

The first in world-wargaming?

Exploring the popularity of WWII with wargamers.

Taking Position

During a recent family trip I browsed idly in a bargain bookshop whilst the female contingent of the Hilton dynasty toiled diligently, further consolidating the UK's £35 billion credit card debt. In a feverish desire to blot out my imminent financial ruination I lost myself in the products on sale. What caught my eye was a new release – a compendium of *The Best 10 Commando Books ever!* Wow, I thought, are any of *my* favourites in there? Alas, *Night Snatch!* (rivalry between a British Para platoon and their brothers in arms from the US 101st) did not make the short list but...what a must have nostalgia purchase nonetheless.

I grew up on a diet of those books, Airfix kits and figures, Action Man, GI Joe, movies like *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Battle of Britain*, *Ice Cold in Alex* and the *Cruel Sea*. I was addicted to TV shows like *Combat!* (do you remember Vic Morrow as Sergeant Chip Saunders?), Hogan's Heroes (does anyone else out there know of the sordid fate that befell Bob Crane - Colonel Hogan?), Dad's Army and Colditz. My own father was in Malta from 1941-43, my maternal grandfather with the BEF and later the 8th Army. When I started getting interested in toy soldiers it was only twenty years after the end of a war in which most of us had at least one male member of family who had participated. During my childhood stories of 'The War' still floated around the family at dinners and parties. I have a life long memory of being at gran's one Sunday afternoon and seeing my grandfather sitting alone in his chair sobbing quietly as he watched a black and white movie. It featured a young John Mills running along a beach in a British uniform being bombed and shot at. I didn't understand at the time, but I do now. The film was *Dunkirk* and my grandfather had been there on that beach with his mates for three days.

Wargaming has come a long way since the sixties and amongst the big three periods, two (Ancients & Napoleonic) have to some extent waxed and waned. The third has remained consistently popular and to my mind has increased its domination of the wargaming market particularly over the last few years. That period is World War II. Occasionally I have found myself musing over why it has remained a consistent 'top of the poll' candidate. This article attempts to take a broad perspective on why it appears to be the most popular period for wargamers.

Digging in

Where do you start? There are so many reasons why this war above all others captures people's attention generally, wargamer's specifically and those, particularly in the UK. One of the strongest is perhaps the personal link previously mentioned. We know people who fought in it and emotional connection is a most powerful identification mechanism. There is also the fact that for a time, we stood alone against the giant and lived to tell the tale. That is the stuff of legend. Couple this with the media coverage that the war received (and still receives), the raft of publications available, modern day social mobility (we can visit many of the fields of battle relatively easily), recent Hollywood interest and you have an immediacy and accessibility not characteristic of any other period of military activity. I once heard WWII described as the only just war that Britain had ever participated in. That may well be true, our finest hour perhaps – a noble cause fought and won without leaving too much of a shameful vapour trail (although that is a moot point). Its beginnings, roots and legacy are not esoteric. It was a gargantuan struggle of ideologies dominated by colossal personalities. It had little of the political greyness of many other conflicts throughout history. So it is BIG in almost every dimension that you can define the word. Civilization threatened by the powers of evil and saving the world from a thousand years of darkness offer the 'high level' hooks for people's interest but only partly explain its popularity for wargamers.

What's the mission?

Taking the huge leap from this geo-political or even philosophical perspective onto the green baize of the wargames table, more tangible levels of appeal become apparent. Every possible terrain type is on the menu, from snowy mountains to equatorial jungles, Manchurian deserts to Italian vineyards, tropical islands to the ghettos of Europe's oldest cities, the frozen seas of the arctic to the crystal blue waters of the Indian Ocean. Add to this the three dimensions of land, sea and air and the possibilities multiply exponentially.

And, it doesn't stop there. The option to act out in miniature, the largest battles ever fought such as *Zitadelle*, *Bagration* and *Overlord* or small immediate incidents like a commando raid or the kidnapping of an enemy general, spread the focus from grand strategy to a moment in time. I'm actually amazed that it's not the ONLY wargaming period.

