

# DISPLAY BOARD 101

Richard Lonski

**I**n my 10+ years of table top gaming, I have seen many display boards. It was easy to pick out the ones I liked, but I never really understood the thought behind making them. A couple years ago, I was fortunate enough to sit in on a seminar put on by some much more experienced gamers. This seminar focused on what makes a good Display Board and some tips on how to make it easy. Below is a combination of what I learned, and some of my own experiences.



## STEP 0: UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OF A DISPLAY BOARD

It may seem obvious, but the basic function of a display board is to:

1. Easily transport your army from 1 place to another without having to put it away (optional, but nice),
2. Highlight your army as a whole,
3. Highlight certain units (center piece units....unusual units etc) and,
4. Provide a context in which to view your army.

During the planning/construction of your board, you need to keep this in mind. It is easy to make choices that are contrary to these purposes. The biggest trap to be aware of is that a display board is not terrain. You are using many of the same skills, materials and tools, but terrain has a different purpose on a table. If you build your board as terrain, it will likely come out too busy and will cause the viewer to spend more time looking at your board than your army. You want your board to be interesting, but not distract from the army itself.

## STEP 1: CHOOSE THE STYLE OF DISPLAY BOARD YOU WANT

I typically see 2 basic styles of display boards: Parade Ground and Diorama. While both types work, the Diorama style best fulfills all 4 purposes while Parade Ground style boards is mostly just a tool to carry your army from 1 table to the next.

- A Parade Ground Display Boards look like....well, a parade ground. They are generally flat and featureless. While the 'ground' on the board often matches the bases of your units there is not much else of interest. Additionally, the units themselves are often laid out as in 'on review', as opposed to in a more dynamic 'in the field' type look.
- A Diorama Display Board provides a setting for which to view

the army. Ideally, it would match the terrain of a major battle that your unit was involved in (as well as the season). This provides a great opportunity tie in your unit history/story in a more dynamic and interesting way.

## STEP 2: SIZING AND LAYOUT OF THE BOARD

First, you need to determine approximate size of the board you need. To do this, simply lay out the units on a flat surface. Then you need to adjust placement for any extras you want to add for flavor (like hills, buildings, trees, hedges, fences etc.). Often times, I will just spread out the units at this point to allow room for extras without a solid idea of that they will be. Another trick is to keep in mind the standard picture frame sizes (16x20, 20x30, etc). As you will be using a picture frame to further set off your display board and make your army stand out. While standard frame sizes are cheaper/easier, you can also go with a custom frame. Don't pass up an opportunity for something unique if the creativity bug strikes you. Maybe setting up an armor column for your tank company on an 8x24 frame or something of that sort. The only disadvantage is that non-standard sizing drives up the cost.

Once you have the size figured out, now it is off to Wal-mart/Hobby Lobby or whatever to get an appropriate frame. I recommend black as it is the safe choice. It will match with any army's color scheme and not distract or conflict from what it frames. Other options are to try to pick up some of the color choices from your army (maybe a red tone to set off your Brit Para's berets for example).

## STEP 3: CREATING THE FOUNDATION

Once I have the frame, I remove the glass/plastic and just keep the backing. I use a marker to trace the inside of the frame onto the backing (so I know where to glue the terrain part of the board). Once that is done, I get a sheet of 1" foam (the blue/pink home insulation board works best IMO). Remove the plastic sheeting from the foam and use the frame as a stencil to mark the size of foam square I need. Alternatively, you can also piece

together the shape from scrap foam you may have laying around from terrain/table projects. Just keep the gaps between pieces at a minimum and steps 4 and 5 will blend them together so you won't be able to tell they were separate pieces. When you cut the foam, be sure to use a sharp knife (box knives work well) and don't cut too fast. The faster you cut, the more likely you will not get a clean cut. While you can cover that up later, you are just making more work for yourself. Also using a metal straight edge of some sort helps to ensure a straight clean cut. Remember, in your completed board, the edge you are cutting will be up against the inside of the frame. If your cut lines are not straight, it could be very noticeable.

Now, attach your square of foam to the backing of the frame. I have used both PVA glue and Hot Glue to good effect. The only trick here is to make sure you have the placement of your foam piece correct (or the frame won't fit around it properly) and that you get a nice flat seal between the foam and the backing. For placement, I normally fit it into the frame while the glue is still wet and let it dry with the frame in place. That way I am guaranteed that it will fit properly. As far as getting a good seal, add some weight on top of the foam while it dries (I generally use books) will really help give you a good seal. Don't worry about any marks/indentations you leave in the foam, we'll take care of those later.

