

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

A REVIEW BY RICH JONES

Between modern printing methods and the advent of the PDF you could argue that it is too easy to publish a decent looking set of rules nowadays. A slightly cynical an outlook I suppose but running up to Salute 07 wargames how I was keeping a track on the new sets of rules coming out on the day for WWII.

There were quite a few being launched and at least 3 at Platoon skirmish level. So it was hard to summon the enthusiasm to get and try them all out as a slightly blasé attitude overtook over. You see, I'm happy with the squad sets I play (and regular readers will know I am referring to NUTS and Final Combat; NUTS can be played up to platoon level by dropping the character detailing a bit) and couldn't really see WHY any of the new releases would change that or how they would add any new dimension to what I hadn't already seen before.

So although I looked at Rules of Engagement on the day and was impressed with the presentation (a thick hard cover set of rules always has a particular allure ... or maybe that's just me) I resisted the temptation and spent the money (£25) on some more 36mm paratroopers instead. However, on the way home the rules junkie inside me couldn't help thinking ... I wish I had gone back to pick a set up anyway. So when a review copy was sent to WJ no one else got the chance to get their grubby hands on them.

Firstly you can't really help but be impressed with the physical book itself; A4 and a 'proper' hard back to boot. Nestled between the weighty covers are 240 odd pages of rules, background, hobby resources, Orders of Battle and scenarios. Well illustrated with the now normal mix of graphics, photos and charts in both greyscale and full colour (for the hobby section). The only criticism I have heard has been about the quality of the front cover painting and graphics which may have suffered from a bit of over zealous photo-shop filtering.

Although I was overjoyed to get hold of the set I set a certain criteria that I decided to judge the rules upon. This was because, to be frank, this level of gaming is oversubscribed rules wise and the last thing we probably need is a new set which isn't building on an existing player/fan base (like the Lardies TW&T for instance) or adding anything new to the pot.

So I decided the success criteria for this review would be:

- Do they add anything 'new' or exciting?
- Whatever the mechanics, does it 'feel' like a WWII skirmish?
- Do they fill a niche, of which I don't think there are many left?
- Will they attract new players to WWII skirmish?
- And the last rather selfish one ... will it make me want to play them again after reviewing them?

Firstly let's get a bit of basic info out the way. The authors play in 28mm (they have linked up with the guys at Bolt Action to supply figure packs for the basic building 'blocks' and even design and make specific figures for them) and the rules are designed so that an ordinary level game is played on a 6x4 table, with a supported platoon a side on the table. So this means that a basic game is about 80 figures and maybe a few vehicles all in all.

Obviously you can play with different size figures (I have also been playing the rules in 12mm and 20mm, keeping all the distances the same, which looks and feels excellent) and the authors suggest how you may want to change the measuring units to suit.

The rules are also designed to play one of the suggested scenarios out of the book in around 2-3 hours which seems to fit in with most people's gaming lifestyles nowadays. They use our fantastic plastic friend the D6 throughout (a D3 is used occasionally for variable rate of fire) and you need a fair few of them when the proverbial hits the fan action wise. The game forces are built around the 'platoon' with the basic unit being the squad/section, although some nations can split into 'groups' if a squad has 2 NCOs.

Ground scale wise they are what I consider to be 'suited for the purpose', what I mean is the ground scale is tailored towards the game and not 'reality'. At WJ towers we are all painfully aware of what a 1:1 ground scale in 28mm actually means through our games using Final Combat, a grenade blast covering too much of the table when you have a platoon worth of troops on a 6' x 4'. The ranges and blast radius in Rules of Engagement are explained as being the 'effective' range of the weapons in the close



terrain the authors suggest you need to be playing in.

Indeed this is true as the 80cm range for a bolt action rifle as it normally pans out to be 'line of sight'. However, when it boils down to it the game has to 'kick in' somewhere and with RoE it is in the weapon ranges. Again I have no problem with this abstraction and to be honest if this does trouble you then just say there is unlimited small arms range on the table and it would make very little difference to the rules. The unit measure is in cm throughout the game.

