

Combat Commander

Developer's Notes — Up Close and Personal

By John A. Foley

A New Tactical Wargame Adventure

I have been a wargamer for more than 40 years, but I did not discover *tactical* wargames until the late 1980's. When I did, I fell in love. Every night for a year I studied the massive rulebook by my bedside table, immersing myself completely. When I played my first tactical wargame, it was like a revelation. My cardboard battlefield came alive — more than I thought possible. For the next 8 years, I was an avid and dedicated player, making various contributions to the hobby and gaining friends along the way.

With the passage of time and my growing real life responsibilities my interest and devotion waned. I became interested in other games.

I then heard, via Rodger MacGowan on *Consinworld*, about a new tactical wargame that GMT Games was considering for their upcoming *P500 List*. Rodger had discovered **Combat Commander**, and first met designer Chad Jensen, while attending the *Conquest* Convention in San Francisco. **CC** seemed to be building up a fair amount of enthusiasm on *CSW*. It was proclaimed to be a blend of three famous but utterly distinct wargames. Then **CC** was featured in **C3i Magazine** Nr17 with sample components, an After Action Report, and Designer's Notes.

Privately, I had spent 2 years trying to design a somewhat similar game system myself. I mention, this only because I had worked countless hours wrestling with this subject, seeking to reimagine a framework that was visually concrete, yet highly fluid and dynamic. I had glimmers of a solution but as it turned out mostly a pile of failed ideas.

Was it possible that another game designer had managed to pull it off? When I received a copy of the rules to **Combat Commander** and began reading I felt real excitement. As I looked over the materials I exclaimed, "WOW" — Huge hexes! No dice! Cool maps! This is it!

The Foundation

Let us start with the foundation of the game: The Rulebook and the Playbook.

I have read many rulebooks. I have also written, edited, and proofread many rulebooks.



It seems there are a myriad of ways to get them wrong. There are precious few examples that shine. That's a tough record for us to live with in this wargame hobby. I was struck by how different this **Combat Commander** rulebook is, with every facet designed for fast lookup and clear understanding.

Just as the cards in the *Fate Deck* are structured into sections of information, so are the rules. The core rules that explain the mechanics of the game are described first, then followed

by the Rules sections containing the details of the game: Orders, Actions, Events, Terrain and Fortifications. These sections are arranged alphabetically allowing players to quickly find the rule for clarification.

The next thing that struck me about the Rules was the comprehensive, extremely clear examples embedded at key points. Examples of Play using illustrations as well as explanations can be very helpful for players learning a new game. The recent trend in Examples of Play is to make them more comprehensive than in the past. The graphic examples in **CC** of how units fire their weapons are superb; taking into account almost all of the possible situations that could be encountered in forming Fire Groups and initiating Fire Attacks.

First Play

Although I had seen the **CC** playtest kit at two game conventions, I had only witnessed enthusiastic game play by others — I had not yet experienced it for myself. Over a very long week

of vacation, I finished building my own playtest kit and set the game up for a test drive.

I chose *Scenario #1, Fat Lipki*, because it has a very low unit count, no hills, simple terrain, few hindrances, and no ordnance. The setup was deceptively simple. As I pondered it, it dawned on me that the designer had put both players on the horns of a dilemma: should I split my forces evenly or not?

I have discovered that - due to changing objectives, terrain, and "surprise factors" — each scenario presents an almost unique dilemma that constantly changes as play progresses.

As I started flipping the Fate Cards for each side, I was dragged into the foreboding woods, lonely village buildings, and mist laden side roads of Russia. Unit groups became confused and moved slowly; actions and events interwove suddenly — the choreography of battle was on display before me; wholly different than what I had experienced before in a tactical wargame. As the Fate cards dealt out Sniper Triggers, I understood these to be any number of chaotic battle events — stray shells from another sector, booby traps, wayward bullets, inaccurate mortar fire and so on. I felt my cardboard battlefield coming alive — I huddled my squads around my leaders — what a visceral moment it was.

