



*Staunch British troops advance to the next battle, ready to fight Fritz!*

# BOLT ACTION!



A PREVIEW OF THE OSPREY PUBLISHING/  
WARLORD GAMES WW2 RULES By Rick Priestley

***Bolt Action*** is the eagerly anticipated and soon-to-be launched World War Two combat wargame from Osprey Publishing, produced in conjunction with those scamps from Warlord Games. As the title suggests, this latest game has been developed as an adjunct to Warlord's well-known Bolt Action range of WWII miniatures and vehicles, so it's very much a game aimed at playing WWII in 28mm - not that this is likely to stop anyone playing in 20mm or 15mm or with tiddlywinks of course. It's also a game that has been a good while in development by the Warlord team and some of their least-disreputable associates - so naturally our esteemed *WI* editor collared me one day as we were both queuing outside the soup kitchen and asked me to pen a few words about Bolt Action and Warlord's plans for the future.

## INTRODUCTIONS AND INFLUENCES

By way of a brief, said editor directed me towards the *Force on Force* introductory article by the Ambush Alley team in *WI284* which, as it turns out, explains much of the motivation for and thinking behind that particular set of rules. Now this is all very interesting, with lots of quite serious stuff about 'asymmetrical and kinetic warfare', 'operational momentum' and 'spawn points'. This last one sounds scary and I was much relieved to discover it refers to a position on the tabletop from which troops deploy, and has nothing to do with tentacles or eye-stalks at all. Piece of cake this wargames article writing I tell you - invent a few la-di-da terms, roll out a few anecdotes, quick jog through the mechanics and we're done!

Right, where to start...?

The scene is a pub in the English Midlands. It is lunchtime. There is a pint of Bateman's XB on the copper-clad tabletop and behind it shelters your author - me, Rick Priestley - sometime developer of wargames and occasional garden ornament. Opposite, behind a substantial pile of empty wine glasses sits the substantial pile that is John Stallard, mighty and stentorian owner of Warlord Games.

*"We have to have a WW2 game - here we are, Warlord Games - fantastic range of WW2 kit and no game to go with it... it's sheer madness I tell you!"* The merlot sloshed affirmatively in response as John hurled his challenge across the tabletop.

*"Well, we could always get that Alessio Cavatore to write us a game. He did a*

*fair job on all that Warhammer and Lord of The Rings malarkey, and I hear he's got nothing better to do than sit at home inventing endless chess variants."*

*"Does he know anything about WWII?"*

*"Bound to... he's very tall... and Italian."*

*"Are you sure that does the trick...?"*

*"Oh yes... every time... don't you worry about it John, it'll be great. Any chance of another pint? I seem to have left my wallet in my other trousers."*

And so was born the concept of Warlord's very own WWII wargame, conceived by John Stallard, designed by Alessio Cavatore and written up by me, with considerable encouragement and assistance from the Warlords and our friends from both sides of the Atlantic and - come to think of it - the Pacific. Now the fact is that John and I have been playing WWII wargames for more years than either of us can easily recall, using a variety of rule sets in scales from 28mm right down to the old 6mm micro-armour. So it's not as if we weren't already steeped in the ins and outs of the subject as evidenced by many an enjoyable session of "What's your favourite tank?" and other assorted WWII trivia games. Also, having been brought up in the 1960s on a nourishing diet of *Battle Picture Library*, the *Victor* comic, *Biggles*

and endless repeats of *Where Eagles Dare* there wasn't much about the Second World War that had escaped our attention. Along the way a set of WWII wargames rules had been concocted that served us well for many years; however, sadly these were later used by me as the basis for the 3rd edition of *Warhammer 40K*, which rather scuppered any idea of publishing those. Besides, we wanted something noticeably different that would stand out from the crowd, something unusual, something that would make people stop, draw breath and exclaim, 'Blimey!'

Alessio Cavatore sprang to mind at once. After a crash course in WWII history that included watching all nine series of *Allo, Allo*, Alessio declared himself ready and willing.