At first glance I was tempted to think that the rules had no 'new' or innovative mechanics. Not that with the plethora of rules sets out there this is any easy thing to achieve but like I alluded to, who really needs yet another make of cheese and onion crisps (or chips for our US and Aussie readers) on the shelf?

My first, rather cynical glance through the rule book with a gaming friend, involved a rather cruel game we play: spot the rules this mechanic came from. It is an IGO UGO system with provision for opportunity fire to interrupt this with turn interactivity coming from the use of 'saving throws'. Movement is based on your troops 'move attribute' (usually 20cm) with additions or subtractions for terrain and 'type of movement'; running will get you further but means you can't claim using any terrain to help your saving throw or shoot, advancing means you can do everything as well as move, sneaking means you can use terrain to help your chance of survival and lets you 'hide' at the end of movement.

Firing is based on rolling over your troops 'shoot' attribute and there are various modifiers for cover etc. Once hit the target gets an 'experience' roll to avoid becoming a possible casualty, basically a saving throw this is modified by the figure using 'terrain' which is determined on the whole by what movement order they received the last order phase. If this is failed then each weapon has an antipersonnel rating which must be rolled over to actually remove the figure as a casualty.

Firing is done in squads/groups at squads or groups and is a lot quicker than it may appear reading through the above description. While being an infantry based game tanks and vehicles do feature and the same base mechanics are used which makes it an easy transition. On the whole though, the first few fire fight tests seemed pretty standard stuff.

However, as we started to actually play the game a number of subtle innovative mechanics began to seep through. Morale is handled through discipline rolls and a sliding scale of discipline states – I like this game mechanic, but then again we've been using this idea in a set of WJ home grown sci-fi rules for a couple of years now. This was the first departure from the normal humdrum of commercial

rules; a unit can be forced to check discipline at the beginning of their turn by a number of factors including taking a lot of hits (not casualties but just the hits). The mechanism which made it stand out was that a unit can opt to fall back to regroup and steady itself. If it wants to stay put then it must make a discipline roll and risks failing making the discipline state one worse. So one of those 'great minds think alike' moments there and one that really does work well.

Then there is the order phase. When I read this I was worried it would be a throw back to the days of having to write down orders every move, sending 'runners' to change them etc. Thankfully all it means is stating what type of movement the unit is to use that turn, what they will shoot at and what they will assault. Another game mechanic that we use in house with WJ rules and one that works well if you keep it simple.

Orders in RoE are easy and works very well, the type of movement used has subtle effects on the troops ability to hide, use terrain to better the roll against experience if hit etc. Weapon rate of fire is handled in an excellent way, auto weapons have variable random bursts, an example are SMGs which have a standard ROF of 2 dice but which increases (perhaps) to a D6 worth of dice at short range. MG42 ROF is 6 plus a D6, this mechanism simulates gunners firing different bursts and does away with having to keep track of jams and reloading as this can be explained away when you roll a low number. Another game mechanic that I've seen before, but well implemented within the RoE rules.

So after a 'proper' game I had to re-adjust my view as it was now obvious that the rules had new mechanisms to satisfy the most ardent WWII gamer. Also there are other aspects that we have not got room to go into, such as how hidden troops are handled, how tank hits are located and handled etc. These innovative mechanisms are supported by a solid base of well proven rule mechanisms. However unlike what sometimes happens when rules toss together some 'favourite' mechanisms, the rules flow very smoothly. I was very impressed with the test games we played.

Whether a rule set makes you feel like you are 'playing the period' is quite subjective and also depends on your slant of the period of course. However I see it as mainly whether the rules allow you to use those well documented tactics of the day and if there is anything in the rules to make you play the different nations in a differing manner.

