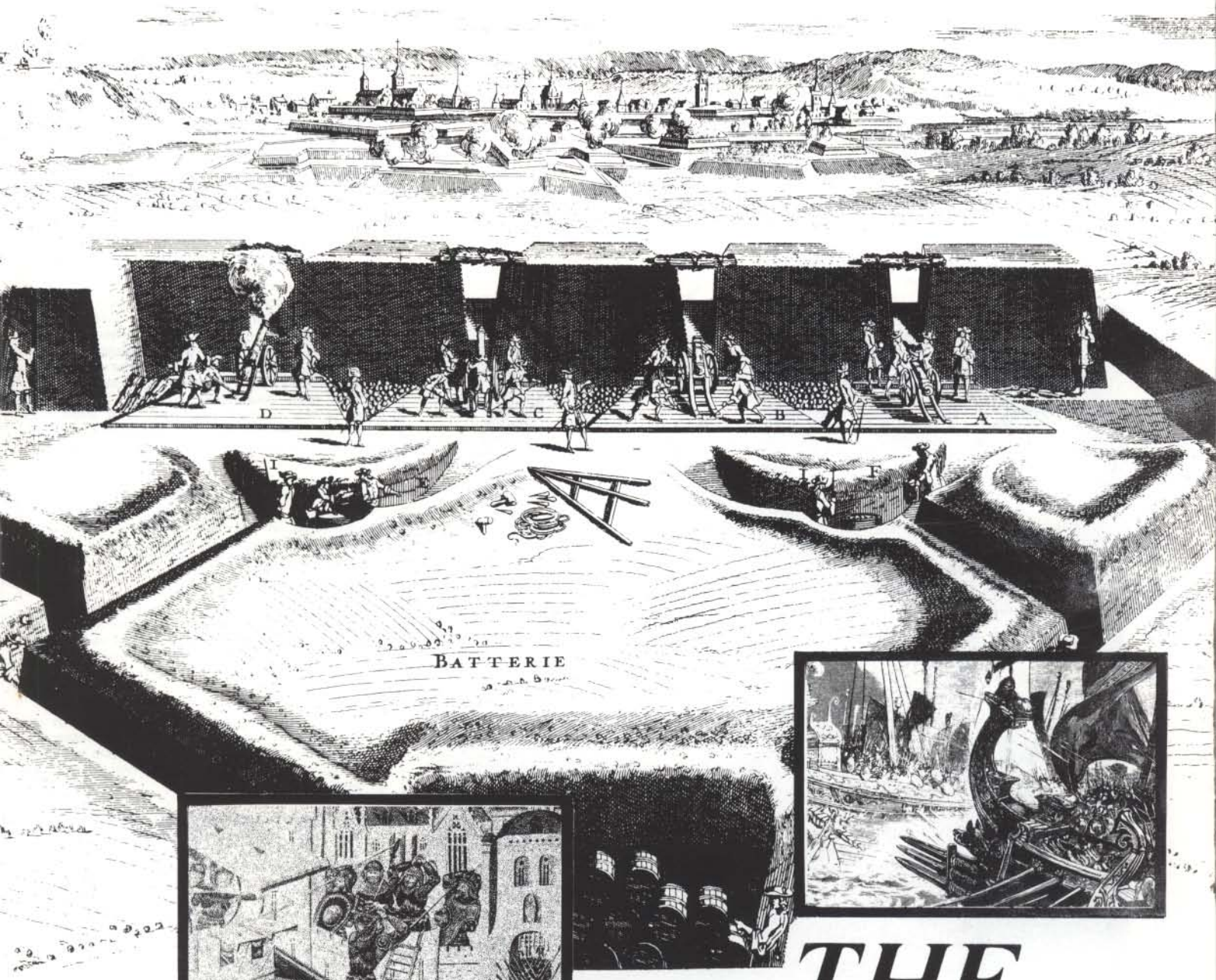


THE ART OF SIEGE

RALPH VICKERS

It had to happen sooner or later --- a wargame with *no hexes*!

