

Putting things in perspective

Observations by, and opinions from, a solo wargamer

By Chris Hahn

Cause for Concern?

Figuring it would be prudent to take a brief sabbatical from Ancient concerns, at the end of June/start of July 2013, I put together a "little" BP (Black Powder) scenario set in the Peninsula. Initially, things went well. There was the traditional "research," troop preparation, landscaping, etc. I was looking forward to documenting the tabletop and sending it along to George and Rich for their consideration. My alternate plan was to proof it several times and post it to the files section of the Yahoo BP Forum.

Perhaps I was thinking too far ahead or perhaps the scenario was too large for one person to handle effectively, but when turn three (or was it four?) rolled around, I found my interest flagging.

Believing that I had a good plan and had only failed in the execution, I revised the parameters a little bit and launched version 2.0, using Arty Conliffe's Shako rules. Imagine my discomfiture, when, at around turn four (again!), the wheels started to come off. Frustrated but not completely freaked out by this development, I switched gears (or more correctly, scales) and attempted a grander version of the same basic scenario. This time, I used Volley & Bayonet - Road to Glory, and borrowed heavily from the orders for Salamanca, which were found in a recent (2012) issue of *Miniature Wargames* magazine, BHH (Before Henry Hyde). Incidentally, the terrain for the fictional scenario was adapted from a 1991 issue of *The Courier*. (It's a bit scary to find that I have wargame publications older than my six nieces and nephews!)

Hoping that this third time would prove a charm, I proceeded with the usual preparation of troops and terrain. Though tempted to tinker with the rules, I did not, guessing that this proclivity might have contributed to my problems with the first two tries at the scenario set in the Peninsula. Unfortunately, three in a batch proved to be bad luck, and this grand-tactical attempt failed on or around the third turn as well.

Suffice to say, my confidence was more than a little shaken by this string of cancelled wargames. And of course, the questions multiplied and grew in the nagging power. Had I lost my solo wargaming "mojo"? Was I not as full-versed in the selected rules as I should have been? Was I suffering from some form (as yet undiagnosed by the AMA, and even if it is one day, I very much doubt if insurance will cover it) of Napoleonic wargaming attention deficit disorder?

Unable and more to the point, unwilling to address these questions, I proceeded to shift my focus to the ACW. Perhaps a change of conflict and of scenery was what I needed?

Forthwith, a fictional scenario pitting A. P. Hill's III Corps against the formations of

Generals Sickles and Howard was set up. Fire and Fury, not the regimental version, but the original brigade rule book was used. Once again, things started out well enough. The Yankees were learning a hard lesson about the cost of making a frontal assault against a Confederate defensive line. And then ... you guessed, the wheels on this Maryland-owned train went off the tracks.

A little depressed and more disturbed with this latest attempt and "failure"/loss of interest/or whatever it is -- I haven't figured out a name for it yet, I was not very taken with the idea of trying again, even if I had to go back a thousand years in time to get my wargaming right. Yes, yes ... I am familiar with the saying that goes: "If at first you don't succeed, keep on trying until you do succeed." I am also familiar with the adage, "Once burned, twice shy." Interestingly enough, before beginning to play the very short third scenario, I thought about referencing the commonly used quote on insanity. The reader may be familiar with it: "Doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result." I recalled hearing this on an episode of *The West Wing* (it was an exchange, witty, of course, and charged with just a hint of romantic potential, between Josh and Donna). Wanting to reference the original speaker, I was surprised to find that the quote is often misused. Interested readers are encouraged to check out this link:

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/in-therapy/200907/the-definition-insanity-is>

Anyway. To make a potentially long "story" short, it appears quite evident that I've hit something like a writer's block with respect to wargaming. More disconcerting is the impression that I've lost a certain degree of interest. I'm not sure if this is a result of overexposure (or overindulgence) as I've recently extended my TMP membership for a full year and have recently become a member of The Society of Ancients. I certainly don't intend to over-think it here, and I sincerely hope that the reader does not think that I'm making a mountain out of a molehill, but it's fair to state that wargaming (and all that goes with it) is and has been a big part of my life, of who I am.

