

Comfortable War Gaming: Reflections from an ‘Old Timer’ (Part the First) By Stuart Asquith

EDITOR’S NOTE: Stuart Asquith is an Honorary Member of the Solo Wargamers Association and a noted wargaming author. This article was originally published in *The Foreign Correspondent*, Ralph Weaver editor, and is re-published here with the author’s kind permission.

This is not intended to be a ‘when Mars bars were thruppence’ type article, but I was sat out in the garden the other day with a coffee, pondering on many things such as why is our garden has seemingly become the slug capital of the world, whether or not Gloucestershire will ever get the hang of playing cricket again and where your lap goes to when you stand up.

Whilst in this reflective mood, my mind inevitably turned to war gaming. I’ve been in the hobby since the 1960s, some 50 years or so now. In my view, the hobby has changed radically during this period, but to all intents and purposes I am still in the sixties – or at best, the early 1970s - in my approach to war gaming.

Perhaps I should offer a few remarks on this to explain why and how I go about the hobby these days – November 2012 as I write.

Books

We’ve moved house a few times during our married life, but no more than anyone else I don’t suppose. I find that moving house can have a very cathartic effect on the hobby, or rather, the paraphernalia that the hobby attracts.

Books are a particular case in point. As well as buying books at shows and through various dealers’ catalogues, I was in the very fortunate position of being the editor of two hobby related magazines (*Practical Wargamer* 1987-1999 and *Regiment* 1994-2001, plus the *Observation Post* 1981-2001 and *Soldier Box* 1990-2001 columns in *Military Modelling*) for some 20 years and amassed a fairly wide ranging library in the process, or rather I would have, had we not of moved house during that period – it’s amazing how many people suddenly like you when you’re dishing out freebies.

But no matter how many times we moved, some books have always stayed with me and it is these titles that, since their purchase, have been my guide and inspiration during my many years in the hobby; they have shaped my war gaming and indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that they have been formative in how I go about the hobby, they’re like old friends in a way.

These ‘comfortable’ titles are probably predictable enough; *War Games* (1962), *Tackle Model Soldiers This Way* (1963), *Advanced War Games* (1969), *War Games Campaigns* (1970), *Introduction to Battle Gaming* (1969), *Charge! Or How to Play War Games* (1971), *The War Game* (1971), *Practical Wargaming* (1974) and *Little Wars* (1970 edition). Note the publication dates gentle reader, nothing for nearly 40 years...

I find the style and content of these books very much to my liking, presenting both the type of rules I like and scenarios that I enjoy. For me *Charge!* is the outstanding example, but I have also used the three sets of rules (ancient, horse and musket, modern) featured in Donald Featherstone's *Tackle Model Soldiers This Way* (Stanley Paul 1963) on and off for many years now; these are very simple rules which provide for interesting, fast moving games – just what I like.

In every walk of life I suppose, one truly seminal event happens which dictates how subsequent events take place. In my view, for war gamers there has been not one three such happenings namely the publication of Donald Featherstone's *War Games* (1962), Brigadier Young and Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson's *Charge!* (1971) and Charles Grant's *The War Game* (1971).

Without doubt *War Games* set the scene, brought war gaming into centre stage and well, it would not perhaps be an exaggeration to say, started it all. The fans of *Charge!* and *The War Game* are legion and will happily debate the merits of either or both of these masterly titles. Charlie Wesencraft's *Practical Wargaming* (Elmfield Press 1974) is often overlooked, but I have had some good games with the rules he suggests for a number of periods. Every year Charlie, Terry Wise and I used to get together for 'Triad', a long weekend's war gaming at each other's home in rotation and we used the host's 'house rules', so I became familiar with Charlie's style and also the rules by Terry, most of which he eventually published commercially, with some success.

But it's not just the war gaming books. Does anyone out there remember the Rene North uniform books published by Almark (does anyone remember Almark?) *Regiments at Waterloo* (1971) and *Soldiers of the Peninsular War* (1972). These featured colour depictions of uniforms, supported by monochrome illustrations and an informative text. Then there was the extensive series of uniform books written and illustrated by Liliane and Fred Funcken, once eagerly purchased, then generally ridiculed, then back in favour; I've lost track...

