Sergeant Arent
Materials for a Decision-Forcing Case

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This exercise serves neither as an argument for particular courses of action nor a criticism of decisions made in specific circumstances. Rather, it exists to give participants opportunities to immerse themselves in problems faced by a real person at some point in the past, and, in doing so, cultivate such martial virtues as decisiveness, critical thinking, creativity, situational awareness and functional empathy.

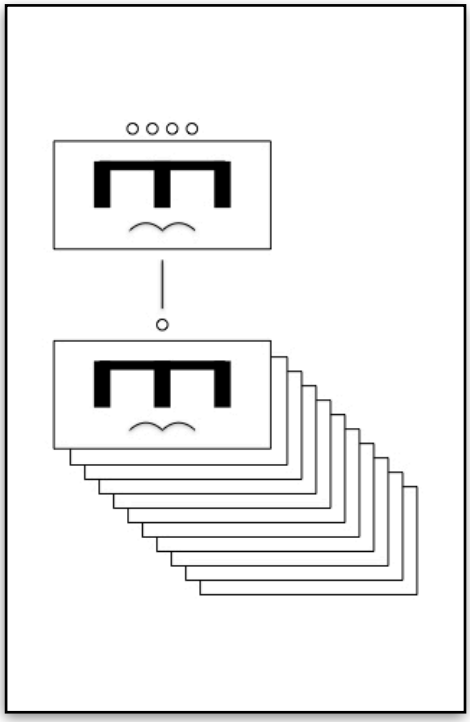
Please not that, while useable, this set of case materials is far from complete. Please direct all questions, suggestions for improvement, and requests for the most recent version of these case materials to: decision.forcing.case@gmail.com

Sergeant Arent

It is 10 May 1940, the first day of "Case Yellow," the invasion of Belgium and the Netherlands by the armed forces of Greater Germany. You are Sergeant Peter Nikolaus Arent, leader of the Third Squad of Assault Group Granite. Born in 1917, you are a fully qualified parachutist, an experienced combat engineer, and veteran of the Polish campaign of 1939.

For the past six months, you and the other 84 members of Assault Group Granite have been training for a special operation. You did not know the time or place of this undertaking. However, as you spent a lot of time learning about gliders, explosives, concrete bunkers, and steel armor, you suspected that it had something to do with landing on top of an ultra-modern fort.*

Sergeant Arent



Assault Group Granite

You recently learned that the mission of Assault Group Granite is the destruction of the weapons of Belgian the fortress of Eben-Emael. Built in the late 1930s, Eben-Emael consists largely of underground tunnels and subterranean chambers built into a plateau. The long-range artillery of the fort is located in casemates (which don't rotate) and turrets (which do) on top of the plateau that overlooks the place where the Albert Canal meets the Meuse River. The close-defense weapons of the fort, both machine guns and anti-tank guns, arm a series of blockhouses built into the reinforced concrete walls of the fortress.

