

Squad Leader's Third Installment

CRESSENDO OF DOOM; Game Analysis

By Jay Selover

CRESSENDO OF DOOM

The Game of Tactical Warfare on the Western Front, 1939-1941

The Avalon Hill Game Company
4517 Harford Rd., Baltimore, MD 21214

- ***Design and Development:*** Don Greenwood
- ***Art:*** Rodger MacGowan, Scott Moores, Dale Sheaffer, Don Greenwood
- ***Topic:*** Twelve scenarios from Poland, Finland (Winter War), Norway, Holland, Belgium, France, Greece
- ***Size:*** Two 8x22-inch mapboards (mounted), 1224 counters
- ***Scale:*** Squad level; ca 40 yards per hex, ca 2 minutes per turn
- ***Game System:*** Complex sequence of play with interlocking player phases (expanded **Squad Leader** system), Programmed Instruction format
- ***Complexity:*** High
- ***Solitaire Playability:*** Good
- ***Suitability for Postal Play:*** Poor
- ***Price:*** \$15.00
- ***Published:*** March 1980
- Requires both **Squad Leader** and **Cross of Iron** for play

Crescendo of Doom is Avalon Hill's second "gamette" in the Squad Leader series and covers the early years of World War II. It is an expansion kit, and both the parent game, Squad Leader and the first gamette, Cross of Iron are needed for play.

Crescendo costs \$15.00. Since Cross of Iron now lists at \$13.00 and Crescendo has one more mapboard, I suppose the price can be justified (don't you just love inflation?). Actually, the gamette is more like three expansions in one box: an addition to the variety of Squad Leader and Cross of Iron

through new general rules and the mapboards; the addition of pre-1942 combat through inclusion of the French, Belgians, Poles, etc., and the scenarios; and the addition of the complete British order of battle, to be used in the scenarios and, as you see fit, for designing your own.

For those who felt cheated when Cross of Iron told them to throw away all their vehicles from Squad Leader: everything in Crescendo is new, yet nothing from the previous games is made obsolete (except a few rules). The addition of Crescendo makes the Squad Leader system, as a whole, one of the largest games in the hobby today; with about 3000 counters, 1408 square inches of mapboard, and 108 pages of rules.

What can you do with a "monster" like that? You can play it. The true victory of the Squad Leader system, playability, is unimpaired by the addition of Crescendo. This is primarily because the scenarios are developed with distinct focal points, allowing the players to concentrate on a particular aspect of the rules. There is nothing to stop you from writing a scenario that uses paratroops, cavalry, gliders, boats, and motorcycles all at once. But most players recognize that the system was not developed to be used that way; you can overload yourself with the system but that is because each component is covered in enough detail to stand on its own merits.

The "feel" of the scenarios is distinctly infantry. There is a closer link to Squad Leader than to **Cross of Iron** in that armor is almost always functioning in an infantry support role. After playing 1944 East Front scenarios it is kind of funny to find anti-tank rifle a valuable weapon, and the infantry firepower equivalent of your tanks more important than their gun size. If you don't think it's exciting unless you've got some 122mm long barrels, you might feel like skipping this one.

It would be a mistake, though; to prejudice this gamette on the basis of the historical facts it models. The situation in 1940 was mostly infantry, but was by no means trench warfare; and the twelve scenarios generally present that situation very well. Overall, both the size of the whole **Squad Leader** system and the specifics covered in Crescendo end up looking pretty good.

RULES

“A Word About Mechanics of Play.” This section states in essence that the designers realize the **Squad Leader** system is now large enough to tax the human memory. To handle this problem when playing a scenario, all rules not specifically excluded before the start are assumed to be enforceable. You can cite a rule to keep your opponent from doing something illegal, but you need not bring to his attention any situation where he fails to utilize all his capabilities. Once play proceeds to the next phase, the error stands and you are free to tell him if you wish. Your recall of the rules is now a part of your arsenal, so to speak.

The rules themselves are 23 pages long (comprising Sections 104 to 140). They are followed by five pages of ordnance and armor listings, and additions to the point value chart, three pages of Questions and Answers, and finally the Index. The armor listings include a handful of Belgian and Polish and 21 French vehicles, and the British order of battle for 1945. The information on the British armor in particular is impressive: there are 53 notes covering special capabilities, optional armaments, number of vehicles which saw action, etc. Unfortunately, most of the British armor information (and armor counters) will not be used until the next gamette in the series comes out.

The rules fall into what I see as three categories:

- 1) Rules which make important additions to the system, and are applicable to most scenarios you are likely to play;
- 2) Rules which add to the system in terms of spice or flavor, but are more specialized or optional; and
- 3) Rules written specifically to cover the new situations. These latter are concerned with the pre-1942 combatants, the terrain on the new boards, and the peculiarities of combat early in the war.