As I progressed through the play of my first game, the next shock came with the handling of time. There are no set game turns rushing you along, and you do not know whether the end of the deck will save you or not. In a few cases, the Time Trigger came like a stiff slap in the face and suddenly I went from steady progress to desperately behind the timetable. Then came desperation and shock as the phaseless feeling of game play settled about me and trapped me.

Gamers usually don't appreciate artificial lulls that break the spell of the play of a game. For example, I found my worry and frustration mounting because I was receiving nothing to help me from my Fate Cards. However, for such a rotten streak of luck, I had only myself to blame. Earlier, I had drawn some cards I needed — one of which I needed right now — but at that time I chose to do something else with it; something that I knew was a lower priority. At this moment, I came to experience what other writers have described as "seeing with imagination" in **CC**.

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Studying the Narrative

If I had to pick an art form that captures the essence of **Combat Commander** — it would be the Japanese comic form of *manga*. The narrative is extremely visual, blending, and twisting time, points-of-view, characters, and story line. The story is frequently non-structured and non-linear and even within a single frame can present multiple points of view, including characters not represented. This is a highly cinematic art form, which leads me to the following proposition about game designs:

- The use of structured phases in a design is an attempt at the logical elaboration of the components of time and place and events — the progression through phases imparts a literary flavor to the drama.
- The lack of phases in a design is an attempt at unifying the components of *time*, and *place*, and *events* — this progression imparts a cinematic flavor to the drama.
- Both methods are dramatic and can impart to players a compelling engagement in the narrative.

In Japanese *manga*, time comes in chapters, which end at an unexpected mini-climax, but the telling of the narrative has multiple points of view, within and outside of the time flow (like triggers). A compelling narrative has characters, plot lines that mesh, narrative focus, dramatic climax, surprising redirection and turns. **CC** mirrors this chapter-like structure strongly. A player needs to have enough impact on the narrative where his choices result in his advantage. He should be able to say to himself: "I chose that action well and it had the intended result". This is what players mean when they say a narrative is believable. By this they mean compelling and they want to play the game again and receive new narrative rewards. So what makes **CC** believable and compelling?

The cinematic flavor of **CC** is like a visual conversation — time flows, it is interrupted, suspended, and hastened. Time in the game can be frame-by-frame or like a blur. It is unusual to have both senses of time formalized in a game design. It is far more usual for game designs to use a frame-by-frame approach that players project by their imaginations into a visual experience. The units themselves are the characters of the drama — by themselves they have no dramatic weight until they enter into the flow of the conversation between the players. In **CC**, the structure of the conversation is sequenced, but not in formal phases. What each player does for his own part is defined by (a) his hand of Fate cards and (b) what he chooses to do with what he has. This is quite

different from a phased structure found in other wargames, where typically a certain function is accomplished during a pre-defined phase — this is like saying, "this is the part of the conversation during which you may move any of your pieces that have not yet fired; you'll have to wait to fire later".

This cinematic flavor is the narrative experience of **CC**, but there has to be much more at work for the design to avoid being a mere kaleidoscope. In my view, there is a focus to this game design that brings it all together — the mechanisms, the chrome, the goals, the gaming experience. After repeated playing and thinking about the game, it occurred to me that **CC** most highly values combinations — combinations of orders and actions, of unit groups and objectives. To understand how I arrived at this conclusion, let's focus on the central question — what is it that *you control* in this game design?

Developing Decisive Energy

Unlike many other tactical game designs, you control your capabilities indirectly. For example, you cannot decide to use your movement capability directly; you must receive the option to use that movement capability in the form of a card in your hand. You control potential not actual capability. Some will debate whether

you can formulate a strategy and ensure you can accomplish the strategy under these conditions. I think that if you can gain insights into how much you actually control — even though it is indirect — it can be asserted that if you can effectively and systematically manage your capabilities, you will tend to be more successful in executing your strategy.

