



**MOVES CANADA** edited by Ian Chadwick

# COMMANDO

by Ian Chadwick

Since at least ten percent of our regular readers are Canadians it seems only fair that at least ten percent of it be *written* by Canadians. The prolific Mr. Chadwick has volunteered himself as Canadian Editor and we both encourage all Canadian gamer/writers to answer to the call. —Redmond

*Commando* has always been somewhat of a dark horse in the game market. A tactical level game of infantry combat *and* a modern role-playing game, it offers qualities of both systems, but the compromises made in attempting to be so wide ranging has meant that each system lacks something that a game with singular purpose would have. Still, the fusion of the two has provided a unique gestalt that is one of the rare quantities in the industry: a realistic role-playing game set in the modern era.

The historical game segment of *Commando* is something different in the usual gamut of tactical wargames. It not only uses *both* 10 and 6 sided dice but it uses no standard counters and the maps are drawn on a square rather than on a hexagonal grid. Instead of shuffling cardboard units about, players mark on the map (an acetate overlay is seriously recommended) the positions of each man and the paths of movement. Two copies of each map are provided so that a gamesmaster may control the hidden movement which best portrays the nature of the game (three would be handy in this case).

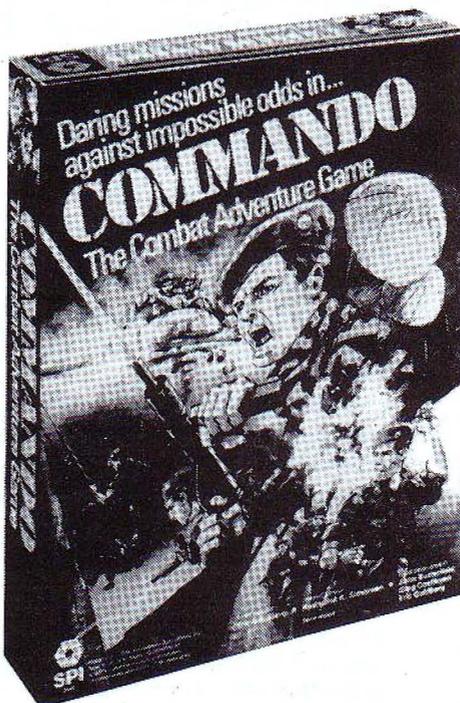
Unlike most wargames, units have no set combat/fire or movement allowances; instead they expend "task points" in performing functions. Normally a man has 50 points per turn to expend, but this may be modified by wounds, panic or the presence of enemy units in the same square. A record for each man must be kept to record current status and task points expended. While the book-keeping does not increase the complexity of the game, it does add to the time required to make each move, making scenarios with numerous men per side somewhat long.

## Historical Game

The historical game in *Commando* has two sections: the regular and the optional rules. The former is a straightforward, easy to learn system which includes rules commonly found in tactical games: initiative (one man per side until all men have moved), observation (linked with facing), grenades, fire combat, panic, preservation and movement. There are also rules to cover exchanging

weapons, facing, falling prone, hand-to-hand combat (surprise, disengagement, grappling, evasion, blows, garrotes), wounds, endurance and plotting moves. Hand-to-hand combat is given considerable length, obviously due to its importance in any commando action.

Sequence of play is familiar: observation phase, opportunity fire plot phase, initiative determination phase, hand-to-hand combat phase, non-prepared task execution phase, prepared task execution phase, book-keeping and preservation check phase, turn record phase. Before any task execution, each man must check for panic. The difference between prepared and non-prepared tasks is basically who was or was not plotted to perform opportunity fire that turn.



Anyone with some familiarity with tactical games will have no difficulty learning the basic rules, and I doubt that even a relative novice will have cause for puzzlement over the rules.

The optional rules cover some fourteen pages with such areas as flamethrowers, rifle grenades, horses and camels, barbed wire, thump guns, mines, tanks and other vehicles, satchel charges, rocket launchers, artillery, electric wire, guard dogs, climbing, illumina-

tion devices and underwater operations. Some of these rules delve into detail as might be expected, and inclusion of one or more such rules can add significant time to the play of the game. On the other hand, some rules such as those covering horses, guard dogs or underwater operations can add real flavor to a scenario that offsets the additional time.

*Commando's* 34 separate charts and tables take up seven pages of which 16 tables are for use with one or more optional rules. A wealth of information is contained here not otherwise found in the rules: costs for task execution, observation range cross-indexed with weather and time of day, a fire combat chart which lists weapon types, damage and chance of hitting at various ranges, grenade accuracy table listing type and range, grenade scatter table, terrain effects chart, observation chance modification chart, panic modifiers, hand-to-hand combat and damage charts, rifle grenade accuracy charts and more. Despite the intensity of data packed into these pages, the charts are easy to use, refreshingly legible and conveniently laid out for quick access.

