



JUST ANOTHER C.O.G.G. IN THE MACHINE

a Tale of a Rookie Tournament Organizer
by Mark Gunter



On Saturday, April 25, 2009, the 1st Annual C.O.G.G. Flames of War Regional Qualifier was held at Game Headquarters in Oklahoma City. Fourteen players attended the event and, based on feedback received from the participants, it was a success. What follows is a recounting of the tournament's conception, design, and execution through the eyes of the Tournament Organizer.

THE GAMING ENVIRONMENT

The Oklahoma City metro area is a sprawling community of over 500,000 people with multiple colleges and universities and a major Air Force Base within a 25 mile radius. Within that area, there are limited locations that carry Flames of War (FOW) product on the shelf. I know of one for sure, but I understand another store has picked up some product.

There is a decent gaming community in Oklahoma City, but FOW has never been a front runner that I could tell. Since getting into the game in 2006, I have only been made aware of two tournaments and some semi-regular weekend gaming. The one FOW tournament I attended only had eight players. The largest tourney I took part in, for Warhammer 40K, had sixteen. In general, while gamers were playing FOW, there was no sense of presence beyond the random battles in the game room. It was not until I began to advertise plans for a tournament that I discovered just how deep FOW had dug into the community.

THE IMPETUS

After discovering the joys of FOW, I began participating more and more on the Battlefront forums and it became my primary contact with other players. Reading about the other events around the world spurred on conversations with my best friend about the tournament scene in Oklahoma. This was not a new topic for us, but it was typically limited to talk of how no one seems to want to run an event. Finally, I traveled to Kansas City to visit the Fall Recruits event in 2007. It looked fun enough and everyone treated me as if I belonged there, so I came back to play in Spring 2008. The return trip in Fall 2008 clinched it. I was going to run a tournament in Oklahoma City.

For the Fall Recruits 2008 event, I rode up with another local player. We had met before, but only once that I could recall. A seasoned veteran of war gaming, he offered good advice on not only how to proceed, but also in what to expect from the local gaming community.

As my best friend later remarked, he seemed to be the voice of reason and what he said gave me hope that I could pull off a worthwhile event. Full speed ahead!

THE TIMING

The first roadblock to consider was when to hold the tourney. Looking at the events I do or would like to travel to, work schedules, holidays, and a host of other issues, it came down to April. In hindsight, still my best choice, although choosing the last weekend was a bad idea as our date was also the last date of a popular arts festival in town.



THE LOCATION

Once a date is set, determine a location. First, you need to have a general idea of how many will attend. How can you determine that for an event that is so rarely held and you are planning to plaster news of the event far and wide? You really can't do it. My solution was to cap the event at 20 players, just the right size to squeeze into our local game shop if we couldn't find another venue. It also is a more manageable number for a first-time event organizer. After looking at other possible venues, a quick conversation with Game Headquarters was all it took to reserve game space.

With the response I received for the 1st Annual C.O.G.G. event, it is possible that we could exceed 20 players, so we are now looking for other venue options. The game shop has two rooms, but they are on opposite sides of the store, creating a completely different logistical

problem, and not one I was prepared to deal with this year. Finding a location for 2010 will be a challenge and I will, once again, have to guess at numbers. In this case, the venue may dictate attendance.



THE COMPETITORS

Having determined the venue and, as a result, the number of competitors, the official announcement was made. At this point, all I had was the place and date, but that was all I needed. Every local forum I could find had a post announcing the 1st Annual C.O.G.G. event. Even with minimal information, the numbers filled out within a week. This was a full five months before the event.

Over the course of the next few months, I would receive sporadic e-mails or make contact with other players who were interested. We had a short list of alternates and an even longer list of people wanting to be added to any future mailing lists regarding events. If everyone who stated an interest could make it, we would have seen 32 or more individuals! Definitely more than I was prepared for and while disappointed that I had to turn some away, I was ecstatic that future events would have no problem finding players.

There were only two real issues with gathering the competitors and they were related. With only 20 slots available, supply quickly outstripped demand (a happy occurrence). We tried to encourage people to sign up as alternates, but as should be expected, many found other events to travel to in the meantime. We also had attrition due to a wide number of factors. Again, that was to be expected, thus our concern with getting alternates signed up. As slots began to open up and we ran out of alternates, we began spreading the word again in an attempt to keep our numbers up. This

netted some replacement players, but we ended up with room for additional players.

