

HOME BREW

Designing Your Own Scenarios for Mech War 77 and Panzer 44

by Matthew Buynowski

One of the most difficult things to encourage is free experimentation with existing games —most of you take the printed situations a little too Talmudically. And so, with this we push you into heresy:

The avid simove Fan has by now exhausted all the *Mech War* and *Panzer '44* scenarios. Worse, he has come to know intimately every hex of both games maps. A pall sets in; the frustrated gamer takes the plunge and orders six blank hexsheets. Within a few hours 154 square miles of terrain can be created, all new and all to the gamers liking. Fine, but be warned, there are pitfalls on that route.

Scale. What is more natural, with six blank map sections, than to make one gigantic map? Nothing, but don't do it. Tables that big are rare, and even if one is available, try moving units, counting ranges, or reading hex numbers in the center of such a map. Put the boards together in pairs, or triplets; two joined on the long edge is about optimum. Should the mad urge for giant-sized simulations persist, make roads, etc., join at the edges. But plan the maps mainly for use as separate sections. An interesting thing to do with blank mapsheets is to draw your home town. While the historical justification for *Mech-War* scenarios in Manhattan or southern Arkansas may be weak, there's a certain fascination in fighting over places you're intimately familiar with. You can get maps from the US Coast and Geodetic Service or tromp around town with a pencil.

Whatever size map is used, the next bad impulse is to rush out and do divisional-sized scenarios. Don't. Although the physical game-scale accomodates such actions (even on a single board), the number of counters required is unwieldy. For example, the "book" frontage for a U.S. World War infantry division is about 5.1 miles, which fits on a 4 by 6½ mile single map, but such a unit requires over 125 counters to simulate! If there was ever an "ironclad" si-move rule, it is to restrict each player to less than 25 combat units. Otherwise, so much plotting and die rolling ensue that boredom develops. The only way around this stumbling block is to go back to sequential movement and combat, without plotting. Totally unrealistic, but unavoidable. And fun. Try to rustle up some kind of opportunity fire.

Under "the rule," divisional simulations will require five to six per side. Even with a good-sized gaming group, that's nearly impossible. But six players total is not unreasonable, and this fits well with regimental/combat-command scenarios on a two-hexsheet map.

The order of battle may be bloated to near-division size by the expedient of using battle-

worn formations. Combat units are rarely at full strength, and, in fact, this allows the weeding out of "useless" counters and maximization of "interesting" ones. *Mech War* scenarios reflect this, unlike the earlier *Red Star/White Star* situations.

Terrain has predictable results on the final scenarios and tactics employed. Very closed terrain will make infantry potent (especially with CA doubled at one hex). If the terrain is opened to the point that the usual engagement is 3 to 10 hexes, armor comes to the fore. As the distance from one terrain feature to the next increases, the non-attenuated G and H-class weapons become the most powerful.

On-board objectives give scenarios purpose and add spice. The best are bridges, road junctions, towns, and other tactical scale items; strategic objectives like vital resources or industry are best avoided. Read some military history for inspiration. The Roer River Dams posed a sticky operational problem; put a flood control dam on your map's river. And so on. Experiment with any crazy terrain feature you please. Patton once diverted troops to liberate an Austrian stable. Once selected, objectives should be put on the map with some maneuver space on all sides.

Try to prevent canalization by terrain, so that all of the map is used; Don't put a river right through the middle of the board and provide only one or two bridges. All scenario action will be magnetically drawn over and over those same spots. By the same token, don't give both sides tank-heavy forces and hide the objectives in swamps or forests. Put the objectives where everyone can get at them.

If considerable woods, towns, or slopes are to be drawn, \$2 rubber stamps can be well worth it. An added advantage of this is that some colored stamp-pad inks are not water-soluble like colored marking pens. And while we're spending money, pick up some plexiglas map covers at a hardware store. You can draw on them and erase, and it's cheaper in the long run than buying lots of blank maps.

He who attacks without superiority ends up with a bloody nose. Thus, experienced gamers will avoid action in too-even scenarios. To avoid this, some imbalance in the opposing forces, be it quantitative or qualitative, must be included. Overall scenario balance is then achieved by the relative difficulty of the victory conditions. When forces are identical, you do have a problem. But this doesn't apply in tactical games, unless you give both players units of one nationality. Each unit has strengths and weaknesses; you

can have an even fight without identical forces. For example, the superior Soviet infantry and infantry AT missiles are countered by superior American artillery and helicopters in *Mech War*.

The weak-side build-up scenario, wherein one side receives more and more reinforcements, is the best. There is continuous action, and every player "takes the offensive" at some time. This is a legitimate operational plan for mobile defenses (as distinguished from the area defense). Overall balance/local imbalance scenarios, in which total forces are even but distributed unevenly on the map, work for multi-commander set-ups. Unfortunately, not every player has offensive opportunities. The scenario in which one side is totally defensive and (usually) crushed, requires victory condition balancing. Some players find this challenging; others hate it.

Pervading all the above has been the idea of multiple-commander teams. This immediately brings up the question of how to simulate tactical co-ordination. Possible methods of dealing with this are limited communications and unit boundaries. The former can be done in any of several ways:

A. Written notes. A percentage of these may be lost, "intercepted," or "garbled." But radio makes written messages obsolete.

B. Conferences. Always one at the start. Thereafter, one every "x" turns. The enemy's jamming the radio, and you can only get a word in occasionally. Conferences should have time limits.

C. None whatever. This is riotous. Hey, now that I think of it, how about a radio jamming table? Fix it so either side's communications can break down at any time. This especially applies to *Mech War*, as jamming technology is a lot more advanced these days.

D. No restrictions at all. Differences of opinion cause tactical faux-pas, only if no overall commander is assigned. Especially if the teammates have different objectives, rather than being involved in a race. For example, if one player is to take a town and a teammate benefits from enemy casualties, the latter may be incensed over the former's refusal to finish off a disrupted unit.

Boundary lines reflect the actual control devices used in combat to avoid friendly clashes, assign advance roads, etc. A possible optional rule:

- 1 Each commander's units must stay within his zone and may not voluntarily move out.
2. Units may fire into adjacent zones. Artillery may not indirectly fire across a boundary in the case of the attacking team, even if both teammates agree. This simulates the inability

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of artillery to switch fire, which is covered by the *Mech War* US multiple artillery rules.

3. A unit panicked into other zones may remain so long as not plotted "mv". First voluntary movement must return it to proper zone.

4. Boundaries must be assigned unambiguously by team commander, and only changed by him.

Other monkey wrenches, like not allowing units to spot for neighboring zones, can be added. Bear in mind that all this is speculative, and almost anything can be "justified." Just how many wrenches to throw in is again a matter of personal taste.

Scenarios are more "real" if couched in an "historical" sequence. This can be real history (Pz '44), entirely imagined, or constructed from other games. The only constraint is that map terrain should match reasonably to that required by the history.

Create scenarios from the next-higher level games such as *Ardennes Offensive*, *Modern Battles Quad*, *Sinai*, or *East is Red*; when a critical attack comes up, recreate the forces engaged on the tactical maps. Be careful to adjust for the proper scale factors (units, time, distance) in the transfer. And don't go overboard. I once tried to do that with NATO and *Red Star/White Star*. I don't recommend it; stick to comparatively easy conversions like *Wurzburg* and *Hurtgen Forest*. Similarly, every completed fantasy scenario can set the stage for the next scenario; play-as-you-go history. At this point, the road is wide open—let your imagination run free, tethered by restrictions of playability.