In **CC**, the following happens regularly:

- You get the right cards and combinations to make progress.
- Or you get none of the right cards and combinations.
- Some players manage to make progress on the downside as well as the upside.

If you have determined how you want to win the scenario (your strategy & disposition) and you do not receive the cards you need to win (in the way you have planned) — what do you do then? Curse a luck-driven system? Stay the course and lose? Or do you adjust and try to figure out how to respond to these unexpected levels of chaos?

Let me pose this question to you: who are you when you play this game? While you will always be the *Great Big Hand in the Sky* reaching down and taking actions, this game design constantly

puts you in the role of the overall (but not depicted) — *combat commander* — managing options and information and issuing orders as you are able to. Clearly you are not unified with the cardboard playing pieces — you are removed — but not at 10,000 feet. It is more like you are in a command post, just off the game board.

This is the heart of the answer: what you control is your adaptive, and rational, response, to the chaos. Tactical execution is not the inner core of this simulation — rather it is a command decision, which in turn drives the tactical execution.

Players of this and other tactical simulations must identify the mission and goals, determine what special circumstances and capabilities apply, then develop a disposition, approach, and proceed to execute the plan. In tactical simulations, planning for alternatives is important. In **CC**, it is *mandatory*, since you are likely in every scenario to be tested on your ability to either stick with the main plan, or shift to an alternative precisely because of the indirect control you have.

Your central problem in playing **CC** is how to gain more control over the actions and capabilities of your units because you cannot know when, or if, you will receive the cards to direct your units according to your plan. There is only one clear answer, getting cards into and through your hand with a clear-minded purpose.

The remainder of this **C3i** article develops an approach about this decision making process, which I propose will give you a basis for seeing just how to play this game.

The Order/Action Combination

As I played the game over and over, I drove myself to discern an analytical framework to answer the question regarding when to play cards, save cards, and discard cards. For example, given sufficient discard capability, do you hoard three Concealment Actions, or do you discard at least two of them in the hopes that you will draw more useful cards? The answer does not seem to be dictated by the situation alone. Naturally, if you were about to receive murderous fire, hoarding the three cards for use on the Defense Roll is just the thing. But if the expected Fire Attack is not yet at hand, you have limited your options very seriously.

One day I said the following to myself:

- If you can play more cards than you can discard, play the cards.

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- If you can discard more cards than you can play, discard.

These are simple statements that focus your *command decisions* on the flow of options. With that flow of options comes the potential to adapt more rapidly. Indiscriminate play or discard however will defeat your attempts to gain effective control.

All games give capabilities to the players which are *levers* in the design itself. These design levers are there to use, and the more effectively they are used, the more effectively the player can play inside the design. The levers create the framework of insights and discoveries that the players encounter in the course of game play.

It is inevitable that a non-real time simulation needs to have some way to govern the sequence of player choices, which is what the Order sequence does. Perhaps the most striking lever in this game design is the way both players are allowed to play Actions at any time. This did not have to be designed this way. Because of this fluidity, the game design approaches a phase-less quality. Since Actions may be played at any time, it becomes crucial to develop an understanding around optimal card play.

I won't address the development of instinct for good timing, since that, like a good poker instinct, is best left for you to discover during the play itself. However, through repeated play I have found that using an Action to enhance an Order is frequently more effective than playing either separately. This is not unilaterally true, but is true often enough that I have posited the Order-Action combination (*OA combo* hereafter) to be a fundamental element of managing your options. The *OA combo* takes on different flavors depending on your Posture, your Discard Capability and your Orders. Since these factors can vary greatly due to Posture, I'll examine them for the Attacker and then the Defender separately.

(Note that the analysis from this point forward assumes access to both CC: Europe and CC: Mediterranean as I'd like to have the useful shelf-life of this C3i article be as long as possible.)

Attacker's Decisions

The player taking on the Attacker's role has to make the most of forward movement, covering fire and advance opportunities for the various unit groups in his command. This places a premium on the Move, Fire and Advance Orders.