Before resolving combat, players must first resolve observation. Each side in a scenario is given an observation code which corresponds to a percentage chance of observing an enemy man. If the enemy to be observed *can* be seen (referring first to the observation range table and terrain effects chart), the player refers to the observation chance modification table to see if the base chance as given in the scenario will be altered (by target prone, observing man moving, target inside building, etc.). Two ten-sided dice are rolled, and if the number (read as a number from 1 to 100) is equal to or less than the modified observation chance, the enemy is observed.

The player then cross-references his weapon type with the range on the fire combat results table to find the base chance of hitting the opponent. This number is further modified by terrain and the fire modifications table which contains target prone, using enemy weapon, firer severely wounded and other considerations. A column on the fire combat table also indicates the number of times per fire a man may roll the dice to attempt to hit the target.

Assuming a hit on the target, the player then checks to see if an automatic kill was made. If not, the hit opponent suffers damage according to the number of dice

thrown listed on the fire combat results table. (Prior to fire combat, as with any task, the player must have checked to see if the man intended to fire panics, and afterwards, if the weapon has run out of ammunition.) Such frequent referrals to charts and tables, plus dice rolling, make combat turns in *Commando* relatively long, although the system works quite smoothly as players become more familiar with it.

As a game system, the historical segment of *Commando* works well; it is neither overly simple nor overly complex. It can easily be adapted to cover any modern time period and would probably work just as well modified for use with SF games. The use of small square grid maps (1/4-inch squares) makes the paperwork unwieldy; I would recommend that anybody with the time make their own maps in larger scale and design some counters for sheer ease of play. The very smallness of the grid, plus the necessity of marking and erasing from a covering surface makes for an awkward and messy movement and fire phase. I was surprised that no rules were included to cover command control, aside from the preservation/panic rules. While commandos are generally able to function without specific visual reference to a command symbol, their opponents probably don't have the same training to act individually. Also, when coordinated attacks are made in silence, one assumes a visual identification with a leader's signals; again not covered in the rules.

One particularly pleasing aspect of the game is the variation provided in the 12 different maps, allowing players to recreate scenarios of their own without having to redesign a wide variety of terrain. While it is understood that the maps represent terrain from all parts of the world — designed for scenarios as widely disparate as Lawrence of Arabia and the raid on Entebbe — it would have been nice if the exact details had been generalized enough so as to make some of the maps geomorphic to aid the design of a player's own scenarios. The scenarios themselves are varied and balanced: historical scenarios blended with fictional scenarios including one closely resembling the popular adventure movie, *Where Eagles Dare*. Finally the booklet is completed with an informative historical article on commando operation by Stephen Patrick, taken from *Strategy & Tactics*.

### Role-Playing Commando

Obviously once having mastered the tactical game, players should go on to the role-playing game; described as "the ultimate form of *Commando*" in the 24-page booklet which contains the rules, charts and notes for expanding the game.

As a role-playing game, *Commando* is in rather rare company. Despite the popularity of adventure fiction, and the obvious popularity with the wargaming crowd of anything dealing with modern warfare, there are very few role-playing games of the modern era. TSR has produced *Top Secret*, a game of spies, intelligence and the 007 mythos. Timeline Inc. brought out *The Mor-*

*row Project*, a game of post-nuclear survival cast in the near future. But none to my knowledge rank beside *Commando* as a modern "combat adventure game."

Despite the slimness of the rules book, the second booklet manages to get through

### [64.32] DISMISSAL TABLE

**Saving Roll:** Before using the Dismissal Table, the Player consults his Character's Hero Rating and multiplies it by *three*. He then rolls 1D100. If he rolls equal to or less than the multiplied Hero Rating, he does *not* roll on the Dismissal Table (a hearing into the Character's professional conduct exonerates him). Three months time elapsed is recorded on the Character Record (do not re-roll on the Time Elapsed Table). If the Player fails to make this roll, he must roll 2D6 and refer to the Dismissal Table. See Case 64.16 for a complete explanation.