No recorded conflict has ever presented such a skull splitting array of weaponry. At the beginning of the war most soldiers were marching or riding horses into battle and biplanes were common still. Six years later the space age had arrived with rocket technology delivering huge payloads to targets hundreds of miles from the launch site. At the close, bombs of incredible power and the fate of hundreds of thousands of people were in the hands of no more than a dozen air crew. No war has ever seen such quantum leap technological change over such a short period of time. This age of change adds yet another dimension to an already rich seam of options for the gamer.

By definition, a world war involves many nations and so the choice of an army, navy or air force from over thirty countries, representing every culture and corner of the globe is open to the gamer. Forces that are regular or irregular, high tech or low tech, traditional in nature or quirky and offbeat, all are available as a subject. The conflict also passed through distinct phases which could be loosely termed as Early, Middle and Late and when taken in conjunction with specific theatres of operation add another layer of specialism to the already rich mixture. This is an easily understood concept which has been picked up by Battlefront Miniatures and used to market their extremely successful Flames of War range of products. So taken from the choice perspective alone, WWII is in a field of one for gaming options.

Consolidating the position

Wargaming has been a part of my life since the age of nine. During that time I have taken an active interest in many periods and the sagging trusses of my loft bear silent witness to the fact. This is no different from the experience of hundreds of other gamers but I offer it for a reason. I am not a wargaming butterfly, flitting from period to period with effortless ease. I am an obsessive and when I get into something, I really get into it. Ancients for six years, The Grand Alliance for six more and with no peripheral vision diverting my efforts to dead end projects. Despite my boyhood fixation with WWII, I came to it late in my adult years reengaging via micro tanks and since that happened about six years ago have been unable to see past it. I am also regretting the time between 1986 and 2000 when I completely ignored it. There has been no appreciable dimming of my enthusiasm despite the passing of the 'six year itch cycle' expiry date and if anything, Battlefront's holistic approach to the period has done even more to stimulate my interest. By attending a local FoW group I have been able to do my small bit to encourage a bunch of former Fantasy gamers to stay away from the insidious twilight that is fantasy gaming and enjoy the wholesome sunny uplands of historical wargaming. They are getting further into WWII by shifting from the rather sterile world of 1500 point per side slugfests which seem to characterize a lot of FoW activity and focusing more on scenario based games which involve uneven forces and mission based objectives. I am pleased to report that the lads seem to like this new style of approach. My reason for mentioning all of this is that I believe the myriad dimensions of WWII gaming make it a period which it is very difficult to tire of.

Choose you weapon(s)

A common problem facing wargamers in many periods is a lack of available and suitable models (just try wargaming something like the Russo-Turkish War of the 1870s). This is not a challenge that need vex the WWII gamer. A huge selection of products is available from 1/2400th to 1/35th with at least six ubiquitous commercial scales in between. With the emergence of new high quality manufacturers from China it looks like a whole lot more will open up over the coming months and years. All of this amounts to an amazing range of visual perspective on the period. So whether your pleasure is to deliver the decisive attack of the 8th Army at El Alamein in 6mm on a twenty foot long table or play cat and mouse with motorized 1/12th scale Tamiya Shermans and Tigers in a local car park, there is nothing stopping you.

An entire article could easily be filled with the names and types of products offered to those interested in WWII. The choice even at the good end of the market is simply, vast. Hard plastic, polythene, resin and metal are all available as kits, part kits or finished models. Painted or unpainted, boxed sets, collectors items, limited editions, volume production runs, there is almost no end to the options. Often the problem is too much choice! Many gamers tend to flit around, unable to settle on a scale they are happy with (I speak from personal experience!). After spending considerable sums of money and painting more than 2,000 models and figures from WWII in various scales, I have finally found the compromise that I have been looking for in 15mm or 1/100th scale. I made this decision after many hours of reflection and at some personal cost as it means that I have gone through the painful process of getting rid of much of my precious collection in scales other than 15mm. I have finally settled at 15mm on the basis of visual perspective. 28mm (my normal scale for most periods) is good for infantry actions but the ranges for vehicle mounted weapons seem unrealistic if made too short or require enormous gaming areas if made too long. I have never been a fan of 20mm finding it to be neither fish nor fowl (although it may actually be foul). It is not as pleasing in perspective terms as 15mm and has so far (with one notable exception) failed to offer the figure quality available in 28mm. That exception is ironically the finest range of WWII figures available and possibly the finest range of wargames figures ever made in my personal opinion – those of Tony Barton. If you have never seen his WWII range (as it's in 20mm I sound like a complete hypocrite!) you must look at it. The poses are so natural, the detail so crisp and the subjects so well chosen that they are almost in themselves a sublime reason to go 20mm. However being a man of conviction I took several cold baths and thus far have resisted the temptation to purchase anything more than a couple of panzer crewmen. I of course acknowledge that such partizan views are purely a matter of personal taste as the frothing at the mouth reaction many of you are currently experiencing confirms. I suspect however it may be rather significant that the 20mm scale has never really caught on to any great extent in other wargaming periods despite some attempts to make it happen. I may change my views as a result of exciting new products (several of which I believe, are in the pipe) but I doubt it.