The Year(Show) So Far ...

It would be more appropriate to wait until the end of November or first week of December -- as opposed to the 20th day of August -- to reflect upon the soon to be history year. Given the recent run of "bad luck," however, it seems a prudent course of action to put down the dice and ruler for at least a few months and relieve myself of what may be simply a case of self-imposed pressure. (I was tempted to insert some horrible pun about being "gun shy" with regard to setting up yet another wargame, but resisted!)

Okay then, bad news first. In my "discontinued projects" file folder on my laptop, there are 23 items. The first (dated January) was an Armati idea with the very rough working title of "A Very Norman Civil War -- Brother Against Brother in the 11th Century." With the exception of the recent Napoleonic snafus, the majority of these discontinued projects (half-baked ideas and/or scenarios?) were set in the Ancient or Medieval periods. Rule selections ranged from *Impetus* to *Might of Arms* to *Hordes and Heroes* to *Mr. Priestley's Hail Caesar*.

On the plus side, I did have five articles/reports appear in Issues 181, 182, and 183 of *Lone Warrior*. Three other pieces went up on the Miscellaneous Page of the LW Blog. There were two battle reports posted to the Files section of the Yahoo Hail Caesar forum. Five ðwrite upsö (four to the Ancient Battle Reports and one to Medieval Battle Reports) were posted to TMP.

A very rough averaging of my production suggests that I am ðflailing aboutö around three times each month, while ðstriking goldö almost twice a month. This second average is more accurately stated at about one report a month since the articles appearing in the printed journal were gamed and written a long time ago.

Looking at the larger picture, I can take some small measure of satisfaction from having had 100 articles published, in a variety of publications, since 1993. Granted, averaging five finished reports a year is not great accomplishment. Then again, 100 published pieces (the number may increase to 102 if my submitted material is accepted at the editorial desks of WI and MWwBG - fingers are crossed!) is certainly nothing to sneeze at.

Or is it? Casting a critical eye over this body of work, Iðve come nowhere near to making the impact that individuals like Featherstone, Asquith, Grant, Priestley, Barker, Thinglum, Hilton, Wally Simon, Arty Conliffe, George Knapp, et al., have made. Then again, I don't believe that was my initial motivation. I simply wanted to wargame and write about my wargames.

I like to think Iðve done a fair job of keeping track of my writing. Over the course of the last 20 years, I have seen approximately 1,057 pages of narrative and maps appear in a number of journals and publications. How many hours of wargaming and writing/typing does that add up to?

It's impossible to document the exact number of hours Iðve spent on(in?) the hobby. For sake of general argument, let us say that it takes one hour to type a page of text or prepare a map. Let us also postulate that for each typed page, there are two hours of game time and preparation time. Each finished page of wargame report or related article, therefore, takes something like three hours to fabricate. What about the hours spent prior to the fall of 1993, when my first piece was published in the pages of MWAN? Again, it's impossible to offer an accurate assessment, but it is enjoyable to think back to my early days in the hobby. (I'm not sure if I should count the hours spent playing with the Marx sets -- Fort Apache, Gettysburg?, the Alamo, and the set for the Revolution -- gosh, but that was fun!) As Iðve related in previous posts and in previous submissions to *Lone Warrior*, I ðcut my wargaming teethö playing at battle in World War II. When the mini-course ended, I was given the rank of Colonel. (Not at all bad for a 12-year-old!) Oh how we chuckled when the one boy in our ðclassö was given the rank of ðCook!ö From there, it was on to Airfix Napoleonic boxed sets and ACW figures. As I recall, I drafted some of the AWI figures to fight in my Napoleonic battles. It did not matter at all that none of the figures were painted and mounted on landscaped movement trays and deployed on superbly crafted terrain.