#### DICE Result

- 2 Character marched out before firing squad and shot; last cigarette tasted lousy.
- 3 Character disgraced in court martial proceedings; reduced to Rank 0 and forcibly retired.
- 4 Character disgraced after barroom altercation with General; reduced to Rank 1 and released from service, may join another organization.
- 5 Character reduced one Rank and placed on twelve month probation; may join another organization.
- 6 Character reduced one Rank and placed on six month probation; may join another organization.
- 7 Character placed on six month probation; may join another organization.
- 8 Character placed on three month probation; may join another organization.
- 9 Character acquitted during court martial by technicality; subtract 5% from his next Promotion die roll.
- 10 Character talked into extremely dangerous mission to exonerate himself from blame; add three men to the Defending Force and subtract 10% (to a minimum of 5%) from the panic chance of entire Defending Force on the Character's next mission.
- 11 Character held in protective custody for three months.
- 12 Machinations of jealous rival revealed — Character completely exonerated; add 15% to his next *five* Promotion die rolls.

the usual run of rules common to most games of the genre: character generation, mission preparation, generation of the defending force, promotion, skill levels and the like. Rather than such skills as thaumaturgy, or-hacking, or raising of an arcane elemental, players can choose skills appropriate to the characters: demolitions, sniping (does one call it snipery?), grenade tossing, safe cracking, mountain climbing...the list is pitifully short. One would hope for a roster of military and intelligence skills derived from both fiction and reality but only a few were chosen for representation, leaving it to the imaginative gamesmaster to provide more as necessary.

Other characteristics brought into consideration include strength, marksmanship, dexterity, endurance and leadership, all rolled on 4 six-sided dice. The individual's character may also roll for a "hero rating" which represents a class that ranges from "miserable coward" to "big budget movie hero" according to the index on the chart. Hero rating may increase or decrease as a result of the character's performance during the mission. It's very similar to experience points in the fantasy games except that a character can actually *lose* points as well during play. In addition, a character can also increase his weapons proficiency during play. Note that a player-character may improve during play but accompanying "men" — non-player characters — may not.

One of the sorely needed rules sections is that covered only by three paragraphs: rank, age and name. Unlike most role-playing games there is no detailed system by which to create a believable character and generate a background for him. Players might feel the urge to plagiarise other games systems to create some past history for their character: school, military service, technical skills; parentage, languages, etc. According to the rules each character (and accompanying man) starts at 22 years of age, somewhat young I would think for a seasoned commando — can you see Sgt. Fury at 22 leading a squad?

Characters may be promoted as they progress, but the ranks are merely numbers, not named — which is excused in the rules because "these may vary by army or organization." A simple table listing ranks would be helpful for those who are not conversant with which rank follows captain. Rank as defined in the rules not only affects characters as do military ranks, but a sufficiently high rank may allow a player to influence the choice of his next mission. Of course, players may elect to ignore an order from a character of higher rank, but they may suffer due punishment for insubordination if they return alive.

Two items which make the game interesting — and humorous — are the hero abilities that allow favorite characters to survive against the odds. Once a hero reaches "TV Hero" class, he can choose one ability from the list which includes such delights as "right place right time," "engaged to a striking paramour" or "luck of the Irish."

[continued on page 34]

## MOVES Canada [continued from page 26]

Despite the titles, the abilities have real effects on the character's play and differentiate the character's player from the "joes" who accompany him.

Once up into the "Major Novel" hero class (two ranks above TV hero) he may choose to use the Miraculous Escape Matrix once per mission, immediately after learning the results of a combat. The player rolls two dice and cross-references the results on the matrix to obtain an escape — a predictably tongue-in-cheek result such as "meteorite strikes enemy man," "enemy man falls for the old 'Look, It's Halley's Comet Trick,'" "sentry trips over untied shoelace" and "bullet strikes commando's lucky charm." But no matter what it reads, the results are the same: miraculous escape from imminent doom (unless of course the unlucky sod rolls 1,1 or 6,6 in which case he takes the wound points due). It comes as a bit of surprise that the thin humor does not detract from the game but rather adds to it...perhaps because so little flavor otherwise colors the role-playing section.

Another desolate area in the rules is the between-mission status of the commando and his team. While a character may heal wounds, increase certain characteristics, and practice skills, the process is boringly mechanical and without any role-playing flavor. The same may be said of the rules for the perpetuation of the fire-team (assuming you have a team you want to keep together... but what would happen if Sgt. Fury changed cronies each comic?) along with the rules on aging and retirement. The designer seems to have stopped short in his efforts, providing us with a fairly complete game for simulating missions but not providing us with a system by which to give life to the characters performing those missions. It becomes incumbent on the players to fill in the blanks in order to complete the game in the manner we have come to expect in role-playing games.

Again, for reasons known only to the designer, command control has been left out of the rules (although covered in part in the section on rank and promotion). Perhaps they were considered too "dirty" for the system to be included.

Basically, one must consider the role-playing segment an open-ended system: a framework to allow players to develop their own more elaborate structures. Obviously to prevent *Commando* from being a mere one-shot game, players will want to establish a continuity-fiction such as bind fantasy role-playing games between expeditions. An interested gamesmaster will be able to research and add into the game structure a wealth of current information and militia to give added chrome to the game. Players should consider required reading Forsythe's *Dogs of War* (the book; not the movie which offers a rather flat presentation of the characters). This should help to create an atmosphere for players to design their own characters.

