

YALU: DESIGNER'S NOTES

by John HILL

A Now Wrinkle on the Chinese Water Torture...

Every game designer probably has his favorite war that for some obscure reason or another seems to fascinate him. For the longest time, I was enraptured with the Korean War. I have always been fascinated by collisions between vastly dissimilar military systems and the game possibilities they present. My specialty has always been to capture the 'mode of operation' and mentality of the armies of different cultures, and Korea seemed like an ideal vehicle for such design exploration. In the one corner we had the post World War II American Army which had evolved into almost pure *'Panzergranadier'*, 'with the most liberal artillery and airpower imaginable, and with a logistical system that is still considered one of the seven wonders of the world. In the other corner, an army that was barely past World War I in terms of equipment and supply. With respect to armor, artillery, and airpower the Chinese Army was still in the technological dark ages. In modern, western military theory a clash between these two forces would have been as much of a true battle as Wounded Knee. But when it did occur, it was actually closer to Little Big Horn. The 'why' of that fact has always fascinated me.

Another thing I love is seeing the great military generals suddenly 'catch their lunch.' All wargamers delight in seeing the total braggart, who claims himself the 'King of Hexagons,' receive a thorough thrashing. And dear Douglas MacArthur did take a beating. Once again the intriguing question 'what happened?' begs answering. Our army that invaded North Korea was well equipped, well led, and veterans of victory - then suddenly. this same army was fleeing southward in total disorder. We had a turnabout situation that just had to be explored with a game.

The standard explanation was that the Chinese Army, because of our failure to bomb a few bridges, suddenly materialized with 'umpteen' million men and overwhelmed our gallant boys with at least ten-to-one odds. But by fighting tenaciously we inflicted such grievous casualties that the Chinese Army was totally ruined and if we had only 'unleashed' Chiang Kai-Shek, the entire monolith that was Red China would have been totally humbled. And if we had only been allowed to chase the Red airplanes across the Yalu River, not only would the 'Comms' have been taught a lesson, but their whole army would have been forced to surrender and General MacArthur would have been proclaimed the new Kubla Khan.

Incredible you say? The only thing incredible about it is that the vast majority of Americans today still believe this to be the true military situation at the time. Since we believed that, it should come as no surprise we were sold the 'crusade' in Vietnam.

The facts of the situation are perhaps even more incredible. In reality, in terms of manpower, the total UN forces in Korea at that time actually outnumbered (slightly) the Chinese. The vast majority of the attacking Chinese did not use the 'key bridges,' and their entire build-up was done secretly, right under the nose of intensive air reconnaissance. While many tenacious stands were indeed made by the American units, there were a disturbing number of divisional routs not seen since the first battle of Bull Run. Americans, even in good positions, were suddenly surrendering. Entire regiments had their morale shattered, beyond repair, overnight. It was a military disaster of the first order and like most such disasters, it had its roots in faulty doctrine, faulty deployment and general blundering.

At this point, consider the nature of the adversary, the Peoples Volunteer Army. Despite the fact that they did have some of the modern trappings, such as mortars and machine-guns, this was a fighting infantry army. Compare this to the American Army where the infantry was not really expected to fight, but rather to pin down the enemy so that our air power and artillery could pulverize him. In the Peoples Volunteer Army, it was the infantry, often alone, that was expected to do the job and

close with the enemy and destroy him. It came down to a simple difference in outlook.