Actually two of the four games contained in SPI's latest quadrigame. **The Art of Siege**, are hexless. These games deal with the more recent sieges of the four covered --- **Lille**, the siege of the French by the Duke of Marlborough in 1708, and **Sevastopol**, the long and bitter French-British vs. Russians struggle during the Crimean War of 1854-55.

The conventionally treated "hex" sieges are Alexander's assault on **Tyre** in 322 BC, and the 1191 siege of **Acre** by Richard the Lionhearted.

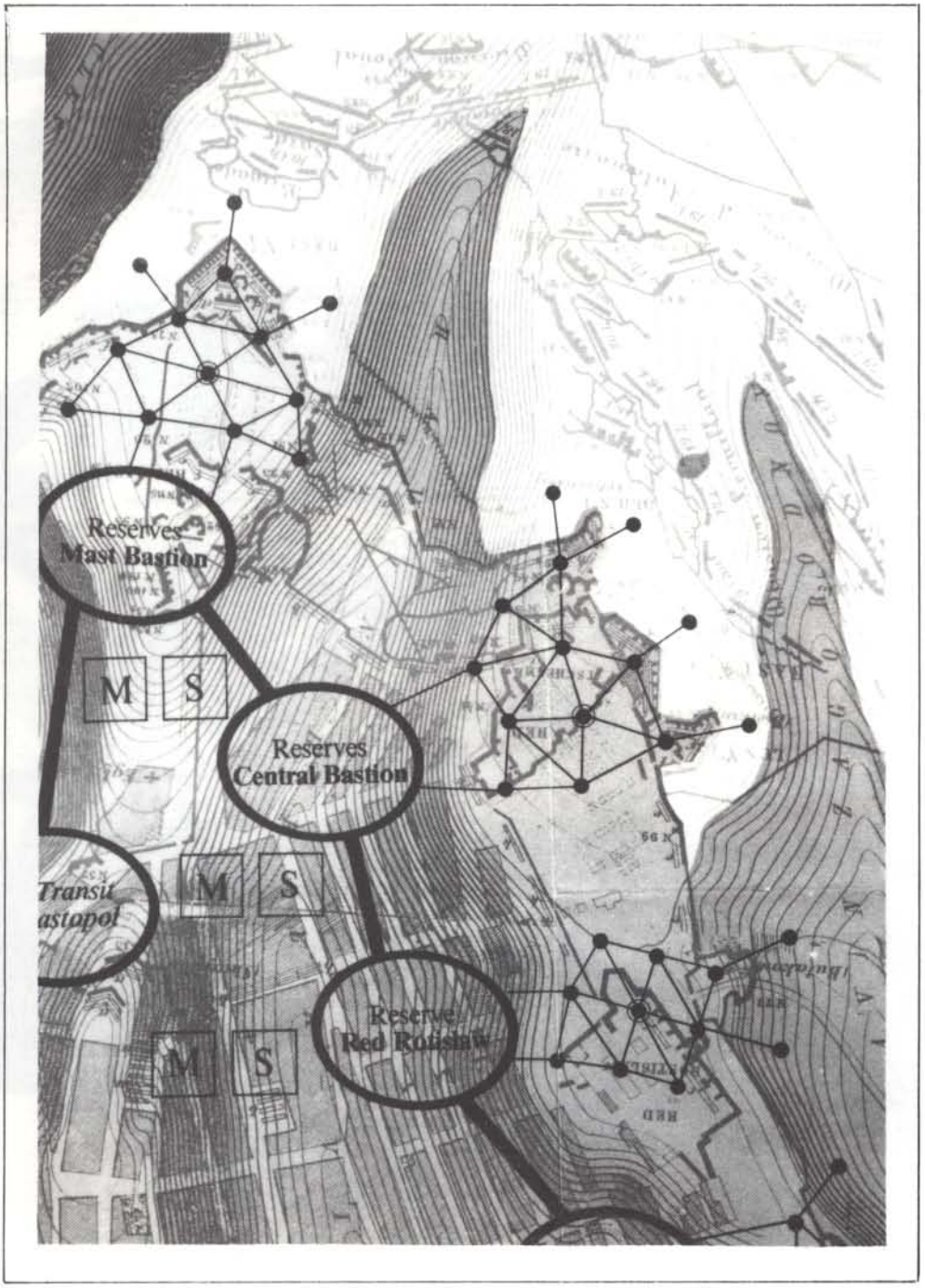
Why have two of these games abandoned the traditional hexes? And we don't mean SPI has reverted to squares or some other form of dividing the game map. These are unadorned hexless, squareless, circleless maps. In fact --- a nice authentic historical touch --- the Lille and Sevastopol maps are actually enlargements of contemporary maps showing in detail the actual siegeworks, defensive bastions and so on --- everything you could want to know about the constructions during the real campaign.

