

YALU: STRATEGY & TACTICS by Tyrone Bomba

By popular demand we are returning to one of the most intriguing games of the last few years, *YALU*, previously reviewed in *F&M* #11. Rather than repeating a description and analysis, our contributions in this issue., focus on the two facets which sets this game apart from others: its remarkable resistance to being 'cracked' or settling into a routing, and the fact the opponents play two quite different games against one another.

YALU: The Chinese Counteroffensive in Korea: 1950-1951	
Publisher	Conflict Games/Game Designers' Workshop 203 North Street, Normal, Illinois 61761`
Designer.	John Hill
Art Director:	Paul Richard Banner
Topic:	Fighting. in Korea, November 1950 to May 1951.
Size:	One 19.x25 4 inch map (mounted); ca 350 counters
Scale:	Division level, ca 10 miles per hex, four turns per month; 26 turns total.
Game System:	Alternating player phases with standard movement-combat sequence; Rigid, inactive zones of control; Defensive fire support after attacks have been announced; Two-dice combat resolution; Extensive weather rules; Chinese infiltration, UN 'bug out'; abstract air and naval support.
Complexity:	Moderately simple
Solitaire	Playability; Good
Price:	\$11.98
Date	Published July 1977

When *YALU* first arrived among us, here at the 6931st Security Squadron, last spring, it caused little stir. Frankly, the game looked so typical, and the rules presented no obvious innovations, that we didn't expect much play mileage from it. Those expectations changed, at an ever accelerating pace, as we got through our initial games and our play experience increased. The most unusual aspect of the game for us proved to be its 'uncrackability'. That is, like most experienced gamers, we find that historic simulations can usually be figured out, within a few playings, in the sense of what strategy, techniques, and tactics will best maximize a given XXXX chances for victory. This was not the case with *YALU*, for though our matches produced victories, both close ones and huge ones, for both sides, the players remained, without exception, unable to formulate any hard and fast guidelines for winning.

To paraphrase scientific jargon, our experiments aimed at finding the definitive play approach for either side remained irreproducible. What worked well in one match failed the next, or only barely succeeded. To minds trained, as ours are, to the military belief that any problem can be broken down into its constituent parts, analyzed, and from this analysis have a proper solution applied to it, all in double quick time, this situation was very uncomfortable. For twelve dollars I'd thought I'd purchased a game, instead it seemed I'd found a crack in the philosophic egg of myself and my comrades.

As the hobby's literature caught up with *YALU*, we were again surprised and disappointed. The reviewers praised the game's cleanness, or

bemoaned the lack of a few ports, the blandness of the map, the inevitable inaccuracies in the Order of Battle, movement rates, etc., but none struck at this issue we were so hung on, this uncrackability. (On our parts, we, too, had noticed those other matters and more, but all agreed that when one buys a game designed by John Hill, who gave us Autobahn-wide streets in Squad Leader, these little things must be expected.) True, the issue was broached in *F&M* #11, but little was "resented in the way of solutions. Accordingly, we went into psychic-huddle and produced the following results:

THESIS: There are two rules components in *YALU*, which render the game immune to any formalistic solution. They are, first and foremost, the double-die combat system, and second, the weather changes. In *YALU*'s combat system 'sure thing' battles are possible, but they are much less so than in the normal one-die systems we've grown so used to. With eleven possible outcomes, as opposed to six, each time the die is rolled, absolute assurance is not the simple 'get 3 to 1 and surround lem' proposition it used to be; nor is there anything in *YALU* like a truly hopeless counterattack.

At the same time, one's armies are campaigning through a land where the weather can be anything from an immobilizing blizzard to clear and calm, plus eight gradations in between, all within a few turns. Thus the ground is never too firm under any commander's feet in *YALU*, since each turn can, through some combination of the above, virtually take on the peculiar flavor and characteristics of a unique game-within-a-game. Its hard to produce basic guidelines when the assumptions of play you must use to formulate those guidelines are constantly in flux.

A Chinese Solution:

- Initially, your main thrust should be down the eastern half of the peninsula. Destroying the First Marine Division on Turn 1 is of highest priority, after which the drive should center on capturing Hungnam and Wonsan. After Wonsan falls, deflect the drive down the road and rail net toward Seoul. It is certain that if you force the eastern half of the peninsula, the western portion of the U.N. front will have to **fall back commensurably**, since it is much less favored with defensible terrain and lacks ports. The same is not true of the opposite strategy. Players who launch their main strength down the western coast will indeed find the going easy at first, but their advance will grow increasingly lopsided as the American 'hedgehogs' himself in the mountains of the center and east. Such ploys often end in communist defeats, delivered by U.N. counterattacks springing from the general are south or southwest of Wonsan forcing a corridor to the Yellow Sea.
- Fill Chinese Army losses with Korean divisions. It may look very artful to have a portion of the front held solely by North Koreans, but it has no utility. Intermingling the armies will give you greater freedom in taking (and replacing) losses.
- Human Wave assaults are only to be used as last acts of desperation when all else has failed to produce some vital result. They are very dramatic spectacles, but any overindulgence is the quickest way to bring defeat.
- Always use infiltration tactics. A stack of U.N. troops is never too securely surrounded.
- Don't attempt to hoard attack supply for some imagined great second blow. If your first offensive works correctly, you won't need any such second blow, and if it didn't, it won't do you any good.
- Always give priority to killing the non-replaceable U.N. units first, then Americans, then South Koreans. Ideally, never attack at less than 3 to 1 odds.

A U.N. Solution:

- No huge withdrawals. Retreat your line the minimum distance necessary each turn to maintain a straight, compact front. Courage.
- Use your support pieces for direct defensive-fire-subphase and assault-phase assistance, and bombardment of enemy units. All their other roles are basically luxuries which, except in some rarely occurring situations, produce negligible results.
- The Navy will do you more good on the east, where the course of battle in general tends to follow the coast more so than it does on the irregular western seaboard.
- Use 'bug-outs' as sparingly as a good communist player uses human wave assaults, and for the same reasons.
- Stack your units; this allows for maximum concentration of firepower in defensive-fire subphases, while providing maximum protection for those weak, but irreplaceable, U.N. units. Try for a full stack, empty hex, full stack, empty hex arrangement. It is true that this allows for infiltration. but infiltration is inevitable anyway, and how would you rather have it happen. in a way that allows you maximum defensive-fire opportunities, or by having the Chicom's first blow through a weakly held, continuous front and then infiltrate your Survivors?
- When counterattacking (defensive fire subphase), always concentrate on destroying the minimum number of enemy units necessary to break your encirclement. A smaller, but steady, stream of Chinese losses is always preferable to a tactical doctrine that constantly seeks, and inevitably fails at the worst moments, to overturn whole enemy armies. One dead Chinaman is here worth any three neutralized ones. Likewise, give priority to destroying Chinese units before Korean.
- Don't get involved in any big anti-guerilla campaigns. You can lose the game many ways, but I've never seen a U.N. player go down to defeat at the hands of the rear area partisans. It is usually sufficient to allow advancing replacements or reinforcements to take a passing shot as they move up toward the front.

For both sides, more than in other games, it is important to remain flexible and adapt quickly to the rapidly and unpredictably changing situations and demands. this is what makes *YALU* fascinating. Good Gaming!