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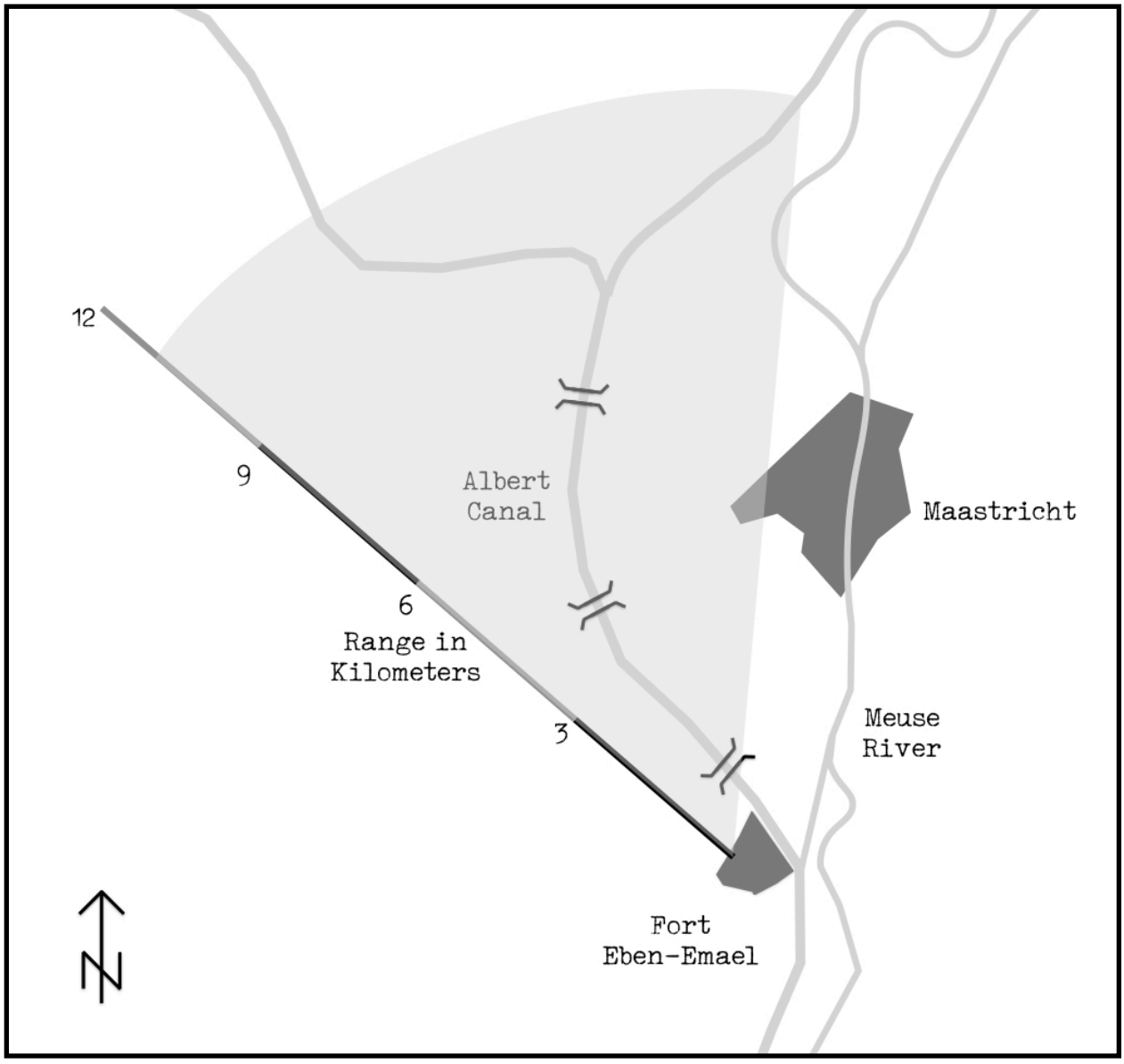
*On the organizational diagram, Assault Group Granite is represented by a symbol surmounted with four dots. This indicates that the unit is larger than a platoon, but smaller than a company.