I'm also rather fond – if that's the right word – of my well thumbed and now dog eared copy of Phil Barker's simple and straight forward *The Armies and Enemies of Imperial Rome* (Wargames Research Group 1973). In those days, Miniature Figurines used to base a range of their 25mm figures on the very basic illustrations contained in these readily assimilated works. Happy, simpler days.

Magazines

Here Donald Featherstone's *Wargamer's Newsletter* comes to the fore – I still have some copies (particularly the one with me and my ECW set up on the front cover – for shame I hear you cry). Its publication was eagerly awaited and I for one made myself a bit of a nuisance by pestering my local newsagent every month when I thought it should have been on the shelf by now. Then there was John Tunstill's *Miniature Warfare* magazine, *Meccano Magazine* which sort of evolved into *Military Modelling* and dear old *Airfix Magazine*; there hasn't been the like since, although Hal Thinglum's *Midwest Association Newsletter* and *Lone Warrior* from the Solo Wargamers' Association came close to the *Wargamer's Newsletter* homely style.

Figures

Way back when, war game figures tended to be 20mm, or perhaps a rather diminutive 25mm compared to the huge figures of today.

Airfix offered a growing number of boxed sets of plastic figures; the positive impact of Airfix figures and kits on the hobby should, in my humble opinion, neither be over looked nor under rated. Jack Alexander provided an extensive range of 20mm figures under the Jacklex banner, those by Miniature Figurines – particularly their ‘S’ range and its predecessor Alberken – always seemed to carry telegraph poles for spears and lances, Hinchliffe initially only made artillery pieces, Hinton Hunt sometimes gave you as much ‘flash’ as there was figure, Douglas Miniatures had some lovely figures, as did Phoenix. The Greenwood and Ball range was extensive and Bill Lamming produced some very attractive, if chunky, figures. Warrior Miniatures were an excellent range and still hold great appeal for me.

For the rich there were the 30mm Tradition and Suren ‘Willie’ figures, while at the other end of the price range was the plastic Spencer Smith series. Peter Laing had an acquired taste range of 15mm figures and equipment and was renowned for a mail order service that was second to none. Doubtless there were others, I’ve no wish to tread on toes, but the above have particularly preserved slots in my memory.

I have some rather special and treasured figures dating from this time here in a showcase in the study; these include a 30mm Suren figure of a mounted general, who I painted as General Soubise (taken from *Charge!* who it is said had ‘*Demonstrated his inability to win a military action, or even to take part in one; he owed his selection to his handsome uniform, rather than any unsuspected talent*’) and who has commanded my 18th century Electoral army for more than 40 years, then there is a 15mm Boudicca in a two horse chariot with driver, made specially for me by Peter Laing, a Hinchliffe 25mm figure of Prince Rupert, given to me by Peter Gilder who designed and painted the figure and McAbre, a Spencer Smith artilleryman converted into an executioner by my good friend Charles Grant and presented by him to me on one occasion with much unnecessary merriment after a particularly poor showing by my Soubise led army many years ago...

Paints

When it came to paints, enamels ruled, usually those by Humbrol. Airfix also had a range of paints in screw top jars and later in tins, but it was Humbrol who generally held sway. The first acrylic paints came from Japan and smelled so strongly that as I recall they actually made the figure one painted smell as well.

Terrain

The terrain and buildings incorporated in my war games were mostly either kits from the Airfix ‘trackside’ series of useful buildings, or sometimes the plastic and card kits made by Faller, supported by the Britains and Merit ranges of plastic trees, hedges, fences and stone walls. I rarely if ever attempted scratch building.

Specialised items of scenery could be found in the Bellona range of vac-formed plastic items of scenery designed by Terry Wise. Some were small cut out items such as lengths of walling or river sections, while others such as a trench system could be used as stand alone items, but all required painting. Airfix provided forts, gun emplacements and some buildings, plus the items from their range for railway modellers. Terry wrote some terrific articles in Airfix magazine in which he described how he converted the given buildings into something very different.

Then there was the Triang series of pre-painted 'rubberised' buildings which were lovely, but which tended to powder/crumble away over the years and constant use.

I still use similar scenery today, laid out on a green baize cloth on the dining room table. My hills are formed from individual contours, irregularly cut and painted from one inch thick wooden pieces (actually intended by the manufacturers to be bread boards or chopping boards...), which will stack on top of one another to provide various configurations.

