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## Decision-Forcing Cases

A decision-forcing case is, at once, both a case study and a decision game. As a case study, a decision-forcing case provides a reliable description of an event that took place in the real world at some point in the past. As a decision game, it asks players to solve one or more of the problems faced by an actual person who found himself in the middle of that event.

Decision-forcing cases differ from most other case studies in two important respects. Firstly, while most case studies are retrospective, and, as such, look at the events in question after they have taken place, a decision-forcing case is necessarily prospective. That is, the player seeking a solution to the problems at the heart of a decision-forcing case is looking forward in time and, as a result, lacks the benefit of hindsight. Secondly, while most case studies are written from the point-of-view of an objective outside observer, decision-forcing cases place players in the position of someone who is deeply involved in the situation in question.

Decision-forcing cases differ from other decision games in that the majority of the elements of the exercise are drawn from the historical record. That is, the setting is a historical situation, the protagonist is an actual person, and the problem actually occurred. (This is why many decision-forcing cases begin with a description of the time, place, and protagonist.) Moreover, the critique of a decision-forcing case usually begins with the “rest of the story.” Also known as the “reveal” and the “historical solution,” this is a description of the solution employed by the historical protagonist and the results, both immediate and secondary, that followed.

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"History is lived forward but is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was like to know the beginning only."

Cicely Veronica Wedgwood, *William the Silent: William of Nassau, Prince of Orange, 1533-1584*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944), page 35

"It is probably impossible to reconstruct a battle completely. Some information will be absent, some incorrect, and some will contradict."

Colonel Walter Davis, USMC, "Interactive Reading and the Art of War," *The Marine Corps Gazette*, July 2000, page 53

"The history of war is to be regarded and used as the main source for tactical knowledge. One should therefore make frequent reference to historical incidents and, as much as possible, to borrow the scenarios for decision games from military history."

Edouard von Peucker, *Vorschrift über die Methode, den Umfang und die Eintheilung des Unterrichts auf den Königlichen Kriegsschulen* [*Manual for the Methods, Extent, and Arrangement of Instruction at the Royal War Schools*] (Berlin: R. Decker, 1859), page 38

"Not everyone is able to make up, for the sake of decision games, the sort of situations that can be found in war. There is no need, however, for such inventions. Military history itself provides us with them."

Julius von Verdy du Vernois, *Taktische Details aus der Schlacht von Custozza, 24. Juni 1866* [*Tactical Details from the Battle of Custozza, 24 June 1866*], (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1876), page VII





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## Speculative Decision Games

Also known as a “fictional decision game,” a “speculative decision game” is a decision-forcing exercise in which some parts of the problem have been made up. In a few instances, speculative decision games are pure products of the imagination of the author. Most of the time, however, the authors of such problems combine real world elements with things that have been made up. The most common type of speculative decision game, for example, superimposes an imaginary tactical situation on a real piece of terrain.

As a rule, speculative decision games are less complicated, less complex, and less sophisticated than decision games based upon real events. For this reason, they are well-suited to the teaching of fundamental facts and basic conventions, things such as the technical characteristics of weapons, foundational techniques, and elementary concepts. The simple, straightforward character of speculative decision games also makes them useful for introducing more experienced Marines to new weapons, novel organizations, and unfamiliar enemies.

Skillful instructors are able to introduce a little bit of “fog and friction” into speculative decision games. The degree to which they can do this, however, is limited by the ability of players to suspend disbelief. Marines who know that miscommunications, navigation errors, equipment failures, and shortages of various kinds are commonplace in war will, nonetheless, regard them as out-of-place in a fictional decision game. Indeed, they will look upon such attempts to add realism to a fictional decision game as unfair, improper, and, strange to say, unrealistic.

