

# Design Notes on

## TAC 14

BY AL NOFI

I became a game designer rather suddenly one afternoon in 1970 when I suggested that Poultron Press try to design a game on the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Upon my uttering the words, "Why don't we . . ." Jim Dunnigan responded with an enthusiastic, "Yes, why don't you!" Needless to say I was somewhat taken aback by this sudden turn of events. My particular forte was straight military history, with a strong interest in organization, sociology, and psychology. As such I had made a number of contributions to STRATEGY AND TACTICS, such as my CAMPAIGN ANALYSIS: NORTH AFRICA series and the as yet unpublished WATERLOO study.

I had never designed a game, nor had I ever had any real desire to do so. Nevertheless, after reflecting a bit, I realized that I had a considerable head start on the average fan who sets out to design a game. For one thing, I had long been associated with one or another of Dunnigan's many projects, being the sole survivor of the group which used to meet regularly at his luxurious Brooklyn pad back in the halcyon days of 1966, when JUTLAND was being playtested and KAMPF was the latest thing in military history. As a result of this I had been around during the design and testing of most of Dunnigan's games and had even made small contributions to some of them myself.

To make a long story short, I agreed to undertake the design of a tactical level wargame if the topic was moved around a bit to Renaissance Italy in the period 1300-1500.

There were several reasons for making this shift in period and locale. For one thing: I have a reasonable command of Italian, Spanish, and even Latin, all of which figured vitally in Italian history during this period. For another, I had already read rather extensively in the period and had made some tentative conclusions about warfare as it was then waged. Last, and by no means least I had a romantic attachment to the period inasmuch as several of my ancestors had engaged in the art of ~~mercenary~~ mercenary soldiering at the time.

On the other side of the coin, I commanded virtually no German or French and even less Swedish, all of which are vitally important to the Thirty Years War. Then, I particularly disliked the idea of immersing myself in the intricacies of Northern European religious-military politics (though I would not have minded seeing Dunnigan do so). Lastly, I felt little sense of identity with the conflict nor particularly well prepared to begin work.

Having settled upon the topic I began to do some research. As a trained historian--a trait which I found rather rare among game designers, which may account for the plethora of lousy games on the market--I did this in the most professional way I could, by attacking the stacks at the New York Public Library's main reference collection. Several college book boards were used to supplement my research among the fleashpots of 42d street, but basically the library was the place.

Not long after getting into the libraries I discovered that there was a relative dearth of good materials on the subject in English. And what material as did exist kept referring back to two works by Charles Oman, THE ART OF WAR IN THE MIDDLE AGES and THE ART OF WAR IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY. I was fortunate in being able to obtain xerox copies of these volumes, totaling well over 1500 pages, so that I could work with them at my leisure. Here was all that I was after: relatively little was devoted to shit like the chevalier sans puer et sans reproche but pages and pages were given over to things like hardware, organization, conditions of service, tactics, supply, strategy, recruitment, orders of battle, and what have you.

As I worked, however, it soon became obvious that my topic was rather narrow. Warfare in Renaissance Italy was merely one aspect of warfare in Western Europe at the time. Indeed, significant developments were occurring in far off places like Scotland and Wales which frequently influenced the way war was fought in the Italian city-state cosmos. The true situation in Italy, where the most significant military encounters of the Sixteenth Century occurred as a result of the great Hapsburg-Valois struggle for the control of the Peninsula, was influenced by trends in Britain, Switzerland, Castille, Normandy, Granada and elsewhere. Thus, almost imperceptibly, the topic began to expand: Swiss pikemen and feudal heavy cavalry both made themselves felt in Sixteenth Century Italy so why not delve into the origins and characteristics of these systems? And so it went.

Meanwhile, it became increasingly apparent that Sixteenth Century warfare represented the fruition of a trend which had begun way back in the mid-Twelfth Century: the re-appearance of infantry on the battlefield after nearly half a millennium of mounted warfare. With a few new adjustments to my basic design there emerged TAC 14, THE RENAISSANCE OF INFANTRY as the basic project.

While all of this process was going on, my training as an historian was keeping me from making the error common to most game designers. Oman was good, indeed great. But he was not infallible, as events were to prove. Reliance upon one source is the cardinal sin in historiography and game design both. At the very beginning of the TAC 14 project I had committed myself to the use of non-English sources. So I began to dig.