Since China had only infantry, it concentrated on perfecting pure infantry tactical doctrine. Having just completed a combination guerilla/conventional civil war, China had a deep psychological understanding of warfare. In this area the Oriental armies have always made us westerners look like amateurs. Their wily generals had a keen eye for just what events would cause an opponent's mind to come unhinged. Here was our Achilles' heel in Korea. Mentally, Americans do not like cold weather or walking, and they tend to panic when here are no cozy rear area kitchens. Perhaps this is an oversimplification, but deprive the average American soldier of his truck and a hot meal and you are two-thirds of the way to beating him. In a nutshell, that was exactly what the Chinese Army did. Their main tactic was to infiltrate about one-third of their attacking force into a quiet position, overlooking the American road and rear areas. Since we were marching up the roads, all they had to do was creep along the hills and mountains overlooking the roads. Sitting Bull would have been proud. In the middle of the night (Americans hate to be awakened in the middle of the night), with bugles blasting, flares flaring, they would come screaming out of the blackness and pounce upon the sleepy-eyed and stunned defenders. If a panic didn't result (which it often did) the Chinese would slip back into the darkness. It would be very quiet and still for about thirty minutes and then they would come again with another maelstrom of noise and violence. Try to imagine the mental state of the American officer in charge of such a position - he has been promised by the brass, including Doug himself, that this cannot happen. American air power guaranteed that the Chinese would never interfere in Korea. Yet, he looks at his badly shaken men, who had been led to expect they'd be home for Christmas. What to do? In the middle of the night, this seems like some gross nightmare. The American officer says to himself, 'OK, we'll play it safe, we'll fall back and consolidate our position and wait until things become stabilized - then I'll get some explanations and some artillery support.' The pull-back, along the valley road begins. Just what the Chinese have been waiting for. They launch their attack and overrun the rear areas and block the road. The deployment of the American troops is poor, they are in column formation on the road, and the Chinese hit the front of the column. The rearguard is suddenly overwhelmed. Caught on a snowbound road, attacked from all sides (by a guaranteed 'non-existent army') the unit begins to fall apart. Command control collapses and panic sets in. Soldiers attempt to flee, but to where? There are desperate attempts to restore order. Then there is chaos - men throw away their weapons and begin to surrender. It is over, an American unit has been totally eliminated. The following day air reconnaissance discovers only the remnants of what had been an American combat unit. They see abandoned weapons, burning vehicles and no sign of life. The enemy has disappeared back into the snow-covered mountains to prepare for the next attack, maybe ten miles farther south, ten miles deeper 'behind the American lines!'

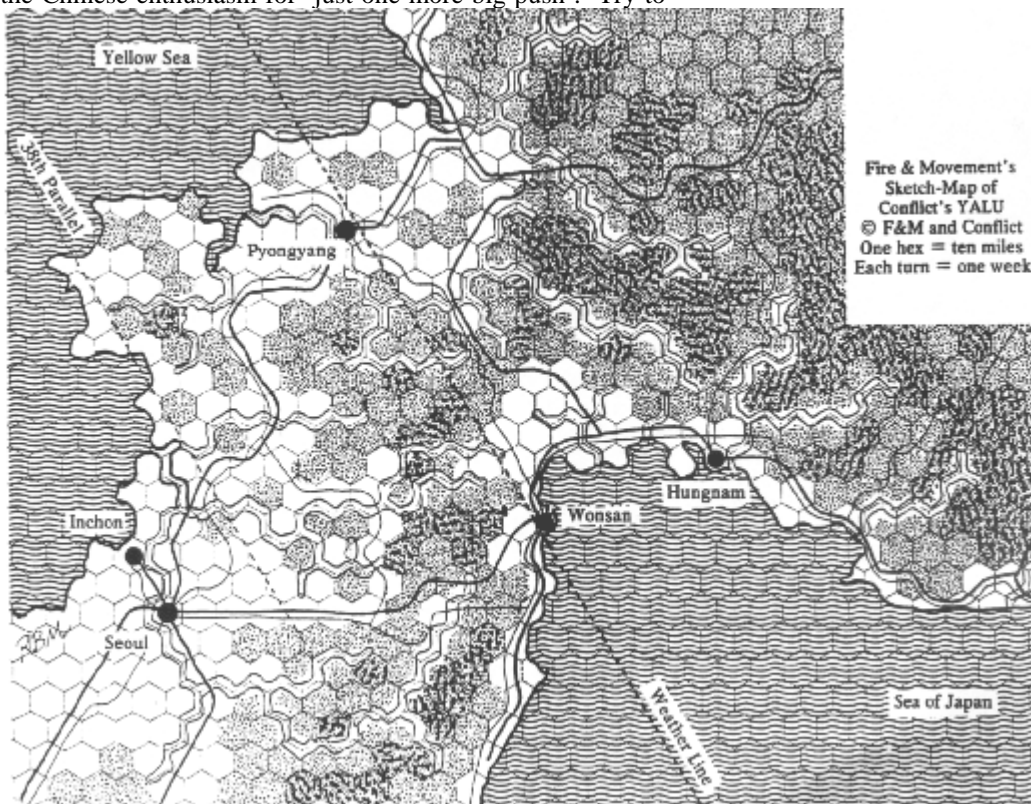
In a very capsulized form, the above experience demonstrates what the American troops had to go through. This did not happen to only isolated battalions or regiments, but whole divisions, like the 2nd, which were totally mauled in this manner. Obviously, the rebuilt ROK (Republic of Korea) formations were totally dismembered by such tactics. The UN forces, faced with such catastrophic defeats, simply decided the only option open to them was to run! Before we judge this decision too harshly, remember that all these events were inflicted on the UN troops in the worst possible terrain, during the worst possible weather and, psychologically, at the worst possible time. In a strategic sense, the entire UN Army was ambushed'.