The fundamental fact for the Attacker's hand is that it uses six cards (al opposed to only four for the Defender). Moreover, in most scenarios, the



Attacker will have two or three leaders, making it natural to split his disposition into two or three unit groups, each one anchored by a leader. The order capability of the Attacker usually provides one order per leader and frequently an additional order above that number, which can be used to split unit groups or possibly access artillery. Given six cards for the posture and two or three unit groups, the Attacker's hand can handle ideally up to three *OA combos*. In many cases, you won't find a hand yielding three *OA combos* — but if you had two to three unit groups each receiving an Order enhanced by an Action each turn, you would be operating at the peak of command efficiency.

Although there are dozens of effective combinations, the classic *OA combos* for the Attacker are Move-Smoke, Move-Assault Fire, Fire-Sustained Fire, and Advance-Ambush. In each case, the Order is matched by an Action which strongly enhances the effectiveness of that Order.

- **Move-Smoke:** ideal for moving out from cover, across open ground, and degrading the Defender's Op Fire shot.
- **Move-Assault Fire:** ideal for moving aggressively forward towards the Defender's position by suppressing the Defender and possibly avoiding an Op Fire shot.
- **Fire-Sustained Fire:** ideal for overcoming superior defensive cover.
- **Advance-Ambush:** ideal for gaining greater control over the dangers of Melee.

If you could acquire these combinations consistently, you would have a potent command force. Because the Attacker can only use roughly 7 of every 10 Actions in the Fate Deck, it can be difficult to match an effective Action to an Order. This means you have to balance three elements in your immediate decision-making: play, discard, and save. The axiom for playing or discarding was stated above — its purpose is to drive options more decisively into your hand. The random distribution of cards and the restrictions to the use of roughly 70% of the Actions makes it imperative to know when and how to save cards in the hand as well.

Attacker's Decision Matrix

Table 1 (below) was created with these decision-making factors in mind:

- Start with the Play-Discard Axiom as stated above
- Build *OA combos* if possible — no matter what your nationality
- If you can build at least one effective *OA combo* and play it, give yourself some flexibility of choice regarding the other cards
- Assume a mismatch factor (roughly 30%) in making *OA combos*, which indicates that portion of your hand you can safely consider saving to build better *OA combos* coming into your hand

Table 1: Attacker's Decision Matrix
Discard Capability vs Number of Playable Cards

	Discard Capability					
	6 Germany	5 America	4 Britain	3 Russia	2 Italy	1 France
1	Discard	Discard	Discard	Discard	Discard	Choose
2	Discard	Discard	Discard	Discard	Choose	Play
3	Choose	Choose	Choose	Choose	Play	Play
4	Choose	Choose	Choose	Play	Play	Play
5	Choose	Choose	Play / Save	Play / Save	Play / Save	Play / Save
6	Choose	Play / Save	Play / Save	Play / Save	Play / Save	Play / Save



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This *Decision Matrix* compares the number of playable cards you hold in your hand at the moment (the Y axis) versus your nationality's Discard Capability (the X axis). The Attacker's standard Posture gives the player six cards to work with — it's possible for a player to have up to six immediately playable cards (although this doesn't happen frequently). The Discard Capability columns are standard for the nationalities in the system. Note that by *playable* I mean both immediately playable and logically playable in the immediate turn. You might have an Advance Order and Ambush Action but not be poised adjacent to a key target hex.

The following choices are based on the principles described in the construction of this Matrix:

- **Choose** — use the game situation (weigh time, objectives, tempo, and intuition) as a dominant factor in deciding whether to play, discard or save each of the playable cards.
- **Play** — given you can play more cards than you can discard, use this fact as a dominant factor in your decisions about your cards.
- **Play/Save** — although you can play more cards than you can discard, your Discard Capability has some limitations compared to your Posture and you should use this fact as a dominant factor in making your decision to put one or more cards into the bank for the following turns.
- **Discard** — given you can discard more cards than you can play and given that you may not even have one *OA combo* in hand, use this fact as a dominant factor in your decision about your cards.

