
# SABRE SQUADRON

**Nick Overland gives us the inside track on his rules which cover the Cold War to the Digital Age.**

What was the best inspiration you've had to start a new period? A film? A convention game? An AAR on a blog? Mine came in the summer of 1982. While sitting in the kitchen having a snack, a news bulletin on the small portable television in the corner featured a report on a major NATO exercise in West Germany. A troop of Chieftains was shown moving across a field and I thought "I've got to get some of those". I must have been good as Santa (OK, I knew by then it was really mum and dad) bought me a 1/300 BAOR starter army, and some Christmas money from the family enabled me to buy some T72s (yes, I know they should have been T64s, but information was scarce then so I have an excuse) and some BMPs. I was hooked and spent many happy hours playing ultra-modern wargames. With the advent of university days, my toys went away and hardly came out for three years.

When I started playing again it wasn't with Challengers and Bradleys. The period had gone out of favour and I struggled to get a game. Whilst many club members liked the idea of the period, few actually wanted to play it much, if at all. Common reasons cited were "too much lethality - one mistake and you lose everything", "too much complexity" and, conversely "too little period feel" for the more abstracted systems. With a considerable pile of lead occupying scarce storage space, the challenge was how to get it onto the table. The solution was to write a set of rules covering conventional warfare since 1950 that I could get people to play.

In drafting the concept I hit upon five principle factors to consider:

**Speed:** Speed of manoeuvre, communications and decision-making mean the rules should not slow the game down

**Firepower:** If you can see it you can kill it, but it can probably kill you too. Also, seeing something is not the same as hitting it.

**Technology:** Minor advantages can be significant, but one shouldn't get bogged down with too many details.

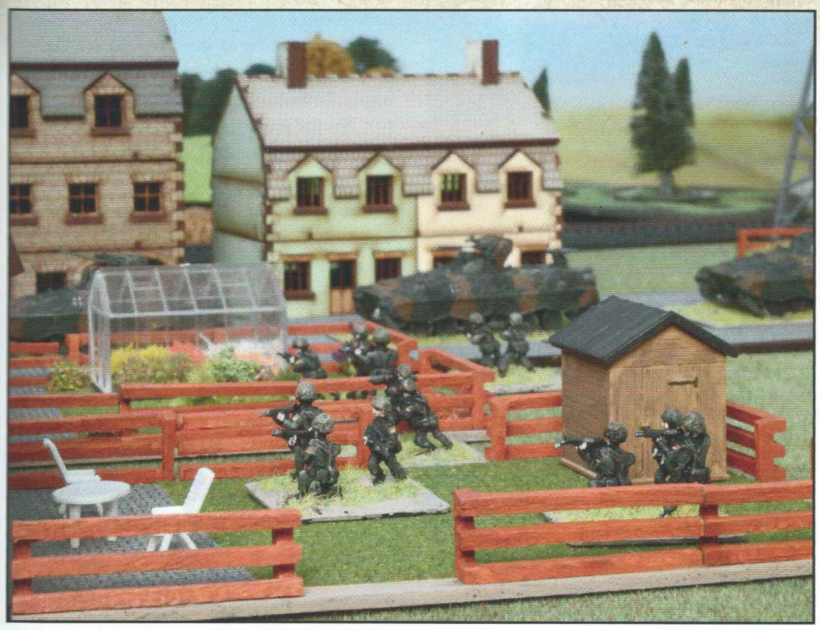
**People:** Training and leadership are vital if any weapons are to be used effectively.

**Position:** Defenders will usually fire first, but a static defence can be located, out-manoeuvred and destroyed.

I added **Time** as an important consideration. I wanted a game that I could play in 2-3 hours leaving time for the important bit, i.e. going to the pub afterwards. Although I have played many sets of modern rules over the years I decided to start with a plain sheet of paper and draw on a variety of influences, mainly from non-modern sets.

## TURN SEQUENCE

A key issue was the turn sequence. I considered various initiative and randomised activation systems but concluded that while friction has always been unavoidable in warfare, there are issues with these processes that can slow the game down and mean that it is decided by one die roll at a crucial moment, or leave a player watching his opponent have all the fun. After lengthy experiments I opted for an IGOUGO system with six phases, three of which are carried out by the 'Responding' (i.e. non- active) player and one of which affects both sides. Movement, firing, assaults and engineering tasks are carried out in one phase by each unit of the Active player's force in turn, with each element having a number of Action Options which it can carry out with some restrictions imposed by equipment, training and/or morale state. I was determined to make manoeuvre an important part of the game - the experience of having lines of tanks sitting and shooting from opposite sides of the table was one I wanted to avoid - so did not penalise an element shooting THEN moving in most circumstances. An AFV with a stabilised gun is less penalised for moving THEN shooting, but with a hefty penalty for moving into sight of a target. The effect of these terms means that a defender gets the first shot or at least the first good shot, so I have been able to dispense with overwatch, which has helped to streamline the turn sequence.



