

## **`One Rule for you.....' (Part One)**

Comparing the results achieved using two popular sets of rules for the same scenarios.

By Barry Hilton

### **The Inspiration to write**

During the dark days of my wargaming youth I frequently attended a local club. That's not to say that I didn't enjoy it, I did partly, but it struck me that most people there had chosen their armies not as a consequence of any great interest in history or a particular culture but for one reason only, because they thought the army would allow them to win games.

This club majored in WRG Ancients 6<sup>th</sup> edition and with hindsight most of the games we played were absurd. Week after week New Kingdom Egyptians fought Samurai, or Mongols took on Sub Roman British and very occasionally, Vikings vied with Saxons or Romans rucked with Gauls. Recalling this now, I resolve to be more generous in my opinions of fantasy gaming as unwittingly, I clearly did a fair bit of it myself in the past and feel vulnerable at being laid open to charges of hypocrisy. I believe 6<sup>th</sup> Edition to be a fine set of rules which always offer an enjoyable game. I can still after about fourteen years (the last time I played with them) recall that immortal first line from the morale table... *`Testers or Friends within 150 paces advancing...+1'* but I digress.

The blokes at our club fell into two categories. Firstly the ***'win at all costs'*** specie. Characteristics of such Iron Men are: finding every twist in the rules then using them, knowing your sub paragraphs by rote, being able to judge a cavalry charge to the millimeter without a measuring device, contesting every marginal decision to the point of unsocial behaviour and most importantly, remembering that last modifier on the morale table that always saved their unit or broke yours. Invariably they chose armies from the following list: Sassanids, Romans, Teutonic Knights, Nikephorian Byzantines, you get the picture. The others (the rest of us) were the ***'hopeless romantics'*** who plumped for such as Huns, Hoplite Greeks, Irish and so forth, usually because we found them *'interesting'*. The net output was a sort of wargaming *Serie A* which consisted of the former group, producing an immediate minus two on the morale of any player from the latter category unlucky enough to be pitted against them. We, the hapless and hopeless formed the club equivalent of a Scottish Sunday Junior Reserve Pub League for fat wheezy boys whose main purpose was to provide *'practice gaming'* and *'sport'* for *Serie A*.

I mention all of this for a particular reason. One collection that I always coveted was a beautifully painted Hunnic Army using 15mm Tabletop Games figures and owned by a nice chap called Alan. They looked just perfect. Their clothing colours, basing style and unit composition made them a joy to behold and contrasted sharply with the unpainted cyborg biblical era hordes of the Pharaoh Rubbatitti or the Teutonic Daleks who had never been or never would be, within a brush length of a sable 00. Needless to say their wonderful look helped them not a jot. They did not win a single game to my knowledge and with monotonous regularity, the unbrushed lead lumps, glued hideously to badly cut pieces of Kellogg's Cornflake box, (cockerel uppermost to add insult to injury) triumphed.

My lasting impression was that Huns were *'no hoppers'*, a waste of painting time and money. That said, years later, like the suckers we all are, I bought the Foundry Huns and so did Phil. We also purchased Warhammer Ancient Battles and to my continuing astonishment the Huns started to win. In fact not just win, but *trounce* the enemy would be more the mot juste. But how could this be? The 6<sup>th</sup> Edition gospel had them down as the biggest losers since Queen's Park beat Shotts Bon Accord 36-0. And that of course is the answer. Use the same figures on the same bases on the same terrain with the same players, change the rule set and what happens? It's a rhetorical question.

## The Mission

This short series of articles sets out to discover what happens using the same scenario and players but using different sets of rules. It is not in any way an attempt to promote one over another. We have no affiliation to any commercial set of rules and undertook this exercise merely out of curiosity. The article outlines the scenario, orbats and results with applicable comments where marked differences were obtained. We found the whole process extremely diverting and useful.

Since becoming rather fixated on WWII gaming over the last couple of years, I wanted to undertake the compari-test on the rules we use, **GHQ MicroArmour, The Game** (hereafter **GHQMTG**) and the rules that everyone else on the planet seems to use, **Rapid Fire**. Although I own a copy of **Rapid Fire** and all of its supplements I had never until writing this piece played a game with them. Hundreds (or is it thousands Duncan?) of other gamers can't be wrong so I thought I'd try them out.