There are of course pros and cons in every scale. One of the most frustrating characteristics of the multi scale approach is that very few if any manufacturer's ever finish a range. The reasons are likely to be various but most common I think may be; lack of volume sales resulting in no funds to continue range development, boredom or new pastures on the part of designers, too much overlap between competing ranges (one sure way to guarantee the slow and the small perish and surely the largest lost opportunity in the hobby), a lack of a realistic business planning process for product development and the cottage industry nature of wargaming manufacturers in general. The incompleteness of certain fine ranges can be a source of enormous frustration. That is why I believe that Battlefront the dynamic and very proactive company from New Zealand have got it exactly right. A professional, planned, informative, customer focused and unashamedly commercial approach has achieved what no one has ever done before in historical gaming. They are actually significantly increasing the number of gamers in a dwindling and slowly dying hobby. For this alone I believe they deserve the highest praise because by doing so they will undoubtedly encouraged other manufacturers to stay in the hunt and thus inject some much needed adrenalin into the market. I am conscious that an uncritical mention of any manufacturer may carry the whiff of something piscine so I must state that I have absolutely no connection to

Battlefront other than as another punter who purchases their wares in spadefuls. Their approach is no doubt being lambasted at a club near you right now as blatant commercialism but let's just take a look at what they've achieved. A comprehensive and ever expanding range of products packaged in a 'purchase-anxiety' free way - gone are the plain cardboard boxes and crepe paper wrapped figures still beloved of some manufacturers. A continuous product rotation and remastering process underpinned by a hyper proactive communication and product information strategy. To support this you can buy high quality, glossy, full colour background briefing books and access the most diverting, informative and dynamic website of any manufacturer in the business. This site includes a forum, scenarios, modelling and painting guides, rules clarification section, army lists, background historical data and other supportive data too numerous to mention. The amount of free downloadable data is extremely impressive. Finally, there are the Flames of War rules which if some quirky language is ignored (I still have trouble with the 'stormtrooper move') are fundamentally sound, quick, unambiguous and likely to deliver up a historically plausible result. In other words, someone has at last cracked the commercial code and created a confident and professional wargames company. The prices aren't too bad either. No other period can even come remotely close to WWII for product choice.

Field Camouflage

When we finally get our models on the table, WWII is a most forgiving period for anyone who wants to paint something. The general hues of the most commonly used colours allow all sorts of the best painting tricks and dodges to be employed in creating results which simply could not be achieved to the same standard of acceptability in other periods. The dry brush, the wash, inking, chalking and weathering are all friends of the WWII gamer. Yes I know all techniques are universal but to get acceptable results using some of these with Horse & Musket figures requires a much higher level of ability which although many may have, most can't be bothered trying to achieve. I am never done thinking up new ways to weather vehicles and that helps my own painting and modelling techniques stay relatively fresh.

The quick paint job approach with dozens or even hundreds of models makes Kursk much more of a reality than say, Waterloo when done in a compatible scale. Even in the smaller scales the quantity of cross belts, plumes, and piping make painting Horse and Musket or even Ancient models a more labour intensive and slow process than WWII. When this is combined with the battle formations used and the number of models required to make a battalion, squadron or regiment appear credible on the table then the differentials become even greater.

