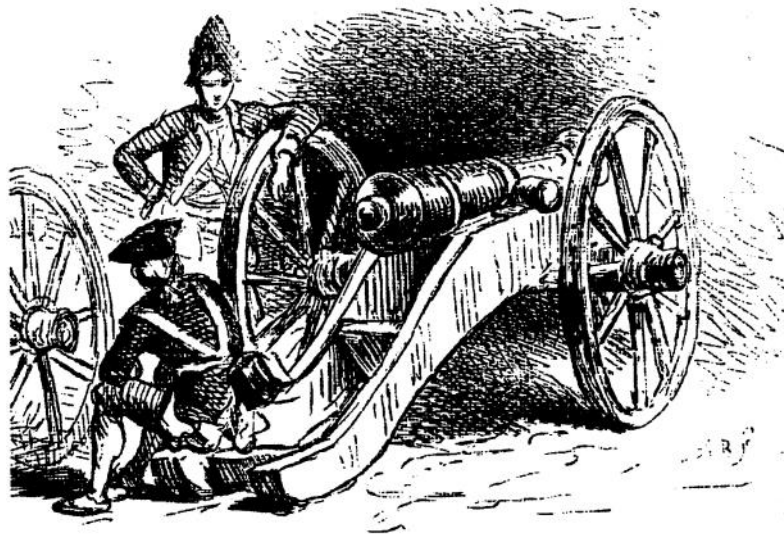# HisEntCo

A Whiff of Grape Shot

Sorry Rocky, You Know Too Much

by Phil Johnston

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"Have you ever felt, whilst maneuvering toy soldiers in a "traditional" wargame, that your perception of the miniature battle bears little resemblance to that of a real commander? ... I am simultaneously in possession of far too much information about my own troops and those of the enemy, and preoccupied with administering rules to determine the minutiae of combat,... ."

I couldn't have said it better myself. The above quote was taken from an article by Arthur Harman entitled, "Can We Introduce Generalship Into the Tabletop Wargame?" which appeared some time ago in Wargames Illustrated. Mr. Harman's analysis of typical wargaming focuses on the two subjects of this article - fog of war (or information) and friction (or control). Oh no, it's one of those "foggers." Run, run!

Let me begin with an opinion. Like Mr. Harman, I believe two common shortcomings in wargame command rules are information and control. Players are given too much of both - at least they are given far more than historic commanders had. They know the exact condition of their own troops and often the exact position, strength and condition of the enemy. And when they want something to happen, it usually does.

Okay, so what? Well, remember we're searching for rules that realistically simulate war, especially command in war. And in the last issue we looked briefly at the four elements Clauswitz gives as defining the environment of war: danger, physical exertion, uncertainty and chance. We saw that while the first two are hard to simulate, the latter two are not. (Uncertainty and chance could also be rendered information and control or fog of war and friction.)

The fog rolls in
Fog of war is bandied about a lot these days, But there seems to be a fair amount of confusion about what constitutes fog of war. Often a surprising or unexpected event is classed as fog of war, especially surprising or unexpected actions by players or interventions by an umpire.

The human nature of the players involved in a wargame can generate unpredictable events and results. That, however, is not the same as "fog of war." Rather, that unpredictability is the same tension which makes any game exciting, even bridge or poker or chess. You can never know what the other players will do. Some have argued "there is built-in fog of war inherent in any wargame if for no other reason than the fact that we are interacting with other human beings." But this is clearly invalid. Otherwise, one could justifiably claim that (from a fog of war component) chess or poker or Risk or Stratego is a realistic wargame.

The problem stems in part from semantics. "Fog of war" refers essentially to the availability and accuracy of information. It does not refer to events that "upset" a commander's (or player's) plans. These Clauswitz refers to as friction or chance. A player's unexpected behavior certainly can generate friction. You could also say that the fact that it was unexpected until it

happened means it added to the fog of war. But to understand the role these elements play in war and wargaming, we need to look at them more closely.