If pressed to name a figure, I would hazard a guess of about 2,000 hours spent on the hobby between the ages of 12 and 28. (This works out to 125 hours a year, which provides for a reasonable monthly average dedicated to actively pursuing or passively enjoying the hobby.) Adding this to my as rough of an estimate for the total hours spent writing about my involvement, and I wind up with a total figure (estimate, it has to be emphasized) of around 5,150 hours.

Based on this very, very rough math, it appears that I have at least 5,000 more hours -- and probably closer to 6,000 or 7,000 hours -- to go before I can be considered a world-class expert in *writing* about wargaming. (Note that this rating -- or is it ranking? -- is very different from being considered an expert in or authority on wargaming or miniature wargaming. This latter identification is something that I will never achieve, as it is my practice to wargame without using miniatures.) At the risk of repeating myself, the recent humbling experiences of this month and July are proof enough that I need to practice wargaming more. As I apparently [accidentally?] linked my participation in the hobby to my writing, it looks like I have another 20 years in which I need to produce 100 more articles. A number of years ago, I read Malcolm Gladwell's "Outliers: The Story of Success." He talks about a "rule" of 10,000 hours in the book. For whatever reason, the "rule" is often misquoted.)

Perhaps I should try, at least for a brief interval, to separate my gaming from my writing? I mean, just because I set something up on my smallish table doesn't mean that the whole world has to read about it. This might be interesting and/or difficult, as the "marriage" has been going strong -- admittedly, with various bumps in the road (meaning articles or reports that were not that good - however one defines that subjective term) -- for 20 years.

What's Next?

Having just finished Guelzo's excellent study of Gettysburg, I would, normally, be spending the majority of my spare moments preparing some sort of ACW scenario based on the famous battle. (In the complete horror that was the engagement, I still find it quite amusing that Professor Guelzo noted instances of Union artillery crews running laps around their guns and flapping their arms like chickens or geese in order to disperse the accumulated smoke!) With a string of four successive incomplete scenarios on record, however, it may be wise -- to say nothing of restorative -- to take a sabbatical for a few months or perhaps longer.

This does not mean that I'm going cold turkey with respect to wargaming. I will still look forward to and "devour" the issues of magazines and journals when they arrive in my post office box. I am going to dial it back a little with respect to checking on various forums and blogs, however. Here's hoping this unplanned break from commanding troops -- such as they are on my tabletop anyway - will allow me to refuel my tanks for a solid year of campaigning in 2014.

I read with interest Mr. Asquith's reflections (LW Blog, Aug. 18, 2013) on his half-century in the hobby. I certainly can appreciate his "argument" for simplicity. At the same time, however, I wonder if it is correct to equate simple or simplicity to better? Are simpler rules, figures, and terrain inherently better than modern rules, figures, and terrain? Or, is it all value-based and subject to individual likes, dislikes, and preferences? There is something to be said for opening the windows on a cool night, or having some refreshing lemonade on a hot day. Simple things to be sure. When push comes to shove, I think I would prefer to have air-conditioning in July and August as opposed to lemonade. I might also prefer an automobile to a horse, a computer to no computer, and modern health care to leeches and emetics -- or worse!

I think it would be very interesting (I won't be around to read it, obviously) to see what a young up and comer would have to say in the year 2063, when he (or she) reflects on his (or her) 50 years in the hobby. What will have changed for them and for the hobby between now and 2063? Will he (or she) yearn for these halcyon days of Perry Plastics and Warlord rules? Will miniature models and miniature terrain even be around -- be a part of the hobby -- in 50 years? I would imagine that wargaming would be entirely computer-based and fully interactive (at least to a point). Helmets or at least visors would be worn by players and their view of and knowledge of the field of battle would be limited -- unlike it is today, when we tower over the tabletop, seeing and knowing all.

Hmmm ... It might be interesting to see what the "big guns" in the hobby have to say on this subject. It might also be interesting to see what the "the rest of us" have to say about the future and future look of wargaming. It looks like I've got at least one more post for TMP before I cut back on my daily dose of wargaming.