



UP FRONT WITH SGT. ROCK

American Problems in the Patrol Scenario

By Stephen Harvester

Face-to-face wargaming has been revolutionized by the advent of the *UP FRONT/BANZAI* game system. A generation inured to sitting idle for an hour at a stretch while observing opponents' moves may not yet realize what has happened. But a revolution once set in motion cannot be turned back. As conventioners wander the halls between interminable boardgame moves, their attention is inevitably drawn to the excited cries from the *UP FRONT* tables. As they watch in amazement while an entire closely-fought battle is begun and ended before their opponent calls them back to the board, the conversion process has taken root in yet another gamer's heart. The initial price and that awful portrait of a Nazi on the box cover (Mr. MacGowen's fine hand at work) may delay the result, but in a relatively short time *UP FRONT* will be their pre-eminent choice for face-to-face play.

In my own gaming group, we recently completed a round-robin *UP FRONT* tournament in which four of us played 11 scenarios in two three-hour sessions. All the games were closely played, with several being resolved on the turn of a single card. Rules questions were rare and always resolved quickly with the aid of a superbly thorough and well laid-out rulebook. Waiting between moves? I sometimes wish there had been *more* time to calculate the consequences of a newly-drawn hand before it was my turn to play again.

In no other wargame is the sense of uncertainty and tension so high as in *UP FRONT*. If I make a 2-1 attack in *AFRIKA KORPS*, I know that there is a 16.7% chance I will be eliminated. But when one group moves forward *UP FRONT*, no such precise calculation is possible. My opponent may be clean out of ammo and/or obstacles, affording me a free trip to the next relative range. Or, I may end up caught in wire, mired in a stream, or disappearing under the weight of a deadly crossfire. A well-prepared hand can mitigate these perils, but there are very few "sure things" on an *UP FRONT* battlefield.

A further charm of the *UP FRONT* system, and the focus of this article, is the scale of play. With each "unit" representing a single combat soldier (with his own unique name, rank, morale, close combat value, and weapon capability), conflict reaches an intensity rarely seen this side of a role-playing game.

In one recent playing of the Paratroop Drop scenario (#R), my German squad landed near the British (on Crete, we decided). My three highest morale men landed adjacent to both British groups and took an F8 attack in open terrain. Sgt. Deitinger and Pvt. Wolff were DOA, but Pvt. Bernhoff (Morale 5), though pinned, survived. For the next half-hour, Pvt. Bernhoff single-handedly held off that entire British squad. If he was pinned, he would rally. When he had a Fire card too high for his Mauser, he picked up Deitinger's "burp" gun and fired that. Finally, it looked like curtains. Bernhoff's position was infiltrated by two Limeys with bayonets while he lay pinned in his freshly-dug foxhole. But Bernhoff turned heroic! Leaping up with doubled firepower, he pinned his attackers, breaking the in-

filtration and putting the British back to where they started. By the time Bernhoff finally went down for good, the rest of my squad was in a winning position. I awarded him the Iron Cross with oak clusters—posthumously.

Another favorite story of mine is that of Japanese Sgt. Okimoto, the only Morale 6 character in the game. I once used his superior infiltration and close combat value (CCV 11) skills to dispatch three Marines in three straight turns before he slithered away to safety. And I have a Private Harvester (Morale 3) in my American squad. Why should Avalon Hill's playtesters be the only ones to project their fantasies onto these marvelous character cards?

It was my enjoyment of such doughty warriors as Bernhoff and Okimoto and Harvester which helped crystalize my one dissatisfaction with *UP FRONT*. The basic American squad (#1-#12) is lousy. Worse than that, it is dull! In short, it has no personality. When I think of the basic German squad, I think of Bernhoff and the hard-bitten Sgt. Deitinger (Morale 5). When I look at the Russians, I find three Morale 5 berserkers who, while they rarely win, always go down with bayonets fixed. When I think of the British, I see the thin red line putting out amazing firepower for their numbers. When I play the Japanese, I think of Okimoto, infiltration and the banzai charge. But when I think of the Americans, all I can remember are Smith and Watson.

Privates Smith and Watson, otherwise known as the "Blues Brothers", make up the only *pair* of Morale 1 men in any nationality's basic squad. These two clowns cannot hide successfully. No matter what the Americans try, Smith and Watson will find a way to foul it up. Consider the following cases.

