

Playtesting the 1956 British Army Tactical Wargame by Martin Rapier

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This was the same game I took to the Innovations in Wargaming in March, and a lengthy onside has already been submitted for that including a print of the rules. I moved this to Friday evening to avoid some clashes on Saturday, and into my favourite room at Knuston, the Brewerton Room, which I would recommend to anyone looking to run a non-mega game.

I had a surprising number of takers for this, considering the lateness of the hour and all the other games on offer. I had deliberately chosen a very constrained (narrow front) scenario so the players would focus on the resource management aspects of the rules rather than any fancy tactical manoeuvre. The scenario essentially gave them a weak Canadian infantry division and four days to advance 10km against German rearguards in 1943 Sicily. In many ways there is little in the rules which would be unfamiliar to Megablitz players, battalion sized elements with different postures determining what they can do etc. The biggest difference is that each activity takes time to plan, and attacks with lots of artillery support take a great deal of time to plan indeed.

The players got into the planning cycle very well indeed, timing their attacks carefully and cycling units between the front line and reserve to preserve their combat strength. Occasionally an attack would go wrong due to bad luck or enemy action and throw the whole cycle out for 12 or even 24 hours. The air recce rules were interesting as the players got an initial recce report, followed up by a photo interpretation two hours later, and sometimes attacks or planned attacks were held up whilst waiting for the despatch rider with the dripping wet photos in his bag! The players also discovered fairly rapidly that movement in daylight under enemy observation attracted artillery fire, which was sufficient to discourage much daylight movement at all so major redeployments took place at night. This also had the interesting effect that the majority of attacks were timed to take place at dawn (so pre-attack deployment could take place) or dusk (so post attack redeployments could happen or enemy counterattacks would be forced to come in during daylight).

In the end the Allies finally drove the Germans (although they had largely been replaced with Italians by then) from the road junction at Agira with two hours to spare, which was thoroughly satisfactory for all concerned. The main thing was that the game felt very different to a conventional game, the cycle of activity mentioned above seemed more realistic, and perhaps more importantly, there always seemed to be lots do, but sometimes great chunks of time would pass while nothing much happened on the ground at all. It was genuine 'hurry up and wait' stuff, and I was particularly interested in the amount of nocturnal activity going on.

The players seemed to enjoy themselves, winning obviously helps, as did surviving a particularly sticky moment when they were counterattacked by German tanks and panzergrenadiers, but it wouldn't be any fun if it wasn't a challenge. They also made a number of helpful suggestions about the book-keeping arrangements, which would have made it a bit easier to keep track of which unit was doing what when, or I could have employed a team of nine extra umpires as the rules suggested! The main thing I struggle with is how to translate the way that this game worked

in practice into a more conventional tabletop game, but maybe the thing is not to try. It works as it is, and some of the model could no doubt be refined further (there is no Tac Air, all infantry battalions are treated the same etc) but I am not sure that the planning cycle would necessarily translate well into other systems. Interestingly it is very similar to the system used in the computer game 'Airborne Assault', where units are allocated to an operation and given a designated forming up point, start line, objective lines etc and then they wander off under AI control and sort themselves out.

Nick Huband mentioned that the planning times etc were all very well, but he couldn't see how they would manage to deal with a Red Army assault coming in at high speed direct off the line of march. In fact this was exactly what the rules were designed to simulate, and a defensive operation using highly mechanised forces against a tank heavy assault would be quite a different game to the infantry slogging modelled in the Sicily game, particularly if nukes are thrown into the equation.