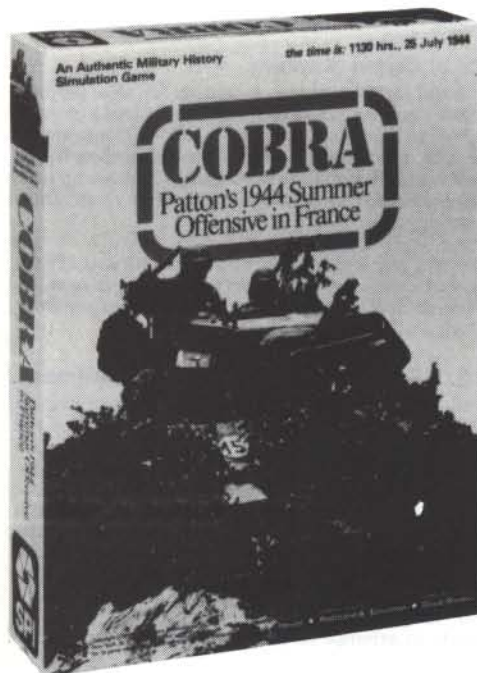




# COBRA RECONSIDERED

ANDREW MCGEE



What must be happening in reality is that the units in the front line are spreading themselves more thinly so as to be able to cover two hexes rather than one, but in this case there seems no good reason why attackers should not be permitted to direct their attacks at the apparently vacant hex, which is really being thinly held – it is odd, is it not, that one way to render a hex immune to attack is to withdraw all units from it. To combat this the following rule is proposed:

“Units may attempt to overrun vacant hexes which are subject to enemy ZOCs and into which the standard rules would not permit them to move. The cost to perform such an overrun is 3 Movement Points, and such an overrun does count against overrun limits for the individual unit and for the phase as a whole. The attacker’s strength is calculated as in an ordinary overrun. The defense value of the hex is found by calculating the strengths of all enemy units exerting a ZOC into the hex and halving the result. Column shifts are calculated exactly as for an ordinary overrun and the overrun is resolved exactly in accordance with section (6.5). The adjacent defending units do not suffer combat losses. If the CRT indicates losses for the defender but none for the attacker, then the attacker may advance into the defending hex. The attacker may not advance after a split result.”

It is to be emphasised that this procedure is used only where the overrunning unit would otherwise be unable to move into the defending hex.

## (7.0) Stacking.

This is merely a proposal to tidy up a small anomaly; the stacking limit is expressed in terms of divisions, but no allowance is made for the effect of losses; a U.S. Infantry Division which has lost

three steps counts the same for stacking as one which is still at full strength. Substitute the following for standard rule (7.1).

“The Stacking Limit is 12 Stacking Points per hex. The Stacking Value of the various units is as follows.

US Armoured Regt	4/2
US Infantry Division	12/9/6/3
US Infantry Regt	4/2
Br/Can Brigade	6/3
German PG Regt	6/3
German Inf Regt	4/2
German Pz Regt	4/2

The first number indicates the stacking value when at full strength, the second number is the stacking value when at reduced strength. In the case of US Infantry Divisions the successive values are for successive step losses.”

## (7.2) Divisional Integrity.

One fairly common rule about which I have always had serious doubts is the one allowing a doubling of strength when all the units of a particular division are present. I do see that there will be an improved performance when the whole division is fighting together, but I find it hard to believe that efficiency is doubled. Of course any change in this will have quite a significant effect on play-balance, and in Cobra this will be principally to the detriment of the Allies. However, some of the other changes to be proposed here will swing the balance back the other way, and this seems to offer a good opportunity to try out a change. Accordingly, the following amendment to rule (7.2) is proposed.

“The effect of Divisional Integrity is now only a 50% increase in strength. The definition of Divisional Integrity and of the units eligible for it is unchanged.”

