

HAM ROLES AND SWEET CORN

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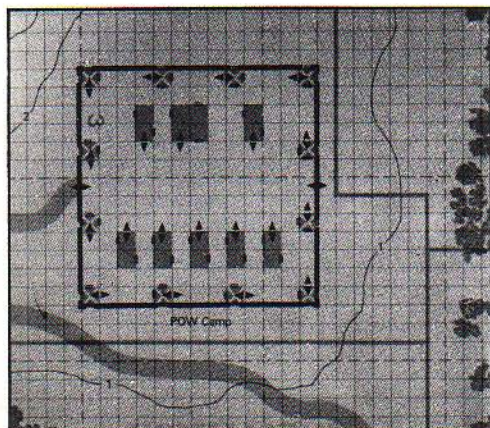
To continue the culinary metaphor just a little longer, the presentation of SPI's **Commando** reminds me of one of the practices common in restaurants — take something well-known and a little banal, give it a new name, smother it in dressing and the suckers will think it's wonderful. To be more specific, this is a game apparently filled with innovation, but which on closer examination reveals many familiar devices thinly disguised.

Before looking at the game itself, though, I feel compelled to describe the box-lid. The inscription on it reads "Daring missions against impossible odds in **COMMANDO** the Combat Adventure Game." Below this numbers of Action Man figures may be seen variously dropping from the sky, scaling vertical cliffs, firing sub-machine guns and otherwise running about like headless chickens. You may think that this resembles nothing so much as a cross between "The Guns of Navarone" and the comics you used to read in your early years — be warned, the illustrations are a remarkably accurate representation of what you will find inside the box.

First, to deal with the dressing. I had followed the S&T/Moves playtest reports on this game, albeit only cursorily, and none of these had led me to suppose that there would be anything unusual about the maps or the counters. There are in fact twelve different maps, two copies of each being provided. All are compressed onto six 17" x 22" mapsheets by the device of backprinting all the sheets. The maps represent the sites of the various scenarios in the game, and the most surprising thing about them is that they have squares instead of hexes. The squares are fairly small — ¼" square to be exact, and this set me wondering about the counters, but these proved no problem for the simple reason that there are none.

This last fact would seem to give rise to a somewhat ticklish problem — how does one play a boardgame without counters? The official SPI answer is to use tracing paper laid over the maps in order to record positions and moves, but I find that this simply does not work, so I have covered my maps with self-adhesive film which allows the use of chinagraph pencils. Despite the expense this seems to be the only solution.

Commando is really two games in one — the Historical Game and the Role-Playing Game, each having a separate rules booklet, although the latter is superimposed on the former which can be played by itself. I propose to deal with the two games separately.



The Historical Game.

The rules run to nearly forty pages, with eight pages of charts thrown in (you also get Steve Patrick's article on Commando operations reprinted from S&T 75) but this does not indicate a super-complex game, for the basic game may be played using only a relatively small proportion of the rules — the first fifteen sections. The rest are optional rules most of which are applicable to only a minority of the scenarios. Happily the rules-writing is of a reasonable standard, probably better than usual for SPI, and the evidence suggests that the playtesting on this game has been fairly thorough; it is unfortunate that such errors and ambiguities as there are seem to occur mainly in the more innovative areas, so that it is not always possible to call on past experience as a guide.

As the title suggests, the basic intention is to simulate, on a man-to-man level, the activities of Commando units; these are typically fairly small-scale affairs, and there are not usually more than a dozen or so men on each side. The game-scales place **Commando** firmly in the tactical bracket — fifteen seconds per game-turn (most scenarios last twenty turns) and three metres for the side of a square. A game on this level and subject clearly cries out for hidden movement, and the use of duplicate maps provides it after a fashion; the defender's units stay hidden until the attacker manages to observe them (which requires the ability to trace a line of sight plus a favourable die-roll). The attacker's units are always in full view of both players but cannot be fired at until observed.

Game-System.

Normally a game-system analysis would be divided into Movement and Combat; but **Commando** fuses the two, and it will probably be most helpful to begin with the Sequence of Play, which runs as follows:

Observation
Opportunity Fire Plot
Initiative Determination
Hand-to-Hand Combat
Non-Prepared Task Execution
Prepared Task Execution
Bookkeeping.