That was the historical situation; now the problem of trying to simulate it. I wanted to show the actual problems without having to 'fudge them.' In the earlier days of wargame design the way to capture the superiority of the Chinese tactics would simply have been by 'upping' their combat factors or giving them a doubling of combat factors for the 'surprise' element for

the first few turns. That was fairly common under the circumstances, but I wanted to show that the Chinese divisions, based on a simple body count, were not that formidable. Indeed, a Chinese division is usually rated equal to a ROK division (4). Later, the Chinese would get their 'heavy divisions' (5), but this still didn't compare to the average American division strength of 10 (or 13 for the Marines). No, the Chinese advantage was in 'situation' this includes the weather and the fragile UN morale that panicked at the thought of isolation. I wanted to design a 'Chinese Effect' into the game, but I also wanted to show that if the Chinese player tried to play the 'American Game' (slugging it out in open terrain in a firepower contest) he would wind up crushed. Given a good position, with even a little air power and flanks covered, the Chinese player should approach the UN line with great foreboding. Hence, the entire thrust of Yalu's 'effect' was to create the mental environment where the players were to be made subtly aware that Yalu is two games, with two sets of rules. There is the 'Chinese Game' where everyone runs around in a pack and plays King of the Snowy Mountains, and then there is the 'UN Game' where both sides line up their troops, with flanks anchored, and simply swap punches in the open terrain under the sunny skies of Korea. The whole trick of winning *Yalu* is to force the other player to play your game. This will demand much discipline on your part. Both sides have special rules that give them a 'cute trick' - if they know when to use it. Since the game begins with the Chinese rules in effect, it is the job of the UN player to switch the game quickly, but not obviously, over to his rules. Hopefully the UN player will work on the Chinese enthusiasm for 'just one more big push'. Try to

turn this into a bloody blunder against your air supported lines. The psychological trick in Yalu is to change the rules without the other player knowing it. In that respect, *Yalu* is my most devious design to date. I wanted the players to think either Oriental or American. This is crucial. I have seen some superbly competent UN players switch sides and be totally eaten alive because they tried to use M Chinese Army as they did their UN Army. To be a good UN commander you must be organized in thought. Plan ahead and see to it that everyone arrives at a conventional battle line at the same time. Your army must operate like a well-heeled corporation, meshing the elements of air, land, and sea. To be a good Chinese commander, be wily. Always look for a hole in the UN line where you can infiltrate through. Think of your army as oozing through the UN line, and, most of all, be patient. Remember that the UN player is experiencing nightmares of your troops infiltrating his lines. He will often overreact and panic and give up a viable position due to some harmless infiltration. Always think of how to unhinge your opponent's psyche, and don't forget to smile.

Finally, if this isn't mind bending enough, remember that no matter how good you are in forcing the game to your design, it all can be totally undone by the weather! *Yalu*, by virtue of being fought in the hideous climate of northern Korea, has a vicious weather table. The most suspenseful point of most turns is at the beginning, when the die is rolled for weather. The effect is that in good weather the UN air power makes Chinese attacks risky; Chinese movement is hindered in the open.



and the very presence of air power raises the morale of any isolated UN unit. On the other hand, should the die toll go the other way and a heavy snow or blizzard result, the UN is in big trouble. There is no air power and no movement. Needless to say, any isolated UN units would be in a very serious situation if a blizzard were to last many turns. Hence, not only does each player have to prepare for what the enemy may do, but he must be aware of what Mother Nature might do. This requires mental effort by both players since they must be ready to take advantage of weather favoring their tactics and be prepared for the opposite situation.

All of the above noted points contribute to the overall effect I wanted to create in the players' minds. I want them to experience the mental pressures of the actual war, at the command level that is simulated. In *Squad Leader* I strove to create the mental decision environment of the company commander and the psyche pressure that 'one mistake and you all could die.' With *Yalu*, which is more operational, the mental

pressure I wanted was twofold - I wanted the Chinese player literally to cringe at what the UN firepower could do to him should it be applied; and I wanted the UN player to feel real horror at all those enemy counters that keep sneaking through his lines, and like any Korean veteran I wanted him to curse that rugged country and its vile weather wanted *Yalu* to be more than just a simulation of the ground fighting in Korea. The design techniques that have been developed make it easy to design a game that shows operational combat, but in designing for effect, I wanted Yalu to be a total emotional involvement. I intended this design to be a double-edged sword which both players would find cutting their way at times and being aimed at their throats at other times - or to quote one of my infamous design criteria, "A design is successful if both sides feel pimped..." All in all, not a bad criterion.