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“A **Thunderbolt + Apache Leader** TDA”

by Jeff Petraska

Thunderbolt+Apache Leader offers much more variety in terms of campaign strategy, operations strategy, and mission tactics than its predecessor, **Hornet Leader**. In **Thunderbolt+Apache Leader**, a single campaign consists of a combination of Campaign Card that defines the theater, numbers, and quality of the opposition, and a Situation Card that determines the player's objective and victory conditions.

There are four different types of operations, or situations as the rules call them, in which the Apaches and Warthogs can participate. Two of these situations, the General War and the Show of Force, offer players the greatest opportunities to arm their aircraft to the teeth and beat the hell out of enemy units day after day. Heavy on both logistical support (in terms of air base points) and ground force strength, they are real power trips and are a lot of fun to play.

However, in this article I intend to focus upon the other two situations, the Holding Action and Rapid Deployment, where supplies are scarce, friendly ground forces weak, and the player is on the defensive. While not quite as much rip-roarin' fun as the aforementioned situations, they are nonetheless exciting and challenging. Because resource management is a so much larger problem in these situations, I've chosen to examine them closely and offer up operational strategy suggestions for winning as the underdog.

For the sake of the operational strategy discussion, I'll assume that each of the combat operations are taking place in Korea. The enemy forces consist of 5 assault, 3 support, and 2 command units. Rated as "Advanced" in difficulty, Korea offers tough opposition for any **Thunderbolt+Apache Leader** campaign.

Holding Action

The Holding Action situation puts you on the receiving end of an old-fashioned banzai charge that would make General Tojo proud. Playing this situation in the Advanced or Expert conflict theaters will trigger your basic survival instinct like nothing else.

The main feature of this situation is the weakness of your forces. Your airfield starts the game with only 10 air base points, and receives a measly 2 additional points per day. Although you are provided with one armored and two mechanized battalions, they all start at half strength and only recover on a die roll of "10." A final minor hindrance is that you cannot replace lost aircraft or crews during the game.

With those meager forces you are tasked to survive at least 6 days before being overrun, or to break the enemy forces, to achieve victory. All enemy units have a -2 modifier to their movement die rolls, which when combined with the cumulative modifier for full strength command units, creates a veritable tidal wave of trouble for the good guys.

What's the best way to tackle this situation? Well, the first thing to realize is that every enemy unit, whether full or half strength, is going to come charging forward. With only two air base points' worth of replenishment per day, you simply cannot afford to let enemy units occupy friendly territory for more than one turn. Therefore, you must turn the Friendly Transit zone into a killing ground where the enemy units come in, but never come out.

Circumstances will force you, therefore, to concentrate your air power into lethal strikes on select target units. On day 1 I don't recommend consuming more than six air base points, which will result in having another six air base points available for day 2. Don't even consider using scout helicopters; you can't afford to fly them and, even if you did, you couldn't afford to increase the weapons loads on your aircraft.

In the Korean theater the enemy troop quality is likely to be either poor or normal. The strategy I've used with considerable success is to attack three assault units in the Front Line sector on day 1, one with my primary attack and the other two with secondary missions. For my primary attack target I try to choose a unit consisting completely of vehicles, with an air arrival range of 2 or less. For secondary targets I try to choose units that have relatively low target values, and either a high proportion of infantry units or air arrival ranges of 3 or more. Infantry-heavy units like the Dismounted (7A), Infantry Company (10A), and Infantry Assault (12A) make excellent secondary mission targets for these reasons.

My primary mission is flown by 4 Apaches or 2 Warthogs, which expends 2 air base points. (Purist that I am, I almost never choose to play with

a mix of AH-64s and A-10s. I like to select either one type or the other.) The secondary mission is then flown by the remaining A-10s or Apaches, along with one Harrier, at the cost of 4 additional air base points. This approach almost always results in the elimination of the primary mission target, and 1:1 odds against two low-valued secondary targets. With the +2 or +3 die roll modifier for a normal or poor quality enemy, respectively, even a 1:1 attack will yield a 40-50% probability of outright unit elimination. The most common result, therefore, is the elimination of two enemy assault units and the reduction of a third from full to half strength.