MOVEMENT AND COMBAT:

The first category in my classification includes the rules for Bypass Movement, Men Under Fire, Artillery revisions, and some additions to fire combat. As rules of this type have the potential to change the direction of the **Squad Leader** system (as was the

case with the armor rules in Cross of Iron), they merit some discussion. None of them really changes the “feel” of the game. They address real weaknesses of the system in a manageable way; if you don’t buy **Crescendo of Doom**, at least mail order the rules booklet.

The Bypass Movement rules allow men and vehicles to traverse (and, in the case of vehicles, remain in) a hex containing an obstacle (building, woods, etc.) without actually entering the obstacle itself. The particulars would take too long to explain, but the rules work very nicely indeed. (The only confusion arises in modifications to the rules on exposing a concealed unit in the obstacle).

The Men Under Fire rules cover a number of miscellaneous infantry situations. An infantry unit, which is fired upon while moving in the open, and which just passes a morale check is forced to ground and may move no further. A unit which comes under preparatory fire and which just passes a morale check is pinned and has its firepower halved during the defensive fire phase. Any infantry file dice roll of “doubles” (same number on both dice) means that some of the men were cowering, and the firepower of the attack is reduced by one column on the Fire Table. Finally, leaders can split a squad into two “half squads”(represented by crew counters) if more area need be covered.

The revisions to the artillery rules eliminate the chit selection by which one knew exactly how many fire missions were available during the scenario. Now, a successful “battery access” dice roll is required for an artillery request to get through or fire support to be obtained. Each support obtained makes it harder to get another one. Also, spotting round corrections of up to 18 hexes can now be made, but are not automatically accurate. Thus, you can quickly shift fire quite a distance, but at a cost in accuracy.

The added rules for fire combat include provisions for multiple hits against vehicles by small ordnance with a high rate of fire (in some instances, a hit on the To Hit Table allows two chances on the To Kill Table) and for determining hit location on vehicles, which present different turret and vehicular target facings. Another rule allows for critical hits by high-

explosive rounds (if an armor piercing round can hit the vision slit or turret ring of a tank, it makes sense that a high explosive round can hit a firing slit on a bunker or go right through a window into a building). Finally, a rule for "Shock" covers the case where an armor-piercing round does not actually penetrate the target, but still gives everyone inside a helluva headache.

NICE SPICE.

The rules mentioned above constitute the most basic changes and additions. Among the other, less important "system rules" are scouts, wounded leaders, interrogation of prisoners, booby traps and anti-tank mines, fighter air support, weather, creation of leaders, trenches, and third levels in buildings. I don't mean to imply that these are trivial additions, which just fill space; they serve a valid purpose. Two sentences in the introduction to the rules are appropriate: "The sole purpose of **Crescendo of Doom** is to add variety to your **Squad Leader** gaming and demonstrate how truly varied WWII combat really was..." and "...each of the rules presented herein is an addition to the original **Squad Leader** system, and as such, can be considered optional."

THE EARLY YEARS

The last category of rules covers the specifics introduced in Crescendo: pre-1942 combat, the new nationalities, and the new terrain. The rules unique to combat early in the war include a provision for the intimidating effect of armored vehicles before 1942. Thus, enemy infantry adjacent to and within the field of fire of functioning weapons on an armored vehicle must pass a morale check to remain in that hex. Failure of the morale check does not break the unit but forces it to move away. Other peculiarities of pre-1942 combat allow machineguns to attempt immobilization of armored vehicles in defensive fire, and prohibit British, French, and minor allied infantry from riding on tanks or self-propelled guns; also, such infantry, if firing a machinegun, may direct any hand-arms fire only at the same target hex.

THE NEW COMBATANTS

The new nationalities introduced are British, French, Finns, and "minor allied," the latter, representing Belgian, Dutch, Polish, Norwegian, or Greek troops. They differ in their "rally numbers" which determine the ease of recovery from broken morale; this number is highest for the British and lowest for the minor allies. Finns are given special morale and weaponry rules to reflect their excellent quality and steadfastness.

The twelve scenarios generally place the Germans in the attacking role; once each against the Poles, Norwegians, Belgians, Dutch, and British; and three times against the French. Two scenarios cover allied counterattacks, and two scenarios pit the Russians against the Finns.

TERRAIN

New terrain features introduced on Boards 6 and 7 are kept to a minimum but, unfortunately, each new terrain has a minor annoyance associated with it. Board 6 adds "orchards," represented by ordered green dots in the hex, looking very much like an aerial view of an orchard. These are areas with trees but no significant foliage at ground level. They are no impediment to movement, and sighting through two orchard hexes is unimpaired (during the winter, this range extends to three hexes). Line of sight through orchards from higher elevations does create a blind zone behind the orchard hex (except during winter) because of the foliage above ground level. The minor annoyance is that orchards use one of my pet peeves in wargaming - the concept of the obstacle hex. The orchard rules state that the *entire* hex is intersected by the line of sight. The rule was probably written because many times the line of sight will pass dead center through an orchard without touching any "trees." Had orchards instead been declared to comprise all the green dots and any area within the "trees" structure, that nagging question of sighting along hex spines could have been avoided. More important, the treatment of orchards would then be consistent with that of other terrain (woods, buildings, etc.). The importance of consistency, and of an absolute minimum of exceptions to the most basic of rules, becomes greater and greater as the system gets larger. With so many valid exceptions

and special cases already present, a change in the basic concept of “blocking terrain” would require special justification.