## (8.2) Extent of Zones of Control.

Another of the minor amendments; it concerns the effect of bridged Major River hexsides on zones of control. It is a point not expressly dealt with by the rules; Major River hexsides are said to negate zones of control, but nothing is said about whether this applies even to bridged Major River hexsides. It seems reasonable that some kind of zone of control should exist in such cases, but it is questionable whether it should be as strong as the ordinary Cobra zone of control. The following compromise is suggested.

“Movement ZOCs do extend across bridged Major River hexsides, but these zones are fluid. It costs one extra MP to enter such a ZOC, over and above the cost of the terrain, and one extra to leave it, but a unit may both enter and leave such a ZOC in the same movement phase, and may move direct from such a ZOC to another ZOC, as well as entering it from another ZOC, even a rigid one. For retreat and supply purposes ZOCs do not extend across bridged Major River hexsides.”

## (9.0) Combat.

A mixture of minor and major changes here. First, two small ones:  
(9.38) The one-column bonus is given to Tiger tanks in attack as well as in defence.

Cobra was a game which should have been a success from the start, having the magic ingredients of tanks and Nazis, and using the highly successful PGG system. In fact it has not had quite as much attention or acclaim as the East Front games on the same system. One of the reasons for this was no doubt that the game as originally published in S&T 65 had Victory Conditions so badly worded as to make an Allied victory almost impossible; subsequent errata have rectified this, and Cobra is now an eminently playable and reasonably well-balanced game. For my part, however, I entertain certain reservations about the details of the system, especially as applied to the Western Front; some of these are relatively minor whilst others are more fundamental. I hope that the rules changes which they have led me to propose will be of interest to all those interested in the PGG system, although I should emphasise that I have not experimented with the effects of any of these changes in East Front games. For the sake of convenience the suggestions follow the order of the original rules.

## (6.5) Overrun.

This is one of the more radical proposals, and warrants some explanation. I have long been unhappy about the standard tactic in games with rigid movement-zocs of organising a defensive line on alternate hexes, thereby exposing the minimum number of units to attack, using the minimum number of units in the front line and at the same time making it very difficult to surround any unit.

I have never understood the reason for limiting this advantage to defence and cannot justify retaining the original rule.

(9.76) This rule is abolished. Again I can find no justification for it. It is extraordinary to suppose that all the trucks will be lost when the division retreats. Since the truck markers can be fairly freely interchanged between one division and another, it might be argued that there is in fact an abundance of trucks but a shortage of petrol, and that what is really simulated here is the allocation of fuel, but remember that the marker may be replaced on the same unit in the next replacement phase, so that this argument asks us to assume that the allocations of fuel are being chopped and changed every two or three days.

Now for the two major changes. The first concerns the options available to the attacker when he suffers a combat result. The standard rule in *Cobra*, as in all PGG games, is that he may retreat or may take the step losses. In PGG itself this is to some extent a genuine dilemma since it may be important to keep an integrated division together for overrun purposes in the second movement phase. In *Cobra* overruns are not permitted in the second movement phase. In any case it is surely unrealistic to think of the attacker simply politely pulling back on discovering that the enemy forces are too strong for him. When a division attacks and is repulsed, people tend to get killed and there is little to be done to prevent this. Accordingly, I propose the following radical amendment:

"The attacker is obliged to take all his combat results as step losses."

It is, I think, worth saying a little about the effect this has been found to have on the play of the game. It might be thought that, combined with the reduction in the effect of divisional integrity, it would severely handicap the Allied armoured divisions. In fact this consequence is mitigated by two things. First, the armoured divisions can lose at least two, and in the case of the Americans three, steps without forfeiting integrity; second, the Allied Player quickly learns the importance of attacking with combined forces of infantry and armour, using the infantry to take the loss. In this rather indirect way combined arms tactics are forced on the player. For the Germans of course this rule is of less importance, since they spend most of their time on the defensive. The next change is aimed entirely at them, however.