One source did not require much digging, Machiavelli's DELL'ARTE DELLA GUERRA. I knew exactly where to get a copy of this work--in which the great mind's evaluation of the military situation of his day was damnably accurate while all his predictions were incredibly lousy. I had a copy of the Italian text and the NYPL had a "recent" English version, done about 1812 which proved next to useless as things turned out. Ploughing through 500 year old Italian prose was difficult but yielded up some valuable gems of information. Altogether a rewarding experience but by no means to be recommended. Machiavelli's friend, Guicciardini, had put together a very well recommended STORIA D'ITALIA covering precisely the period of the Hapsburg-Valois conflict and this was available in a modern translation, which proved nearly worthless since the translator had ignored most of the significant and well described battle pieces for the juicier diplomatic and familial conflicts. Again I was forced to use the Italian source and worked with a copy at NYPL.

By this time I was fully into Italian materials: things like Ricotti's STORIA DELLE CAMPAGNIE DI VENTURA. This proved an invaluable source in that it covered virtually every military campaign in Italy through the Renaissance in considerable detail (interesting items like the condottiero Antonio Nofi, who failed to survive a battle around 1525 did not by any means diminish my enthusiasm for the topic.). Like Oman's work, this goes into detail on: orders of battle, numbers, tactical developments, and what have you. Indeed one suspects that Oman cribbed a bit from Ricotti, though the latter often falls down on things like conditions of service, recruitment, supply, and what not.

Another particularly useful work, though one of very uneven quality was LAS BATTALLAS DE ESPAÑA, which sets forth in summary fashion the details of every battle ever fought in Spain by Spaniards, or in Spain's name from somewhere before Christ through the Second World War. From this came the details of a number of battles listed in the order of battle chart.

Many other works were rummaged through, and not a few yielded up useful little items. Thus the note in S&T no. 22 on the pay of soldiers during the Fifteenth Century turned up while I was browsing through a dictionary of useless facts while waiting for someone in a library. To help set up a proper "mood" for the whole thing I re-read Deiss' CAPTAINS OF FORTUNE and Shellabarger's BAYARD, dug up Piper's excellent science fiction novel LORD KALVAN OF OTHERWHEN, and delved into a few other odd places. The CONAN SWORDBOOK, provided a host of scholarly articles on weaponry and the general problems of staying alive in an unfriendly sword armed society, all of which had some influence on Tac 14's final form.

Now, while doing all this rummaging around I was already into the design of a prototype version. No matter how much research you do, you have not really accomplished very much until you do get a working prototype in hand. As one of the Tactical Series Games, TAC 14 bears a direct relationship with Poultron Press' TAC 3--which evolved into PANZERBLITZ-- and TAC 10, more commonly known as DEPLOYMENT. The Tactical Series Games are devoted to the simulation of warfare on the most basic level of the period in question. Thus, in TAC 3 the action is platoon and company, while for TAC 10 it is battalion and battery. All action assumes that strategic maneuver has brought the combatants to the battlefield and that the only thing left to do is to have at it. As one of this series TAC 14 was naturally expected to fit into this mold. Thus, there exists a high degree of interchangeability among the several published and unpublished Tactical Series Games.

The first thing developed for TAC 14 was the board, and great care was taken so that there would be a good "mix" of terrain features on it. Thus roughly one-third the board is "clear" terrain, one-third very rough, and the remaining third intermediate. Since the historical scenarios provided with the game gave considerable latitude in deployment it was hoped that the players would deploy in terrain most suitable to the tactical system favored by their forces.

While the board was in process, the actual work on the troop counters began. The first decision involved the question of how many men would each counter represent and the figure of 500 was taken as the standard, though in some scenarios each counter represents as few as 100 men while certain others have as many as 2,000 per counter: the proportions among the armies

and the arms being actually more important than the actual numbers involved. Combat factors were a rather thorny problem until I hit upon the idea of assigning one type of troops a factor rather arbitrarily and then doing the combat factors of all other types on the basis of how they actually related to these in the period. Thus, regular pikemen became 4-4s.