Board 7 is dominated by a river running the length of the board, and ranging in width from three to eight hexes. New terrain for Board 7 includes rivers and marshes (now present as actual terrain symbols). This is the first mapboard that is not completely “geomorphic”; with the river running the length of the map, Board 7 does not mate end-to-end with the others. This is a small price to pay for so valuable a terrain feature, as the river adds considerably to the variety of actions, which can be simulated with the system. In general, the whole set of water rules is very good. These rules are mostly concerned with how to cross the river; by bridge, by fording, or by boat. The fording and bridge rules work the best because they relate to men or vehicles moving all by themselves; whereas boats represent a transport system, which requires special rules and added complexity. The best thing about the boat rules is that they work; they seem to “feel” right as far as vulnerability to fire, overland portaging, drifting, mounting, etc. are concerned. The problem is that they are a system different from all the others relating to transport of infantry. I have found that the best course of action when confronted with a “boat scenario” is to blank out from one’s mind all thoughts of trucks, tanks, horses, motorcycles, and bicycles, and then to go back through the boat rules one more time to “get it all straight.”

I mentioned earlier a minor annoyance in the terrain of Board 7; that annoyance is in the rules for line of sight. Basically, rivers and marshes are considered to be at terrain level -1, that is one level below the predominant surrounding terrain. The shoreline of the river is not the same kind of crest one finds with other elevation chances; instead it is a “modified crest.” The special rules associated with this “modified crest” allow sighting into the river from level 0 terrain away from the shoreline, after allowing a blind zone on the river equal to double the distance from the shoreline to the sighting unit. All this is in order. I understand the requirement for special rules, since you don’t want your river right at ground level, allowing full freedom of sighting from

all over the board, *and you* also don’t want your river behind a normal crestline which would require everyone to be right at the shoreline to see any of the river. However, testing let a little confusing when marshes are added. Marshes, like rivers, are at terrain level -1 (allowing boats to slowly traverse marshes), but sighting through a marsh hexside into a river exempts that line of sight from the blind-zone restrictions. As, long as you are careful about what is a “marsh hexside,” you will have no problem, but there are also water, open ground, water-marsh, and marsh-open ground hexsides on some of the marsh hexes.

The “pond” on board 7 is another interesting feature. It occupies three hexes and is separated from the river by a marsh. Now, the river and marsh are at terrain level -1, while the pond is specifically designated as at terrain level 0. The inescapable conclusion is that a boat on the river could enter and traverse the marsh, only to be faced with a 20-foot tall sheer wall of water at the edge of the pond.

OUTLOOK

Well, what it all boils down to is: should you buy the game or not? Assuming you liked **Squad Leader** and **Cross of Iron**, my answer is yes, except for those who have no interest in early World War II or feel their system is complete enough with **Cross of Iron**. Those who have little interest in the time period or new rules, but are waiting with bated breath to get their hands on the 1944-45 American vehicles in the next gamette, are faced with a dilemma. They must either buy **Crescendo** or just mail order the components which will be needed to enjoy **G.I.: Anvil of Victory** - at least the rulebook and new maps (\$6) but probably also the British counters (three counter sheets bring the total to \$10.50).

One thing I can’t help but be curious about is the future of the **Squad Leader system**, both specifically for the next gamette and generally for the whole system. I imagine that **G.I.: Anvil of Victory** will cover American forces, with scenario potential of North Africa, West Front 1944-45, and perhaps Italy (if Italian counters are included). The gamette can be envisioned as a limited expansion (say \$6-7) with only the American order of battle and several

scenarios, but I'll bet the more comprehensive \$15 type will be delivered. It is hard to imagine that Don Greenwood and his friends will be able to write another 36-page rule booklet, but I am sure they'll come up with something.

In the long run, what does the future hold for **Squad Leader!** How many more gamettes will be produced? The design of the **Squad Leader** series so far will result in a pyramid for the sales of each succeeding gamette. That is, Crescendo of Doom cannot sell any more copies than Cross of Iron did. With each gamette requiring the preceding one, sales of each next one will decline as subscribers to the series gradually lose interest and drop from the ranks of the faithful. Whether this will eventually spell the end of additions to the system, or Don and friends will run out of combat situations to model first, only time will tell. As for me, I hope you folks keep those sales figures high, because I personally am hooked on the system, and I'll keep buying them as long as Avalon Hill keeps putting them out.