My trees today remain the Merit plastic deciduous, poplar or pine offerings. These I have fixed to card bases in various shapes to provide either instant 'woods' or a solitary copse as required. Rivers are still Bellona sections and although their paint is fading these days, they remain 'fit for purpose'. Bridges are either Bellona or home made, but my houses etc. are assembled from pre-printed card from a number of companies such as Village Green.

Shops

Way back when there was still a fair number of war game shops; Minifig Skytrex in Gillingham Street just around the corner from Victoria station was a mecca for war gamers working in London, then there was the treasure trove that was the Model Shop in Harrow, the Garrison in South Harrow, the Northern Garrison in Skipton. All provided good ranges of figures and other necessary paraphernalia. John Tunstill's shop in Lambeth near the Imperial War Museum offered a good selection of figures, but most of them seemed to be perpetually out of stock; to visit Ted Suren's shop in Lower Sloane Street was an experience in itself and the upstairs war games department at Tradition in Piccadilly was a pleasurable compulsion. I know that there are still a few model shops, but are there any 'walk in' war game shops left, I don't think so.

So?

So, what was so good about those far off days that has left me rooted there while surrounded by the sheer volume and quality of today's hobby products? Is it simply that these were my formative years and, just as anyone has fond memories of their first car, I have retained happy and comfortable memories of those now far off days. Have I made my case or is it just my age?

It seemed to me that the hobby was a lot simpler then. Rules were shorter and much, much cheaper without all the accompanying paraphernalia and didn't include reams of factors that needed to be considered, if it wasn't in the rules, dice for it and go with the outcome.

Army lists hadn't been invented and uniform books were more general and straight forward. The figures were simpler and could generally stand on their own bases as supplied without the obligatory need for re-basing. The hobby seemed smaller and friendlier, not the giant commercial beast that I feel it has become these days. This is not necessarily a bad thing, it's just not for me. Most – but not all, it must be said – of my long term friends and acquaintances come from these early years and no, I haven't named them for fear of being accused of shameless name dropping, although the clues are there I do suppose.

I like simple rules that let you get on with the game rather than frantically leaf through page after page in search of a particular plus or minus factor. I also like the clean cut, basic style of early figures and have a total aversion to the modern trend by manufacturers to provide variations of pose within a figure type – 'for greater realism'.

The word ‘simple’ has occurred a few times in the above and I think that probably sums up my affinity with the hobby as it was some 50 years ago, it was much more ‘comfortable’.

As a result my war gaming today – figures, terrain and rules is set firmly in the late 1960s to early 1970s.

I like my hobby to be simple, life is complicated, let the hobby be the counter point to this.

Next time: More on figures, rules and so forth...

Comfortable War Gaming (continued) ***(Part the second)*** ***By Stuart Asquith***

In the first part of this article, I looked at the books, magazines, and terrain that have stayed with me over the years. In this part I intend to concentrate more on the figures and rules that have sparked the hobby for me.

Scenery

Firstly however, a word about scenery for later 19th century actions. I feel that the terrain needs to say ‘This is not a Napoleonic battle’. This I achieve to my own satisfaction by using some industrial buildings, usually the ready-made and painted, straight-from-the-box variety such as Hornby’s ‘Trackside’ series, intended for model railway enthusiasts.

Now, I am certainly not an industrial historian (nor a particularly industrious one for that matter) and I do not know if such-and-such a building selected from the series could have actually existed in say 1870, but I don’t worry over much about such detail. I aim for the overall ‘look of the thing’ – a few industrial buildings, may be a railway station and certainly a length of railway track sets the scene nicely for me.

A few vehicles can be added, as well as perhaps some railway rolling stock – all purchased cheaply at toy fairs or bargain basement counters in model shops.

Choose well and there’s nothing needs doing to such models, just place them straight on the table top. Another item I tend to utilise is the telegraph pole, it’s amazing how a row of these on the table really does say ‘not Napoleonic’.

Figures

I have previously mentioned the Airfix sets of HO/OO figures. The first period in which all three service arms – artillery, cavalry and infantry – were represented by this company was for the American Civil War. Numerous conversions were possible, with the resultant figures being used to represent either different units, or to serve in different periods such as the Franco-Prussian War. I well remember a fascinating series in *Airfix Magazine* (perhaps the commercial magazine of its time) in 1970 in which R C Gibson suggested conversions of Airfix figures into types suitable for the Seven Week War of 1866.