It is essential to understand that the game is not divided into Player-Turns; rather the action in each phase alternates between the players; this device will be familiar to players of games such as **October War**. A further integration of movement and combat is achieved by a system of task points, similar to that used in **Sniper** and **Patrol**; each action costs task points, whether involving movement or firing. The basic allocation is 50 task points per turn, and some idea of the pace of the game may be derived from the fact that it costs 5TP's to move one square orthogonally and 7 to move one square diagonally (each map is 64 squares by 40). This represents a speed of 4½ miles per hour, which I suspect to be a little slow for a highly trained commando in a 60 yard dash but at the same time imprudently fast when attempting a stealthy approach. There does seem to be something of a problem in that no provision is made for a quick dash across open ground, but this is really a quibble, for there is no doubt that the task point system works well, giving a convincing impression of reality.

Surprise and concealment are obviously vital factors in commando operations and the hidden movement system already described is the designer's attempt to provide this. Observation of previously unspotted enemy men may happen at any of three different times during the game-turn, beginning in the very first phase. However only one attempt at observation may be made during this phase. The likelihood of observation is expressed as a percentage and two 20-sided dice are used to resolve the attempt.

The second phase, Opportunity Fire Plot, is extremely important. Any OF which is to be executed in the coming turn must be plotted here and is of course kept secret. A man not plotted for OF must sit by helplessly even if an enemy approaches and seeks to shoot him dead! Conversely men who are plotted for OF may do nothing until they see an enemy or someone fires or until the prepared Task Execution Phase.

After Initiative Determination — a simple matter of throwing dice to decide who goes first — comes Hand-to-Hand Combat, which takes place between men in the same square; the subject is treated in some detail, with provision for the use of knives and garottes (as well as fists) and an elaborate routine for determining whether a man has been surprised and whether he may disengage from combat. Since this is the first time I have dealt with actual combat, a few words on the damage system will not be out of place. Every man has an "Endurance Rating" expressed in points. This may be the same for all men on a particular side, but rules are also provided for semi-random determination for each man. When a man is struck in Hand-to-Hand combat or hit by gunfire or caught by the explosion of a grenade one die is thrown (which kind of die depends on the source of the damage) and the total thrown is scored against the victim's endurance rating. When he has suffered damage equal to 50% of his Endurance Rating, a man is Seriously Wounded — all actions cost him twice as many Task Points as previously. When the Endurance Rating is reached, the man is Incapacitated and when it is exceeded by two, he is dead. Whether this is an entirely appropriate way of simulating the effect of rifle fire in the 20th Century may be questioned, but such is the system provided.

Non-prepared Task Execution involves movement and firing by all men not plotted for Opportunity Fire. The first stage in any man's move is to check for Panic. Depending on the scenario, the likelihood of this varies between 5 and 35%. The Panic Rules are considerably more sophisticated than those in **Patrol**, **Sniper** et al; a panicked man may move, fall prone or fire, with falling prone easily the most likely. If he moves, it will be in a direction directly away from the nearest enemy he can see. If he fires it will be at the nearest enemy he can see, or if he cannot see any enemy men, at the nearest visible friendly man, an excellent rule productive of great entertainment, especially for the opposing player. Movement may of course trigger Opportunity Fire, and this, combined with the practice of moving just one man at a time, induces caution — a man who has moved and fired is a sitting duck if an enemy man can get near him. In the narrow sense this is clearly "unrealistic" — within the fifteen seconds of the game-turn different men would be doing different things simultaneously, but it does serve to make the point that moving first is very risky; you may get across the open ground, you may hit your target, but you are in deep trouble if you do not.

Prepared Task Execution covers movement by men plotted for Opportunity Fire who have not expended all their Task Points. By itself it involves the same considerations as the previous phase, but the really interesting question is that of dividing one's men between prepared task and no prepared task. Whereas a man who has expended his task points is vulnerable, one plotted for OF is helpless until his line of sight is crossed (although there is no general facing requirement). Thus he may be bypassed as far as possible. The resolution of this conundrum is one of the difficulties facing a commander (in passing it may be noted that this is one of those games where realism would seem to demand that a commander should not always know the positions of his own men — in effect the player is not the commander of either force, but each individual member in turn).