*Above: 15mm QRF West German mechanized infantry advance through domestic gardens.*

## SHOOTING

I've played games where a thirty second firefight takes twenty minutes to resolve due to the need to consult charts and consider long lists of factors that take into account exactly what the firer and target have done prior to the shot being fired. This is at odds with the principle of Speed mentioned above. I read an account of a US Army M1A1 in Operation Desert Storm destroying three Iraqi tanks in less than twenty seconds - there was no consulting of charts, the crew just got on with their jobs. This passage provided something to aim for, a quick sharp system that incorporated the main factors affecting accuracy. These main factors I considered to be the training of both the firer and the target, range, fire control, and how well the firer is focussed on firing at the target. The respective training levels are allowed for by adjusting for the difference in quality (the firer's competence with his weapon versus the target's ability to use terrain for example), with either a positive or negative modifier depending on the degree of difference. Range and fire control are handled together by a modifier for 'Long Range' that depends on the fire control method being employed; consistent increments are used to make them easier to remember. The 'focus' factors allow for things such as coming under close fire or suddenly seeing an enemy during the firer's bound. In all cases I considered the overall effect and what tactics and behaviour the factors might encourage. Accounts of tanks in combat show that crews fear infantry getting too close, so I penalised armoured vehicles when shooting at infantry within 4" - pull back and engage from distance!

The modifiers are all against a basic score to hit of 5 or higher on a ten-sided die (D10). Sabresquadron uses D10 for all resolutions and 5+ is the basic score for success with a natural 1 always failing and a natural 10 always succeeding. All hits are resolved by the player fired at, rolling to see whether armour is penetrated or to see the effect on infantry. Modern anti-tank weapons use either kinetic energy or explosives to disable armoured vehicles, and a range of special armours have been developed to withstand the shaped charges on missiles and infantry anti-tank weapons. This is handled by separating the two types of defence and attack on equipment, which is a small but necessary complication.

When infantry are hit the owning player rolls to see the effect. I'm happy to call this a 'Save' as that is the common name, but it is really just a very efficient mechanism. Infantry may receive a positive modifier for being in cover, which heavy weapons negate. My reasoning is that tanks will fire machine guns on infantry in the open but high explosive on targets in buildings, with similar effects. It is difficult for troops with small arms to kill enemy in heavy cover (e.g. buildings) and they need either superior numbers or heavy weapons. Again, considering the overall effect, this is why tanks are often needed to clear urban areas. There have been

*Below: 15mm QRF T62.*

## INTELLIGENCE GATHERING

**Author Nick Overland kindly paid a visit to *WIHQ* to showcase his rules for us and these are the top five things we noticed about the game.**

**Scale:** The rules can be used for games using 3mm all the way up to 20mm size. The main change would come with the usage of larger or smaller table sizes and some larger measurements for 20mm.

**Scope:** The rules cover any real or imagined conflict from post-WWII up to the Near Future. Just check the available information on that particular AFV or similar and adapt it to the information in the book e.g. the M1A1 has a stabilized gun, can fire when on the move, so use the relevant modifiers and rules in the book. You can also use the charts and appendices in the main rules and create a version of your chosen unit.

**Scenarios:** The rules contain ideas for setting up games and appendices on Data, Tactics and Conflicts that allow you to rapidly create scenarios.

**Support:** There are a number of clear examples of play in the rules, plus gamers have access to online support through the website. There are also a number of supplements planned to focus on particular conflicts.

**Satisfaction:** It's always hard to generalize about so many potentially diverse gaming experiences but, for us, the rules provided for realistic outcomes – if you could be seen, you could be fired at, if you were fired at, there was a chance of being taken out. Needing to keep moving balanced with returning fire, etc. was an essential part. No one aspect or type of unit was safe, just because you have the best technology doesn't mean you are invulnerable. Lastly, the game has the author's research built into it, so if you a platoon of UK Challenger 1's from the First Gulf War, they 'feel' and 'fight' in a satisfying way.