Rules of Engagement relies on you using realistic tactics. Try a 40K style rush across the battlefield and you will not get very far. Machine guns are to be treated with respect, suppress before you move is essential and the use of the sneak and hide orders mean your troops will have a far better chance of success. National characteristics come in the form of special rules for different troops within the



nation's orders of battle. These are subtle enough not to make you think you are playing a 'power' game but do make a difference to how you have to handle different forces.

A simple example is the rule of 'tactical flexibility' allowing a squad to be split and able to operate up to 30cm apart. Some troops do not have this, forcing you to keep them together, while the Panzergrenadiers for instance can split into two groups using one to lay down fire while the other outflanks etc.

The 10 scenarios included are well thought out and can be used to game most operations of that late war period. An extra twist to the scenario is that if a side rolls a 6 then they get an extra mission to try and accomplish along side the scenario. This can be very frustrating, I was sure I was on for a good victory against my mate Shaun until he revealed he has accomplished his side mission which made the result a draw! There is no 'point system' in the usual sense. Each platoon has a base makeup and is given a combat effectiveness which ranges from around 9-16 depending on the troop type. Each scenario lays out a suggested combat effectiveness rating for the attacker and defender. Any discrepancy in the rating can be made up by spending these points on 'support troops' from the orders of battle. Tailoring your force to the scenario is easy and quick to do.

So do the rules fill a niche in the market ... I think they do. They are a simple to learn, easy and fun to play yet with a subtle enough feel and enough detail to even make the most avid WWII gamer happy. It fits quite happily between the sets aimed at a larger number of figures but still counting as skirmish (think Arc of Fire and the like here) and the rules aiming at fewer figures than a supported platoon with more detail (think NUTS and Final Combat).

In my opinion it has a more subtle feel and smoother play than those rules aimed at around the same number of figures and play time expectation. My club and even WJ have it pencilled in as the ideal set to involve people who are new to WWII or even gaming, those games for example on games days, open days and show demos.

The whole book seems to be ideal for tempting newbies to WWII skirmish games. There is a superb 'introduction' to the war from D-Day to the fall of Berlin giving historical information. While many of you reading this will not need this information it is amazing how little younger non-WWII players know about the war. It is not really taught as such in the UK curriculum any more (the prelude and legacy yes, but the actual action ... no).

I suspect the authors will get flak by starting the history at D-Day and for the fact that the orders of battle only reflect this period. However it only seems sensible, there isn't room to give the same amount of detail for the early/

mid war era or for other theatres. The authors are already adding this information to the website and plan to keep doing so. Also those new gamers who will be tempted are coming from watching series and films like Band of Brothers and Saving Private Ryan. Normandy and beyond are their frame of reference and is what they want to play.

There is also an extensive hobby section with sections on how to make terrain and paint figures and the extensive army lists at the back of the book means that there is no need for any additional supplements or books to force you to spend money.

I think supporting the rules with 'platoon packs' of 28mm scale figures will also help draw in new players. I can really see a lot of the younger FOW players being tempted to play RoE as the bigger figures and more intimate action will be familiar to a lot of their gaming backgrounds, let's wait and see ... hopefully I will be right.

So onto the last criteria, will I be playing them after the play tests for the review? Well the answer has to be a resounding YES. I've been waiting for a set of rules which allow around 40 figs a side with a few vehicles to be played easily without much book keeping as a 'throw together' club game. I love playing the NUTS rules and will never replace them, but you can't really just throw a game together for newbies to play on a club night. Same side play is easy but opposing sides is a lot harder to pull off.

Also, 40 figures a side is pushing NUTS, even for a player who knows the rules well, and nigh on impossible if you keep the level of character detail that make it the game it is. With RoE these games will be easy to do but will still have enough detail and to make it feel 'right' and not just a game with WWII figures. Furthermore the rules are 'fun' to play... and to think I nearly didn't bother, don't make the same mistake!

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Platoon level WWII skirmish rules. Aimed at 28mm scale.

**Great Escape Games
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