

# Rapid Fire is 21

## How a ruleset can remain popular for decades

The pioneering WWII rule set is 21 years old this year, so we asked **Richard Marsh** from RF to celebrate the anniversary with a cautionary tale of battlegames and business.

**O**n a research visit to Bovington Tank Museum library in the 1990s, chief librarian, author and eminent tankophile David Fletcher told me the story of a writer so obsessed with German tank ace Michael Wittman that he plagued the man's widow for any and every scrap of information about the famous SS officer. The end result was a book graced with stilted dialogue purporting to be exact transcripts of the conversations between Wittman and his crew as they ploughed through Villers Bocage and the unfortunate 7th Armoured Division. "Unleash hell meine Herren. Feur! Take the next right Hans, no not this one. Has anyone seen mein goggles?" (I've made this up, but you get the idea). Obviously, the poor woman had palmed off the eager author with any old rubbish in an attempt to get rid of him, but the poor deluded soul had got what he wanted – in his eyes, the definitive, historical **truth**.

This spins through my mind as I contemplate twenty one years of rule and scenario writing under the flag of *Rapid Fire*, the original, fast play WWII miniatures ruleset, established 1994, made in England and played globally, despite the fact that we have strategically planned our business empire with such acumen that 50% of it (me) is in Plymouth and the other half (Colin Rumford) resides 350 miles away in York. The connection is that historical wargamers are also seekers of an elusive truth. It may be in multiple shades, but underlying our obsession with playing toy soldiers is the triple need for the rules we use to mirror *the real thing*, have only *one* possible interpretation and be able to cover *all* situations.

So, if you're rash enough to write a set of wargames rules and egotistical and deluded enough to want to publish them (or you are of sound mind and just like reading about others' misfortunes), please read on.

### CONGRATULATIONS, YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE A RULESET

Actually, it was nothing to do with me. I'd just wanted a passing relationship with a collection of WWII scenarios, but Colin Rumford had other ideas. He had been toiling away on a new concept in wargames rules, one that would change the way we played games with toy tanks forever.

"I have created a set of fast play WWII rules that will allow opponents to play a game..." he paused for effect (the concept of throwing for effect would come later) "...to play an entire game... in less than a week."

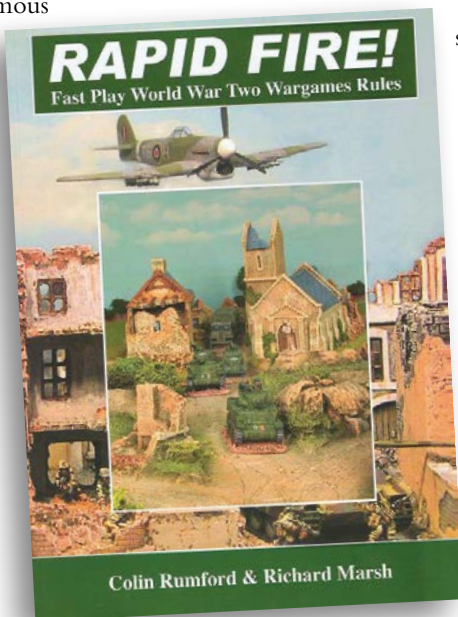
I gasped. Surely this was impossible in the 1990s. Did he really mean more than three moves at one sitting? He really did.

The union of Colin's rules and my scenarios was appropriately swift and in no time at all we were sitting in a pub garden trying to agree on a name for this revolutionary publication. It went on forever.

"*Tanking Along? Snappy Panzers? WWII GT? Kwik Fight? Rapid Fire? A Bridge too Fast...?*"

"Hold on. What was that 'rapid' one?"

And so it came to pass. But choosing the name was the least of our concerns. This new creation had to be turned into something that wargamers would a) be able to understand; b) want to use; and c) not want to kill each other over. The first two were relatively easy to achieve compared to all the issues raised by the third.



### RULES FOR LIFE

The biggest problem with any rule writing can be summed up in a word that I've already mentioned: "interpretation". Lawyers' language may seem like arcane, antiquated gibberish, but that's because – as far as humanly possible – it has to have only one possible meaning. I'm old enough to remember that in the 1970s and 80s a lot of people had tried to eradicate uncertainty by applying legal principles to their WWII wargames rules.

"And if, in the action of firing, the player controlling the fire of said weapon, henceforth to be known as the firer, wishes to engage a target (being the hitherto identified object of fire falling under the auspices of the firer's opponent, henceforth to be known as the victim) it shall be incumbent upon the firer to



Wittman's crew discuss the selection of this week's turret number as their Tiger bypasses the spearhead of 22nd Armoured Brigade. (Our own take on the Battle for Villers Bocage is featured in the new *Rapid Fire Normandy Battle Games* book, due out shortly).

proceed with the employment of a six-sided cube emblazoned with six single digits, each occupying one face of said cube and encompassing the numerical range from 1 to 6 without repetition (henceforth to be known as the die)...”

