

GAME PROFILE:

FRIGATE

SeaWar in the Age of Sail

by Steve List

A View of the Game

Gathering the data for *Frigate* was apparently a treat for the researchers, as they voluntarily put in far more man-hours than is usually done. But, as with any simulation, data must be converted into a format and game mechanics, a process that must be guided by external constraints. The first of these to consider is scope - just what the game will cover. As there was no intent to make this a strategic game, it remained to choose between tactical and operational levels. At this point, other considerations were involved. Surveys indicated that a game based on actual battles would be preferred to one employing hypothetical or insignificant historical conflicts. Since virtually all the decisive naval battles in the period were fleet actions, this part was settled. The game had to validly reflect the essential elements of handling a fleet of sailing ships in combat. In order for this to work, the details of handling individual ships had to be submerged in favor of the generalities of handling a fleet. Without that sort of simplification, the sheer labor involved in moving counters would destroy the game's playability.

While the handling of a ship in battle was a complex blending of seamanship and combat canniness, fleet handling can be boiled down to a few elements. These elements are found in almost every form of warfare, hence in almost every war game. They are, as revealed by the designer, our old friends "fire and maneuver". While adequately simulating fire and maneuver in a land battle may be a complex task, in a naval game it is relatively simple. A ship can only be in one place at a time; unlike an infantry unit, it cannot change formation, advance by bounds, dig in or do anything but move on a two dimensional surface. It is only a minor simplification to say that a ship can only fire at one target at a time. Thus, to simulate a fleet in combat it was only necessary to provide for movement of individual ships and allow them to shoot.

In arriving at the precise mechanics to do this, the designer had pretty much a free hand. Other than in the field of miniatures, naval wargames are few in number and those dealing with sailing ships almost non-existent. There was no "state of the art" for sailing ship games; the field could be considered wide open. However, the designer had other experience with naval games, and it is not surprising that he fell back on it. *Frigate* bears a certain resemblance to *CA*; this is more collateral than lineal as the ancestor of both games was the unpublished prototype of *Jutland*.

In form, *Frigate* started with much the same movement mechanics as *CA*, including the use of speed/facing counters, adapted for simultaneous movement. Since *SiMove* was to be used, however, a written record of the ships' speeds would be kept, and facing could be determined by the orientation of the ship counter. The elimination of the now extraneous markers reduced the pieces in

Mix A [France/Spain/Italy]

x2	x3	x5	x24
x7	x4	x5	x5
x2	x1	x2	

Mix B [Britain]

x7	x2	x17	x12
x5	x4	x3	x2
x1	x5		

Mix C [Netherlands]

x4	x8	x4

Mix D [United States]

x5	x4	x1	x1

Merchantmen

x5

play by half and greatly reduced the mechanical problems of the game. With this accomplished, and with the extensive work already done on *Jutland* and *CA*, the design was nearly complete. Playtesting had little effect on the mechanics of the game; most changes due to it were of minor nature, such as the reduction in variation of wind direction and velocity. The developer has said that the game system "just fell into place" with little difficulty. The main effort of playtesting went into balancing the scenarios and arriving at reasonable victory conditions.

As mentioned, the game mechanics are simple. Wind speed and direction are set at the start of each Game-Turn. Ships have a maximum movement allowance depending on the wind strength and relative direction, further restricted by the amount of acceleration or deceleration possible per turn. There are some restrictions on changing direction, but, beyond that, ships may move freely as long as they expend their full movement allowance each turn. For combat, ships have four gunnery strengths corresponding to the four ranges at which combat may take place. Each ship has an invariable defense strength as well, with combat odds being the ratio of gunnery to attack strength. Gunnery strength can be increased by raking the target, which in the game consists of firing from a position outside the target's own field of fire, or by running afoul. This latter device represents close combat and boarding action. Ships are subject to Command Control, loss of which results in their following a randomly selected course; maneuvering in formation reduces the incidence of control problems.

The sequence of play is rather involved. Wind direction and strength are determined at the start of each turn. Movement and combat for each ship is then plotted on the standard SiMove form. Command Control is then determined for each ship and any new plots needed are written. Combat is then executed simultaneously, followed by simultaneous movement execution. All combat results incurred that turn are applied after movement is executed, and may be negated by the damage control phase which follows immediately. The last step in each turn is to total up the damage has suffered. If one Player has exceeded his preservation level, he must try to disengage from combat and escape.

Damages from combat are rather simplistic. An attacker may attempt to achieve "mast hits" or "crew hits". One or two mast hits halves a ship's potential Movement Allowance; three leaves it unable to move or recover from crew hits. One or two crew hits halves a ship's gunnery strength; three reduces it to zero and leaves the ship unable to remove mast hits, and vulnerable to capture.