Obviously the overall strategic situation of the game is that the Germans are on the defensive. In addition they will generally be fairly seriously outnumbered. To some extent it is difficult for defenders in such circumstances to retreat freely, and for the Germans this was aggravated in the original campaign by Hitler's insistence on the importance of retaining ground even at the expense of losing men. Admittedly this insistence was not so extreme as at times on the Eastern Front, but there were numerous occasions when the Fuhrer took it into his head either that a particular piece of soil was vital or that his generals were conspiring to retreat as far as possible, and consequently issued orders to fight to the last man. To simulate the combined effects of these factors, when a German unit suffers a combat loss and wishes to absorb this by retreating, the German Player rolls one die and consults the table below.

	Die-roll					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Combat	1	—	—	—	—	1
Result	2	—	—	—	1	1
	3	—	1	1	2	2
	4	1	1	2	2	3

The number shown is the *minimum* number of steps which must be taken as losses rather than retreats. The German Player has of course always the option to lose more steps than this if he thinks it the wiser course.

### (10.0) Headquarters Units.

The standard rules allow the HQ of General Patton to be used to give two combat shifts for American

Units. No other Allied HQ is favoured in this way, although all German HQ's may be used for the purpose of combat bonuses. I am deeply suspicious of this rule, regarding it as merely another chapter in the SPI story of how the Americans really won the war all by themselves, and have preferred to disregard it. I would propose its abolition.

### (11.0) Supply.

Supply rules have always been a particular interest of mine, not least because I have thought them the poor relations of game design. *Cobra* is not a sufficiently complex game to require sophisticated supply rules, but there is in my experience a flaw in the rule that the supply line may be of any length; I have on occasion seen U.S. units trace supply from Avranches via Falaise, which is surely stretching belief a little far. I think that the following amendment to rule (11.1) represents a sensible compromise.

"A line of supply may cross a maximum of three non-road hex-sides before leaving the friendly map-edge. Both Primary and Secondary Roads count as roads for this purpose. The non-road hexsides may or may not occur in immediate succession."

### (15.3) Carpet Bombing.

A small adjustment is proposed in this section. Given that one game-turn represents three days, it seems to me excessive to forbid all movement through the bombed hex in the succeeding Mech. Movement Phase. Therefore I suggest allowing such movement but at an additional cost of three movement points.

The two sections which follow, (18.0) and (19.0), have of course no counterpart in the standard rules. They embody further changes and developments, which I offer for your consideration.

### (18.0) Reserve Designation and Commitment.

This rule was developed at least partly to restore game balance when it was found that some of the other changes, in particular the limitation on German retreats, had tilted the game considerably in favour of the Allies. One problem which arose was that the Allies found it so easy to tear holes in the German line that in almost every game the Germans were surrounded by about turn 5. To counteract this it was decided to allow the Germans the option of designating certain units as reserves, and to give them a special movement phase in which to attempt to shore up gaps created by the Allies.

The Sequence of Play is amended by the insertion at the end of the German Player Turn of a "Reserve Designation Phase" and the insertion immediately after the Allied Combat Phase of a "Reserve Movement Phase".

#### (18.1) Reserve Designation.

In the Reserve Designation Phase the German Player may designate mechanised units as reserves. To be eligible for this status the unit must not at that time be in an enemy movement-zoc, whether rigid or fluid.

A unit which has been designated a reserve is eligible to move in the following German Reserve Movement Phase. It is not eligible to move in the following German Initial Movement Phase, whether or not it performs Reserve Movement. Thereafter it loses Reserve Status and may fight and move normally. It may be designated a reserve again on any number of turns, so long as it satisfies the conditions of this rule.

#### (18.2) Reserve Movement.

In the Reserve Movement Phase any unit currently in Reserve may move up to its full movement allowance, as modified by the weather, which is the prevailing weather of the Allied Player Turn. This movement is subject to all Supply, Terrain and Zone of Control Rules. No Overruns may be performed in this phase.

