies) until they get back on their side of the boundary.

3. Try to respect the unit frontages Dean gave above wherever possible, though of course some units may be required to defend a large area. These frontages aren't law, but they were standard operating procedure. Using unit boundaries will probably make this a lot easier, since you won't be tempted to draw unrealistically large areas on Op Sheets if other units can't enter the area.
4. Use Lines of Departure and Phase lines in your Op Sheets. In the attack, no unit should proceed until all units reach the LoD and then the respective PLs.
5. Be reasonable in assigning an Axis of Advance, using the frontages Dean gives above. As long as your axes aren't unreasonable, move and fight with your units inside them freely.
6. Because night operations are so difficult (as Dean writes: "The difficulty of military operations at night is impossible to describe adequately"), require the use of Direction of Advance (i.e. specified routes) for all movement at night (including execution of preliminary instructions and the like). Units that get out of their routes (due to SYRs or other causes) should be considered lost, unable to move until daybreak. These restrictions should put a bit of the fear of the dark back into the game...

Writing Effective Op Sheets

Before I give some pointers, I want to make clear my general presuppositions when writing Op Sheets. Any Op Sheet should strive to do as much as the following as possible:

1. Achieve local superiority in firepower.
2. Achieve local positional advantage (such as surrounding the enemy, bringing greater firepower to bear, etc.)
3. Paralyze your opponent by forcing him to change opsheets (the infamous Boyd Cycle.)
4. Strive to maintain maneuverability, generally through attacking but also through mobile defense.

Op Sheets are all about maneuvering to gain an advantage. Defending in place can be fine and useful, but if you find that all your forces are simply static, you are giving the initiative to your opponent. As much as possible, use maneuver to gain advantages over your opponent.

Now to some hints on writing effective Op Sheets:

Embrace the Idea of Operations

To write good opsheets, you need to embrace this philosophy rather than resist it. Since familiarity with other games leads players to expect full control of their units, the use of Op Sheets will often be very uncomfortable at first, even grating. But by the same token, if you

master the formulation and mechanics of Op Sheets, you will gain a big advantage over your opponent. THINK about your plans. As in chess, try to see as far ahead as you can. As in actual military operations, it is often best to come up with a unified plan and stick to it, rather than responding piecemeal to what your opponent is doing. By thinking things through, you will be able to read the battle better than your opponent, giving you a decisive edge.

You should plan your initial Op Sheets especially carefully. If you know your intent, it will be easier to stick to it and you won't be tempted to slop it. Initial plans for the various TCS games can be drawn up during leisure moments so that when you get together to play, you can set-up and have at it without spending a lot of time writing up the Op Sheets.

Full Employment

Every unit should be on 2 Op Sheets. **Always.** If you have units that are on only one, write up a new one. This discipline will keep you looking ahead in the game and will give you an advantage in flexibility. The natural tendency is to get more careless about this once the shooting starts. Let your opponent suffer from such complacency, but not you! If your opponent is lax in this regard, get some new Op Sheets going, withdraw from contact and flank him. Op Sheets are like compound interest: their initial returns may not be that hot, but down the road they can be awesome. Like an investor, think long-term and stay up-to-date with your Op Sheets.

Keep a Clear Head

Figure out a way to keep from getting yourself confused with lots of paper. Some players like everything on one Op Sheet, some like each unit on a separate one. Find a way that gives you the best control over what you're trying to achieve. Have plenty of spare blanks, and a pen/pencil that you can read easily on your Op Sheets. On the older Op Sheets, this is important, since photocopies of them tend to hide pencil. Most of my Op Sheets are photocopied very light, so I can better read what I write. Organize them however you need to keep your purpose clear. When you start changing Op Sheets (which is usually the way to go), it can get pretty messy if you're not organized.

Reserves (6.14b)

If your Prep Rating is 4 or better (even 5 in some cases), you should be using reserves. This is a great way to respond to unexpected turns of fortune, enemy attacks, exploitation of successful attacks (i.e. flanking maneuvers to cut off a retreating enemy) and the like. If you have units on Hasty Defense (hopefully not too often), instead of a Prep Defense you may want them to be working on a new Reserve Op Sheet. Reserves are **great**, and it is difficult to overemphasize their importance. If you aren't using them, then start!

When you have reserves, avoid the temptation to commit them piecemeal. In WWII this was usually a poor practice, and so it is in the TCS. Often a strong threat to an enemy flank by your reserve may be of more value than reinforcing a part of your line with a company or two.

Alternates (6.14c)

It seems that there are very few people who use alternates, which is a shame, because they are quite useful. They are different from reserves in two critical points. On the positive side, alternates are on implemented Op Sheets, so you don't have to worry about getting hit while in

reserve (where you suffer the same penalties as units without orders). On the down side, alternates aren't as flexible as reserves, because you must write in what they are when you write up the Op Sheet.