The "normal" American setup in our group's Patrol (Scenario #A) matchups is a high-morale four-man maneuver group in A and an eight-man firebase (with FP9 or FP10 at RR1) in B. The FP is nine if the ASL is kept with the firebase for smoke and rally purposes. The FP is ten (permitting use of an extra F4 and F5 card, plus numerous combinations) if both Thompsons go into the maneuver group. If that group can reach RR5 to the enemy, it will wield a respectable FP16. In theory this organization matches up well with the standard six-man German firebase and its RR1 FP of nine. In practice, it's usually a horrid mis-match.

The game begins with the German playing first from a five-card hand. With a FP of four at RRO, there are twenty useable Fire cards available to the German, or about an eighth of the deck. Thus, 51.2% of all Patrols will begin with a German fire attack on an unentrenched, low-morale, eight-man American group. Even if the Yanks have found some starting cover, the targets are so many and the morale so poor that an attack, even an attack of "0" or "—1", will likely pin someone in the group. Unable to play and discard simultaneously, the GIs will often throw away Movement cards, terrain cards, usable Fire cards in a desperate search for a Rally card. Of course, they remain unentrenched. Once the firebase is in disarray, the Germans are

free to advance into good terrain at their leisure, slowly chewing the Americans to pieces at RR1.

Other formations are equally unpromising. We can put Smith and Watson into the maneuver group and replace them with sturdier fellows, bringing the firebase morale up closer to that of the German's. But there are still eight targets for any attack, making the odds for *someone* getting pinned 25% higher than an equivalent attack on the six-man German firebase. And of course the odds of the Blues Brothers making it unscathed to RR4 for the victory are next to nil. With this formation, the "maneuver group" is actually the "find-a-Gully" group. They can only hope to reach RR1 to challenge a rush forward by the Bernhoff. Not too likely.

A third option is to put Watson alone with Sgt. Burnett in Group A, hoping to win with sheer firepower out of a massive Group B. But with *ten* targets to draw cards on, including two Morale 2 men and the craven Smith, this oversized mob will rarely do more than look around for Rally cards.

For a long time the most hopeful, and interesting, strategy was to throw the Blues Brothers away in a separate Group A, going with a six-man firebase of FP7 or FP8 at RR1 (again depending on where the ASL is placed) and a four-man maneuver group in C. The American is then essentially playing a ten-on-ten game with the German player. Unfortunately, this too usually falls short (see Don Greenwood's try with in the Series Replay in Vol. 21, No. 1). An American firebase of FP7 with smoke protection of FP8 without it is simply not going to stand up against the German FP9 at RR1 and FP10 at RR2. That one or two FP difference translates into six or twelve chances over the course of three decks for the Germans to play an F4 or F5 card on their opposite numbers—a card which they need not fear themselves. It also means any successful flanking move will permit the Germans to use any Fire card in the deck, right up to and including those game-ending F8s.

Most recently, a viable alternative to the traditional groupings has emerged. The "Harvester Spread" calls for a firebase in the unconventional Group A position, consisting of the four highest morale riflemen and the BAR. The Blues Brothers occupy Group B, and the two Thompsons start with one Morale 3 and two Morale 2 riflemen in Group C. With the first available Movement card, a lateral group transfer is made to Group D. (The Russian Variation of the "Harvester Spread" has also proven effective, with a starting alignment of 6-2-2-5 and no group transfer necessary.)

The theory is that the six-man German firebase in Group B (with firepower at ranges 0-5 of 4, 9, 10, 15, 17, and 23) is unbeatable in a direct confrontation. The only way the American can match German firepower is with a hopelessly big and fragile eight- or ten-man group. The "Harvester Spread" forces the German to choose which American five-man group it will be adjacent to. The other one will enjoy a -1 range differential relative to the German firebase.

If the German shifts his firebase to Group C, following the maneuver group, the American Group

D will find a Gully or keep moving right. Group A will then be free to advance to RR1 facing only the German LMG, or three rifles from Group A. From RR1, it can square off against the German maneuver group with all the odds on its side: a fire-power advantage of 7-3 at RR1, 12-7 at RR3, and better than a full point's morale superiority per man. There is even the possibility of Smith and Watson sneaking in for a flank attack.

Realizing the potential mismatch, the German may keep his firebase at B and attempt to defeat the GIs in detail, overwhelming Group A before Group D can advance to achieve victory conditions. If the maneuver group is not followed, it must advance as rapidly as possible while Group A hunkers down for a siege. They may even retreat to RR -1. There is a good chance that with their high morale and small target size, Group A will hold out, permitting the Americans to advance far enough to win on Victory Points even if they don't achieve an out-right victory.