#### **STEP 4: PLAN OUT YOUR TERRAIN**

Once the foam is secured to the backing, now you can begin to plan out how you want it to look. Just using the foam as is, gives you an unrealistically flat surface. So you want to give it some character. This is where the 2nd, 3rd and 4th purposes of a display board come into play. Now you want to start planning the terrain features to add to your board as well as basic placement of units. I find drawing them out with a marker to be helpful. I also keep my models handy to help with placement/sizing. There are several ways to highlight specific units. You can:

- Raise them above your other units (place them on a hill etc).
- Frame them in by placing tall terrain features (trees/fences etc) on either side of them.

- Use the sight lines to draw the viewer's eyes to them. This is a bit more subtle and artsy, but basically means creating long linear lines within your diorama. The lines will naturally bring your viewer's eye to where they converge or end.

You can add any hills you want by hot gluing an additional layer of foam where you want it. Be sure the extra layer for your hill is larger than you want it to end up (at least an inch in all directions). Once that is done, simply use a wire brush to create the gentle slope of the hill, add slight contours for ditches/roadbeds or merely the natural roll of the ground. This also creates the base texture of your ground. A couple words of warning:

1. This step is messy (little shreds of foam everywhere)... keep a shop vacuum handy and,
2. Be sure to brush in multiple directions, otherwise you will get a corduroy effect from the wire brush (could be useful to model plowed fields, but mostly just looks silly).

In the example picture, you can see how I used the Hedges to create sight lines and direct your attention to the bottom left corner where I also placed piles of fuel drums. In planning these hedge rows, I made sure to leave a raised area to form the bed of the hedges. This helped model the fields of Normandy where the roadways and fields were sunken lower than the base of the hedge rows. Again, nothing dramatic to distract from the army, but enough detail to tie into the history of your army and where they fought.

Other details I had planned were the craters and a slight roll to the ground. Concept wise, I chose fuel drums for my objective marker to help tie into the board and well as tying into my history (fuel supply to German Panzer Divisions were always low). I added the craters as a nod to the pounding that my Panzer Lehr took from US artillery and planes during Operation Cobra (my force is modeled after a Kampfgruppe formed at the tail end of that operation). They also provided a nice detail that added to the board, but did not distract from the army.

#### **STEP 5: CREATING THE TERRAIN ITSELF**

At this point, you should have the foam board shaped to your satisfaction. Now it is time to add the features and surface your





board. By adding the features now before you surface the entire board, you can blend those features into the board and make it look as if it belonged there (instead of something glued on top of the ground). In my example, I built up the base for the hedge rows (2 layers of kitty litter and PVA glue) and added my fuel drums and craters. Once that was done, paint the entire board with PVA glue. Then I toss a little bit of kitty litter to represent the odd rock that will be in the ground followed by a heavy coat of Play Sand over the entire thing. A couple notes of interest:

- For sand, I purchased a 50# bag of sand from Lowe's for about \$3. I've been using it for terrain, display boards and basing materials for several years now.
- I used Play Sand (as opposed to regular sand) as the grains are finer and more consistent (makes ground more 'field' like). I use Kitty Litter to add whatever rocks I want. If you want rougher terrain, you could go with regular sand. Just remember, it is easier to add kitty litter to sand as you use it, than to pick out the chunks that are too large.
- Many sites/tutorials mention using watered down PVA

glue. I find that thinning down the PVA glue only gives me a weaker glue bond and a longer drying time. Neither of which I want. I almost never thin down PVA glue during construction of terrain. I do find it useful as a sealer.

- If I was making terrain, I would do at least 2 layers of PVA/sand to make it durable and able to stand up to regular play. As a display board will not see this kind of use, 1 layer is fine.

## STEP 6: PAINTING YOUR BOARD

Now you are done creating your board, you are left with painting it. Typical hobby paints (Vallejo, GW, Reaper etc) are expensive. I always use cheapo craft paints for my terrain/boards. Other than that, if you are this far in the hobby, you already know how to paint, so have at it. I do suggest having at least 3 layers/shades of color for the dirt/rocks to give the best appearance. Be sure to give the edges of your display board a heavy coat of black....spots of bright pink/blue foam exposed between your 'ground' and the frame are very distracting.



The contents of this article originally appeared on Battlefront's *Flames of War* forums and have been reprinted here with the express permission of the author. For more information on the *Flames of War* miniature game or to visit the online forums, go to [www.flamesofwar.com](http://www.flamesofwar.com).