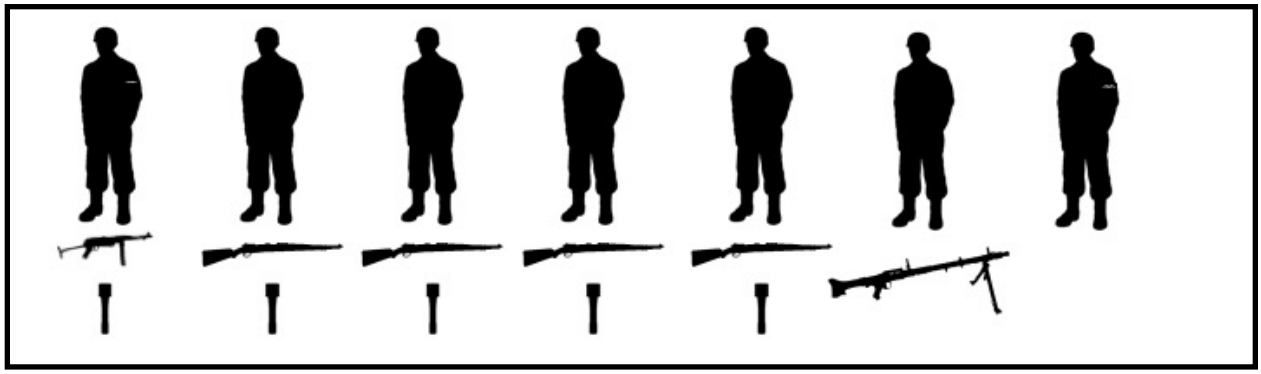


Range Fan of the 75mm Guns on Top of Fort Eben-Emael

Fort Eben-Emael serves a number of purposes. From your point of view, the most important of these is the provision of fire support for the Belgian forces defending the line of the Albert Canal. In particular, the artillery pieces on top of Fort Eben-Emael are able to drop a large number of shells on German soldiers moving towards the Albert Canal from the east, and, especially, those who are attempting to seize or hold the three large bridges that cross the canal. You have also been told that the three sister units of Assault Group Granite (Assault Group Iron, Assault Group Concrete, and Assault Group Steel) will be landing near these bridges in order to seize and hold them, thereby enabling German ground forces emerging from the city of Maastrict to move rapidly over the Albert Canal.)

Sergeant Arent

The Third Squad consists of yourself, five combat engineers, and a glider pilot.[†] It is armed with a submachine gun (your personal weapon), four rifles, a light machine gun, and seven pistols. Apart from the machine gunner and the pilot, each member of the squad carries of bag of small explosive devices. (Each of these bags contains two 1-kilogram charges, a smoke candle, two smoke grenades, two "egg" grenades, and eight "potato masher" grenades, as well as an assortment of fuzes.)[‡]



Third Squad, Assault Group Granite

The glider assigned to Third Squad also carries a 6-meter ladder, a variety of pioneer tools (such as shovels, saws, wire-cutters, and pickaxes), and a substantial stock of explosive charges. (The last named consists of three Bangalore torpedoes, three 50-kilogram shaped charges, three 12.5-kilogram shaped charges, six 3-kilogram charges, and a 25-kilogram box of bulk explosives.)

Like the other ten squads in Assault Group Granite, your squad has a primary mission. The moment you land, you are to head straight for Objective 12, a concrete casemate armed with three 75^{mm} guns, each of which is pointed towards the north. Once you get to the casemate, you are to destroy the three guns. If you fail to do this, the guns of Objective 12 will be able to fire, at a rate of as many as sixty 7-kilogram (15-pound) shells each minute, upon any German soldiers trying to seize, hold, or make use of the three bridges that cross the Albert Canal in the area west of Maastricht.[§]

[†] The chief job of the glider pilot, Sergeant Alfred Sapper, is to land the unpowered aircraft that carries the Third Squad as close as possible to Objective 12. This done, he is to help the squad in any way that he can. He is armed with a pistol.

[‡]A kilogram equals 2.2 pounds. Thus, the 50-kilogram shaped charge, the 12.5-kilogram shaped charge, and the 3-kilogram shaped charge contain, respectively, 110, 27.5, and 6.6 pounds of explosive.

[§]The 75mm guns of Objective 12 have a range of 11,000 meters and are mounted in a way that allows them to traverse 35 degrees to the left and the right.