### (19.0) Hitler Directives.

Hitler's intervention has been mentioned briefly already in connection with Combat Results; but his insistence on holding the line obviously extended to attempts to withdraw units not in combat. In addition there was the case of the counter-attack at Mortain, which he ordered for the night of 6th-7th

August, against the opposition of his commanders on the spot. To simulate intervention of these two kinds this rule limits the movement of German units and requires the German Player to make a certain number of attacks.

#### (19.1) Holding the Line.

(19.11) Subject to sections (19.12), (19.13) and (19.14) any hex which is in a German Movement-Zoc at the start of a German Player Turn must be in such a Zoc at the end of that Player Turn, unless a hex further north in the same hex-row is in a German Movement-Zoc at the end of the Player-turn. Different units may be used at the start and end of the turn to fulfil this requirement. A move which would result in the violation of this rule is an illegal move and may not be made.

(19.12) The German Player may ask the Fuhrer's permission to disregard rule (19.11). He does so by designating any one or more hex-rows, not necessarily contiguous, in respect of which he wishes to make the application. He rolls two dice, modifying the total as indicated in (19.14). If the modified total is 10 or more, he may disregard rule (19.11) in respect of the designated hexrows for the rest of the current game-turn.

(19.13) Applications may be made at any time in the German Player-Turn, and the number of applications to be made in any one Player-Turn is unlimited, save that only one application is allowed in respect of each hex-row in any one turn.

(19.14) The die-roll is modified as follows:

Turns 5-8 +1	Allied VP's 21-40 +1
9-13 +2	41-60 +2
	61+ +3

For the purposes of this die-roll **ONLY** the Allied VP total does not take into account points scored by the Germans for exiting units off the eastern edge of the map. In addition the total is increased as shown below for the Allied capture of the towns indicated.

St Lo	+10	Lisieux	+15
Caen	+15	Falaise	+20
Villedieu	+15		

A town is captured for this purpose when all its hexes are occupied or were last occupied by Allied units.

#### (19.2) Exiting Units.

(19.21) The German Player is restricted in his freedom to exit units for the purpose of satisfying Victory Conditions.

(19.22) At the beginning of each German Player-Turn the German Player rolls one die and adds the number of the turn to it. The result is the maximum number of units he may exit from the map this turn.

#### (19.3) Compulsory Attacks.

(19.31) Each turn the German Player is liable to be required to launch a number of attacks.

(19.32) At the start of each German Player-Turn the German Player rolls two dice and subtracts from their sum the number of the Game-Turn. The result is the number of attacks he must launch that turn.

(19.33) The maximum number of attacks the German Player may be required to launch in any one turn is four. If the process described in (19.32) produces a result greater than four, then the German Player must launch four attacks that turn.

(19.34) An overrun does count as an attack for the purposes of this subsection.

#### (19.4) Disobedience

(19.41) At the start of any one German Player-Turn the German Player, after determining the weather, but before doing anything else, may declare that he intends to disregard the Fuhrer's orders this turn.

(19.42) The effect of this declaration is that rules (19.1) (19.2) and (19.3) are suspended for the duration of the German Player Turn.

(19.43) This option may be exercised only once in the game.

## The New Game.

Having set out all the new rules, it seems a good idea to say a little about the effect they have been found to have on the play of the game.

Obviously the German Player must approach the game in a way very different from that likely to succeed in the standard game. One criticism of the standard game has always been that it is too easy for the German Player to make an orderly withdrawal from the map. This is certainly no longer the case, for he is now obliged to hold the forward positions for a long time, unless he is very lucky with the die-rolls. In this context it is necessary to think carefully about the use of the two options which are given to him by the new rules, namely Reserves and Disobedience. With Reserves it is dangerous to designate units as reserves indiscriminately, since they lose their next initial movement, whether used as reserves or not. Perhaps more important, the value of a reserve is much diminished if it is in an enemy Zoc when the time comes to use it, so it is helpful if the reserve unit can be in some way screened by infantry. Disobedience is available only once, and good timing is essential. The ideal conditions are bad weather and as few German units in Allied Zocs as possible. Unfortunately these cannot always be achieved, and in my experience players tend to wait as long as possible before exercising this option. I consider this a mistake, because using disobedience to salvage something from what is almost a debacle usually means that you get very little benefit from it. I would favour using it no later than turn four, unless the Allied offensive is very badly stalled.