A hexless wargame is a radical departure from *board* game conventions. It might or might not (as will be discussed later) be a significant new breakthrough for wargaming. But first, why did SPI take this drastic step?

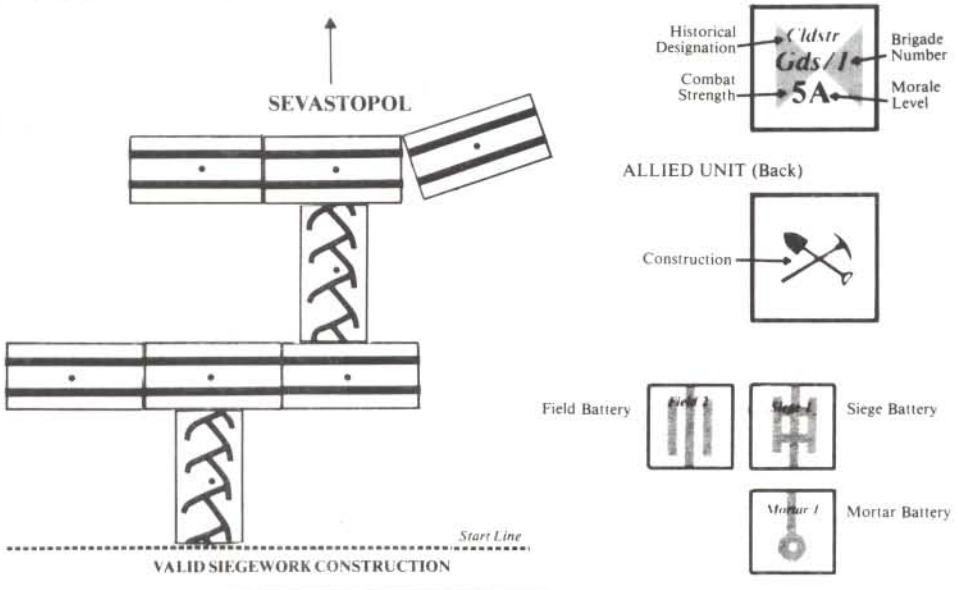
Rob Mosca in his Designer's notes in the **Sevastopol** rules explains it this way: ".... Sevastopol's map contains no hexes. This was done because of the nature of building a trench system and the time/distance scale between the two sides. Indeed, it (hexes) was found detrimental to the game as it imposed problems dealing with the construction of siegeworks."

Innovation is only justified if it provides a clear improvement. Is it justified here?

In one respect, definitely YES. To set up **Lille** and **Sevastopol** you almost just dump your units on the map, the besieged forces more or less anywhere inside the fortifications and the besiegers outside. There is plenty of time when the game begins to organize your forces more specifically. This is a marvellous convenience for those who chafe impatiently at the usual long and painstaking setting up of games.



Playing pieces from SEVASTOPOL



Even better (to digress for a moment) the designers have taken advantage of a condition which allowed them to write the rules as rules (ideally) should be written: All you have to do to come to grips with these two games is skim through the rules once to give yourself a general orientation, then start at "square one". The Game Turn Sequence refers you at the end of each brief description of the Game Phases (well, almost always) to the appropriate section in the rules. So you can begin to play either of these games with only a hazy idea of what they are all about and be instructed by the rules step by step as you proceed.