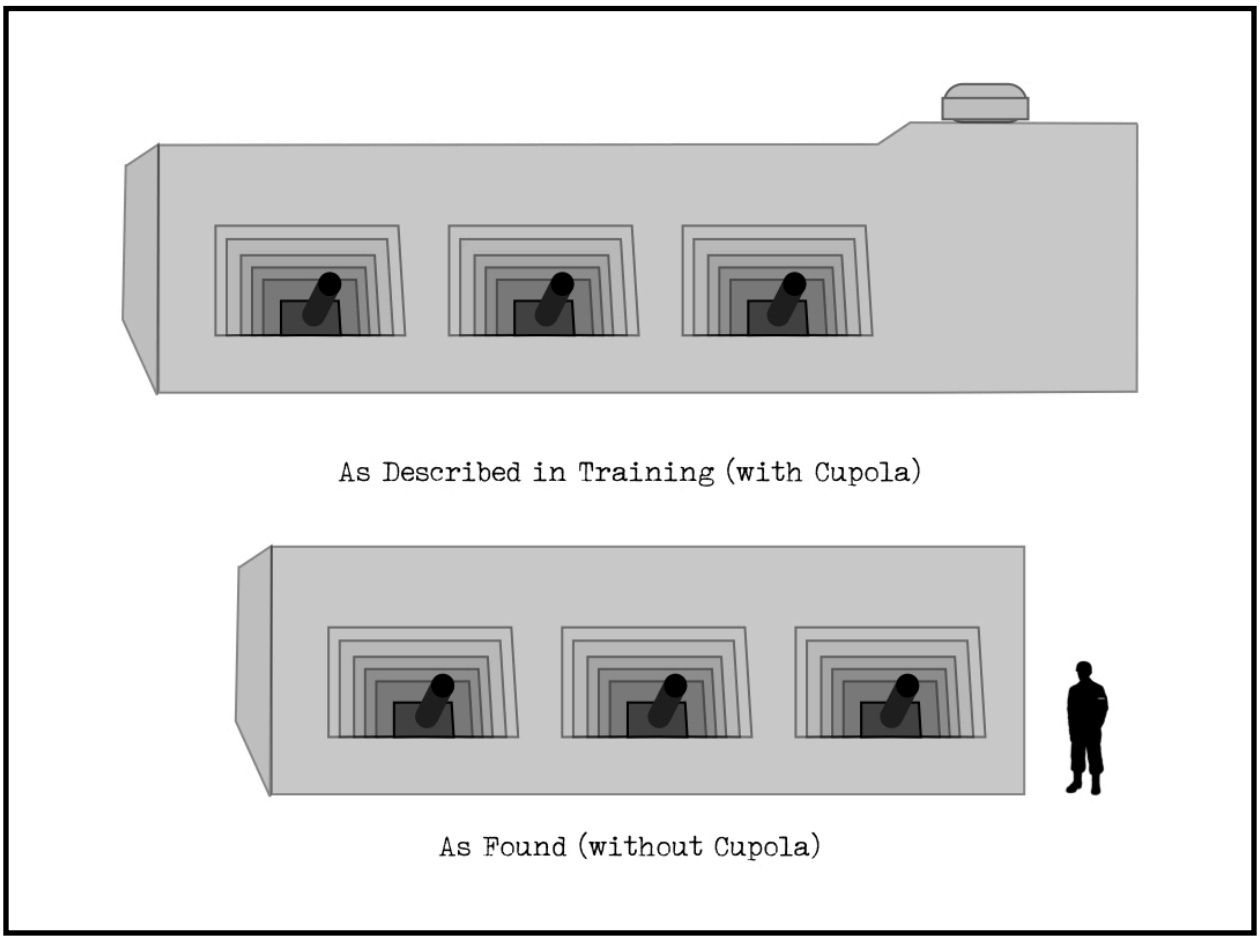
Sergeant Arent

The First Problem

At 0524, the glider carrying the Third Squad lands on top of Eben-Emael, some 25 meters away from Objective 12. In keeping with your training, you and your squad jump out of the glider and run towards the casemate. Your plan, which you and your squad have practiced many times, calls for the placement of a 50-kilogram shaped charge on top of the steel observation cupola on top of casemate. This, you have been told, will not only deprive the gun crews inside of their ability to observe the fire of their guns, it will also fill the interior of the bunker with fire and smoke. This done, your men will use a 12.5- kilogram shaped charge to blow in the steel door in the rear of the casemate, thereby enabling them to enter the bunker and destroy the artillery pieces.

As you approach the casemate, you notice that the cupola that you expected to be on the top of bunker is not there. When you get closer, you also discover that the is no steel door, whether in the rear of the casemate, its sides, or in front. That's the bad news. The good news is that no one is firing upon your squad.