The more flexible nationalities (Germany, America and Britain) have more obvious latitude on the *Attack* but frequently need to do more with fewer troops. The need to drive your command energy forward and avoid stagnation is critical, otherwise you'll be tempted into sloppy, unimaginative play,

The less flexible nationalities (Russia, Italy and France) are more demanding to play, but frequently have more troops to work with. They require a bimodal approach to play. First, since the Discard Capability is moderate to poor, players must urgently play cards to keep the command energy flow. On the other hand, since it is easy to draw three or four unusable cards in a row, it's essential to bank cards in a great hand rather than spend them as if you were playing one of the more flexible nationalities. This explains the Play/Save option. It also explains why the more flexible nationalities have more Choose options at lower points — you can quickly extricate yourself from a poor run by resolutely discarding most of your cards.

(Note: I consider the Decision Matrix for the player assigned the Recon Posture to be a cautious case of the Attacker's situation — in sum, simply remove the 6th row from Table 1.)

Defender's Decisions

The player taking on the Defender's role has to work with fewer cards than the Attacker, but has access to all the available Actions in the Fate deck. However, the lower number of cards reduces the possibility of building some of the key *OA combos* on the defense. In practice one of the toughest hurdles for the Defender is the fact that he/she typically plays a card (usually the Fire card) during the Attacker's turn, leaving him with three or fewer cards to work with on his own turn. While it is true that the Defender can benefit from the classic Attacker *OA combos* mentioned above, it is more difficult to assemble these in the Jland for use on his/her turn. Frequently, the Defender will look for disruptive Actions to play during the Attacker's Orders coupled with the Opportunity Fire Order/Action when he/she is moving. So, a Fire-Hidden Defense *OA combo* is highly effective for the Defender: you drop Hidden Wire on a moving squad and let loose with Opportunity Fire as well.

The rest of the Defender's best tools come not in strictly linked pairs of Orders and Actions, but they serve as complementary defensive mechanisms. One of these pairs is an Action-Order pair Concealment-Recover. Since many effective attacks come from multiple points (first to break you then to eliminate you), the Concealment Action frequently allows a Defender to ward off the disastrous effects of breaking a second time. If you have survived the multiple-point attack, you turn around and immediately play the Recover Order.

Table 2 (below left) was created with these decision-making factors in mind:

- Start with the Play-Discard Axiom stated above.
- Build *OA combos* if possible, no matter your nationality.
- If you can build at least one effective *OA combo* and play it, give yourself some flexibility of choice regarding the other cards.
- Saving cards is critical for access to the *Scenario Defender Only* Actions and to use Actions during both players' turns.

The *Defender Decision Matrix* has the same axes as Table 1. The Defender's standard Posture gives the player four cards to work with. It is possible for a player to have up to four immediately playable cards (although this doesn't happen frequently either). The Discard Capability columns are standard for the nationalities in the system. The choices are the following based on the principles described in the construction of this Matrix:

- **Choose** — use the game situation (weigh time, objectives, tempo, and intuition) as a dominant factor in deciding whether to play, discard or save each of the playable cards.
- **Play** — given you can play more cards than you can discard, use this fact as a dominant factor in your decisions about your cards.
- **Play/Save** — although you can play more cards than you can discard, your Discard Capability has some limitations compared to your Posture and you should use this fact as a dominant factor in your decision to put one or more cards into the bank for the following turns.
- **Discard** — given you can discard more cards than you can play and given that you may not even have one *OA combo* in hand, use this fact as a dominant factor in your decisions about your cards.
- **Discard/Save** — this option acknowledges

Table 2: Defender's Decision Matrix
Discard Capability vs Number of Playable Cards

Number of Playable Cards	Discard Capability					
	6	5	4	3	2	1
	Germany	America	Britain	Russia	Italy	France
1	Discard	Discard	Discard	Discard	Discard	Choose
2	Discard / Save	Discard / Save	Discard / Save	Discard / Save	Choose	Play
3	Choose	Choose	Choose	Choose	Play / Save	Play / Save
4	Choose	Choose	Choose	Play / Save	Play / Save	Play / Save



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a special factor for the Defender; namely, that the *O.A. combo* is likely to be split between the Attacker's turn and your turn (Concealment-Recover) or ought to be saved entirely for the Attacker's turn.

