

BATTLE OF BRIHUEGA 18 MARCH 1937
(As played at the SunCoast Skirmishes Game Day 15 May 2010)



The 1st Blackshirt Legion Dug In At Brihuega

This game was based on a battle which essentially brought an end to the Italian Corpo de Truppi Volontari offensive of March 1937. The CTV numbered four divisions (Littorio, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Blackshirt Divisions and various corps troops.) They were initially opposed on the 8th of March by a handful of Republican Popular Army units. After several days of moderate success they were checked by Republican reinforcements and a massive commitment of Russian Air and Armor.

On the 18th of March the Littorio Motor Division drove into the depleted 11th Popular Army Division on the Caraterra Franzia but was repulsed by a counterattack led by two Russian tank companies. At Brihuega the CTV held the town and a bridgehead over the Tajuna River. The positions around the town were held by the 1st Blackshirt Division (Dio lo Vouli, or “God Wills It.”) It consisted of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd “Legions,” (regiments) each consisting of three “Cohorts” (battalions) of three rifle companies, one machine gun company. The “Legion” also had a battery of 65mm infantry guns and some mortars which in this game were kicked down to the “Cohort.” The Division had no organic artillery other than the regimental canon companies, but was reinforced by three “Gruppos” of three

batteries each in this battle. I also provided an automatic AA battery, though there may not have been one present historically.

Facing them was the Popular Army's 14th Division. Notionally it had only two brigades, one being the XII International Brigade of French, Italian, and Polish volunteers and one of border guards, or Carabineros (the 65th.) But in fact two brigades intended for the 11th Division, the Movil de Choque, a spin off of the Partido Comunista Espagnol (PCE) Madrid Militia, known as the 5th Regiment, and one of Anarchist Militia (the 70th) were also present. They were also supported by four companies of tanks under a Russian Officer named Pavlov, and several squadrons (four in the game) of Russian aircraft. The brigades had a few batteries of light artillery and medium mortars as well as two "off the board" Grupos.



The 3rd Blackshirt Legion with Division HQ on the hills overlooking Brihuega
My rules (VIVA EL CRISTO REY!) have different values for morale and weapons skills. The Blackshirts were for the most part overaged and undertrained men who had originally been told they were going to Abyssinia. They were rated as poor marksmen and had a base morale of 4. The Republican 70th Brigade had a base morale of 4 and abysmal marksmanship skills. The Movil de Choque a base morale of 5 and poor marksmanship. But the Internationals had a base morale of 6 and moderate marksmanship while the Carabineros were professionals. Their morale was 6, and marksmanship exceptional.

The initial deployment was basically historical. The 1st Blackshirts held the town entrenchments with reserves in the town. The 2nd and 3rd were deployed in the hills above and beyond the town, with the 6th Legion holding the entrenchments of the bridgehead. The Republicans had their brigades from left to right 70th, Movil de Choque, XII Internationals, and (over the Tajuna River) the 65th. The armor could be deployed anywhere along the front. They had a few artillery and mortars batteries deployed, and two gruppos off the table, as well as two fighter and two bomber squadrons.

To give the players a chance to overcome the constraints of the historical dispositions I gave them the opportunity to make “night” moves to re-align the troops. The Republican Commander made a remarkable decision. He sent his armor over the river (presumably at a downstream bridge) and sent them to reinforce the Carabineros. Unfortunately that took them through a woods at night, and I diced for their positions. Two “companies”, surprisingly enough, arrived at the 65th Brigade HQ. The other two wound up far to the right and further back in the woods.

I told the Fascist Commander that he would be aware of the move since the enemy tanks had been crashing through the woods all night. I expected that he might do the prudent thing and sneak back over the bridge, then mine it. There was, after all, only one 65mm battery with the 6th Legion. But instead he deployed forward a gruppo of 75mm guns to reinforce the lines-but none to the bridgehead where the 6th Legion faced all those tanks.

The artillery preparation came first. The Republican long range batteries were aimed at the middle of town where the 1st Legion’s reserves were posted-presumably in the deepest wine cellars of the ruined Church and other buildings.

The Fascist batteries had pre-registered the main roads approaching town in anticipation of a tank attack, but of course the tanks were over the river. And there was some exchange of fire between the forward batteries. For the most part it favored the Fascists, who had more actual guns, and were dug in. Moreover, the shelling of the town center was accomplishing little. But gradually the Russian Armor was reaching the edge of the woods over the river and preparing to test the weak anti-tank defenses of the 6th Legion.

“El Glorioso”, the title given the Russian aviation by the Republicans, was about to play a part. It was the Air Force and the Armor that were to give the four Popular Army Brigades a chance of driving the better equipped Fascists out of prepared positions.

I had warned the players that aircraft in my game had the properties of Non Player Characters used by our RPG friends. That is, there were few radios on aircraft. No calling in air support from a forward air controller. The Republican Commander was told to give the target priorities, and decide whether the SB-2, which has the capacity to drop three “bombs” (equivalent to a battery salvo) was to drop them on one run or up to three.