In his work, On War, Clauswitz spends a lot of time studying uncertainty and chance or, as he sometimes puts it, information and friction. So, we will look to him quite a bit.

If I may borrow a phrase
Here are a few excerpts from what Clauswitz has to say about uncertainty or information in war:

"Each commander can only fully know his own position; that of his opponent can only be known to him by reports, which are uncertain. A great part of the information obtained in War is contradictory, a still greater part is false, and by far the greatest part is of a doubtful character. The great uncertainty of all data in War is a peculiar difficulty, because all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not infrequently - like the effect of a fog or moonshine - gives to things exaggerated dimensions and an unnatural appearance. In a few words, most reports are false."

Wargamers on the other hand, often know virtually everything except their opponents' intentions. We know the strength, position and movements of the enemy because we can see them on the table, and there usually are no rules to inhibit our ability to act on that information.

Clearly at this point, most wargame rules diverge sharply from reality. However, there are ways to overcome this: hidden deployments, marker cards, umpire-determined visibility, depending on the scale and scope of the game. In a future column I will give you a set of fog-of-war rules I helped develop as an add-on to a popular set of wargame rules to address these issues. So hang on; better yet experiment with your own ideas.

A rider, sir
How does a commander get information? What kinds of data should be available to the commander in wargaming?

First, obviously, are his eyes - what he can see. Hence, historic commanders sought superior vantage points, hills, tall building, etc., which extended their field of vision. Unfortunately few rules encourage player/commanders to seek and occupy such positions, though Guard du Corps and Legacy of Glory are a couple of exceptions to this. (There may be others.)

But, terrain, weather and battlefield smoke conspire to limit this field of vision. Of course, smoke also acts as a positive element, marking areas of heavy fighting or the advance of a line of battle. Napoleon's waiting for the smoke from Davout's battle line to pass the

Markgrafneusiedl church tower at Wagram is a prime example of this.

Second, there are reports from scouts, lower level commanders and colleagues on other parts of the battlefield. These, as Clauswitz says, are largely unreliable. Here a gamemaster can easily interject a bit of reality by creating their own scouting reports to give to commanders and by insisting that all communication among players be written, unless the commanders are together. (I've been in games where I get contradictory reports from different sources, which dramatically added to the tension of my decision-making.)

Other sources include prisoners, sounds of battle, stragglers and personal reconnaissance (a risky measure since it takes the commander out of the command control picture and exposes him to harm).

Oh, the humanity
You know, I was wrong when I said that the actions of human beings in war and wargaming are insufficient to generate realism. Actually, human nature is enough; the problem is that most wargame rules I know of don't take into account all the humans involved, including those little lead humans we like to push around.

War is a human activity. Humans, with their capacity for individual thought and will, are always affecting the outcome of events. This produces friction.

"Friction is the only conception which in a general way corresponds to that which distin-guishes real War from War on paper," writes Clauswitz. "The military machine, the Army and all belonging to it, is in fact simple, and appears on this account easy to manage. But, let us reflect that no part of it is in one piece, that it is composed entirely of individuals, each of which keeps up its own friction in all directions. ... This enormous friction, which is not concen-trated, as in mechanics, at a few points, is therefore everywhere brought into contact with chance, and thus incidents take place upon which it was impossible to calculate, their chief origin being chance."

An aside at this point. Like Tolstoy, I really don't think there is such a thing as chance. Rather chance is the term we use to describe a complex series of interactions which are virtually im-possible to analyze, let alone reproduce. Take, for example the classic flipping of a coin. We were taught that the coin has a 50 percent chance of landing on heads or tails. However, chance does not determine whether the coin lands heads or tails. Rather, such things as air currents, initial positioning of the coin, the energy imparted during the flip and the distance traveled all determine its final heads or tails. If we were able to analyze all these elements and duplicate them consistently, we would dramatically restrict or eliminate chance. The problem is, we can't. So, we describe this complex interaction as the workings of chance.