A number of rules are given as options. The first is that ships cannot sail directly into the wind. Given the sailing qualities of a square rigged warship, this is not an unreasonable proposition. The next option gives the choice

of wind tables; the standard table makes the wind far more variable in both strength and direction than is reasonable, though it may make a dull scenario exciting. The optional table should be used. The next option should be employed as well; it requires a one Movement Point penalty for turning one hexside into the wind. The fourth option concerns drifting and requires that all ships with a Movement Allowance of zero move one hex in the wind direction in all but calm winds. These four rules all add realism to the movement procedure without unduly complicating it, and should be employed as soon as the Players feel they can handle them comfortably.

Most of the remaining options deal with combat. French, Spanish and Italian ships may use triple Gunnery Strength when afoul. This is to reflect larger crews and so is not uniformly applicable. It may be freely used for all scenarios from 1798 on, as during the Napoleonic wars British vessels were chronically undermanned. Optional rule 7.23 is a game effect rule, that is, it exists more to influence the Players than to reflect real conditions. It requires that when more than one ship attack a single target in a turn, the total Attacking Strength is halved. This serves mainly to discourage ganging up on a single target, which was not commonly done in battle. Optional rule 7.31 merely adds some spice to things by providing for ships to blow up occasionally. This can have a tremendous effect on the outcome of a game when it does happen, so it should be handled with care. Another option which can be invoked only rarely and then with dubious justification is that when a ship of the line is moving with a Movement Allowance of 10 or more its Gunnery Strength is halved. This is supposedly due to their lower gun decks being awash, a condition usually found only during stormier weather than exists in this game. The last option should always be employed; it allows recapture of captured ships.

In addition to the above options, there are two alternate methods of determining Command Control; both involve selecting random numbers corresponding to hex numbers on the board. One uses a die roll as the random number generator, while the other uses a set of ten chits. The latter is a bit more cumbersome, but provides an exactly even probability distribution.

So, SPI labored mightily and brought forth a game, a game on sea warfare in the age of sail, one of very few now in existence. It has many good features; it is playable, easy to learn, flexible; it presents a wide variety of combat situations, each rated for complexity and containing a short briefing for the Players. It is for the most part well done physically, particularly in the use of map sections which can be rearranged continuously to eliminate the old hazard of being forced off the mapboard. The graphics are clear and well-done, though the ship symbols are both hard to differentiate at a glance and mostly meaningless in a historical sense.

There are bad points as well. Two minor ones are physical. There are no separate play aids; all charts and tables are buried in the rules folder, on different pages. As most must be referred to each turn, it is a minor nuisance hunting them up. Another point is the lack of any 36 or 38 gun frigates in the British counter mix. It is a strange omission, considering the British have frigates, a 44 gun frigate counter must be substituted for the historically smaller ship. Most of these game faults, however, stem from oversimplification; in an effort to produce a "clean" game for recreating large battles, a little too much of what went on in the individual ships was sacrificed. This is felt primarily only in the scenarios involving few ships on either side, and makes them much less enjoyable. Most combat actions require making low odds attacks, due to the difficulty of obtaining any higher odds. This makes achieving a hit relatively rare, but when one is achieved, the target is hit hard, with half its Gunnery Strength gone or maximum movement rate halved. To even achieve the minimum odds needed to attack another ship of comparable size, it is necessary to get close. This is difficult when using SiMove; unless the Players agree to move to the same hex and have it out, they are likely to go blundering past one another as each guesses wrongly about where the enemy will go. On top of this, every ship has the same turning ability and nearly the same Movement Allowance under most conditions. Frigates are thus not only weaker than ships-of-the-line, they have no compensating qualities. They are reduced to just being middling-strong warships. In five of the scenarios, only frigates are involved on either side, but due to the play mechanics, there is no good way of outmaneuvering the enemy on a ship-to-ship basis. In some of these scenarios, there are enough frigates to form a short line of battle at least, and these can be played as fleet actions. In the remaining 15 scenarios, there are either no frigates on one or both sides, or the ones there are are insignificant compared to the battleships and reduced to a purely auxiliary role. It is true that proper use of the frigates may be decisive in those scenarios, but for the most part they are about as important as infantry in *KampfPanzer*. In short, this game has as little to do with frigates and what made them special as *Blitzkrieg* has to do with lightning warfare.

Aside from the misnomer of its title, the game should be forgiven its faults. It was never intended to simulate single ship actions; the designer included those scenarios more as beginner's exercises than as anything else. It is a good game for simulating fleet actions, on the operational level. It is certainly the best, if not the only, one now available in this category.

This is altogether an excellent game for beginners, but it is a first generation game insofar as the subject is concerned, and so is subject to critical scrutiny. Any further sail-naval games to come from SPI should show a quantum jump improvement over it.