Against good or elite opposition, this approach becomes more risky. In these situations I prefer to focus the secondary mission on a single unit and get a 2:1 strength ratio, netting a much more satisfying +4 or +5 die roll modifier. This will yield a 60-70% elimination probability, and will reduce the risk of damage to secondary mission aircraft considerably.

After your strikes are concluded, the enemy will probably have three assault units remaining in the Front Line range band of the sector map. You can expect all three of these units to move forward to the Friendly Transit band. It's at this point that your friendly ground forces must play their crucial role.

At the start of any Holding Action situation, all friendly units should be set up in the Air Base range band of the sector map. Let's face it, you're on the defensive here. Since you know the enemy will be coming to you, there's no need to set up anywhere else. Most important, however, is that by setting up in the Air Base band each of your half-strength units will get a +2 modifier to

their recovery die rolls before sallying forth into battle. There is a 66% chance that at least one ground unit will recover to full strength on day 1.

After the recovery rolls, move all three units into the Friendly Transit range band and, in all likelihood, to their doom. They certainly won't last more than two days, but then the victory conditions don't depend upon friendly unit survival. Perhaps more than in any other situation, the performance of the friendly ground units plays a major role in the ultimate outcome of a Holding Action in an Advanced or Expert situation. Your friendly ground units must, as a minimum, eliminate one enemy assault unit during the ground combat step. If one of the enemy units is at half strength to begin with, then hoping to eliminate two units is not out of the question. Always attack with the strongest friendly unit first, and use any 2 step results to eliminate an enemy unit rather than reduce two units to half strength. If you're lucky, one of your ground units may survive to fight again on day 2. But don't count on it.

Dawn on day 2 should find one, no more than two, enemy assault units in the Friendly Transit range band. Your objective, from this point forward, is to eliminate all enemy units in the Friendly Transit band with air strikes. This will keep the trickle of air base points coming long enough to cause the enemy to break and retreat prior to day 7, which will result in a completely successful holding action.

Rapid Deployment

The Rapid Deployment situation is similar to the Holding Action in that you start with weak forces. You are allocated 10 air base points at start, and receive three points per day in resupply. Your ground forces are even weaker than those in the Holding Action; a single, full strength mechanized battalion is all you get. Friendly recovery is successful on a die roll of 9 or more, and repair and replacement costs are doubled.

Nonetheless, the Rapid Deployment situation does not have the same survival-driven tension level as the Holding Action. Your objective in this situation is to drive all enemy forces back behind the Front Line range band on the sector map. There is no modifier to the enemy movement die rolls in this situation, so the pressure is somewhat reduced. However, I have found the Rapid Deployment situation more difficult to win against the Korean forces than the Holding Action.

Because the Holding Action and Rapid Deployment situations are so similar, it is possible to play them both using essentially the same strategy. However, my experience has been that doing so usually results in a draw. The two main reasons for this are that the single mechanized battalion does not inflict enough losses on the enemy units, and that the situation does not immediately end when the enemy forces break.

The key things to remember when playing this situation are that full strength enemy units never retreat unless broken, that the check for broken status occurs after enemy unit movement rolls in the turn sequence, and that units in the Friendly Transit range band will take two full days to retreat to

the Enemy Transit range band. To successfully clear all enemy units from the Front Line range band within 4 days, you must accomplish the following:

- Eliminate or damage all the enemy Assault units.
- Eliminate any enemy unit that advances into the Friendly Transit band.
- Try to force the enemy to break by the end of day 3.