All this was in the past. In the latter half of the cutting edge '90s, a thing called the World Wide Web had just emerged and everything was about speed, speed, speed. Here we were with a set of rules that, by their very nature (fast play), were intended to be user friendly, easy to learn, simple to follow and brief. But the threat of mis- or multiple-interpretation hung over our enterprise like a Tiger's barrel over a slit trench. There was only one thing for it. Bit by bit, the original rules – already well tested in miniature battle – were dissected like the corpse in a TV detective drama and then re-assembled like Robocop, but without the electrical bits.

Our earlier distinct roles of 'rule writer' and 'scenario creator' had, by this time, been well and truly blurred. Now we were jointly engaged in the battle against ambiguity, an uphill struggle that you never win. As a rule writer, until your rules are eventually forgotten and ground into dust, you will be constantly reminded by the people you owe the most to – the ones who bought them and use them – of their inadequacies, double meanings, omissions and multiple interpretations. If you don't believe me, consider the fate of the offside rule and the Ten Commandments.

However, we did have one card up our joint sleeve when it came to handling the barrack room lawyers and other players with an overdeveloped competitive streak.

“In writing any set of rules it is impossible to foresee every problem which may arise during the playing of a game”, we wrote in the introduction, anticipating everything from a spilt

cup of tea to a Zombie invasion. “In the case of dispute let common sense prevail. In 'grey areas' let the dice decide.”

There you are, problem solved. Until, of course, people start asking for a definition of common sense or demanding the greyscale pixel intensity.

*Rapid Fire* was always going to be based on our personal wargaming ethos, which I would sum up as: 1) it's a game; 2) it's supposed to be fun; and 3) would you want this headline in your local paper? “(Your name here) charged with assault during game of toy soldiers.”

Of course, nothing you can say or do will stop people doing whatever they want with your rules and scenarios; not that we would want to stop them. As soon as wargamers started forking out good money for *Rapid Fire*, they bought the right to tweak, adapt and extend the original to suit their personal preferences. As long as they don't try to impose those changes on the unwilling or type them up and sell them, we're happy. Over the past two decades and a bit, the vast majority of players have turned out to be a lovely bunch and soon gently sort out the few who attempt to steer their *RF* games towards the dark side.

## DOING THE BUSINESS

Nowadays, most of us have the ability to publish anything we want. This is thanks to the wonder of the Internet and the transformation of self publishing from something that in the 1990s allowed well-heeled crazy people to print 20,000 hard-back copies of *Can Moles Knit?* to today's Kindle-friendly deluge of amateur-penned books about over-elaborate serial killers and rural infidelity. [Well, if you call James Patterson or Stephen King 'amateur'... Ed.]

In the olden days, you needed a publisher: someone who





General Gore-Blimey: "I say old bean, I jolly well believe I'm entitled to reserve fire." General Blutengutz: "You looking at me Tommy?!" If games got held up while the figures had a massive row, players would soon get the hump. *Rapid Fire* says "Keep Calm and Carry On Playing".

could front the operation and invest the cash to print and turn your creation into a book. This is what happened to the new-born *Rapid Fire* and initially all was fine. However, just a few pointers if you are considering a similar route for your wargaming scribbles:

1. Don't sell the copyright. And if you do feel absolutely compelled to hand the whole thing over for a one-off payment, get a second, third and fourth opinion on how much the ruleset, scenario book, players' handbook or even idea may be worth long term.
2. If, instead, you opt for regular royalty payments, unless you have lots of very large brothers or sisters, make sure that the contract includes what percentage of sales is paid to you as royalties and when these payments will be received.
3. Any sort of publishing deal needs a contract. Ink's fine (blood's an option), but get a friendly legal type to give it the once over before signing on the dotted line.

Otherwise (and to avoid possible libel suits or assassination bids) I shall merely refer you to the WWII wargamer's favourite film in the 'silly but brilliant' category: *Where Eagles Dare*.

Apart from Clint's famous metre long MP40 magazine, the annoying urge to count all the explosive charges and mentally try to fit them into the suitcases and, of course, the helicopter, what is it that you bring away from every viewing? You've got it. Don't trust anyone (...except Clint and Mary... and Ingrid).