What's all this got to do with Clauswitz? Simply this. Clauswitz describes as chance all those

myriad events which create friction and undo a commander's plans. In reality, those events are determined by cause and effect. Clauswitz himself hints at this when he writes, "So in War, through the influence of an infinity of petty circumstances, which cannot properly be described on paper, things disappoint us, and we fall short of the mark."

Take this example. A battalion gets cannistered at close range. My friend Bob just got blown to little bits by something I couldn't even see. I'm scared and begin to run away. Bill sees me go, and this pushes him over the edge. The battalion dissolves as the panic spreads. The adjacent battalion commander, seeing this movement and sensing disaster, orders his unit to retire - unfortunately through a third battalion, and both collapse in disorder. Soon the whole brigade is streaming to the rear.

Chance? Not really. But, from the perspective of the corps or army commander it seems so, since the causes and effects are impossible to analyze, reproduce or prevent in reality - or in a game. In fact, Clauswitz says, "the element of chance only is wanting to make of War a game, and in that element is least of all deficient. We see from the forgoing how much the objective nature of War makes it a calculation of probabilities ... ." Hence, it is not unreasonable to say we can accurately simulate war (as in the scenario above) by attempting to isolate the major factors involved - surprise, casualties inflicted, etc., - and determine the outcome based on the probable effect of those factors and the roll of the die.

Yes, that's right. Reality in wargames, or at least another realistic element that can be incorporated into wargames, and often is. Just trying to make the point that reality and wargaming are not mutually exclusive.

B'rer general and tar baby
What does all this friction produce? Failure. "Activity in War is movement in a resistant medium," Clauswitz writes. "Just as a man immersed in water is unable to perform with ease and regularity the most natural and simplest movement, that of walking, so in War, with ordinary powers, one cannot keep even the line of mediocrity. ... Everything is very simple in War, but the simplest thing is difficult. These difficulties accumulate and produce a friction which no man can imagine exactly who has not seen War. ... It is this friction, or what is so termed here, which makes that which appears easy in War difficult in reality."

Another example. As a player/commander you order a division to attack. You wait while the courier rides across the field with the order. He is shot. You send another and wait. The division leader gets the order, finally, but believes you cannot really have understood his situation and given such an order. He sends you a message to this effect. You reiterate your order and send it with the courier, whose horse is shot. The courier eventually again finds the division leader and delivers your preemptive order to attack. But, he thinks it a bad order and is in no hurry to obey it.

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He slowly moves to notify all his subordinate commanders and the process is repeated, this time amid the added friction of smoke and carnage. Finally, everything is ready and the division commander prepares to execute your order - two hours after you wrote it. The moment is passed, and like in the movie Gallipoli your men charge into destruction. But, when you saw the opportunity and conceived the plan, it was brilliant, a Nathan Bedford Forrest move. As it turned out, you're an Ambrose Burnside or worse.

What does it all mean? Fog of war and friction are separate but interacting elements in war. And both should be represented in any rules set that aspires to realistically simulating war and command.

"War is the province of chance," writes our friend. "In no sphere of human activity is such a margin to be left for this intruder, because none is so much in constant contact with him on all sides. He increases the uncertainty of every circumstance, and deranges the course of events. From this uncertainty of all intelligence and suppositions, this continual interposition of chance, the actor in War constantly finds things different from his expectations; and this cannot fail to have an influence on his plans, or at least on the presumptions connected with these plans.

"In War more than anywhere else in the world things happen differently to what we had expected, and look differently when near, to what they did at a distance. ... In War, on the other hand, the Commander of an immense whole finds himself in a constant whirlpool of false and true information, of mistakes committed through fear, through negligence, through precipitation, of contraventions of his authority, either from mistaken or correct motives, from ill will, true or false sense of duty, indolence or exhaustion, of accidents which no mortal could have foreseen." Doesn't sound like your typical wargame to me.

So, we've seen what fog of war and friction mean to a battlefield commander and how they make his life difficult. We've also touched on how these elements usually are not but might be simulated in wargames. In future issues we will explore this latter theme in more depth.