The first step, attacking the enemy Assault units, must be done on day 1. My approach has been to attack one Assault unit, preferably a high value unit, with the primary mission. I try to target the remaining four Assault units for the secondary mission, providing I can get at least a 1:2 strength ratio and still have enough aircraft left to damage the primary target. Against the usual poor or normal quality Korean units, the secondary mission will end up with a 0 or +1 die roll modifier, which is likely to inflict damage on each Assault unit. Likewise, I make every effort to at least reduce the primary target to half strength, and am willing to take a few chances if there is a reasonable chance of eliminating it altogether.

The aftermath of these attacks, which may consume up to 7 air base points, is usually the elimination of one or two Assault units and the reduction of the remainder to half strength. Even with the +2 movement die roll modifier for the two Command units, some of these damaged units will either remain in place or retreat to the Enemy Transit band on their first movement. One or two, however, will probably advance into the Friendly Transit band.

As with the Holding Action, now is the time to throw your mechanized battalion into battle in the Friendly Transit band. With its +2 combat modifier, you will have a 20% chance of scoring a 2-step reduction and a 50% chance of scoring a 1-step reduction. Whichever occurs, use the damage that to eliminate half-strength units. Since you can't afford to lose any of your replacement air base points, any units that aren't killed by the ground forces will have to be eliminated by air missions on the next turn.

The strategy to follow for the remainder of the game depends strongly upon the situation at the start of day 2. Dawn will probably find one or two surviving assault units in the Friendly Transit band, a mixture of enemy assault and support units in the Front Line band, and the command units in the Enemy Transit bands. Some of the assault units may have recovered to full strength, thanks to the -3 support unit die roll modifier.

As stated earlier, units that start the day in the Friendly Transit band must be eliminated. A full strength unit in this band is usually my first choice for the primary mission target, and I commit enough to the attack (2 A-10s or 3 AH-64s) to virtually ensure its destruction. If there are no full strength units in the Friendly Transit band, then my next primary target candidates are a Command unit in the Enemy Transit band, or one of the Support units in the Front Line.

The best secondary target candidates are half strength units in the Front Line or Friendly Transit band. As with the attacks on day 1, I try to include as many half strength units as possible in the secondary mission and still retain at least a 1:2 attack ratio. If half strength units are rare, then

enemy Support units in the Front Line are my next highest priority. Six air base points are all you will probably be able to spend this day.

On day 3 your targeting strategy should be to eliminate all enemy units in the Friendly Transit band (again), and eliminate enough other units to cause the enemy army to break. In Korea, this means eliminating 7 out of 10 enemy units. By day 3 you should be well on your way to achieving that goal, having hopefully destroyed at least 4 units already. Pick on the weakest units possible, especially half strength units, and plan your missions with enough strength to get the job done. Use all your remaining air base points if necessary. Focus your attacks on the Front Line and Friendly Transit bands because, even if you do succeed in breaking the enemy army, the units will undergo a normal movement die roll prior to the broken status being enacted this turn. Any units that move forward into the Friendly Transit band this day must be destroyed tomorrow in order to win, and by day 4 your air base point total may not be sufficient to do the job.

If dawn on day 4 finds the Friendly Transit band cleared of enemy units and the enemy army broken, then this is a day of relaxation. Use what few remaining air base points you have to beat up on the units of your choice, and watch as the survivors retreat into their own territory and hand you a successful operation. If an enemy unit or two still inhabit friendly territory, this is your last chance. Use all your air base points and hit them as hard as you can. Again, half strength units are best assigned as secondary mission targets, while full strength units should be the primary targets. If there should be two full strength units still in friendly territory, then you're in a heap o' trouble!

Conclusion

Hopefully this operational analysis will be of assistance to novice **Thunderbolt+Apache Leader** players, and to those who have shied away from the two situations discussed here because they found a defensive posture less fun than an offensive one. It's the tough times that test a person's mettle and bring the highest accolades for success, right? The strategies described above are far from foolproof, but have brought me a fair degree of success and satisfaction. I imagine they'll do the same for anyone else who experiments with them. If you come up with strategies that you think work better, then let us know! I haven't won a complete success in Korea yet, and I'm sure willing to listen to suggestions!

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