To deal now with the detail of the Combat System: there is considerable discrimination among different types of weapons, carbines being distinguished from automatic rifles, and both from semi-automatic rifles, for example. Inevitably there is detailed provision for the throwing of grenades. The basic procedure for combat is this: ensure that the firer has spotted the target and that the proposed firing is within the scope of his orders. Next, establish the range (a knowledge of Pythagoras' theorem can be useful here) and find the appropriate column on the Weapons' Chart. The figure found here is the basic hit percentage, and is modified for terrain, range and posture and condition of both men. Then throw the percentage dice to see whether a hit has been obtained (more than one throw may be allowed in the case of certain weapons). If a hit is scored, refer to the Outright Kill Table to see if the target is killed — the chances of this are fairly small. If no kill is scored, throw one die, 20-sided or 6-sided according to the weapon involved, and credit the number thrown against the target's Endurance Rating. It is worth noting that Endurance Ratings vary from scenario to scenario and from nation to nation. For a contemporary American Marine the average (assuming use of the semi-random endurance generation system) is 18. This means that if he is hit by a rifle bullet and not killed outright (the chance of which can never exceed 16%) then there is only a 10% chance that he will be seriously wounded and no chance at all that he will be incapacitated. Whether this is realistic I doubt — indeed I am unsure about the damage points system as a whole; whilst no doubt well-suited to engagements between capital ships, it seems to me not to represent accurately what happens when a modern high-velocity bullet strikes human flesh. From the point of view of realism I prefer the Sniper/Patrol system where hit and damage are combined in one die-roll and the range of possible results is more limited. I have the impression that the system used has been chosen in the interests of a fun game rather than because it models reality, and this is an impression which extends to the game as a whole.

The optional rules add much detail and variety to the basic structure, covering a wide range of possibilities. Some of them are obviously aimed at particular scenarios, but the field is open for invention by the players with rules ranging from rocket-launchers to camels to underwater operations.

There are twelve scenarios and these too show some imagination, covering subjects as diverse as a WWI Trench Raid, Entebbe and Lawrence of Arabia (hence the camel rules) as well as a hypothetical American raid on the South Woggestani(!) oilfields. There is no coverage of a raid on the American Embassy in Tehran, but one could easily construct such a scenario. Each scenario has its own map (which is why there are so many maps, and, incidentally, why there are no counters — they could not afford to do both) and although the defenders have the advantage of being hidden they may not move until they spot the attackers — at which point they automatically spend one turn panicking, which is perhaps a little hard on WWI Germans, for example. The Victory Conditions naturally vary widely and it is difficult to generalise as a fair range of commando operations is covered.

The tactical lessons contained in the game are moderately convincing; a player who simply charges

headlong will not get far, but the attacker is compelled to be aggressive. The balance between suppressive fire and advance is a fine one and, if players feel able to trust each other sufficiently, an added degree of confusion may be created by allowing all attacks to be resolved secretly where the target man is in cover, so that the firer will not know what effect he has achieved. There is an interesting contrast with *Sniper* where grenades are normally reckoned the most useful weapon; in *Commando* automatic weapons are much to be preferred, with Hand-to-Hand Combat coming second.

The Historical Game may be briefly summed up as follows; it is an interesting and in some ways original design, a first cousin to *Patrol* and *Sniper* though not necessarily as realistic as either. Devotees of those two games will almost certainly like *Commando*.

Role-Playing Game.

This is the icing on the cake, as one might say. It cannot be played by itself but adds on to the Historical Game. It is only fair for me to begin by saying that I have no love for the Role-Playing side of the hobby and was thus biased against this part of the game right from the start. Unfortunately *Commando* does nothing to wear down my prejudices.

Essentially the RPG allows players to imagine themselves in the place of one or more of the men participating in the battle, and this "character" may then be conducted through a series of missions, in much the same way as I am told happens in the curious and strangely popular games of *Dungeons and Dragons*. A Gamesmaster is required to oversee all this, and it is suggested that he should take charge of the defending forces, leaving the active players to represent the various leaders among the attackers. In the RPG there is a much closer personal identification with the men on the map than in the Historical Game; that letter creeping through the woods is you, and players entering into the spirit of the thing can become very attached to their characters.