Why use them? Because alternates give you added flexibility for free. I suggest that most of your Op Sheets (those requiring movement) have alternates on them. The only thing it costs you is the time and thought to plan them, and they may come in handy. Armies with lousy Prep Ratings can use them too, because they are not all-or-nothing. Advance down the primary route, and if the alternate route looks good, try to make the roll. If you fail, keep going the main way. Even if your Prep Rating is 5 or 6, alternates can be useful, whereas reserves with a Prep Rating of 6 are not really helpful. In essence, you can only win with alternates, at the cost of more careful planning.

Adding Units to Op Sheets

The process of adding units to implemented Op Sheets (6.13c) is fairly straightforward. However, adding units to unimplemented Op Sheets (6.13d) is more interesting. Basically, you can add a battalion element to an unimplemented Op Sheet by subtracting 3 weighted turns from it and then writing it in. This is great! Let's say that you have a battalion that has accumulated 36 turns or so towards a new Op Sheet and you want to reinforce it. Add your reinforcements to the Op Sheet, subtract 3 turns, and voil[^], your reinforcing unit is now on an Op Sheet with 33 weighted turns! AND the unit being added can be on an implemented Op Sheet, since the new Op Sheet is not yet implemented. There are lots of possibilities here if you think about it. In case you play with people who abuse this too much, e.g. by having platoons develop Op Sheets for the entire army, I suggest requiring a full battalion on the Op Sheet being joined, to give them the staff to handle new units coming in.

Digging In (6.16)

Digging in is overrated in my book. What you gain is a small defensive modifier and a -1 morale modifier, but it costs you mobility. If you are committed to defending an area against assault, then by all means, write up a Prep Defense and dig in. But don't commit all your units to the front-line. If your front-line units are in any type of cover (which they usually are), you only need part of your units to be dug-in to receive full benefits. So have a screen of hard-points that are manned, and leave your other forces behind cover. They can respond to attack as seems best, move into the friendly hexes and get all the benefits. If you want to live dangerously, man the front line with MG units. The danger here is that they will be eliminated before you can reinforce them with infantry platoons, and thus you lose the dug-in status in that hex. But that way you have the bulk of your infantry safely out of sight, ready to respond to the critical point in the defense. At any rate, don't let the lure of a few small modifiers entice you into sitting still with whole battalions. The best way to defend against a punch to the face is not a tougher face, it's dodging the punch!

Reinforcements (6.13e)

Make sure you are paying as much attention to writing Op Sheets for your reinforcements as you are for units already on the map. Adding reinforcements to unimplemented Op Sheets is a great way to get them into action quickly. Alternately, you can remove units on map from their

Op Sheets and add them to the reinforcements before they implement in order to shift directions quickly

Mission Failure

Give your failure instructions some thought. Make sure that they fit in with your overall plan, and that your units won't be cut-off easily by the enemy. If you are in a bad situation and the enemy has cut you off from your line of retreat, you will probably have to implement a new Op Sheet to move (since units on preliminary instructions cannot contact enemy units). If you use some of the optional rules below, you will need to be especially careful to write good failure instructions.

Unity of Effort

Every Op Sheet you write should have a coherent relationship to all your other Op Sheets. That is, all your units should be striving for one goal. If you are running each unit separate and reacting on a turn-by-turn basis, you are forfeiting unity of effort, and are probably falling victim to that dreaded word: piecemeal. In many games this is difficult to achieve, but in the TCS you really can lose terribly by attacking or defending piecemeal. Keep your focus, know what you are trying to do, and don't write any Op Sheets that do not further this goal or achieve any of the 5 basic purposes of an Op Sheet articulated above.

Victory most often goes to the audacious and crafty, and the TCS is no exception. Fiendishly clever Op Sheets which have a unified plan can give you the decisive edge. Using Op Sheets, come up with a good plan, then execute it violently. Hopefully some of the suggestions above will help you improve your planning and Op Sheet writing. As Dean said, a well-executed plan can be very satisfying, and can add immensely to your enjoyment of the TCS games.

Optional Rules for Opsheets

After playing the TCS for a while, I have a few variant rules to suggest for those who want to try something a little different:

1. In order to execute Preliminary Instructions, a unit must make a roll vs. its Prep Rating, just like committing reserves or implementing Alternate Routes. It takes units a while to organize for a march, and as things stand, with Preliminary Instructions you can change directions instantly. Note that armies with a Prep Rating of 7 or higher will not be able to use Preliminary Instructions.
2. Units on a Move Op Sheet do NOT automatically fail upon contact. Treat them as unassigned units. Thus they may not SFA and have to break contact with the enemy (i.e. be moving away either forward or backwards) after 3 turns. This rule, combined with #1 above, will make Move Op Sheets viable. Notice that a Move can now be used to execute a hasty attack, especially by tanks which stick to overrunning.
3. As suggested above, units operating at night can only use Direction of Advance for movement, i.e. exact routes.
4. Do not allow units to execute preliminary instructions while in contact with the enemy. This is to prevent units from essentially ignoring their failure instructions and moving immediately to a new Op Sheet when the situation is dicey. Now the only way out of a

bad situation is to either execute failure instructions or implement a new Move or Attack Op Sheet. This will certainly encourage players to watch their flanks and keep a path of retreat open, both of which are actual tactical concerns.