Various other sets of figures, often designed by John Niblett, such as the French Foreign Legion, World War British and German infantry were of great use for wars in the latter half on the 19th century – and beyond.

I fondly recall re-creating Don Featherstone's 'A Punitive Expedition to the Pushna Valley (North West Frontier of India 1936)' as featured in his book *War Game Campaigns* (Stanley Paul 1970). Airfix WW2 Eighth Army figures formed the British troops, while the Bedouin Arabs provided the opposition as indeed they did for Don in the original action. The Airfix Foreign Legion Fort provided the focal point for the British assault and assorted vehicles, possibly including the 1/87th scale Roco Minitanks offerings, were pressed into service.

Today's purist and – not meant unkindly may I say – spoilt war gamers may balk at such 'liberties' with figures, but in those days (say mid 1960s to early 1970s) it was the norm rather than the exception to adapt 'almost suitable' figures into scenarios outside their correct historical period.

It was around this time that metal figures began to make an appearance. Such companies as Alberken (1964), Douglas Miniatures (1967), Garrison (1968), Greenwood and Ball (1959 [20mm]), Hinton Hunt (1964), Lamming (1968), Les Higgins (1967) among others and Miniature Figurines brought out their 'S Range' series.

Spencer Smith plastic figures appeared about this time and the talented Jack Alexander also started producing some beautiful little figures – and lots of supporting equipment – with his Jacklex range in 1968.

Now I do not intend this to be simply a catalogue of past and present figures, so I'll stop there. Suffice to say as the years went on, more and more figures came on to the market and interestingly today 20mm is still a popular size of figure with many plastic and metal figure ranges being available, although perhaps overshadowed by their huge 28mm comrades.

Which brings me to the last point. As someone who has metaphorically speaking, returned to the 1960s/1970s for their war gaming enjoyment, I was really pleased, nay delighted, to learn that experienced war gamer and dedicated 20mm specialist John Cunningham has made the Douglas Miniatures ranges available once more.

This means that now, instead of continually haunting the various buying and selling websites and/or bring and buy stall at conventions seeking these or second hand Hinton Hunt or Miniature Figurine's 'S Range' figures, I can purchase newly cast Douglas figures from John at very reasonable prices. For further information may I suggest you contact John at Cunnjoh@aol.com.

Peter Johnstone still has the Jacklex figures and some of the Spencer Smith ranges on sale, but alas the latter are no longer available in plastic – contact Peter via www.spencersmithminiatures.co.uk.

I also have fond memories of the Warrior Miniatures figures – still in production today under genial John Holt (see www.warrioronline.demon.co.uk), while Tradition still produce their 25mm ranges amongst others but they are now only available from Sweden or via Peter Johnstone. I'm sure that other figures were available, but I think this has been sufficient to demonstrate my continuing interest in typical figures of the period, some of which, as noted, are still available today.

Another range that always attracts my attention is the 42mm series from Irregular Miniatures and I have been known to play many a table top action using Britains 54mm traditional toy soldiers – but that, as they say, really is another story.

Raising Armies

Now when it comes to raising armies, well, actually I tend not to.

Instead, I find that creating forces for particular scenarios prevents me simply adding division after division, battery after battery.

Such projects have achievable targets in terms of financial outlay and painting, as well as being relatively easy to store the necessary figures and equipment.

I have four favourite war games, namely The Battle of Hook's Farm (*Little Wars*), The Action at Blasthof Bridge (*Charge!*), Sawmill Village (*Chance Encounter, Scenarios for Wargamers*) and The Battle of Sittangbad (*Charge!*) and what I do is to raise sufficient forces for any given 'army' to fight as either side in any of these actions. These actions can be set in any period, be it Marlburian, Franco-Prussian or Great War, or whatever one chooses.

Hook's Farm for instance as initially written and recorded by H G Wells needs three artillery pieces, 48 infantry and 25 cavalry a side, organised as you wish. To give another example Blasthof Bridge requires 13 cavalry on one side, 18 on the other, along with 43 infantry matched against 34, both sides having two artillery pieces and a couple of generals. Sittangbad requires the largest number of troops, but I still amass sufficient for say the British/French or Russian Crimean forces for example to fight as either side of this battle.

To continue this theme, if I wish to raise say a mid 19th century Danish army with which to represent either of the contending forces at Sittangbad, I know I need to amass a unit of light cavalry, two of heavy cavalry, a light infantry battalion, four infantry battalions, six guns and a few engineers in order for it to be used as either the 'Imperial' army or the 'Electoral' army for the battle. (May I refer you to *Charge!* for more details).