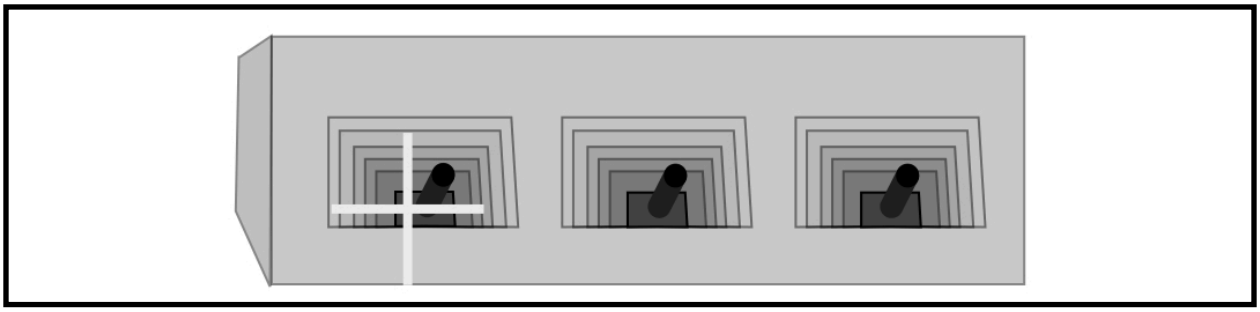
Sergeant Arent, what are your orders to your squad? What other actions will you take?



Casemate with Three 75mm Guns (Objective 12)

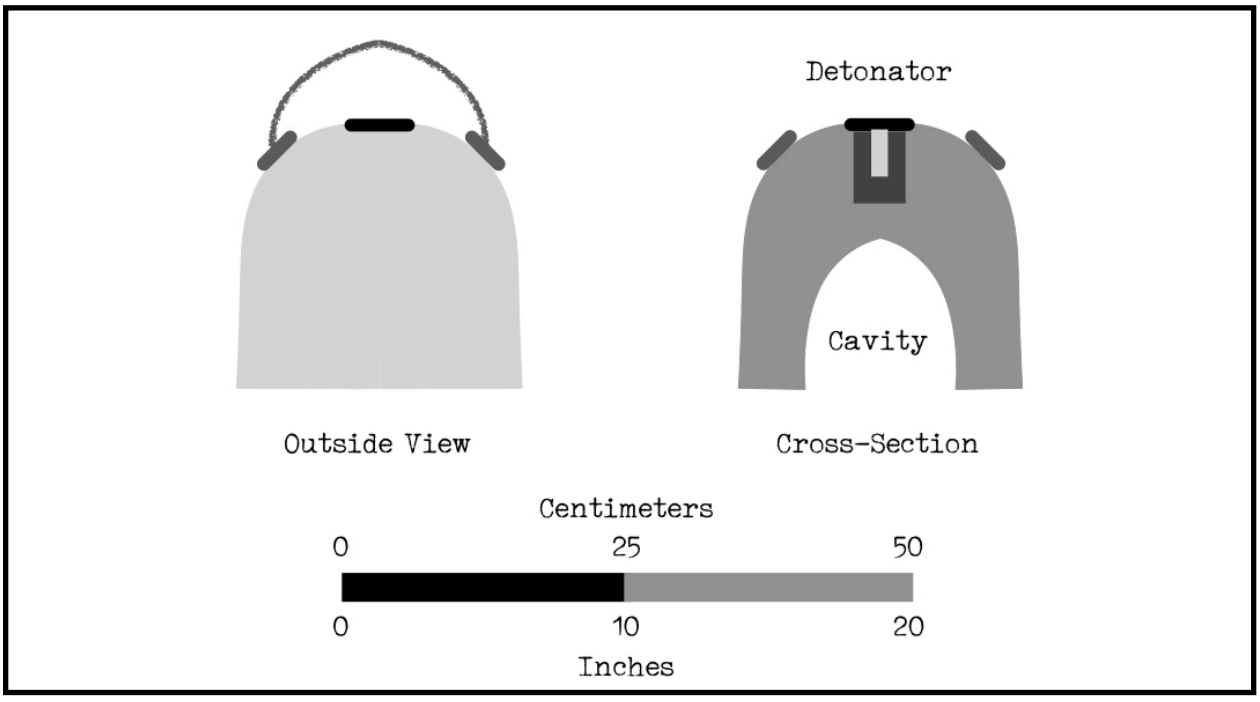
Historical Solution to the First Problem