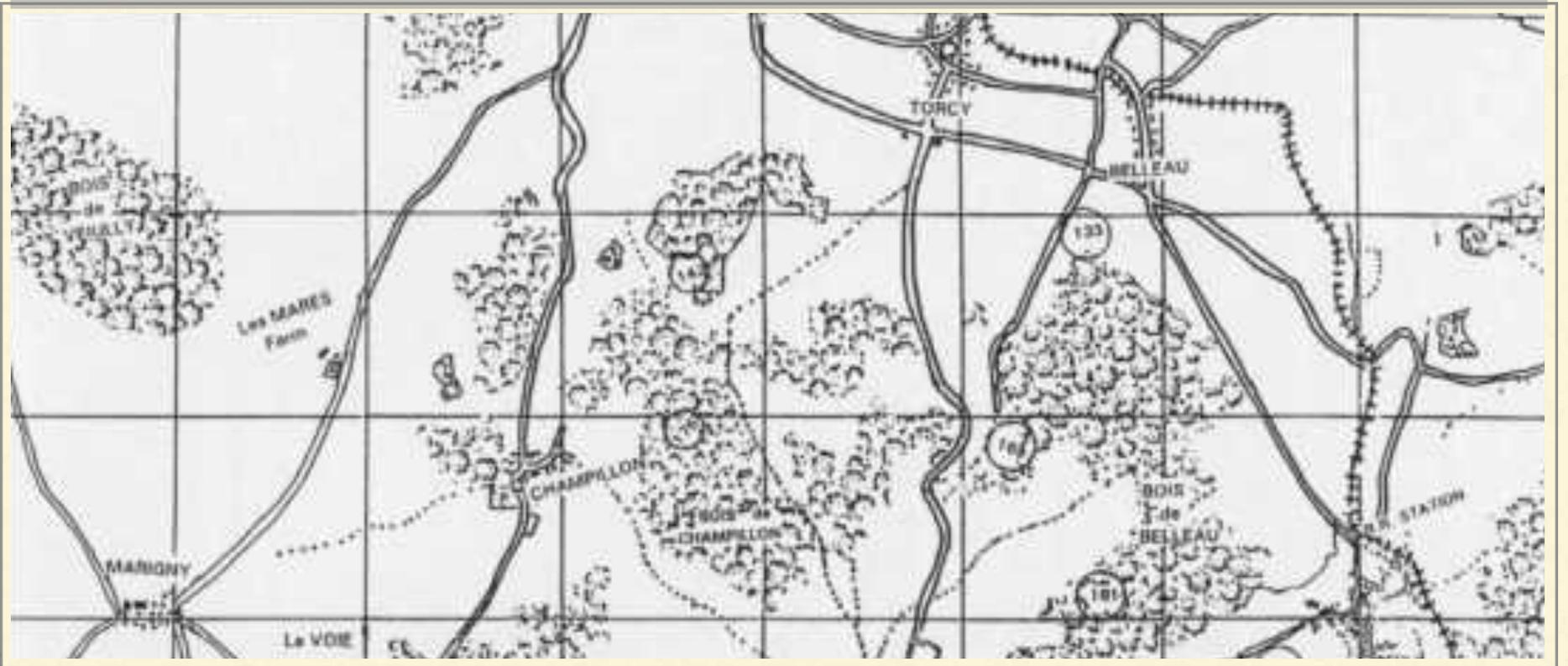
“Only an expert, who possesses a thorough professional knowledge, who is master of his subject, and who has the facility for presenting it skillfully, will be able to produce imaginary scenes which faithfully represent reality and which are free from objectionable features.”

William Balck (Walter Krueger, translator), *Tactics: Volume 1, Introduction and Formal Tactics of Infantry*, (Ft. Leavenworth: US Cavalry Association, 1915), page 10

“To give full, detailed, and precise information would not be war-like. In actual warfare information usually is scant, indefinite, and often unreliable. It is the commander’s business to sift the probable from the improbable, the true from the false, and to shape his course of action from his own deductions.”

M.W. Meyerhardt, “The War Game,” *The Pedagogical Seminary*, Volume XXII, 1915, page 507





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## Setting the Stage

A decision game begins with a description of the situation in which the problem (or problems) at the heart of the game take place. The amount of information provided in this “setting of the stage” will depend upon the background knowledge of the players. Those who know something about the historical event in which a decision-forcing case is set will need less information than those who are new to that particular time and place. Likewise, players who are familiar with the units, equipment, or location depicted in a speculative decision game can make do with a shorter introduction than those who have yet to learn about those things.

As a rule, the setting of the stage should be as brief as possible. To this end, it should contain nothing that players already know, nothing that they can figure out for themselves, and nothing that will be provided at a later stage in the game. In other words, rather than providing players with all of the facts and figures that might be useful to them in the course of the game, the setting of the stage should only provide the knowledge that they need to get started.

All particulars included in the setting of the stage should be provided from the point of view of the protagonist of the exercise. Thus, to begin with, it should consist entirely of things that the protagonist knew, or, could reasonably have known, prior to making the first decision of the game. It should also be phrased in a way that reminds players that much of the information provided is subjective, incomplete, and, at times, less than entirely reliable.

"I found that the ordinary form of our tactical problems committed two deadly sins, relieving the student from the greatest difficulties of his tactical task in warfare of movement. The information of the enemy was about 80 per cent too complete. And the requirement called for his decision at a pictured moment, when the real problem is usually when to make a decision and not what the decision should be."

George C. Marshall, letter to Stuart Heintzelman, 4 December, 1933, quoted in Forrest C. Pogue, *Marshal: Education of a General, 1880-1939*, (New York: Viking, 1963), page 251

"He hammered incessantly on the theme of simplicity: no long lectures containing only school-approved doctrine, no exercises dependent upon possessing elaborate maps, no beautifully detailed orders stifling initiative, no overblown intelligence estimates that harried commanders had no time to read, and no field procedures so complex that tired citizen-soldiers could not perform them. He said, 'get down to the essentials, make clear the real difficulties, and expunge the bunk, complications and ponderosities.'"

Larry I. Bland, "George C. Marshall and the Education of Army Leaders," *Military Review*, October 1988, page 34.