That said, I should point out that my 20/25mm mid to late 19th century period units are not large, infantry formations have 10-12 figures, cavalry units are four figures strong and a gun plus four gunners represents an artillery battery.

Also, I don't worry over much about historical context. For example Marcus Hinton didn't make Russian Crimean cavalry, so my Hinton Hunt Russian infantry of that period are happily supported by later period Jacklex cavalry, Warrior Napoleonic Cossacks and, latterly, Douglas Miniatures Crimean Russian cavalry and gunners, these last named manning Airfix American Civil War artillery pieces. It's probably worth mentioning here in passing that the plastic 1/72nd scale H&T Russian Militia (8099) and Russian Cossacks (8006) are extremely useful in this context as additional types.

Also, my Tradition Franco-Prussian War infantry chaps are supported by plastic Spencer Smith cavalymen in the form of Napoleonic hussars (painted for both sides to suit the later period) and lifeguards (painted as Bavarian cuirassiers), along with the company's lancers of a more indeterminate, but probably post-Napoleonic, period, again for both sides. The Prussian commanders are from Calpe,

those for French from the Perry's Carlist Wars range, the guns and crews are of American Civil War vintage.

You can probably see from this that the memories and 'make do and mend/adapt' trends created in the early days of my hobby are still very much with me, even after all the intervening years.

Rules

The rules I favour are straight forward, uncomplicated and easy to use.

One of my favourite sets first appeared as 'Rules for Horse-and-Musket Type War Game' in *Tackle Model Soldiers This Way* by Donald Featherstone (Stanley Paul 1963) and with the full written permission of Don, I reproduce my take on them below:-

Rules for a Hook's Farm Type War Game with Toy Soldiers

(Based on rules suggested in *Tackle Model Soldiers This Way* by Don Featherstone)

Movement

Infantry 6 inches

Cavalry 12 inches

Guns 6 inches

Half rate up hills, through woods or marshes, three inch bonus when moving on roads.

Infantry Firing

One dice for every five figures (remainders ignored)

Short range 0 – 6 inches dice -1

Medium range 6 - 12 inches dice -2

Long range 12 – 18 inches dice -3

Remaining score is the number of enemy figures killed.

Artillery Firing

One dice for each gun

Short range 0 – 12 inches dice -1

Medium range 12 - 18 inches dice -2

Long range 18 - 24 inches dice -3

Remaining score is the number of enemy figures killed.

Gun Firing on Gun

Roll one dice, to score a hit a 5 or 6 are required.

If achieved, roll another dice, a 5 or 6 knocks the gun out, a 4 kills a crew member.

In all cases of firing, if target is under cover, then a further -1 from dice score.

Gun Crew Members

Guns have crews of four figures.

The effect of guns firing is reduced by -1 for every crew member killed.

To replace a crew member, move a figure up to gun at normal speed, the following game turn the figure is deemed to be part of the crew.

Mêlée

Cavalry count two points each, infantry one point each. When troops advance to within one inch of each other a mêlée ensues; both sides count up their points value and roll one dice for every five points involved (remainders ignored). The force making the actual attack gains a ‘shock bonus’ of +1 per dice.

If a unit is on higher ground or behind cover then the ‘shock bonus’ will not be given to the attackers.

When the mêlée is over, each side rolls one dice and multiplies the number of their survivors by the dice score. The lower retires directly backwards six inches for infantry and 12 inches for cavalry.

Note: There are no units, there are no morale rules.

There are other rules – those in *Charge!* are an outstanding example, I have used these for my 18th century battles ever since the book was published in 1971, they have long since been committed to memory. Speaking briefly of the 18th century, the popular rules for that period that were first set out in *The War Game* by Charles Grant (1971) have been reproduced and expanded by Charles S Grant in a new publication *The War Game Rules* (2012). Charles has also produced *The War Game Companion* (2008) which expands many aspects of his late father’s book. Several of the suggested rules in Charlie Wesencraft’s *Practical Wargaming* (The Elmfield Press 1974) have great merit and are well worth a study.

If you want to shell out around £30 for a set of rules, then feel free, but you know, you really don’t have to – don’t worry about phases or factors, go back to simple enjoyment.