## PERFORMANCE ENHANCING SUPPLEMENTS

Once the rules were up and running, they did rather well. At least they did in Leeds, where they were voted 'Best Rules' at the Fiasco show not once (in 1996) but twice (in 1998 as well). But of course, that was just the beginning. The original set had an eclectic mix of scenarios to complement the rules, ranging from Italians and Brits in 1940s East Somaliland to the 1942 American landings at Safi in Vichy French Morocco (what were we on?). Now, we had to get more organised and give everyone clutching a newly purchased copy of *RF* more information on vehicles, weaponry, unit organisations and, of course, something else to play.

I've no idea where the term 'supplement' came from. I know it means 'to add' and thank goodness we didn't choose 'additive' or 'optional extra', but it still looks really weird nowadays.

Anyway, *Rapid Fire* supporting books now became 'supplements', with the first penned by Colin under the snappy title of *First Supplement: Unit Organisations for the 1944-45 Campaign in North West Europe*. This was rapidly (no pun intended) followed by the slightly more sleekly named *Second Supplement: Unit organisations for the Russian Front 1941-1945*,

written by me, mainly standing up as I recovered from having my spine bolted back together.

By the time we got to *Third Supplement: Scenarios for the Russian Front 1941-1945*, the names were getting simpler but business matters were getting more complicated. The good thing was I could sit down again and generally move about, but there were storm clouds on the horizon and we authors started to get a little wary.

The storm broke with the imminent publication of Colin's *Operation Market Garden Campaign Guide*. First of all, it wasn't a supplement. Second, Colin had to self-finance its publication. All of a sudden, in a gradual sort of way, the business arrangement with our publisher began to unravel...and unravel.

And so, what everybody calls *Rapid Fire 2*, but which is actually just *Rapid Fire: Fast Play World War Two Wargames Rules (again)* came to be. We were on our own (eek!) and aiming to ramp up the quality, sort out the anomalies and add loads of stuff that had evolved since *Rapid Fire* had first emerged in 1994.

The precursor to the publication of the rules was 'Mad February'. But before I recount its horrors, just a word (actually six) on wargames rules/scenario book writing: IT'S ALL IN THE PROOF READING!!!

I hate proof reading (you've noticed, Henry). [Yes. Ed.] There are professional proof readers, people who spend every one of their working hours looking for errors in the written word. Without proof reading, everything you read in print would be like Twitter or Facebook ("I ams surtin Germuns used panser 111 in Sisilee..."). [Richard, a quiet word about these bits of the internet you're visiting... Ed.] I really hate proof reading. And the problem with wargames books is that they unite all the pet hates of proof readers: text, numbers, tables, rules, captions and (loads of) cross-referencing. Most published books include errors, little (or big) things that the proof reader has missed. Imagine them lying awake in bed at night on the day after publication screaming about "adress" or a missing semi-colon. [Okay, that's enough, have you been watching me? Ed.] To give you some idea of how this gift keeps on giving, someone recently emailed me to point out a previously unnoticed error in a *RF* book that went out of print four years ago.

## MAD FEBRUARY

The current *Rapid Fire* rule book took years to conceive, plan, write, play test and revise, but all the photography took place over three days in Yorkshire in February 2005. To be correct, it was three days and nights and it nearly finished us off.

The plan was to use plenty of photographs (and diagrams) to illustrate the rules; on the basis that seeing something as well as reading about it makes it easier to understand. This meant we had to take 300+ digital shots, then edit, format and caption them in time to meet our looming print deadline. The rulebook photos were virtually all close-ups and every shot had to have a change of scenery, a set-up that illustrated the rule in question and an interesting angle.

"Rich, it's tea-time!" I remember Col shouting as his ever understanding wife Sue prepared to engage us in mid-flight refuelling. "Ready in a minute", I replied, "just got to crack this shot of Priller strafing the D-Day beaches". Colin – eyes red and noticeably square following 14 hours of non-stop downloading, photoshopping and captioning – entered his wargames room/photographic studio to find me standing on the table pointing the camera down the rear end of a precariously suspended FW109. I may also have been mumbling something like 'ratatatatat'. I'd finally succumbed to 'snapper madness', but at

least the photo worked (it's on page 108).

Finally, it was over. Although having woken up at 2.00am to drive back to Plymouth (it's the only way to avoid the traffic), I remember ringing Col from home at 8.00am, as my wife, Jo, administered intravenous black coffee, and spewing out all the errors I'd remembered as I travelled the motorway system. I then collapsed into a daze, hallucinating that Priller's fighter was chasing me down a beach, shooting comma-shaped holes in the sand and dropping "boms".