*Above: West German armour crests the hill to open fire.*

some significant urban battles in the modern era - Hue, Grozny and Fallujah to name three - so I gave some thought to this aspect and have allowed for building destruction, firing to and from upper storeys (yes, you can put an RPG onto the roof of a tank), and even combat in glass-sided office blocks. The Close Assault rules have a special section on floor clearing.

Hits can cause one of three effects. The minimum effect of a hit is 'Suppression' which has only a minor impression on armoured vehicles but mars the movement and firing abilities of infantry and soft vehicles. Worse is 'Neutralisation' which puts an element out of the game while it lasts. A neutralised element suffering further neutralisations may be destroyed. Both Suppression and Neutralisation last until an afflicted element passes a quick test - one die roll, no modifiers. The final possible effect of a hit is of course that the element is destroyed.

Guided missiles are treated differently to guns as there is the possibility of the target taking action to avoid getting hit. This can take various forms including sudden turning, suppressive fire, deploying smoke or using an Active Protection System. I have combined this into a single 'Dodge' roll, modified according to the equipment and condition of the target. A successful Dodge roll means the missile has been avoided in some way, while a failed Dodge roll leaves the firer free to resolve whether it hits. A target that survives is marked as having 'Dodged' as this affects its firing in its next bound.

## CHARTS

There are a fair few charts in Sabresquadron, for two very good reasons. First, there are many weapon types - missiles, guns, bombs, mines, shells, cluster bombs, rockets, grenades et al - to cover, plus things such as engineering, weather effects, terrain types, counter-battery detection, air superiority balances, morale and points costs to consider. Having presented and been presented to on complex subjects many times over the years, I have found that charts are by far the easiest and clearest way of displaying information. Second, as all but the most casual browser will notice, nearly all of the charts are duplicated, some several times. This is because an element may be fired at by several weapons in a game - ground vehicles, helicopters, fixed wing aircraft, artillery - all of which have their unique characteristics (e.g. artillery has to be plotted, aircraft require a flight path), but can have similar effects e.g. cluster bombs are equivalent to Improved Conventional Munitions. Rather than require a player to keep flicking backwards and forwards through the book, each chart is presented at the point in the rules it is needed. Players will soon realise the scores needed to achieve certain effects, which will reduce the need to consult the rulebook.

## ARTILLERY & AIR SUPPORT

Artillery and support from fixed wing aircraft present a need to balance different objectives. Both are essential parts in modern warfare and have to be represented to enable full combined arms operations to be undertaken, plus the threat that each can pose to an on-table force necessitates the need to mitigate their destructive power by spacing out elements. For a game aimed at company-level actions, the support available has to have its limitations so I have gone with the idea of the 'Bigger Picture'. My thinking here is that the tabletop battle is not fought in isolation but is part of a wider conflict so the Captain/Major commanding a force is competing for resources with other similarly-sized forces fighting other equally important actions. Artillery is based off-table due to its range and wider support role, and has to be requested each time it is to fire. To keep artillery honest there is the possibility of counter-battery fire which can in turn be countered by a battery choosing to 'shoot and scoot'. The mechanisms used are consistent, and are designed to keep players making decisions and the action flowing. One way that this is encouraged is the way that artillery is plotted. I wanted to avoid scrawling notes on bits of paper and the need to draw maps (I can't draw for toffee), so artillery uses what I call an Aim Marker. This is a counter, best one with a target on it, that is placed by the Responding Player after the Active Player has completed his moving and shooting. Artillery can be called in only on a previously placed Aim Marker. This may seem odd as it gives one's opponent warning of where a barrage could land and so enables him to move away, but that is deliberate; park your tanks on a hill and the artillery will find them, manoeuvre them and the observer will struggle to zero in, which is what I've been told is the reality. Air support also has to be requested to help the on-table force as there might be better targets elsewhere or the air defences may be too strong in the vicinity for it to get through. Each force is rated for its Air Attack and Air Defence levels which together affect the abilities of the two sides to get air support. Air attacks are carried out by the Responding Player at the start of a bound which enables the Active Player to fire anti-aircraft elements with only minimal disturbance to the turn sequence.

## HELICOPTERS

While helicopters fly, so have much in common with fixed wing aircraft, they can spend many more turns on the table. Because of the latter, I treat them as part of the on-table force with a range of Action Options that enable moving and firing. Helicopters are powerful but also are vulnerable if not used with care, and flying high to avoid ground fire can expose them to enemy air defences positioned off-table. Helicopters in the anti-tank role often carry guided missiles that they use to fire from behind terrain features at long distances. This rarely works on the table so a player can choose to keep such helicopters off-table where they can use their missiles against on-table elements; they are positioned on the baseline to determine the line of sight to targets. This decision is for the duration of the game and they are still at risk from air defences.