### FORMAL AND INFORMAL

The brief was to design a game that would play well with what we felt was a typical wargames force of around 30 to 40 troops, transports, the odd tank, the occasional artillery piece, perhaps a couple of machine guns, mortars, a sniper - that sort of thing. I'd call it a platoon-sized game except that any real infantry platoon would have been overjoyed to have quite so much support - but nonetheless the supported infantry platoon is the basic fighting force. Although this was the size envisaged, it was also important that the game could easily scale up for bigger battles too: two platoons, three platoons, and so on. The other thing laid down right from the start was that the game had to have points values and army lists as well as formal scenarios that would easily facilitate tournaments as well as pick-up games. Whilst there's nothing unusual in that in itself, this is a marked departure from Warlord's *Black Powder*, *Hail Caesar*,

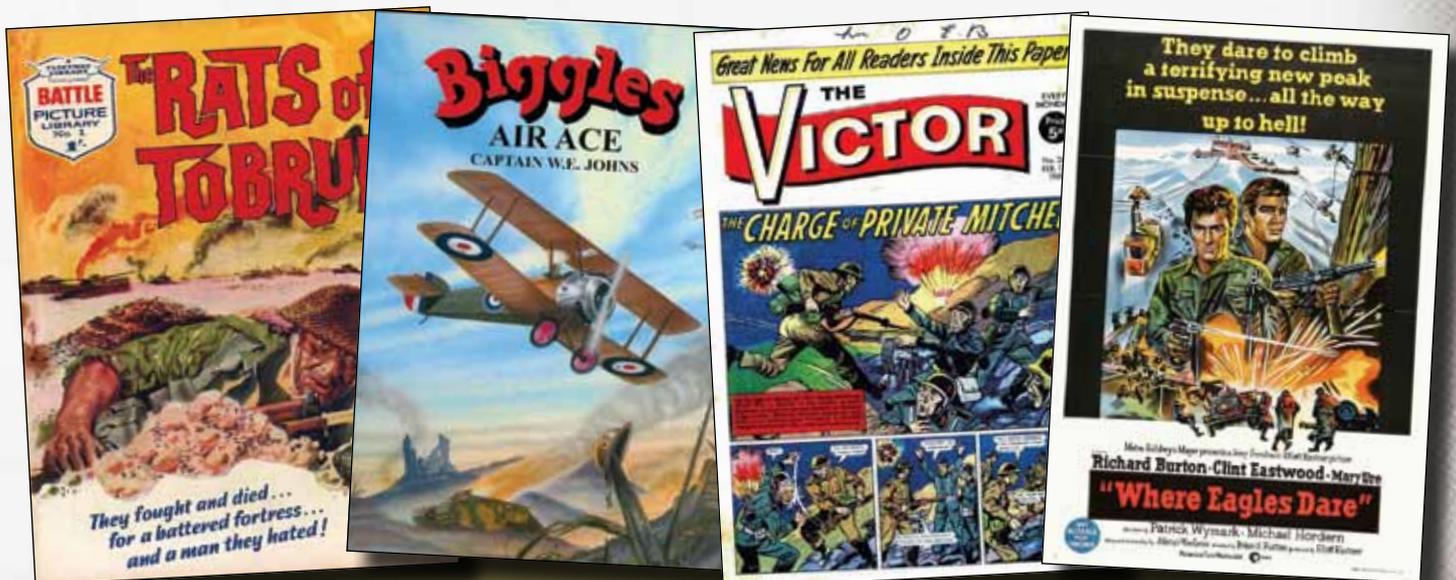
## OSPREY PUBLISHING AND WARLORD GAMES

It's hard to imagine a better combination than Osprey and Warlord - two companies with established reputations for quality publishing and names that must be familiar to every reader of *Wargames Illustrated*. And what with being good pals and all that it seemed like a great opportunity to work together. The *Bolt Action* rulebook is certainly not lacking in colourful artwork, with Osprey's massive library to draw upon as well as cover art from Warlord and many new photographs of arms and equipment from the collections of the authors. But this is a book about wargames at the end of the day, which means it is also crammed with the kind of miniature photography that has become a hallmark of Warlord books. The book itself follows the standard format for Osprey wargames publications which will, no doubt, be familiar to most readers in the shapes of *Field of Glory* (FoG), *Force on Force*, and so on.

and *Pike and Shotte* games which are much more free-form, without points values or standard 'set-up' rules. *Bolt Action* is very different and recognises the tremendous popularity of the points-driven, head-to-head playing style of which *Warhammer 40K* is an obvious example; also a game that both Alessio and I had worked upon together during our time at Games Workshop.