An additional bonus to my "Harvester Spread" is the potential for the Blues Brothers to actually make themselves useful. Besides the obvious fact that they are not around to pin down either major group, and that presence in Group B allows sufficient spread with a single group transfer, Smith and Watson have more to offer. Admittedly, the chances of their accomplishing an effective flank attack on German Group A are slim. But if the Germans transfer to C, Smith and Watson can move right with them, permitting a flank attack by U.S. Group D which cannot be answered.

I've a few more possibilities for the "Deadly-Dull Duo" of Smith and Watson. They will generally be ignored while German fire is directed to the main American threats. This may allow them to make an advance or two unchallenged for some cheap VP. They can use low-value Fire cards, freeing the big groups for other actions and obviating the potential for a malfunction where it would hurt the most.

Unfortunately, the "Harvester Spread" works best against opponents who may have not read this article. They are the ones most likely to transfer their firebase to Group C and allow your own Group A to beat up on the German maneuver group. The most effective German response is to advance with the firebase to RR1 (facing only FP7 from the smallish Group A) and play for flank attack. The dearth of American Movement cards and the maneuver group's low morale will make it hard for them to advance closer than RR2 towards the victory conditions. Meanwhile, the outgunned U.S. Group A is likely to disappear before you reach that third deck.

In the 30% or so games when the Americans have beaten the Germans in this scenario, it has almost always been due to German overconfidence. Having reduced the Americans to the proverbial cowering mob, they advance without a backup Movement card and land in Wire or a Stream. German stupidity is the American's best (almost only) hope.

How tragic. Worse yet - how boring. Yes, the best American strategy is to hope for a Stream card. Their fate is in another's hands.

"If only we had a real man, a true leader," I mused one night as I pondered another shameful debacle. "If only there could rise up a soldier worthy of representing America's highest ideals. Someone steeped in the rugged individualist tradition of Davy Crockett, Teddy Roosevelt, and Sgt. York." Then I knew him.

He was walking towards me from the comic pages of memory. Crew-cut, with a sweat-beaded brow. A two-day's beard on his steely jaw. Muscles rippling beneath the shreds of his G.I. jacket. A Thompson submachine gun held carelessly in one hand. Could it be? Yes!! Ready to leap into action on my own specially prepared *UP FRONT* personality card—it was **SERGEANT ROCK OF EASY COMPANY!**

In preparing this article, I realized (sadly) that some of the younger readers might not be familiar with "Sgt. Rock." I checked the current comic book stands to see if he was still around. The situation was worse than I had feared. The only soldier comic on the stands was "G.I. Joe" - a *doll* for crying out loud! There wasn't a Nazi in sight; Joe has just defeated a bald-headed guy named "Serpenter" - bloodlessly!?! The Vietnam War has, in my opinion, improved America's approach to foreign policy. But it has wreaked havoc with our comic books.

"Sgt. Rock of Easy Company" was a staple of my pre-adolescent, pre-Vietnam childhood. Muscles bulging and eyes glaring, he did to Nazis what I wanted to do to parents, teachers and schoolyard bullies. He annihilated them! No A-Team prisoner-taking for Sgt. Rock. He *killed* people. Hand grenades flew into pillbox gun slits at forty yards. He dodged machinegun bullets like Jim Brown dodged tacklers. He thrived on jumping into trenches and kicking the inhabitants into unconsciousness. His favorite tactic (this seemed to happen every other issue) was to leap down onto the turret of a Tiger Mk. VI and fire his Thompson down the hatch. Inevitably, the turret would rip clear off the chassis as the ammo blew up inside, with Rock leaping clear at the last moment.

Ah, sweet memories. Clearly, what the American squad in *UP FRONT* needs is nothing less than the ol' Rock himself. Not just to make the American squad competitive, but to make it fun. I can just take so much of the history lesson in my gaming. Remember, game designers—most of us gamers have been "realistic" all day long. When it's game time, I for one want to *play*. Everyone is of course free to develop their own Sgt. Rock, but mine has been playtested and found very satisfactory. Without him, the Americans cheer when they reach RR1. With him, every game is an adventure.