The basic mechanics of play are fairly simple. The besiegers begin by constructing a siegeworks of trenches to approach the enemy's ramparts. These siegeworks consist of two types of rectangular counters (measuring 2 x 1 standard unit counters) --- parallels and saps. The parallels represent horizontal trenches and gun emplacements; the saps are zig zag verticals connecting the various lines of horizontals. The object of the besiegers is to extend their siegeworks network conveniently close to the enemy's positions. Thus when they finally go "over the top" the assaulting troops will only have to cross a minimum of open ground to their objectives.

The more trenches the besiegers build the more their tactical options. They can have their troops concentrated in the trenches of one sector and suddenly redeploy them en masse in the trenches of another sector, and immediately after launch a surprise assault.

Meanwhile the besieged are busy repairing and strengthening their defensive bastions. Unit counters of both sides rarely work so hard as they do in these games. They are backprinted, not with the usual reduced combat strengths, but with picks and shovels.

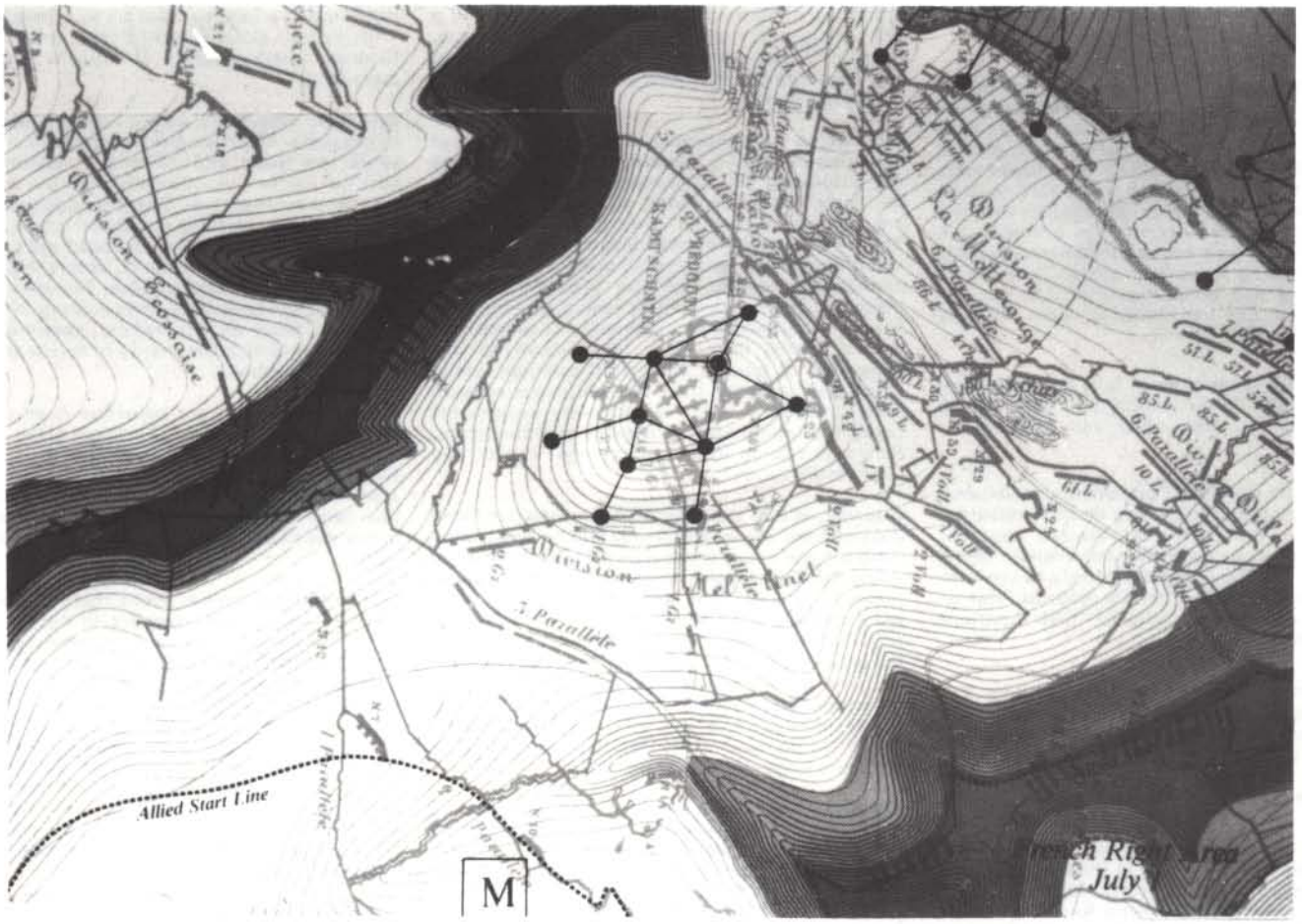
And while all this toil proceeds, both sides are harassing each other with exchanges of mortar and siege gun fire that can reduce to rubble works so laboriously constructed. There is a real flavour here of the sweat and toil of a siege.