At the other end of the spectrum the 'detail' modeller can spend as long as he or she wants on exquisite large scale vehicles providing opportunities not as easily created in other periods. A beautifully modelled Panther tank and a few infantry can produce an interesting game when pitched against a couple of squads of GIs but try making a similar type of game with a British nine pounder and its French opponents in 1815. The gun and crew may need at least a company of Frenchies to shoot at which means a heck of a lot of painting!

So from a painting perspective I think WWII lends itself very well to the 'lazy', the 'slow' and the 'can't really be bothered' categories of gamers who will still manage to get something on the table and have a game when other periods would have simply withered on the vine.

Halt, who goes there?

What shape is your average WWII player? Difficult to determine I think. It has a very wide spectrum of appeal when compared with such as Ancients or Napoleonic. I have definitely seen more women, people under twenty years old and crossover gamers from Fantasy playing WWII than any other period. I am not in a position to confirm the reasons but certainly consider it a positive trend and can take a stab at trying to understand why. Let's face it; the stereotypical 'Wargamer profile' would not present a particularly flattering picture if used on a recruitment poster. Beards, Beer Bellies and Back Packs about sums up the cliché (BO could be added without too many cries of 'unfair') but overall I think this is perhaps a little extreme. There is however no smoke without fire and en masse we are often not a particularly edifying sight as a trot round any convention near you will confirm. I wonder what a suitable collective noun might be for a group of wargamers... A Girth? A Niff? A List?(that was a List not 'A' List), answers on a postcard to the Editor. The point is, WWII's catchment group although including a liberal sprinkling of the stereotype, appears wider than the traditional trend which is a welcome departure much to be encouraged.

This may be because of an aspect of its appeal which whilst not unique is certainly rather rare - it is not especially demanding of the prospective gamer. This is due to its instant accessibility through the media of entertainment, books and photographs. Most wargaming periods require a deal of research, background reading and commitment to get the most out of them. This takes effort and in some ways sifts the 'casual interest' gamer from the hard core enthusiast. My own passion for the Wars of the Grand Alliance grew as much out of the Grail type quest for snippets of information as it did from the gaming. The genuine excitement of discovering a new fact about uniforms, flags, orders of battle and the like seemed often disproportionate to what was actually discovered. It's all about effort and return. When you put some effort in, you become engaged and the rewards are so much more satisfying.

An interesting characteristic I have noticed when gaming with some of the Fantasy Converts to WWII is that they have gotten into the detail of weapon types, army lists and points values but failed to create the backdrop and context of their use and the war for themselves. For some this is a gradual process and will undoubtedly come, for others it is almost a total irrelevance. What they pick up from Battlefront's Intelligence Handbooks is quite enough history thank you very much. They seem only to care what a model of a Tiger tank is capable of on the table and not what the context of using Tiger tanks was on the battlefields of Europe and Russia. The fact that relatively speaking Tigers, Ferdinands or JagdTigers were as rare as snow in Singapore is pointless detail. 20th century warfare and WWII in particular lends itself to this interest 'sub group' because of the enormous variety of weapons produced in a way that earlier periods do not. I am sure that somewhere out there is a wargamer who spends countless hours delving into the technical capabilities of the Brown Bess and how it will help win his Napoleonic campaign but (hopefully) he is in the minority! So the 'tech spec' specialist becomes another subgroup of WWII wargaming introducing yet another dimension of interest.

The 'no effort' entry fee fits rather well with modern day consumerism, a sort of instant gratification. This potentially creates little commitment from the punter but on the flip side makes access to the period easy and thus less of a risky choice consequently adding to the volume of gamers attracted. This low risk, easy access aspect may yet be another reason for WWII's popularity and could even permit it to be described as 'WWII Wargaming Lite'.

High Tech War

The period's ease of accessibility is why in my opinion, WWII computer games are so prolific. It goes something like... I'm into computer games, I saw the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, I bought *Medal of Honor*. It could however just as easily have been *Grand Theft Auto*. Many WWII computer game players have little interest in the history they just like seeing nice graphics and hearing lots of automatic weapons fire sound effects! Perhaps that's not really a fair comment but I don't see too much difference between being a GI in *Medal of Honour* and a Space Marine in *Doom*. Those first person type games are shoot 'em ups which, as you've paid the money to buy it is not likely to get you killed off in a realistic simulation of man to man combat. Your character is going to be a DNA super-soup of John Wayne, Audy Murphy, Burt Lancaster, Errol Flynn and Tom Hanks! Gotthilfe die Deutschen! If you want to be a Hollywood Star for a couple of hours then these kinds of games are for you but I think they have moved out of the world of wargaming and into fantasy wish fulfillment territory.