## MOVEMENT

All movement is defined by move segments. The length of an element's

move segment depends on its speed and the number of move segments available depends on the worst terrain it moves in. Crossing an obstacle or dismounting results in the deduction of a move segment. As an example, an M113 has a Move Segment of 2" and can move four Segments across open ground. If its passengers dismount it will deduct one segment. This can be simplified further by using sticks marked in segment increments, then one just has to count he segments.

## MORALE & RESILIENCE

From the start, I had in mind the system for morale I wanted to use. It is based on the test in a set called *Battlegroup Modern Rules*, a free set written by a friend of mine called Ian Clarke. It takes a tricky and complex subject and covers it in a single test that is both simple and effective. Each time a unit suffers a casualty it takes the test. The die score needed to pass is based on the quality of the unit, modified by losses suffered and by sudden attacks causing shock on a unit. Failing the test results in morale dropping a level - there are four in total from 'Good' to 'Rout' - and requiring a repeat test. The test is repeated until the unit routs or the test is passed. A voluntary test can be used to raise morale, with no negative consequences for a fail.

Each force has a Resilience Level based on the number of units and some other factors. As losses and bad things happen the resilience falls until the force is defeated. I originally intended each force to be of around company strength but found that I needed to be able to field something larger, either due to some players wanting to play with lots of toys on big tables or because it was going to be necessary when pitting a high quality well-equipped force against an opponent deficient in both troop quality and weaponry. This was allowed for by specifying the need for a chain of command and fielding a battalion or regimental commander.

## COMMAND AREA

A challenge when trying to model armoured vehicle warfare is to get the right look to the formations used. Without encouragement to separate tanks close up and formations can look reminiscent of the18th Century. Conversely, modern units do have formations and are mindful of boundaries and of their members mutually supporting each other. I tackled the first challenge by making artillery and air support readily available to encourage separation. For the second issue, I tried out a rule that involved inter-mixing units causing 'Command Confusion' on each other. This rule worked a lot of the time but had its flaws. I don't like rules requiring elements of a unit having maximum separation distances as they compel repeated measurements which are time-consuming and dull. A playtester came up with a simple method using a sheet of A4 paper to set unit Command Areas. The rule is that all elements of a unit must be at least partly under the sheet of paper otherwise their ability to act is impaired. This has been modified for different army and unit types.

## FORCE RATINGS

For a set of rules covering over half a century and the whole world a flexible system of rating troops is essential. I've always favoured separating training and morale types to allow for the poorly trained but enthusiastic volunteer and the well-trained guy who doesn't fancy a fight; both have many examples from the modern era, recently in Iraq for example. In addition I have allowed for some extra characteristics; armies with rigid command structures were termed 'Centralised' and have certain constraints, so that the Arabs and Warsaw Pact handle differently to the Israelis and NATO. A Centralised force has a smaller Command Area, is penalised by the loss of its commander and is more dependent on pre-game artillery than on ad hoc fire missions. Poorly trained troops psyched up to charge - think Iranian Basij - are allowed for, as are 'Irregulars' (although this is a set for conventional warfare and not for hunting 'Terrs' in the bush) and political/religious advisors for boosting morale.

## GAME SET-UPS

It's good to get people playing quickly so I have compiled some ideas to get toys onto the table without delay, with particular emphasis on attack-defence games. I have stuck to the idea of having no paperwork and have come up with a system of phased deployment that means that some of the defenders are found by pre-game reconnaissance while the positions of the rest are revealed later. Pre-game artillery bombardments are included in an abstracted form and there is a method of using reconnaissance units as well. Also, I worked out a points system for balancing armies, but with so many actual conflicts - 22 are briefly described in an appendix - and some good Cold War fiction, there are plenty of opportunities for players to create scenarios. Rapid Deployment - a quick start trial version - was released to gauge reaction. It received favourable comments so I set about improving the basic system and adding in the missing parts. *Sabresquadron* (British Army terminology for an armoured or mechanised company that is also used in the US Army) went on sale in hardback and PDF formats last September and the first supplement - *Seven Days To The Rhine* - is available to cover the Warsaw Pact in the 1980s. In production is the NATO supplement with others and a campaign guide to follow. With increasing interest in the Cold War, hopefully more wargamers will be as inspired as I was.