Despite our insistence upon the formality of army lists, points values and pre-defined scenarios, we still wanted to create a game that we would enjoy ourselves. After all we were going to be playing a lot of it during the course of development. When I say 'we' I refer to John Stallard and myself, as well as the Warlord crew, friends and associates who would naturally be enrolled as things progressed. *Bolt Action* - like all of the Warlord games - would spring from game play - by which I mean it would be played regularly and often by our gaming group as part of our usual routine of social wargaming. Again that might sound an obvious way of going about things, but sometimes I do get the

impression from some games' authors that it's all about 'playtesting' and 'iterative balance', which suggests to me a set of rules created as a paper exercise and knocked into a playable state by a series of opinion polls and consumer surveys. Whilst I'm sure that isn't really true, I have always maintained that the way to design games is to play games, and that the writer's vision behind the game should be its main driving force though admittedly informed by carefully observed game play and personal interaction with players... and also that beer should be involved somewhere. Don't get me wrong - *Bolt Action* has been conscientiously dispatched unseen to player groups throughout the UK, USA, and Australia who have diligently provided their feedback and suggestions, many of which make a direct appearance as rules within the game. However, the most reassuring feedback an author can receive is to learn that players enjoy a game and want to play again - so much so that they volunteer to run demo games, organise tournaments and teach the game to new players. That's the only 'test' that counts in the end, I reckon!



JUST A FEW OF THE INFLUENCES FOR THE BOLT ACTION WARGAME



*German troops have laid a cunning ambush that is about to be revealed with devastating results.*

## GET DOWN!

*Bolt Action* is the sort of game in which terrain plays a vital part in the game play and where much depends upon taking up positions in cover or out of sight. This is where the **Ambush** action comes into play, allowing squads to set up a position commanding a crossroads or covering a gap between hedgerows, for example. Advancing optimistically into the open is likely to end in disaster unless you can hit the enemy with enough firepower to stack three or four pin markers on his key units.

Units encumbered by pin markers suffer dice penalties to all their dice rolls, making it likely they will fail the test to obey their orders, and even when they do they are less likely to hit their targets.

### ACTIVATION AND ACTIONS

Right - that's dealt with the motivation and method of development stuff - or at least as much as any rational man would be prepared to reveal in exchange for mere money. What the reader doubtless wants to know is how the game plays, how the rules work, and practical details of things like army lists and force choices. Well, the big picture stuff is that we are talking about a game where the models are individually based and which uses ordinary dice - D6s. Play proceeds in turns, during which units are activated one at a time in a sequence determined by a random draw. That means player's don't take separate turns at all, there is just a single 'turn' in which both sides take actions as the opportunity arises. This unit activation method is the key mechanic that drives the game play. The method does require that each side has a batch of distinctly and differently coloured dice - preferably different again from the dice that are used during play itself - these are referred to as order dice. For example, one side might have blue order dice and one side green. At the start of the game each side takes one order dice for each unit in the army - a unit typically being a vehicle, an artillery piece, a squad of infantry, a machine gun, a mortar, an officer, a medic team, and so on. A typical standard sized force might have something like a dozen to fifteen units and therefore a dozen to fifteen

dice. The dice from both sides are placed together in a bag, cup or some such container and drawn blind one at a time. When a dice is drawn it is handed to the player it belongs to, who can use it to activate any one of his units that has not already been activated that turn. Once the unit has taken its action - or at least tried to as this is not always automatic - its go is over and another dice is drawn, and so on, until all the dice have been drawn and every unit has taken its turn.