The Germans can do relatively little about the die-rolls for determining when they must take losses rather than retreating, but this rule makes it quite important to mix infantry and armour in the same stack where possible, and this is in turn made easier by the new stacking rules — when units have taken losses it is easier to stack a few infantry units with a Panzer Division, for example.

Overruns against vacant hexes are in practice used mainly where a stretch of good defensive terrain is being held by weak units and there is a less difficult hex between them, and this now gives the German Player something extra to worry about.

On the Allied side the three important changes are Divisional Integrity, Supply and Attacker Losses. The first makes a noticeable impact after the first few turns when the Allies begin to come up against the main German forces. Nothing can be done about it, and the Allied Player just has to remember that his force is less strong than it was. Interestingly this change does not seem to have encouraged players to split up integrated divisions, which I had hoped would be one of the consequences.

The new Supply rules should offset the effects of forcing the Germans to hold the front line, at least to some extent, by making it more difficult for the Allies to surround them without putting themselves out of supply, whilst the Allies obligation to take results as losses will blunt their offensive power by making it necessary for them to take units out of the line for refitting.

Overall I am inclined to think that the balance of the game has shifted somewhat in favour of the Allies; certainly playing the German side has been made significantly more difficult, but I believe that the overall result has been to improve the game as a simulation as well as to offer a new challenge. If you've put away your copy of *Cobra* because you think you've solved all its problems, perhaps this article will encourage you to get it out again. I hope so.

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- Frankel + Smith "Patton's Best" (Hawthorn Books 1978)  
Lucas + Barker, "The Killing Ground" (Batsford, 1978)  
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# THE NORTH CIRCULAR WAS NEVER LIKE THIS

## INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF CAR WARS

from Steve Jackson Games

JOHN LAMBSHEAD

*"14. PEDESTRIANS: If a vehicle collides with a pedestrian, the pedestrian takes full damage (see Collisions)."*

*"16. KILLS: A "kill" is scored when an enemy vehicle can no longer move or fire, either because of a direct attack or because of an attack during combat. The occupants do not have to die. Killing a pedestrian is not a kill."*

Car Wars is a microgame (oops sorry, Metagaming have copyrighted that, I mean small game in a plastic bag of course) which examines car to car (or bike, etc.) combat at a tactical level. Chad Irby and Steve Jackson (the colonial one) admit responsibility for its design. The cars in question bear little resemblance to my trusty Ford as they are armoured and are equipped with an unusual range of optional extras. MGs, Flame throwers, Missiles, Oil sprays, Minedroppers, Anti-tank Guns (?), Lasers (??) etc. All of which is a little fabulous if, like me, you think that a cassette-recorder, whip aerial and cigarette-lighter-which-lights-up-at-night are the last word in motoring sophistication. In case any poor naive soul has still some doubts about the purpose of this game I will bluntly lay it on the line. You have to destroy everybody else's motor car to win. Car Wars looks forward to a near-future when the citizens of the USA live in fortified towns dining exclusively off algae and the countryside belongs to psychopaths in armed vehicles. Oh, and, the chief recreation is watching motor, "destruction-derbies" spiced up with a collection of weaponry which would not disgrace an armoured division.