A quick insight into my reasons for using the GHQ rules may be helpful at this point. A renewed interest in WW2 gaming started via micro armour and so these rules were a logical choice. I liked the layout of the book combining rules with weapon capability information and a wide variety of TO&E. I also liked the very personal designer's note by John Hernandez Jnr. He rationalizes many of his decisions and thought processes which does not always happen in a rule set. Being an ex military man his reasoning was to my mind, sensible. Then again, I'm not an ex military man so it could have been complete twaddle but if it was, it was convincing twaddle. The result for a player is that within a single game or perhaps two, you'll have a very good grasp of the mechanisms and seldom need to refer to the main body of text. Apart from all that, Julian Edwards has a mean line in sales patter so how could I resist? We have played more than fifty games using these rules and cannot remember an outcome that did not seem to us at least, credible in the context of the scenario. This was my benchmark for what follows.

The play testing scenarios were chosen with distinct circumstances in mind. With **Kamenewo**, armour is the predominant arm whereas the **Falaise Pocket** has infantry playing a more prominent role. In a sort of bizarre wargames parody of science class control-experiments we decided to make roughly the same moves in each game so that the player could not learn from mistakes made in a previous incarnation. For this reason also, we kept the orbats small so, apologies to Richard Marsh for messing around with his excellent **Kamenewo** scenario from Rapid Fire Supplement #3. It was all in the interests of science Richard.

### In the Blue corner.....

To begin, I think it is worthwhile highlighting some general areas of different approach between the rule sets. Let's handle morale first. **GHQMTG** does not deal with the subject directly. Its pivotal mechanism is called *Cohesion* which is a numerical representation of any playing element's ability to perform a voluntary action under adverse circumstances. The range of *Cohesion* number value is typically between 9 and 18 (as rolled on a D20). Obviously the higher your base number the more likely it will be that you get to act as you would wish. There are three levels of depletion from normal *Cohesion*. These are: Suppressed (lowers *Cohesion* by 4), Disorganized (lowers *Cohesion* by 3) and finally Suppressed and Disorganized (lowers *Cohesion* by 4+3 giving a cumulative 7). The next stage of depletion removes a playing piece from the game. These depleted states of control are checked for improvement at the end of every game turn. With one exception, the rules do not compel defending forces to retreat or rout under pressure. This means that units do not break and have on some occasions hung on under incredibly hostile conditions. I remember one occasion when a 'dug in' platoon of German infantry resisted repeated attacks by sixteen platoons of Soviet infantry. I believe this mechanism to be immensely robust, clean and logical with the one caveat that units do not give ground or fall back under any battle conditions. This does not produce as many instances of battlefield supermen as

you might imagine but it does create some improbable John Wayne moments perhaps more reminiscent of Hollywood than reality. **Rapid Fire** has a more traditional approach setting thresholds at which morale becomes a critical factor. It also deals with compulsory retreating and routing moves.

Another interesting comparison is the organization of units. In my experience, disciples of WRG 6<sup>th</sup> Edition memorize their army lists like books of the Old Testament used to be learned at school. That fact in itself makes me wary of lists. Although army lists for any period are useful they are also a little dangerous and can encourage rather dogmatic behaviour in the 'win at all costs' gamer. With this in mind, I am less bothered about organizational differences between rules than ever before. Paper strengths seem to be aspirational in most armies and so the differences particularly in vehicle numbers per unit between both sets of rules, is a minor point. Yes there are also marked differences in the make up of units between both but I think with a strong pinch of common sense, anything goes for WW2. Besides, both of these offerings give very useful and comprehensive ideas of unit construction and composition for many theatres and phases of the war which should be applauded.