Each character has certain specialist abilities, which his "owner" may choose from a list including skills as diverse as night-fighting and safe-breaking (the five basic abilities — Strength, Marksmanship, Dexterity, Endurance and Leadership) are generated randomly and three specialist skills in addition may be chosen for a newly created character. So far this is quite ordinary stuff, but now we come to the "Hero-Ratings". As a character progresses through his various missions, his performances may gain or lose him Hero Points and according to his current total he will be in one of eight Hero Classes, listed below in ascending order:

Miserable Coward, Hard-Luck Case, Star-Crossed, Average Joe, TV Hero, B-Movie Hero, Major Novel Hero, Big-Budget Movie Hero. By now most readers will be either chortling with delight or preparing to throw the magazine away in disgust. But there is worse (or better) to come. A character who has reached TV Hero Class may add to his repertory of skills one Hero Ability. Some of these simply increase his Endurance or Leadership capacity, but the more remarkable among them include "Engaged to Striking Paramour" which lasts three turns only but for its duration prevents the character from being even seriously wounded, on the somewhat questionable basis that "love conquers all" and "Establish Good Terms with Intelligent Horse (Comes with Free Intelligent Horse)". The ultimate piece of frippery must however be the Miraculous Escape Matrix. This is available only to the two highest classes of Hero and only once per scenario, but when used it provides a 34/36 chance of avoiding the effects of a hit. For those interested in the details, Section 62 allows Players to throw dice to establish the circumstances of the miraculous escape, and some of these are here listed, largely for their entertainment value.

"5. Meteorite Strikes Enemy Man."

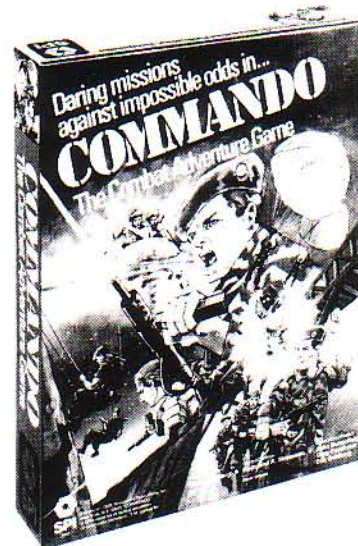
"10. Enemy Man falls for the old 'look, it's Haley's Comet' Trick."

"15. Commando sticks out tongue. Disgusted enemy sentry looks away."

"25. What a Hunk! The Enemy Man is of the opposite gender and is stunned by the commando's beauty. Smitten, he misfires."

"30. Cut! The Great Director yells cut, ending all action. A retake is necessary; begin the game-turn again."

It is difficult to follow this, but there is still the period between missions to be dealt with. This is used for recovering from wounds received and for practising to acquire new skills. In extreme cases a character may be dismissed for various misdemeanours, real or imaginary. The amount of detail and variety which may be injected into this area of the game depends largely on the attitudes and imagination of the Gamesmaster and players.



Evaluation.

I was initially very sceptical of this game; closer acquaintance has improved my opinion, but I still have my doubts. On the credit side the Historical Game is tactically fairly accurate, subject to a few minor reservations about relative Task Point costs, and it is certainly fun to play. Against that there is the basic problem common to all tactical games of lack of variety — tactical warfare is in many ways a somewhat mechanical exercise. A more serious problem, to my mind, is that of historical perspective. I said at the start of this article that the box-lid reminded me of a children's comic and I feel that this quality pervades the game. People who spend their spare time studying and imitating in game form the deeds of soldiers — i.e. wargamers generally — sometimes get funny looks and comments from outsiders for their alleged obsession with violence and killing. There are also those who profess an inability to distinguish between Action Man and *Campaign for North Africa*. I have long believed the difference to be that wargaming retains a historical perspective, or in other words that we do not play out of a love of violence but out of an interest in what happened and why. Excessive identification with men who were paid to kill others does indeed seem to me highly undesirable. Fantasy Games can, I think, be excused (if one really wishes to excuse them) on the ground that no one seriously imagines them to represent reality, but *Commando* is caught squarely in the middle, especially in the Role-Playing Game where players are encouraged to identify with their characters, who in turn are rewarded for undergoing danger of death and for killing people. There is, I would suggest, a danger that this will blot out historical perspective, in the same way that few cowboy films offer any perspective on the wars with the Red Indians, but have lots of "good" battle scenes. Possibly this is over-sensitivity on my part, but I feel that it would be difficult to justify playing the Role-Playing Game as a wargamer (as distinct from a pure games-player). Further, I cannot approve of a game which falls into many of the vices of which wargames and wargamers generally are so often (unjustly, for the most part) accused.

Commando is a fun game and the Role-Playing Game will appeal to a lot of people, but I doubt that I shall be playing it all that often.