But the fear of many wargamers about siege games is that they will be static enterprises with long periods of boredom and inaction. In fact, this is the very atmosphere the designers set out to create. (When you think of it, if they are to realistically simulate a siege, what else can they do?) but hold on --- they also wisely kept a sharp eye on game pace and action. They arrived at a satisfactory compromise between realism and play interest. **Lille** and **Sevastopol** not only give us an adequate "feel" of a siege, but are also enough action to keep us determinedly picking and shovelling right to the end.

Gun ranges and open terrain movement are governed by measurements made with a "range finder". This is a common practice with miniaturists, so it should not cause board gamers any untoward problems. The rules governing this aspect of play are short and clear.

Once the besiegers unleash an assault, operational phases of the game are halted and the action is confined to a sort of mini-game on a tactical level. The objectives of the besiegers are any of a half dozen or more bastions. If the attackers survive their rush across the open ground in the hail of the defenders' field gun fire, they reach certain assault "points". From here movement and combat are channeled by lines connecting a network of these points through each bastion. The mechanics of melee are much the same as though the action were taking place on hexes, but it works *better*. (more on this in a moment.)

Other features which these games offer are off-map intervention by field armies of the besieged forces, attrition by weather and disease, siege battery ammunition supply, leaders' initiative (a change of your commander-in-chief can have a profound effect on your efficiency), and engineers to supervice construction (but not repairs). There are also some nice, realistic rules covering cases where the defenders can fire down on you if you are trying to dig a trench through a depression or a ravine. And just to make sure you aren't careless in positioning your parellels, there is a devastating rule on enfilade fire.