**Rapid Fire** encourages infantry to stick together in companies (about 9 figures) whilst **GHQMTG** takes the platoon (a stand containing a variable number of figures 3-5 normally) as a basic operating unit. **Rapid Fire** is trailed as being suitable for 15-20mm Brigade size actions and **GHQMTG** is similar in scope but written for 1/285<sup>th</sup> scale models. We've used it up to Divisional level games satisfactorily (with minor modifications) and in 20mm and 28mm scales. **GHQMTG** specifies firing by platoon although all firing on a single target is calculated on the basis of one Cohesion test, that is 'all' fire or 'none' fire. **Rapid Fire** uses a 'firing group' mechanism with the 'company' as the basic unit. Effectiveness is proportionate to the amount of the company available to fire.

With regard to the turn mechanism **GHQMTG** uses alternate firing and moving by player (initiative decided at the beginning of each turn) within each turn whereas **Rapid Fire** opts for alternate turns per player. This is a very interesting difference. Alternate turn mechanisms tend in my opinion to make the 'out of phase player' almost a spectator for periods of up to ten minutes in every twenty and although allowing a certain level of thinking time, tend to be somewhat frustrating. I really warmed to Hernandez's technique of alternate actions within any given turn. It adds edge and makes decisions on shot and movement priority crucial components of the game. Combined with his decision to make Move or Fire the choice facing each platoon it does call for quick thinking and more of a chess approach than alternate turn gaming mechanisms. **Rapid Fire** allows Shoot & Move or Move & Shoot with some exceptions. Even as I write this I can hear a lot of people jumping to the defence of **Rapid Fire**. Please folks, don't bother. I am not criticizing only comparing. I enjoyed my **Rapid Fire** games very much and am merely highlighting differences which may to some be inconsequential although I personally don't think so. In conversation over some of these issues with another gamer it was pointed out to me that "*Rapid Fire is a fast play set of rules and so does not get caught up in tedious detail*". Yes it is a very good fast play set of rules but a full turn for both players under **Rapid Fire** is no faster than a normal turn under **GHQMTG**. As a **Rapid Fire** novice I did find the lack of a turn sequence on the play sheet rather unhelpful and confusing. What happens first? when do we do the artillery fire? Are all morale tests enforced during the phasing player's turn taken prior to moving and firing for the next player? Do you have to specify all shots on the same target at once or can you keep trying if the first one's fail? If an element is moving then firing do you have to specify it's firing before you move it? For the initiated these may well seem trivial points but I was not one of the initiated.

Moving on to artillery fire Hernandez resorts to a mechanism I first encountered in naval wargaming over thirty years ago and always loved; estimating and plotting range fire. In **GHQMTG** this is necessary for indirect artillery fire and clearly derives from his personal experience as a USMC artillerist with active combat experience. It does add a little time into each game turn but is well worth the effort. It is not enough under these rules to have an FOO figure on the table with line of sight to the target and for the player to point and say "*I'm aiming for this*". Using traditional methods, one must plot distance horizontally and vertically and then specify a sheaf pattern for fall of shot. Deviation from the 'plot' is your next worry (determined by dicing for Cohesion once more). The cream on the cake is the variable delays applicable to different armies with reference to the arrival of said salvos; following turn for Americans, two turns after for Germans and British, three turns after for everyone else! God help you if you've been over optimistic about the direction of the game! He also ensures that artillery fire is marked on the table and remains active for the whole of the turn impeding movement and LoS. His ranges also seem to reflect the nature of the beast for example a SIG 150mm having an effective range of 37 inches and a Hummel 150mm a range of 105 inches (all in 1/285<sup>th</sup> scale). **Rapid Fire** limits direct artillery fire to 48 inches maximum and indirect to a maximum of 120 inches (in 1/76<sup>th</sup> scale) regardless of calibre.

A minor but interesting contrast is the way that both rules sets address transport issues. **GHQMTG** specifies one transport vehicle per platoon (although the rules do allow you to overload transport) whereas under **Rapid Fire** a transport vehicle allows you to move an entire company. I wondered whether this was a little license in order to save gamers money on buying lots of trucks or alternatively to prevent small tables being gridlocked with dozens of vehicles, maybe someone knows.

Having set the scene by pointing out but a few areas of contrasting approach, Part 2 will detail how the play tests ran.