My Sgt. Rock is armed with a Thompson, but it is no ordinary gun. It never malfunctions (in fact, I don't think I ever saw it run out of ammunition in the comics). And against AFVs, its ammo-seeking bullets give Rock the equivalent of a Demo Charge (+4) in any attacks. Sgt. Rock's firepower at RR5 is FP9, but that's not because of the super-Thompson. At close range, Sgt. Rock fires one-handed from the hip while throwing grenades with the other.

Sgt. Rock's morale is "8"—a wound or KIA for any lesser man. The rationale here is simply that Sgt. Rock never actually dives for cover, but he may get knocked down by the concussion of a shell blast or by slugs bouncing off his helmet and/or dogtags (a result of "8" also inevitably rips the shirt off Sarge's chest, revealing his massive torso). Unlike in the comics (we must be fair—you do have an opponent), the Rock can be killed. His KIA is "9", or "10" when pinned.

Rock's Morale 8 plus CCV three for the Thompson gives him a CCV of "11", equal to Japan's Okimoto with a rifle. His Morale 8 means he automatically passes all morale checks prior to infiltration or close combat.

Sgt. Rock is *never* routed, and he never panics.

Once per game, Sgt. Rock may, without the play of any card, declare himself a Hero. He may conduct any action that a Hero card allows in the player's one turn. He now has the potential, at RR5, of using any Fire card in the deck all by himself.

The effect of Sgt. Rock's insertion into our Patrol encounters has been dramatic. Smith and Watson are still around for slapstick comedy, but a true American hero is also on the scene to save the day. All the American strategies discussed above are still valid, but now they pack offensive dynamite. Let's review them, with Sgt. Rock in charge:

1.) The four-man maneuver group at A backed with an eight-man firebase with FP9 or FP10 now moves forward with a RR5 fire potential of 18 or

20. Instead of the Morale 4 Sgt. Burnett (sorry Jim), advancing under the most ideal conditions, we have Sgt. Rock who might even leave pinned men behind in order to close with the enemy. If some of the firebase is pinned, as it usually is, not to worry! At least no need to sit idly by drawing for Rally cards. Rock moves forward without covering fire, shrugging off attacks of 5FP, 6FP or 7FP along the way.

2.) The ten-man firebase with two-man throwaway is now a ten-man launcher for a two-man torpedo. Sgt. Rock and Pvt. ("Bulldog") Myers, who is a Morale 5/CCV10, can stomp on any four-man German group that gets in their way. As they move in, they will draw fire otherwise headed for the firebase, which now has a vastly improved chance to reach RR1 in good terrain and to start mauling people with their FP11. Once the Germans are pinned, Rock and Myers infiltrate and quickly dispatch the survivors with their fists and high CCVs.

3.) Leaving Smith and Watson behind in Group A and going for the end run with a four-man Group C now takes on a whole new flavor. Instead of an under-manned firebase and a mediocre maneuver group, we now have a Green Bay Packer power sweep. If the Germans don't shift to follow an American lateral group transfer to D, they'll never be stopped. If they do shift, they risk the old Wire/Stream-in-the-six-card-hand trick forever. If they pass this hurdle and succeed in knocking out a GI, thus denying the group its victory conditions, they still must contend with an enraged Rock passing them by to achieve a natural flanking position. If that happens, you can kiss your *wienerschnitzel* goodbye.

Enthusiastic language and humor aside, the presence of a Sgt. Rock type does not unbalance the *UP FRONT* Patrol scenario—it balances it, and makes it much less predictable. None of the above tactics provide a guaranteed win with a Rock-led American squad. In our games, the two-man attack group was as likely to go down under sheer weight of numbers as to win the game. Similarly, Rock can lead an overly-aggressive four-man group to disaster. If the American player starts to think his whole squad is bullet-proof like the Rock, he will get into big trouble quickly. Sometimes the mere threat of a Rock attack is more potent than the actual event. For this reason, the automatic Hero power should be husbanded, never being unleashed until the results will almost certainly be lethal. Besides, if you have the option of waiting, an actual Hero card may find itself into your hand, leaving you with the opportunity for a two-turn orgy of heroism.

UP FRONT by its nature as a personality-level wargame allows room for imaginative involvement that other games can't approach. Can we really get emotionally involved over the fate of the 4th Guards Infantry? But the survival of an isolated Chernenko, bravely brandishing his jammed bolt-action rifle, can matter a great deal. I hope that this article will lead some doubters to try to brighten the world of *UP FRONT*, and might lead in time to other personality-scale wargames.