When it comes to deciding which units to activate, and in which sequence, that is entirely up to the player, introducing an immediate tension into the game that keeps both sides actively involved. Not only can you not be sure which side will 'go next', when a player does get to take a turn he must decide which unit to activate. Of course, as the game progresses it becomes an increasingly desperate decision whether to rally a unit that's under heavy fire, take that pot shot at an opposing tank, make a dash for the

game-winning objective, or whatever. If you are fortunate the draw will give you several goes in a row, but conversely you can never count on acting before your opponent in the general run of things. If you take that pot shot and miss you also risk becoming a sitting duck, whilst your enemy can now advance with impunity safe in the knowledge that your unit has had its go. Better to use the dice to activate a less critical unit and save the big guns for a better opportunity later. All this makes for a very exciting, occasionally frustrating, and overall even a realistic portrayal of combat that has certainly challenged our best efforts during play.

Once activated a unit can undertake one of six actions these are: 1. **Fire**, 2. **Advance**, 3. **Run**, 4. **Ambush**, 5. **Rally**, and 6. **Down**. When a unit makes an action, the order dice is placed next to it with the corresponding face uppermost to indicate what the unit is doing that turn. Some players will no doubt prefer

*The "order dice" Warlord Games will be releasing alongside the launch of Bolt Action.*



to remember, use tokens, or otherwise not place dice on the table itself - but we found it far easier to simply place the order dice next to the unit. At the time of writing, Warlord is engaged in sourcing pre-marked order dice marked **Fire**, **Advance**, **Run**, etc - although in practice it is easy enough to use standard dice and players quickly become accustomed to which values represent which actions. These actions are all fairly self-explanatory: **Fire** allows the unit to shoot at full effect whilst remaining stationary, **Advance** allows the unit to move and shoot but at reduced rate and effect, **Run** allows the unit to move at maximum speed without shooting, **Ambush** puts the unit into 'ready mode' and allows it to shoot later in the turn at enemy units that move into sight, **Rally** reduces the number of pin markers on the unit (more of those in a moment), whilst **Down** simply gets the unit on the ground where it can take cover - meaning it is harder to hit and takes fewer casualties from artillery fire and the like. Units can do these things automatically unless they have already been pinned as a result of enemy fire.

Whenever a unit is hit by enemy fire it becomes pinned and a pin marker is placed next to it to show this. We use the pin markers that are part of the Bolt Action range, but any suitable marker will do, or pins can be recorded in some other fashion as the players wish. A unit can be pinned over and over again, accumulating more pin markers in the process. A unit that has one or more pin markers doesn't automatically take an action when activated - instead it must take an order test. This is more or less difficult depending upon the quality of the troops, proximity of officers, and the number of pins accumulated. If the test is failed, the unit automatically goes **Down** instead



*A Soviet 45mm anti-tank gun and crew from Warlord Games' Bolt Action miniature range. Actually all the models shown in this article are from Warlord and the photos are featured in the Bolt Action rulebook.*

of obeying whatever instruction the player had in mind. If the test is passed, the unit fulfils its action as instructed and also loses one pin marker. This makes it possible for units to shrug off a single pin, but it becomes increasingly difficult to do so with three, four or more pins - although better troops test against higher base values, making them inherently more reliable under fire. There are some appropriate subtleties in the system of course: armoured vehicles are more difficult to pin, and fully enclosed armoured vehicles can't be pinned at all by small-arms fire, for example.

The basic method of shooting and working out casualties is fairly straightforward, with shooting worked out on behalf of each model taking a number of shots depending upon the weapon carried. In the case of the bolt-action rifle borne by most troops, this is one dice per man. Shooting is calculated unit on unit - one unit shooting at one target - rolling to establish the number of hits and then making a second damage roll for each hit inflicted. Armoured vehicles have damage ratings of 7 or more - greater than the roll of a dice -