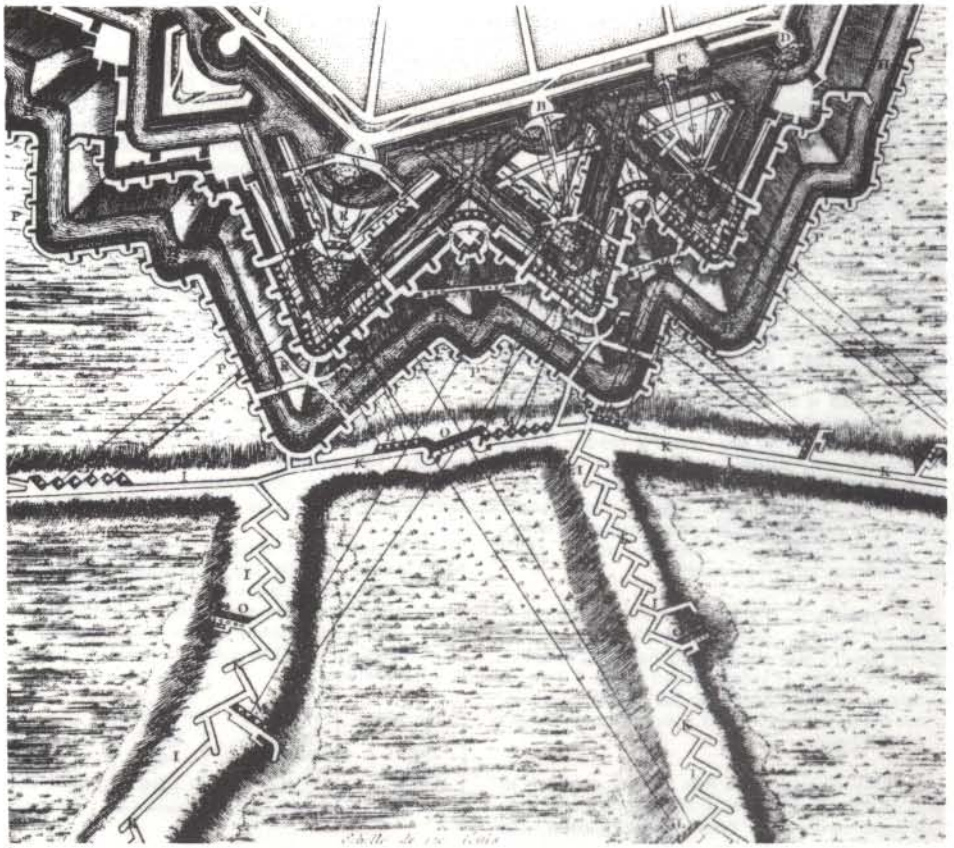


If you are impatient to unleash your assault and don't dig your trenches close enough, you will only do it once. Few troops will survive a long rush across open ground in the hail of defenders' field artillery fire --- that's why the besiegers are provided with picks and shovels.

Once you have seen these two games it is obvious why the designers chucked out hexes. Not only were hexes not needed (and one of the rules of good designing of anything is to eliminate everything that isn't needed) but, as Rob Mosca said, they would have been a hindrance. It is far more logical to set up the siegework parallels and saps on a "bare" map than twist and distort them to conform to the rigid confines of hexes. Even the tactical meleeing works better on the point-to-point system than it would have done with hexes. Not every adjacent point is necessarily joined by a line. This makes sense because within a bastion there would be many walls and other configurations that would separate one group of troops from another. Joined points give more opportunities -- realistic opportunities -- for cutting off and bypassing enemy units than hexes would allow. Thus the mini-games acquire much more interest.

Looking back, the decision to eliminate hexes was obvious and logical, but that decision must have been a traumatic leap. SPI tried this years ago in a long-forgotten game (was it called 1812?) which was a laudable experiment but a disaster. Having been badly burned the first time they tried to do away with hexes, it must have caused some corporate misgivings when another attempt was proposed. Otherwise they would have re-explored this area long ago.

Well, this time it works. But there is still another bouquet to hand out. Usually when a designer trail blazes a new game system he makes a lot of errors and false steps. Usually it is not until the second or third time the system is used that enough bugs are cleaned out to "perfect" it. If SPI has another go at this system no doubt they will improve it, but as it stands it is workable, clean, and sufficiently developed.



The Golden Age of siege warfare was during the wars of Louis XIV when Marshal Vauban conducted 55 successful sieges and built over thirty new fortresses along the French frontier. Vauban wrote many treatises on both the attack and the defence of fortresses. The above is one of the illustrations taken from his works. It details the approach trenches leading to the parallel trench which held the siege batteries and the sappers who dug forward into the fortress ditches.

Let's hope that SPI (and other game publishers) explore further this new frontier. The success of this "hexlessness' raises the question whether some other games wouldn't have been more successful without the restraint of hexes.

Originally hexes were a major technological breakthrough in the hobby. The very earliest games (most of them unpublished) inevitably used squares, or the only slightly better brick pattern rectangles. Everybody could see that hexes were better, but they were just too damn hard to draw --- until someone had the bright idea to turn the chart over to a computer. (It was probably Jim Dunnigan.) Hexes have been a fundamental element of the wargaming scene ever since. They are so handy, logical and ubiquitous that it is not surprising that no one has looked at them critically for a long time.

But if you stare at the maps of **Lille** and **Sevastopol** and think about it for awhile, you begin to see that hexes are ....well....rigid and arbitrary..... and unrealistic.