Inevitably games like this spark off the usual arguments on the 'morality in wargaming' line. Maybe I should state my attitude right away. It is either moral or immoral to derive entertainment from games based on violence. Attempting to draw lines between which types of violence are a 'good thing' and which a 'bad thing' seems nonsensical. If tanks shooting at each other are fair game material then so are cars. Incidentally if wargaming is immoral because entertainment is derived from death where does this leave the book publishing and film industry? John Spence informs me that, with the game, a car sticker is supplied. This apparently bears the game motto Drive Offensively. I would suggest that displaying this sticker would be damned offensive in a country where the most common form of violent death is the traffic 'accident'. It would also be infantile and potentially very stupid. Imagine the following scene. One of Inspector Knacker's flat-footed goon squads has hauled you up before the beak charged with a heinous crime, like doing 31 mph in a built up area or not having enough water in your windscreen wash-bottle. You lie there in chains grovelling and protesting your innocence when the prosecution play their trump card. Why are you driving around with Drive Offensively plastered all over your rear window? Explanations of 'Oh it's only a joke and I don't mean it literally but you see I play this game where you drive around shooting people and running down pedestrians' are not going to get you your licence back. They might just win you a free vallium holiday at the happy farm while trick cyclists discuss your relationship with your father. As an idea Car Wars is tasteless. But bad taste is not necessarily criminal, immoral, fattening or even undesirable.

For a minigame (that's not a copyrighted term is it John?) Car Wars is quite decently presented although, of course, the customer is expected to cut out the counters and map sections. The second surprise about this game is that it is fairly detailed

and quite complex. Indeed I would rate the complexity at about Air Force level. Oddly enough our old friend the hexgrid has been abandoned in favour of squares — you remember squares. Cars do not move from square to square though but can move in any direction in one inch increments, which are equivalent to 10 mph. I found this a little disconcerting and would have preferred a nice simple hexgrid, after all if it's good enough for Air War! Each one second turn is divided into ten movement phases. Cars move in one inch increments in these phases according to their speeds. For example a car moving at 10 mph moves once in phase six, a car moving at 50 mph moves in phases one, three, five, seven and nine while a cardboard counter doing a ton-up moves in all ten phases. This system allows all vehicles to move more or less simultaneously. It is not new having been used by miniatures' people (as opposed to miniature people) and in some board games, e.g. *Star Fleet Battles*. This system is O.K. where there are only two counters on the board, e.g. most SFB duels, but can get excruciatingly tedious where a number of counters are used, e.g. Car Wars. To some extent this is offset by good player aids in the latter game. As well as driving in a straight line players are offered a variety of 'manoeuvres'; turns, drifts, swerves, pivots and something called a bootlegger reverse — which seems to be a sort of handbrake turn. The manoeuvre system is quite interesting. Each car begins with a certain 'handling number' which depends on its suspension type. During a game-turn each manoeuvre causes a number to be subtracted from the handling number. As the handling number drops the controlling player must start rolling on a loss of control table. If he loses control the car will skid and possibly roll. As wargames go this is a fairly sophisticated system — so is it anything like driving a car? Well, no, not really. This emphasises that we should beware the pitfalls of ever casually assuming that our complex games bear too much similarity to real life, whatever we conceive that to be. While on the subject of movement I should point out that cars have different acceleration rates according to their power to weight ratio, while their decelerations largely depend on their handling number.

Combat is as intricate as movement. A weapon can be fired once at any time during the game turn. To damage a target, first a line of sight must be established. Then dice are rolled on the hit table, the die roll being modified according to a variety of factors, range, target size and speed, visibility etc. If the weapon's hit number, or better is rolled then the weapon has hit (simple innit?). Damage is scored on the target according to the weapon's strength. Generally vehicles take hits on their armour first and then, when this is destroyed, on their innards. Other rules cover crashes, collisions, road debris, uncontrolled vehicles, pedestrians, crew skills, vehicle design etc.

Well there 'tiz. I must admit I find it difficult to see who this is going to appeal to. It is a little too complex to be a 'fun' game or to be of much interest to the lunatic fringe. On the other hand who wants to expend so much effort simply to drive an armoured beach buggy around. The back cover shows a teenage lad in the act of heaving a grenade out of a car window. Apparently this was the winner of the first Car Wars Tourney. Perhaps that answers my question. A combination of intelligence and immaturity is required for a full appreciation of Car Wars.