When you realized that there was no door to the casemate, you began to look for weak spots in the concrete. You quickly came to the conclusion that these could be found in the in the gun embrasures, the openings where the barrels of the 75^{mm} guns stuck out. As two of these were covered with heavy grease, you ordered your men to place the 50-kilogram shaped charge on the third gun. Unfortunately, the large shaped charge was too big to fit in the embrasures.



Placement of the 12.5-kilo Shaped Charge in a Gun Embrasure

You therefore decided to try the smaller (12.5-kilogram) charge. This fit snugly against the steel shield that protected the mounting of the gun. When the charge exploded, it pushed the gun and its mounting into the interior of the casemate, leaving a hole in the embrasure large enough for a man to crawl through.

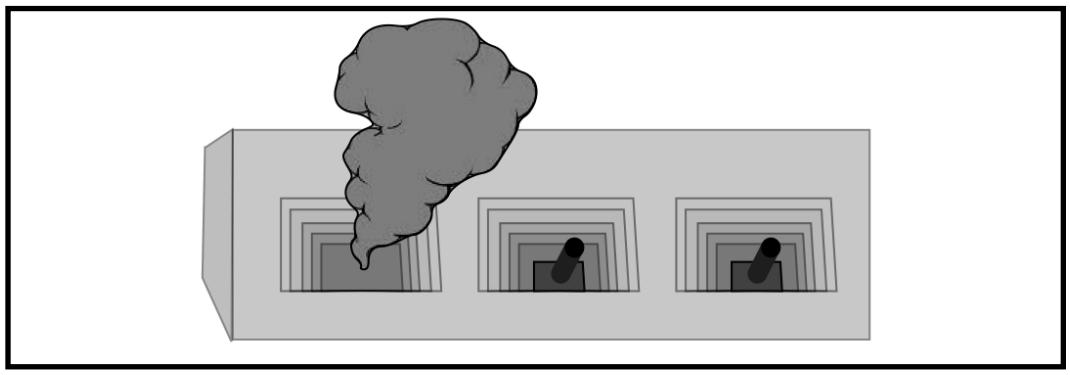


12.5-kilo (27.5 pound) Shaped Charge

The Second Problem

The blast from the charge you placed in the embrasure knocks you down. When you get up, you realize that the same thing happened to some of the other men from your squad. Fortunately, neither you nor any of them are hurt.

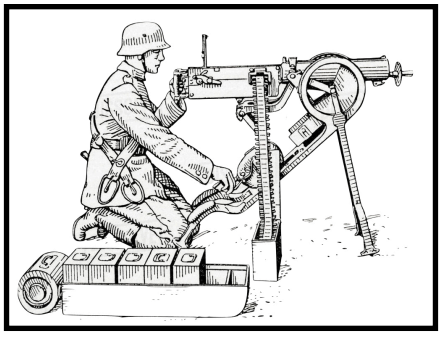
You turn your attention towards Objective 12, where thick black smoke is pouring from the hole in the embrasure. Listening carefully, you hear two sorts of sounds coming from the interior of the casemate. One reminds you of the crackling of wood burning in a fireplace. The other sounds like the moaning of badly wounded men.



Objective 12 after the Explosion of the 12.5-kilogram Shaped Charge

In the distance, two or three hundred meters towards the northeast, you hear the sound of machine guns. This does not strike you as the sort of sounds made by the machine guns (Model 1934) used by Assault Group Granite. Rather, they sound like the old Maxim guns, weapons left over from the Great War of 1914-1918, that you encountered in the earlier phases of your training.

Sergeant Arent, what is going on here? What are your orders to your squad? What other actions will you take?