Simply because hexes have become the established norm, reality on the wargaming board is distorted --- needlessly. Take the most obvious example, those funny rivers we see all over our maps wriggling symetrically along the hexsides. Merely to conform to hexes these important terrain features must be abstracted, their courses altered, their positions sometimes shifted for miles.

Movement must always be in exact multiples. For instance, usually infantry can move exactly twice as fast across clear terrain as it can through woods. Usually it can march precisely twice as fast along a road as across clear terrain. Does this even approximate reality?

Just to see for yourself, get a pad and pencil and work out this little problem: In the example above we can express the movement ratios as 4:2:1. Movement along roads is exactly four times as fast as movement through woods. Take your favourite game and work out what the real ratios should be. On a typical game these should come out more or less like 4.1:3.4:2.5. Now calculate the time/space distortions imposed on your favourite game by hexes, remembering to multiply the product by the number of game turns.

There is another unrealistic aspect of hexes which is not entirely their fault, but this deficiency is clearly shown by the point-to-point tactical system in **Sevastopol.**

On a typical game board a unit always exerts a Zone of Control on all six contiguous hexes (except perhaps sometimes across those wiggly rivers). But in real life (and in Sevastopol) this "ain't necessarily so". It is quite plausible that in the jumble of a defensive bastion opposing units could be "side by side" and yet not exert control over each other. Maybe they are separated by high walls. Maybe they are both in parallel trench systems. Or the situation is even more complicated. Maybe one unit is on relatively open ground while the other is well dug in on a rampart. In this case it is really not realistic to say that the troops on the open ground can exert just as much Zone of Control as their dug-in enemies can exert on them. ZOCs across hexsides are always "reciprocal" whereas in reality there are many instances where ZOCs should extend out but not in — ZOCs should often be "non-reciprocal".

All this unrealistic distortion could be avoided. Instead of bending rivers to conform to hexes, designers should give thought to bending hexes to conform to rivers. If infantry can move 1.3 times faster along a road than it can across clear terrain, why not make the road hex 1.3 times *longer* than a clear terrain hex?

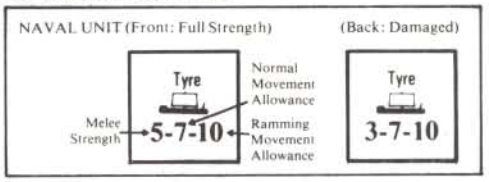
All we really require of a hex is enough space to place a unit in it. For practical reasons a hex cannot be smaller in area than a unit counter, but there is no reason why, for instance, a road hex cannot be longer. (Even this practical limit could be eliminated if wargame publishers mounted their maps on cork boards and made the unit counters as little plastic flags mounted on pins, but that would raise costs enormously. Perhaps one day in the golden future we will all be able to afford such extravagances!)

There are rumours that Somewhere in England a brave designer is working on a game without hexes. Keep at it, whoever you are! Maybe one day you will be the father of a New Age in wargaming -- a more realistic age.

But lest we be misunderstood, and at the risk of labouring our point, we should state that we are not advocating that all wargames should be played on "bare" maps requiring all movement to be regulated by a ruler or scale as miniaturists do. There are undoubted advantages to clearly defined areas. In essence we are saying that hexes should conform to terrain, not vice versa. This would mean, of course, that hexes would no longer be hexes --- they would be elongated, or expanded, or dented along their rims to conform to the exigencies of terrain. These configurations would often give us *more* than six contiguous areas to some "hexes" — which would vastly increase the possible permutations of combat and movement. Surely this is an idea worth at least one or two exploratory forays?

Anyway, as it is the **Lille** and **Sevastopol** are likely distinct from any wargame map you have ever seen. They are *real* maps. It was a pity the art department doing the **Sevastopol** map chose to place blue land beside blue water, but aside from that both maps are striking and attractive. The scale of the **Lille** map is better suited to this game system than is **Sevastopol's.** On the **Lille** map you can see your units on their actual bastion positions whereas in **Sevastopol** positioning is more abstract and there is a great deal of "this unit is here but it is actually there" to contend with. But this is not a major difficulty once you get the hang of it.