The more flexible nationalities (Germany, America and Britain) have a higher expectation of getting useful cards more easily given their higher Discard capabilities. The less flexible nationalities (Russia, Italy and France) must still work with a bimodal approach (Play / Save) since Discards are more difficult to work with effectively. However, with only four cards in hand, it is harder to build *O.A. combos* and frequently a Fire card has to be saved for an Op Fire Action on your opponent's turn rather than used proactively as a Fire Order on your own turn. This fact causes all nationalities on defense to play similarly to one another than is the case when on the attack. In general, unlike the Attacker, you will be glad to get even one *O.A. combo* since the rest of the time, you'll need to tuck away defensive Actions. The more flexible nationalities can choose to play everything more easily than the less flexible ones, which must be prudent to maintain steady command energy.

Tactical Doctrine

We have examined the development of command energy and the decision matrixes based on *O.A. combos*. The former is universal to each player and the latter is centered on the Posture of each player. There is a third layer which reveals some aspects of the tactical doctrines for each nation in the game. A simpler way to say this is that moving cards through your hand gives you the best play options and depending on your Posture and Nationality, you've got a framework for whether to play, discard or save. The third layer, tactical doctrine, refines these elements nationality by nationality. This is what gives you the reasons to say: "I'm the Italian Attacker and I can choose to be more aggressive in this particular situation than my American opponent would".

The first component to account for is contained in the card manifests for each nation. The Play-book for **CC: Mediterranean** contains such detailed manifests, specifying for each card in the Fate Decks: the Order, Action, Event, Random Hex, Die Roll, and Trigger. For brevity I won't analyze these lists, but will leave them for your inspection. However, I'll make some summary observations to give you a start:

- America has more Smoke Actions and the White Phosphorus Event.
- Britain far and away has the most Marksmanship Actions.
- Italy can deploy more readily under

Table 3: Organizational Effectiveness
Leader-to-Squad Ratio vs Discard Capability

		Leader-to-Squad Ratio			
		1:3	1:4	1:5	1:6
Discard Capability	6/5/4	Germany Britain	America		
	3/2/1		France	Russia	Italy



pressure with more Light Wounds Actions.

- Germany has the broadest blend of different Actions and Events.
- Russia has more Concealment Actions and the Entrench Event.

These differences in the nationalities are interesting and could be crucial at certain moments. However, I don't think the card manifest factor is as important as *organizational effectiveness*.

In **CC**, I think two factors in the design give a basic framework for a national doctrinal effectiveness: the Discard Capability; an indicator of command flexibility and the Leader-to-Squad Ratio, an indicator of organizational span of control. A Table of Organization and Effectiveness (TO&E) for each nationality might or might not imply these factors. Effectiveness in game terms, however, is strongly connected with how well you use your resources (cards and units). So I developed Table 3 (above) which compares Leader-to-Squad Ratios (indicator of organizational span of control) with Discard Capability (indicator of command flexibility).

Organizational effectiveness can be viewed along two dimensions: the Y-axis represents organizational flexibility from Rigid (lower Discard Capability) to Dynamic (higher

Discard Capability); the X-axis represents organizational span of control from Tight (lower Leader-to-Squad Ratio) to loose (higher Leader-to-Squad Ratio). These dimensions break into quadrants as follows:

- **Dynamic-Tight:** Discard Capability is higher and Leader-to-Squad Ratio is lower — this quadrant calls a nation to focus on finesse (good card expectation) and cohesion (fewer resources).
- **Dynamic-Loose:** Discard Capability is higher and Leader-to-Squad Ratio is higher — this quadrant calls a nation to focus on finesse (good card expectation) and sheer strength (greater resources).
- **Rigid-Tight:** Discard Capability is lower and Leader-to-Squad Ratio is lower —

this quadrant calls a nation to focus on a systematic approach of the most stringent kind (poor card expectation & fewer resources).