Maxim Gun (Model 1908)

Historical Solution to the Second Problem

You throw two hand grenades through the hole made by the hollow charge. You then point your submachine gun into the opening and fire a burst. The crackling sound has ended and the smoke coming out of the opening is not as thick as it was before.

You shout to your men. "I'm going in. Stopp and Kupsch, follow me. The rest of you, guard the casemate." You enter the casemate, feet first. Once inside, you move slowly into the darkness, feeling your way forward with one hand while using the other to hold the pistol grip of your submachine gun. After taking a few steps, you encounter a human being. You put the barrel of your submachine gun to his head.

The man mumbles something in a language you don't understand. You grab his collar and drag him into the light. You see that your prisoner is a young Belgian soldier who is, as far as you can see, in a state of confusion. You yell a warning to your squad and push your prisoner through the hole in the embrasure.

Stopp and Kupsch enter the casemate. There they find two more Belgian soldiers, one of whom seems to have been hit by some of the bullets fired by your submachine gun. As Stopp and Kupsch take charge of the prisoners, you turn on your flashlight and continue to explore the casemate.

On the far end of the chamber, you see an open door, with a sliver of light and the echoes of human voices coming up from below. The diagrams and models you studied in your training lead you to believe that you have found a shaft that holds both a stairwell and an elevator leading to the underground portion of the fortress.

You throw a 3-kilogram charge down the shaft. The explosion, which is more powerful than you expected, throws you, Stopp and Kupsch against the interior walls of the casemate. When you recover your wits, you notice that the light is gone, and the voices have gone silent.

Taking the unwounded Belgian soldier with you, you descend the stairs. At the bottom of the shaft, some forty meters below the casemate, you find that the way into the fortress is blocked by a pair of steel doors.** (In the fortifications that you studied in the course of the past six months, such doors were commonly reinforced with sand-bags.)

You return to the surface, where you take stock and think about what to do next. At present, you have two missions to accomplish. One of them is to hold Objective 12. The other is to destroy Objective 10, a steel observation cupola.

**By the standards of 1940, as well as those of today, using a prisoner-of-war as a "human shield" is a war crime. Likewise, exposing a prisoner to unnecessary danger is likewise a clear violation of the laws of war.

Sergeant Arent

How to Use These Materials

The pages that make up this set of case materials can be used in a number of different ways. As a whole, they form a solitaire decision game. As separate pages, they can be used as components of sand-table exercises, interactive slide presentations, or "hip pocket" classes in the field. In, particular, the background section might be used as a before class reading assignment or the basis for an introductory brief. The pages that describe particular problems and their historical solutions can be read aloud, paraphrased, or printed for use as handouts.

The common element in all of these exercises is the maintenance of perspective. That this, whatever else he does, the instructor must take care to ensure that players engage each problem as if they were the protagonist of the case. To that end, the instructor will address each player as "Sergeant Arent" and, in the course of asking questions, make extensive use of second person pronouns. Thus, rather than asking "What should Sergeant Arent do?", the instructor should say, "Sergeant Arent, what are your orders to your squad?"

The perspective to be maintained, moreover, is not just that of the protagonist of the case, but of the protagonist of the point in time before the decision in question was made. Thus, the instructor should take pains to avoid providing information that Sergeant Arent could not reasonably have possessed when he engaged a particular problem. Thus, for example, when he is at the bottom of the elevator shaft/stairwell of Objective 12, he does not know that, on the other side of the closed steel doors that can see, there are piles of sandbags, steel bars, and a second set of doors. Likewise, when he and his squad land on top of the fortress, neither he nor they know that Objective 12 will lack an observation cupola or that Objective 10, which they believed to be an observatory of some sort, was, in fact, a protective cover for a ventilation shaft. Indeed, one of the themes of this set of case materials is: "notwithstanding six months-worth of exquisitely thorough preparations, Sergeant Arent and the Third Squad encountered lots of surprises."

For additional information about decision-forcing cases, decision games of other sorts, and professional military education, please see the various webpages on the other side of the Military Learning Gateway (teachusmc.blogspot.com).