The SB-2 attack was put on the front lines of the 1st Legion facing the XII IB. The latter, however, had not begun its attack on the town. And the aiming point for bombers was a block on the Brihuega Toriga road. Unfortunately most of the bombs fell outside of town.



And the R-5 attack was directed at the lines of the 6th Legion over the Tajuna





The fighters, instead of circling around, emptied their machineguns into the town. The bombers had finished their work without coming within range of the Italian AA battery. But the fighters weren't so lucky. Several were brought down on the way out.

At that point the armor (in two packets) started moving out of the woods, the nearest Carabineros battalion moved on the right flank of the 6th Legion and set to work trying to offset the entrenchments of the CTV with their superior weapons skills. The sudden realization that the 6th Legion was facing a massive armor attack changed CTV artillery priorities. All the off board guns changed targets and started shooting at the tanks. But ranging tanks is so difficult that some of the shots fired at the lead companies fell on the rear companies. The attack continued.

And on the other side of the Tajuna the 70th, Movil de Choque, and XII IB moved forward against the CTV positions. However, automatic AA weapons can, when not occupied by their primary duties, shoot at ground targets. The 70th was hard put to close with the small arms and artillery on the hills. But the AA battery was worse.

Both the 70th and the Movil de Choque took a pounding headed up hill. The 70th fell back on Ibarra's Palace (the model, admittedly, a low budget version of a palace) and the Movil de Choque retired after suffering more than 50% casualties.



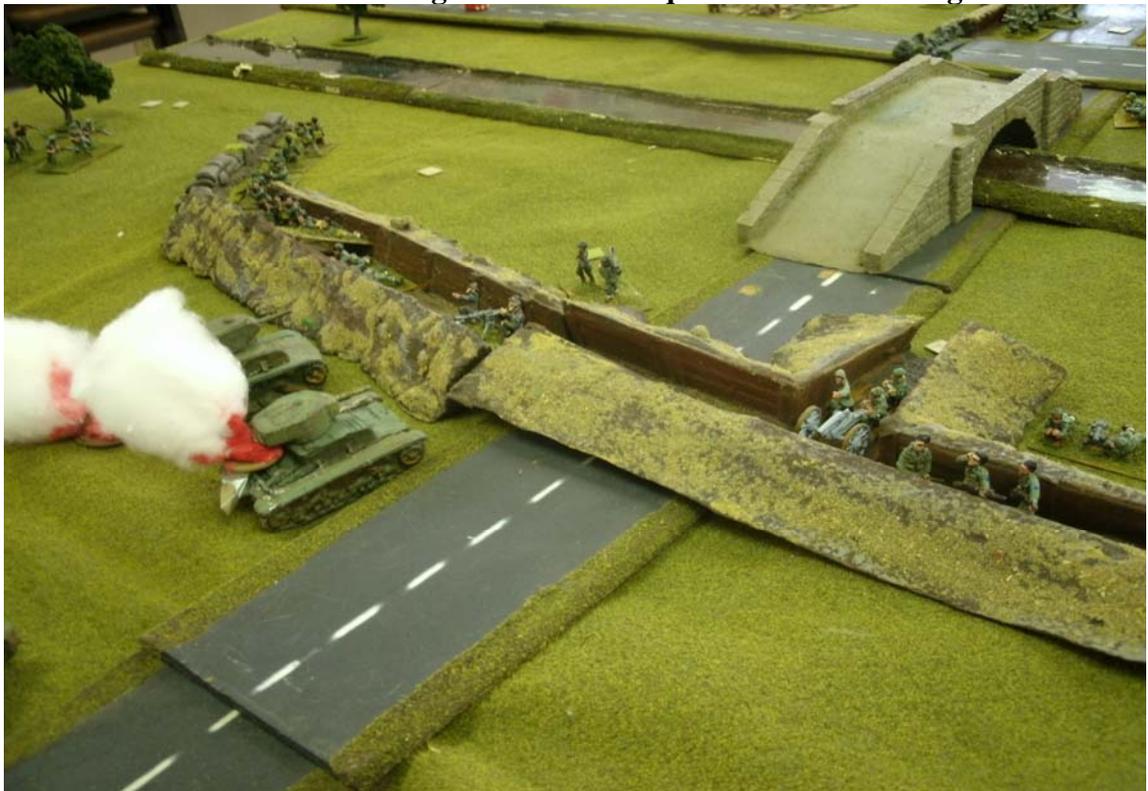
The 20mm Automatic AA Battery Made a Bad Situation Worse



Anarchist Militia Fall Back on Ibarra's Place



XII IB Closes on Brihuega-Movil de Choque Pounded in Background



But the almost unsupported infantry attacks all along the line were unable to make headway. The Carabineros were still chipping away at the 6th Legion's near flank. Only the

armor, attacking in two groups, stood a chance. They did manage to reach the trenches and pour a heavy fire onto the defenders. But the lone 65mm battery found the range and discouraged the forward companies while indirect fire chipped away at the others.

In the end the air attacks proved misplaced, and the movement of the tanks through the woods both delayed and disrupted their attack. Cipriano Mera will probably fall from favor (he was already politically incorrect) and Pavlov may be added to the list of Soviet Officers purged by Comrade Stalin.