Rigid-Loose: (an oxymoron) Discard Capability is lower and Leader-to-Squad Ratio is higher — this quadrant calls a nation to focus on a systematic approach as well (poor card expectation) but with an attitude (greater resources).

I will review each quadrant with respect to a key decision you'll need to make during play — whether to wait to *Recover* your broken units or not. There's space to analyze only this one example of a tactical decision in the light of a tactical doctrine approach, but I think that this quadrant framework is most helpful in fine tuning your efforts to play **CC** effectively.

Dynamic-Tight Doctrine

Germany, America, and Britain inhabit the Dynamic-Tight quadrant. With these nations, you must expect to perform a lot more with a lot less in terms of your choices during play — you have command flexibility but are more constrained in troops at hand. If you manage carefully, you can finesse a lot of situations. Let's look at how you should deal with broken troops.

When you deploy your unit groups, you are likely to have fewer troops per leader to work with. In order to maintain tactical pressure on your opponent, you need to recover your broken troops (*a critical priority*), otherwise you'll risk seriously weakening the effectiveness of your unit groups. Since your command flexibility is higher, you are likely to see a Recover Order sooner than later, so you can more easily consider a tactical pause to restore your suffering unit group.

Dynamic-Loose Doctrine

This is the mythical quadrant that doesn't quite exist in real life. Your command hierarchy supports the lower-level decision making process, your training supports rapid assessment of options and you receive all the men and material you need to accomplish

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the job and then some. It is utopian — it's not a challenge and if it exists no one has found the historical evidence for it.

Rigid-Loose Doctrine

Russia and Italy inhabit the Rigid-Loose quadrant. With these nations, you solve your command rigidity issues (political, doctrinal, and cultural) by throwing resources at the problem. Typically you have more room in the resources area compared to a Dynamic-Tight nation but less flexibility on the attack compared with the defense. Let's look at how you should deal with broken troops.

When you deploy unit groups, you usually have lots of troops at your disposal but given your command rigidity, you need to be careful about planning on how to recover broken troops. This is not a critical priority but you have to be careful. Otherwise you'll risk weakening the effectiveness of your unit groups. Since your command flexibility is lower, you are not likely to see a Recover Order as soon as you need it, so you'll have to consider banking that Order in your hand to avoid a lapse in maintaining tactical pressure on your opponent.

Rigid-Tight Doctrine

France inhabits the Rigid-Tight quadrant. This is the toughest quadrant to manage — your command structure is inflexible and you don't have a lot of resources to handle your tactical problems. Let's look at how you should deal with broken French troops.

With this nation group (since it also encompasses the Minor Allies of the time), you will find yourself with fair numbers of troops to work with but greatly restricted command flexibility. You must accomplish a lot with constant barriers to success. Your command flexibility is so

much lower than other nations that you cannot count on receiving a Recover Order in a timely manner at all. You must try to bank that Recover Order in your hand. However, in order to maintain tactical pressure on your opponent, you may need to let broken troops fall behind. This is not preferred, but it may be necessary.

You may think through other situations where you must weigh the resources you have (units) and what you expect to receive (resources) and place your tactical decisions within a doctrinal framework. For example, as the French Attacker with a fair number of moderate quality troops facing a smaller number of slightly better German troops, you have the lowest command flexibility. With the Rigid-Tight doctrine, you have the highest risk of getting stalled with a handful of nothing. You have to find a way to avoid (as much as possible) the consequences of your command rigidity as well as to enable your troops. The way through this is to use the *Decision Matrix* to avoid playing like Germany or America. You have to bank playable cards for the following turn or turns. The Rigid-Tight doctrine guides you to maintain forward tactical pressure by finding a way to play two or three cards steadily turn over turn. By constantly nudging your larger force forward and securing positions well, you will give your opponent a serious challenge.