These are two games which are a very interesting experiment, and are worth the consideration of everyone in the hobby who wants to keep up with the latest developments.



Because the ancient city of Tyre was situated on an island just offshore, **Tyre** is essentially a naval game. Armchair sailors will enjoy the detailed rules covering the battles of Triremes, Quinqueremes and Biremes, the manoeuvring (naval units must be faced correctly), the meleeing, the exhaustion of the galley slaves after a fast ramming run, the efforts of shipwrights to repair damaged vessels for the next battle. The Macedonian fleets must also bombard the city's walls with shipborne catapults to smash them into rubble --- and even ram them! (And ramming can only be done from all-sea hexes!) Meanwhile the Tyrians are as busy as ants rebuilding their shattered defenses and strewing their beaches with boulders to discourage enemy ships from landing.

Finally the Macedonian fleets sail from their harbours loaded with troops and there is one grand assault. The attackers now have 16 mini-turns to achieve their two objectives --- the Agendrium and the Temple of Hercules --- or they lose.

There is quite a bit of detail in this game. At times, some people would say, too much. (has anyone ever polled wargamers to see if they faithfully try to observe *every* rule in a game? But once you get it all sorted out, patch up a few gaps here and there (e.g. the Mole rules) and memorize it all, the game is quite realistic.

Acre uses essentially the same land system as **Tyre.** For landlubbers it is a more interesting game. It not only features considerable besieging, but each turn there is also an appearance of Saracen relief armies for the Crusaders to contend with. It is an interesting situation competently handled.

The game is played on two levels, strategic and tactical. The strategic level involves general movement and re-deployment and the appearance on the board of a Saracen relief army, or two or three. Then there is either a tactical level involving bombardment and repairs, or assault, repair and regrouping.

Just about everything, except supply, is represented in this game. There are giant catapults such as "The Wrath of God" and "The Evil Neighbour" --- fanciful names the Crusaders, not the designers, gave to these machines. There is underground tunneling, tunnel searching and subterranean combat, filling the fosses, repairing damaged walls, counter bombardments, ladder assaults, leaders, and detailed rules for fire and melee combat. The various forces involved include knights, men-at-arms, Archers of the Eyes, horse archers, cavalry, spearmen militia and Naptha Grenadiers. Plenty of colour and something for everybody.

These four games are a departure from the usual SPI quadrigame format. Each game has its own rulebook rather than the usual Standard Rules and Exclusive Rules, and the maps are larger. If you tried **Constantinople** and didn't like it, don't let this deter you from taking a look at these siege games because there have been a lot of improvements.

One interesting feature about these games is that they all give a prominent role to morale. This is an element of combat that many games ignore, but it is highly debatable whether a game can call itself a serious simulation if it does not include this factor.

It's all very well for a game designer to arm Alexander's forces with slings and arrows, but if the troops do not have the will to use those weapons what use are they? Or to put it a little more precisely, to what degree does the morale of Alexander's troops control the *effectiveness* of those weapons?

In battles, in addition to the ratios of the numbers of troops involved and the relative lethality of the weapons employed, there are human factors which can influence the outcome. These are such qualities as courage, stamina, fear, determination, discipline and so on.

The debatable point is how large a role should morale play in wargame combat simulations?

According to General Eisenhower, "Morale is the greatest single factor in successful wars." (The New York Post, June 23, 1945.) Napoleon said: "In war morale considerations account for three-quarters, the balance of actual forces only for the other quarter." (From a letter, August 27, 1808.) He also said (if memory can be trusted) that in battle the number of disabled men was not nearly as important as the number of men who were frightened. Many other military observers including Clausewitz, Liddel Hart -- even Lenin -- have made similar comments on the paramount importance of morale. Obviously morale is an important factor to some degree (the exact amount open to debate) so the designers of these games should be given credit for taking the trouble to incorporate it into their combat equations. Let us hope that this is a new trend.

And, let us hope that SPI continues to maintain the generally high standards they have achieved in these **Art of Siege** quads.