I am not against WWII computer games and have enjoyed many hundreds of hours playing Talonsoft's turn based *Eastern Front*, *Western Front* & *Rising Sun*. Although the graphics to these are relatively primitive when compared with the first person simulations such as *Medal of Honor*, I actually prefer them. The reason for this is simple, they mirror the turn based format of a table top wargame as opposed to the real time concept of such as *Sudden Strike*, *Stalingrad* and the first person type games already mentioned. I always feel with this later type of game it's not very relaxing, rather out of control and all over before you know it (probably like real war!). Sitting in the comfort of my own room with a glass in hand after a hard week at work, I actually want to take my time and enjoy the game play not be stressed for the thousandth time that week. The bit that is missing though is the interaction with another player. Online networking is of course available these days but how many people really do it. I know dozens of people with computer wargames but only one who networks with his mates to actually play. Strangely, over the years there have been several computer moderated table wargaming systems but I can't at this moment recall seeing any for WWII. Most modern wars seem to rely on paper based rules.. Some irony there I think. Computer games have their place in the wide selection of WWII options but few machines are clever enough to actively out think a human especially at RRP £29.99 ex vat so if you want a real intellectual challenge set up your force against a friendly carbon unit at your local club.

Things that make you go 'hmmm'

If I was writing such a piece as this in 1820 I suspect any hint of even passing admiration for Napoleon would have landed me in extremely hot water. The arch enemy of England, Ravager of Europe, Architect of mass carnage, the Anti-Christ, the monster Bonaparte is now one of history's most revered military figures. He is worshipped in some quarters and features in the pantheon of the 'Big Four' commanders along with Alexander, Caesar and Frederick the Great. The period from the end of the French Revolution until 1815 is now known as the Napoleonic period. The most popular Napoleonic army to build and game with is undoubtedly the French. What is it that changes people's attitudes? Time I think is the answer. When the rawness of the carnage is forgotten and the participants have all passed away, people begin to regard things in a less emotional light. I am not passing comment on the morality of this point but isn't it curious that wargamers appear more predisposed to collect and use WWII German forces in preference to all others. I don't believe this is out of some desire to use them and be beaten (thus proving that the bad guys always lose and offering the player an opportunity for self flagellation). It is more likely that everyone is overawed by their battlefield ability, cool machines and those uniforms. Like it or not, the German Army is admired (overtly or covertly) as being the best that has ever existed and the fact that it fought for such a misguided cause in some perverse way adds to its appeal. I remember a few years back the discomfort caused when so called 'Nazi' re enactor groups were 'banned' from appearing at UK wargaming events. Why do so many people want to dress up as German soldiers from WWII? Why did some American troops in Vietnam carry swastika flags? I am not a psychologist but doubt that all of these people are neo Nazis so there must be some other deep rooted fascination or admiration going on here. Is it the same thing that attracts people

to Darth Vader, Dracula and the Devil? There are of course the partisan types who refuse to use German wargaming units at any price and always want to be the fascist bashing Allies or Soviets but generally speaking most gravitate towards the Germans. Does this mean that Hitler will be reappraised by history in one hundred years? Who'd like to make that bet? Part of Napoleon's appeal of course is that although the political architect he was also the dashing battlefield commander and tactical genius – epithets neither of which can be applied to Germany's wartime leader so maybe Adolf will remain the arch bogey man of modern times and be remembered solely for his crimes against humanity but I just wonder.

Mission accomplished

WWII's popularity is not down to one single factor but a combination, the most important of which is perhaps accessibility. Emotional connection, variety, product availability and a plethora of good rule sets all help oil the already smoothly running Maybach 12 cylinder 690 hp engine. For those of you who love WWII gaming as much as I then what I'm saying you already know. For those who think they might like to try it, then give it a go you won't regret it.