which means they are invulnerable to most infantry side arms, which can only roll a score of 6 at best. Heavy weapons have modifiers to the damage roll varying according to weapon and range, in the case of anti-tank guns, bringing higher armour values within the 'killing zone': 7, 8, 9 and so on. The spread of armour values for tanks is between 7 and 11, allowing for lightly armoured vehicles at the bottom end and lumbering late-war monsters at the other. Damaging shots generally destroy infantry and soft-skinned targets outright. Armoured targets roll on a sub-table that can result in immobilisation, loss of guns, fires, or outright destruction. Various modifiers apply to represent unique vulnerabilities (the Sherman's susceptibility to ammunition fires for example) and allows for some variation between tanks that might otherwise share the same damage value. All of this is, as I say, pretty straightforward, and deliberately so, enabling shooting to be resolved at a good pace and with plenty of scope within the mechanic to represent the full gamut of weaponry from pistols and submachine guns to heavy artillery pieces and the most powerful anti-tank guns.



*A Sherman is completely unaware of the panzerfaust streaking towards it.*



*U.S. Airborne artillery support receives co-ordinates for the next strike.*

## ARTILLERY BARRAGES AND AIR STRIKES

Forward Observers can call down artillery during the game or radio for air support at the vital moment - both can be devastating, although disasters can occasionally happen: friendly aircraft can get shot down, and artillery can be misdirected onto the wrong targets. The British, being big exponents of supporting artillery, get a free Artillery Observer in their force, whilst the Americans - having plentiful aircraft - are allowed to call in a second strike.

### WEAPON AND GROUND SCALES

Weapon ranges and movement distances were necessarily dictated by the size of playing surface rather than worked out to any fixed scale, and assumes that players are going to conduct their games on a tabletop roughly 6'x4'. That said, we have fought battles on far larger tables on occasion, but we were determined to make sure the game could be successfully played on what most wargamers would recognise as a 'standard' tabletop. Given this basic parameter to work with, we settled on a maximum range for rifles of 24" (half the table width) and worked out other ranges relative to that, compressing the longer-ranged weapons whilst extending out the shorter-ranged weapons to enable pistols and submachine guns to be used effectively. I would like to say this was a kind of logarithmic ground scale - though to be honest I don't think it's quite that clever - but that certainly conveys the idea well enough. This means as units approach each other, weapons with short ranges such as bazookas and *panzerfaust* come into play, whilst the heavier tank guns can pretty much command the tabletop from the onset, assuming they have a clear field of fire. The result is visually satisfying even if we must accept a degree of abstraction in the relative distances; a necessity in any case with 28mm models armed with weapons that would - in reality - range out to a thousand yards or more.

### SET-UP AND SCENARIOS

We wanted a game with formal scenarios, set-up rules and victory conditions that would fit comfortably into what many players now expect of a competitive style game, regardless of whether they actually play in tournaments, clubs or just informally. Of course, that doesn't mean players can't just go for it, ignore the army lists, points values, scenarios, victory conditions and make it all up for themselves. However, we felt that most players would prefer something more concrete by way of game structure. The book, therefore, includes six official scenarios complete with rules for setting up and deploying the armies, establishing

objectives, playing to a specific number of turns, and working out which side has won using a scoring system. All this is absolutely necessary for tournament play of course, but we wanted to provide scenarios that were fun, and perhaps a little off-beat as well as the more straightforward 'highest death count wins' kind of games which competition games often devolve into. The players can dice randomly to decide which scenario to play or just choose one, and we imagine in organised tournaments the organisers would probably dictate which scenarios would be played throughout the event. The six scenarios included in the book are: **Envelopment**, **Maximum**



*Revealing the painting of the Fallen Madonna with the big boobies, from the Headley Theatre Club's 2009 production of "Allo, Allo",*

**Attrition, Point Defence, Hold Until Relieved, Top Secret, and Demolition.** **Envelopment** is a classic attack/defence game where the attackers must move onto the board and can attempt to send forces round the flanks to envelop the enemy. **Maximum Attrition** is a minimum complexity encounter between two forces moving onto the table from opposite directions. **Point Defence** places three objectives on the defender's side of the table with the attacker tasked with capturing as many as possible within the time allowed. **Hold Until Relieved** (a.k.a. the Pegasus Bridge scenario!) places one large objective together with a small holding force in the middle of the table to oppose the enemy whilst reinforcements are advanced onto the table from reserve. **Top Secret** is a race to reach and recover vital war plans, a secret formula, or possibly the stolen painting of the 'Fallen Madonna with the Big Boobies' from the crashed plane, staff car, or wrecked hot-air balloon - well, not necessarily any of these, but I'm sure you get the idea. Each side has to grab the despatch box and bring it back to its own table edge. **Demolition** is a game where both sides have a base on their table edge and must attempt to destroy the enemy base whilst defending their own - bases typically being forward observation or command posts, radar stations, ammo dumps and so on.