Unlike far too many role-playing games, characters in *Commando* have real game-

purposes and do not exist merely to accumulate treasures, slay enemies or improve their skills at dice-rolling. *Commando* characters have well-defined goals and their success or failure as a character is keyed into their performance of their missions.

*Commando* as a role-playing game is far from as complete or detailed as many role-playing games are today. No provisions are made for many of the minutiae which flavor (or weight, depending on your viewpoint) these games: carried weight isn't considered; intelligence isn't a factor, nor is charisma; modern electronic technology, communications systems, and high-tech weaponry aren't considered. There are more details missing than included. But players shouldn't consider that it detracts from the game; instead they should consider *Commando* as a base from which to further develop. It's a good game, a remarkably smooth system which has accepted the compromise of a lightweight framework in exchange for a well designed, complete tactical system — something few, if any of the swords-and-sorcery can boast.

### The Morrow Project

A footnote to any mention of modern role-playing games should include reference to Timeline's *The Morrow Project*: a pseudo-SF game which supposes sometime in the present that a concerned group of philanthropists will make exacting preparations for the continuation of civilization after a nuclear holocaust. In order to do so, modern day soldiers and specialists in "hibernation" are sealed into protected bases to be awakened after the next war has devastated a good portion of the planet. The premise isn't exactly new, nor are the rules particularly different from a host of others around. What is of interest is the amazing amount of data the one book provides — hard data about weapons, ammunition, grenades, radiation shielding, travel times, vehicles and nuclear weapons. While the authors were overly-conservative in predicting the development of future weaponry, they have provided an extensively detailed survey of current military hardware. A typical entry for a particular weapon would include name, caliber, weight, effective and maximum ranges, type and rate of fire, feed device and feed device weight, basic load carried, load and total weights, plus comments. For this information alone, players of modern games should get the booklet. It also proves fairly easy to interface with *Commando*.

*Morrow* has unique properties all of its own, however, and players might care to try playing the game itself, although the combat is neither as exciting nor as complex as *Commando*. It is unfair to compare the two games since they represent two divergent paths in game design: *Morrow* is far more the traditional role-playing game while *Commando* is an attempt to meld together two systems. But *Morrow* has some useful and interesting material in it and that is rare enough in current games. You can't criticize it for trying so hard. ■■

## Expanded Simplicity [continued from page 18]

### Effects of Demoralization.

When an attack is made *against* a unit of a demoralized army, the attacker subtracts *one* from the die-roll; cross-index this modified die-roll with the appropriate column on the Combat Results Table.

When an attack is made by a unit of a demoralized army, the attacker adds *one* to the die-roll; cross-index this modified die-roll with the appropriate column of the Combat Results Table. When an attack made by units of a demoralized force clears a hex of defending units, the demoralized attackers may *not* advance into the vacated hex.

### [24.0] DEMORALIZATION TABLE

GAME-TURN	FRENCH LOSSES (in Strength Points)	RUSSIAN LOSSES (in Strength Points)
4	30	25
5	40	30
6	45	35
7	50	45
8	55	50
9	60	55
10	70	60
11	75	65
12	80	70

An army that loses enough Strength Points during a Game-Turn to top the figures in the table becomes demoralized. Assuming the army does not gain too many extra losses, it may regain morale in subsequent turns if its losses fall below the numbers listed on the table.

### [25.0] STARTING THE GAME

In this version of the game, play begins with Game-Turn 4.

One of the overall effects of these rules is to make the cavalry much more mobile. Now, players will have an easier time recreating Murat's famous charge at Eylau in which several stunned Russian brigades were hacked to pieces. Curiously, however, cavalry is also far more fragile than they are in the original rules. Simply put, cavalry simply cannot stay in the battle line against a concerted infantry and artillery counterattack. Improperly used, the cavalry will melt away fairly quickly. Again this result might seem right. Historically, Napoleonic cavalry was the most difficult of the three arms to control. Similarly, the infantry are likely to find themselves locked in attritional but relatively indecisive fire fights up and down the line. In a simplistic way, the variant seems to reproduce the slaughter on the Napoleonic battlefield, with units wearing each other down until finally one side or another cracks altogether.

The game seems to be well balanced. In half of the games played, the French were in possession of both Eylau hexes; in the other games, the Allies held the town. On the average the French lose an average of 17 totally eliminated units for a total of 70 points. Total combat strength losses run about 86 points for the French. The Allies lose about 18 units on the average totalling about 75 points.

I think the modification represents an intriguing alternative to the standard system, one that can be enjoyed by both novice and experienced gamer alike. ■■