Now, the historical evidence culled from the Renaissance experiences and from ancient times as well, indicated that, given relative equality in numbers, sword-and-buckler armed infantrymen could chop up pike armed infantrymen more often than not, particularly if the latter were receiving the attack. To reflect this in the game, the weight of sword-and-buckler men when attacking pikemen was doubled so that their chances of doing in the latter would be increased. However, if pikemen were vulnerable to swordsmen, swordsmen were vulnerable to cavalry, while pikemen were usually quite safe on this score. Both these types of troops were suckers for missile armed troops, but missile armed troops were chumps in a melee with anybody. And so it went, as the relationships were noted and dealt with. Finally, all the factors settled down to more or less where they are in TAC 14, though players of TAC 13 will note some changes developed in seemingly comparable troops between the two games. The process of refinement continued even after the final published form of the game was finished.

Movement factors were relatively easy, once we settled upon the scale of 50 bractie--roughly 100 meters--per hex. The actual tactical rate of march was divided by three to get the rate for twenty minutes. with a bit chopped off to reflect the fact that close order drill and cadence had not yet been invented and most armies manoevered in columns of hordes in this period. Red Simonsen's beautiful unit counters went a long way towards simplifying identification problems for the game and the departure from the "standard" military symbology proved one of the more refreshing aspects of the game.

Then came the big day. Playtesting\*!! Roughly a month after I sat down to work on the project we settled down to the first real playtest of the game. And several reams of notes were taken. As someone new to the game design business I heartily recommend that all game designers pick the snottiest, rulebook lawyers they can find for playtest purposes--as long as you can keep yourself from strangling them. Each loophole they turn up will mean a tighter game for you. The limited zone of control given to units defending behind rivers was the result of someone taking the letter of the rules rather than the spirit and it was a most important development too (specifically, this person tried to march a unit across a river, around the defending unit's flank, and then attack said defender in the rear!). Some of the rules in TAC 13 reflect experience with TAC 14 and nit pickers.

Playtesting ironed out some of the bugs in the game, but by no means all. Not even the full, year long playtest 1914 went through was enough to keep out the bugs, and TAC 14 proved rather free of serious bloopers, though some misinformed people thought there were some which were not--like that the crossbow was more accurate than the English longbow. One big error was in not providing more detailed deployment instructions for the scenarios, as many players overdid their deployments a bit. More specific instructions, such as have been provided in TAC 13, would have added the "idiocy" factor rather nicely: after all, no intelligent French general would have done what the French did do at Crécy. The Feudal Rule had been designed to add the "idiocy" factor but proved inadequate to the task. TAC 13 remedied this.

A major source of problems was typographical errors and last minute oversights on our part. Thus the Spanish may find it a bit difficult to win in the Garigliano scenario without the six arquebus units which they are supposed to have and Hostigos may find it has problems in Fitra unless it deploys second and moves first.

All in all, when TAC 14 was completed I felt a considerable sense of accomplishment, mingled with a little awe at what I had wrought. At the same time I realized that there were a number of valuable lessons which I had learned, though I was soon to discover that I hadn't learned them all by any means.

To recapitulate,

- A. To design a good game you must be able to do your own historical research--investing a \$ and something in Wood Gray's HISTORIAN'S HANDBOOK is a wise move for anyone.
- B. If you can't read the literature, forget it. Unless you are dealing with World War II or the War of Secession all English sources are bound to be limited.
- C. No single source is ever totally valid--neither George Wallace's opinion of Martin Luther King, nor Paul Carrell's ideas about the Russian front are particularly objective but both sources may have some validity.
- D. Certain things never change--information useful in one project may be equally valuable in another, or it may not be.
- E. Don't become overly attached to any part of your project. If there is something wrong with some part of your work toss it out, don't try to repair a bad job.
- F. Change your topic if you get in trouble. A game on Hong Kong in 1941 is about as sensible as pearl diving in pirhana infested waters.

Keep your eyes open for odd facts and bits of data and your ears ready for advice--you need a good memory for this one. ~~Something~~ something historians get as standard issue.

- . Don't quit when things get rough, take a day off, have a drink, look up your girl's roommate or something.
- . Remember that the thing will not get itself done. A good game can be designed in a few days if you treat it as serious business.
- . Find someone who knows how to kick ass selectively, like Jim Dunnigan or Red Simonsen. This helps when the advice in item H fails.