#### THE DREADED ARMY LISTS

And so we come to the key question of army lists; always a matter of interest to players both in terms of content and approach. In our case we decided from the beginning that the rulebook would have to include useable army lists for the four principle warring powers of the USA, Russia, Germany, and Great Britain. However, including rules for all the troops and vehicles that fought

in every theatre for all of these armies was plainly a non-starter within our page limit. I mean the book had to actually fit on an Osprey display rack after all! In any case, both Warlord and Osprey had already decided we would publish further army lists as supplements, so the lists in the book itself would serve to some extent as exemplars and as a 'get you by' until the supplements became available. In the end we decided that we would put full lists in the rulebook to cover the later war period in Europe - that's mid-1944 to 1945 encompassing the Normandy campaign onwards in the west and Operation Bagration to the fall of Berlin in the east. The *Bolt Action* book contains full lists covering these late war forces. Further lists for the early and mid war, as well as the war in the Pacific and elsewhere, will be published separately by Osprey. We discussed various options for publishing the supplementary army lists: by campaign, by theatre and by nationality, and in the end we decided to cover each nationality with its own separate supplement. So, for example, the US Army supplement will cover all the US forces in a series of separate army lists for every theatre, including the North Africa campaign and Pacific. As well as providing complete lists for the US, Russia, German, and British and Commonwealth armies, further supplements would cover other forces either in their own dedicated volumes or a compilation in the case of minor combatants such as the Belgians, early war Poles, Finns and so on. Naturally, the Japanese are planned to have their own supplement, whilst some controversy still rages as to whether the Italians will get their own supplement or be forced to rub shoulders with the French and other "also-rans". That decision won't be made until a little further down the line. The first supplements already completed at

the time of writing are for the Germans and Americans, with the British and Commonwealth and Russians underway. The Japanese will follow and then the rest is to be decided, but is intended to be at least one book of lists covering the remaining armies.

#### AND NOW TO LAUNCH IT!

As I hope I have made clear, *Bolt Action* has been conceived as a game that is ideal for all kinds of structured play, whether a fortuitous match at the local wargames club or a full-on organised tournament. Of course the rules are also perfectly good for less formal gaming, and we have had tremendous fun inventing scenarios, ignoring army lists, and inviting hordes of friends round to play team games with three or four on each side. However, we know that the vast majority of players will probably want to play a more 'official' style of game and to that end Warlord have set about recruiting keen supporters to help run tournaments both in the UK and USA, as well as players to run demo games at wargames shows. The first of these is taking place - or will have taken place depending on when this is published - as part of the Wartorn wargames show in Scarborough in June. As this will be ahead of the release of the game, entrants will receive a pre-release PDF of the game beforehand, as well as a copy of the actual book when it comes out. Needless to say, Warlord would be pleased to hear from any groups or organisers who are keen to join in by running a *Bolt Action* tournament. Both Osprey and Warlord are committed to supporting tournament play as well as encouraging teams who want to demo the game throughout the world. Just drop a line to [info@warlordgames.com](mailto:info@warlordgames.com) and include the words **Bolt Action** in your subject line.

*Polish paras prepare to dig-in and defend the bridge.*

#### DETAILED SPECIAL RULES

The basic game system makes distinctions between inexperienced, regular and veteran troops - but various special rules allow for additional subtleties, such as green troops whose fighting qualities are unpredictable, and shirkers whose fighting qualities are predictably poor (they take double pin markers from hits!) Similarly, we have special rules for snipers, who are allowed to target individual models within a squad, for tough fighters who fight with double effect at hand-to-hand, and fanatics who never check their morale regardless of casualties.