## HELP!

Remember the truth? Now the seekers of wargames historical accuracy had a new target, a big glossy book of rules (and photographs) that had to be played, compared to the 'old set' and forensically examined for errors, anomalies and blatant cock-ups. The big difference between 1994 and 2005 was that now we had something called the internet, a website and the capability to receive and send emails. As I'm rubbish at sales, I volunteered to be *RF*'s call centre/agonny aunt. Only belatedly did I recall the British soldiers' advice to new recruits: "Don't volunteer f'nothing!"

The people who use our rules are great. Answering their myriad questions is not a chore, but a pleasure. However, as the messages poured in from across the globe (we've even got players in Guatemala) I found myself mulling over global belief systems and how easy it can be for a book of 'rules' to stir passions and incite a fevered desire to find the one true way. Combined with a few misprints, a handful of errors and some spirited attempts at written English by international enquirers, this was a heady mix.

Nightly I would sit down to the latest challenges, as relayed through *Rapid Fire*'s own GCHQ monitoring station in Yorkshire (we'd figured out that direct access to my personal email may not be a wise move). Questions neither of us could have imagined came thick and fast.

"Do you realise that if you apply rule 27.3(b) to Elite bicycle troops dismounting under fire from a gunboat that has moved less than 7" at night, they can't use rule 52.9 (Table 64) to observe cavalry in a hedge?"

"All the other 27 guys at my club don't think you can drive a tank through another tank that's been knocked out but I think the rules clearly state that you can. Can you resolve our dispute?"

"It is wel nown that the german panzerIV had wobly tracks. You need to make it more slower on roeds."

And so on...



Don McHugh (left) and Alan McCoubrey (right) playing the Nofolia scenario from the *RF Monty's Desert Battle* book at Bristol's Reveille show in 2014. Like Ridley Scott's *The Duellists*, Don and Al are locked in an endless battle through the *MDB* scenarios at shows across the south of England.

I jest, but of course the real stuff that people had noticed was absolute gold dust. What I quickly realised is that the rule users (bless 'em) were super testing *Rapid Fire (2)* to the Nth degree. It was the play testing equivalent of scientists who persuade thousands of people to use their home PCs to carry out mega experiments: the power of numbers. Not only did we discover anomalies, unexpected contradictions or cock-ups, we also began to gauge the emotional response to our rules, whether a hyper competitive type spotting a weakness to exploit or someone exhibiting the first signs of 'holy book' syndrome.

It says a lot that the most popular question I've posted in two and a half years of running the *Rapid Fire* Facebook page was 'Which *Rapid Fire* rule do you hate the most?'

Bring it on!

## SHOW AND TELL

Even better than the virtual reality of internet communication has been attending wargames shows with *Rapid Fire* demo games and talking to gamers face-to-face. Nowadays, Colin and I tend to get to fewer of these gatherings and I was able to semi-retire from personally carting terrain squares, figures and scenery around the country about four years ago, thanks to a band of doughty *RF* players who often and brilliantly do the honours on our behalf. But over the two decades plus of *RF*, so far the 'game at a show' has been a great way to meet players and get feedback.

I remember revealing the secret of my hamster bedding explosions to a lady gamer at Salute at Kensington Town Hall, chatting to *RF* stalwarts all the way from a newly Mandelated South Africa at Bovington and meeting and then selling a copy of *RF* to Phil Barker of WRG fame (appropriately at Legionary) a couple of years ago. We're only too aware that trends and fashions come and go and we're hardly the most fashionable WWII rule set at the moment, but it was a thrill to find three *Rapid Fire* games at the 2014 Battlegroup South Show at Bovington Tank Museum (including Best of Show), even though when I introduced myself to one of the players he looked like he'd seen a ghost.

## THE FUTURE

A recent article in the Society of Twentieth Century Wargamers' magazine charting one man's personal WWII wargaming history used a picture of *Rapid Fire (2)* to illustrate the advent of 'corporate rules'. Blimey, with the deepest respect, has he got that wrong! Our two-man-band has never been about an all-consuming desire to take over the world, hack everyone's phone and take a photo of where you live (although every book contains a chip that transmits your DNA code to IKEA). We've just worked on a formula that seems to work for a decent number of people, that's still giving a good game and still fuels our enthusiasm to create supporting books and PDFs that hopefully provide a bit of inspiration.

What next? Well the Battlegroup concept we introduced in 2013 for Normandy has proved very popular, with a scenario book on the way this year and various PDFs for the Western Desert and (most recently) Tunisia filling in the gaps before we 'do' Crete and France 1940 in the not too distant future. And, after promising a ruleset buyer in 2005 that we usually wait 10 years before rushing out a new edition, *RF 3* is also on the cards (but don't hold your breath!).

Oh, and if you fancy entering the world of wargame rule production, don't be put off by the ramblings above. Just follow your heart (not your wallet) and have a go.