Cinematic Tapestry

Let's move to one last consideration — how leadership is implemented in the design. The unit activation rules elevate the importance of the leader unit. Since leaders can activate all squads and teams within their command range, it is natural to deploy your units in well-formed unit groups (clusters around a designated leader). For the greatest possible effectiveness in the game, these groups need to be inter-depen-

dent on one another. It is axiomatic to deploy a firebase to cover an advancing group. This real world doctrine is well replicated in tactical games of substance. In **CC**, the interdependence shows itself in an interesting way; when you coordinate the efforts of unit groups closely, you are likely to play more cards at the same time and even play an additional card beyond what you might expect. In effect, coordinating unit groups in action will tend to yield more cards played and thus more options drawn back into your hand — the essence of command energy. This implementation of leadership interlocks with other principles described in this article. Building *OA combos* by using effective decision principles enhances your command energy even further still. Tuning your tactical doctrine gives you the chance to play at the peak of your game.

At the beginning of this article I focused on the highly visual quality of the game play defining it in cinematic terms. Many players love the dramatic narrative shifts while some do not. The key question is to understand whether the drama is *all there is* or whether there is lasting depth. I delved into the design to find out what kind of inner substance is there. Like a great tapestry, rich in colors, vivid in narrative, **Combat Commander** is densely woven with lasting sturdy fabric. The framework of decision levers in the game makes it a game worthy of constant replay.

I hope you have enjoyed reading and thinking about the ideas in this article. Since this article is written well before **CC** becomes a mature product, I trust that others will play, analyze, and improve upon these first thoughts.



On the Scene

Consimworld Expo 2007

By Mark Kaczmarek

The 2007 *Consimworld Expo* (aka *Monstercon*) was held from June 5th to the 10th at the Tempe Mission Palms Hotel in Phoenix, AZ under the direction of John Kranz. Once again the *Expo* helped to prove that our beloved hobby is still alive and well. Attendance by the true *grognards* was up by 15% over last year (230+) with an all important surge in the number of 1st time attendees, including a noticeable number of teenage gamers. Imagine a grand ballroom full of large multi-map wargames with 200+ wargamers playing and you have a pretty good idea what this convention was all about.

GMT Games was well represented in the playing area. I saw games of the *East Front Series*

spread out over a dozen tables. Also, **World at War**, **Europe Engulfed**, **Ardennes '44**, **Three Days of Gettysburg** and the *Down in Flames Series Campaign* in full swing, just to name a few of the more well known titles. The *Expo's* open gaming area looked like a player's smorgasbord. **Combat Commander Europe** seemed to sprout up spontaneously all over the ballroom. Multiple games of **Here I Stand**, **Sword of Rome**, **For the People**, **Paths of Glory**, **Napoleonic Wars**, **Wilderness War**, **Onward Christian Soldiers**, and **Clash of Giants II** were being played. GMT Games spared no expense in showcasing a plethora of their upcoming goodies from the *P500 List*. Notable from this list were **Successors III**, **Combat Commander Pacific**, **Kiev to Rostov**, **Bataan**, **Asia Engulfed**, and **Pursuit of Glory** (PoG II). There was also lighter fare available with **Leaping Lemmings** — a fun game.

This year's *Charles S. Roberts Award* nominees were announced during the opening night ceremonies. GMT Games scored a clean sweep in the *Pre-World War II Game* category capturing all 5 nominations (**Onward Christian Soldiers**, **Command & Colors Ancients Exp #1**, **Gustav Adolph**, **Pax Romana** and **Here I Stand**). The *World War II* category also showed a strong GMT Games presence with two nominations — **Combat Commander Europe** and **Burning Blue**. Plus, my favorite magazine, **C3i Magazine**, scored another *CSR* nomination as the best professional game magazine of the year — thank you for all your support!

If you can only make one game convention per year then I strongly recommend you mark your calendars for May 27–June 1, 2008 and join us for next year's *Consimworld Expo*.