The second issue was a complaint about the method of notifying the community about the tournament. I had posted to every forum I could find, it was posted to Battlefront's event listing, and I had plenty of first-hand evidence that word of mouth was in play as well. Where did I drop the ball? According to some, the standard practice has been to post a sign-up sheet at the game shop. This was actually news to me. I knew they had a bulletin board and I knew that store-run events followed this practice, but the events I had previously attended all involved sign-up via e-mail or on a forum. In my defense, I actually have a flyer I created for posting in the store, but when the event fills to over-flowing within a few days and did so before I had a chance to visit the games shop, there really isn't a need to advertise as word has obviously gotten out. On the other hand, not posting that flyer may have cost me people who could have refilled the six slots that ended up being open on game day.

THE PLANNING

Much of the planning was actually done while seeking out locations and alerting possible competitors, to the point that about 80% was set and ready to go by the time our roster filled. From there it was minor tweaks, making final determinations on such things as era, point values, and scoring methodology. Other than completion of tables construction, everything was pretty much set in stone about two months before the event.

The decision to play a 1500 point Late War event was somewhat difficult. Personally, I prefer Mid War, but Late War books had been the main fare for some time. 1500 points was low enough that a new player just



starting out could jump in with a little less work than a 1750 point affair would create, depending on their force of choice, of course. We also had a more limited time frame in which to run the tourney, so 1500 points would ensure that most games would complete their games in the allotted time and allow us to wrap up at a decent hour.



The scoring methodology (explained later) was not a new approach for me, just a new application. For years, I have tinkered with ways to rank players, score tournaments, and keep track of things as games progressed. It was really just a matter of adapting the available scoring mechanisms to my own tastes. The final scoring method used is being reviewed for the next tourney, but overall I was pleased with the results. The basic premise was that I wanted the two aspects of the hobby, game-play and background, to play two separate rolls, with game-play being most important in determining the Tourney Champion. At the same time, I wanted to insist on a minimal amount of effort being put into the forces involved. I also wanted to make sure that those who enjoy putting extra effort into their forces, be it painting, history, or otherwise, have their own separate venue for recognition. As a result, a certain number of hobby points were defined with



three (Army list by deadline, fully assembled army with basic painting, and no obvious proxies) going towards the Overall or Tourney Champion award. The remaining hobby points focused on very basic items such as the painting style being consistent, exceptional painting or modeling, and background information. They did not figure in to the Overall score, but they did go towards a separate Hobby Award.

THE TABLES

We knew we only had room for ten tables at most, thus the twenty player limit. I had asked my best friend to be the Terrain Marshall for the event and, after much discussion, we determined that we wanted to handle all of the tables ourselves if at all possible. Why take on that burden? We had both witnessed top-notch terrain at other events and via posts on the Flames of War forums. We had also seen the tables put together for local events. While we had seen some decent tables locally, we felt we could do better and saw this as an opportunity to raise the bar. While we did put a call out for tables from others, we also made it clear that we had high expectations for any submissions received.

Both of us had a few good tables already and at least one or two in the planning stages before the tourney idea struck. We both worked to create more tables for our event with an eye towards diversity. In the end, we only set up eight tables for the fourteen players to use. Every table had its own unique challenges and all of them met our visual expectations for the baseline we wanted to set. That is to say that we saw plenty of room for improvement, but we felt we had set a high bar for terrain at future local events. The feedback received from players and onlookers alike confirmed this.

One thing in particular I did that larger tourneys may not be able to do was to provide a Terrain Briefing prior to the event. The Terrain Marshall and I made sure to take standardized photos (all from the same angle) of all of our tables as construction was completed. The images were then dropped into a .pdf alongside the table rules with one page for each table. The first page also included general information regarding the tournament, including the scenarios to be played. This was distributed about a week before army lists were due and the response was positive. It took a little work to put together, but it was also a great way to document the tables before hand.



The only complaints received during or after the event involved specific table, player, and game rule interactions which have been noted for future reference. The complaints were largely about movement being too constricted, especially for the attacker, or making lateral movement too difficult for the defender to respond to enemy strikes in a timely manner. All of the feedback continues to be considered, but by and large, the changes suggested have been fairly minimal.

THE SETUP

We were given access to a large game room capable of supporting up to ten tables with a bit of planning. We ended up with eight tables with plenty of room to move about so that, for the most part, players were comfortable and people could pass through and observe games with little difficulty. The two additional tables we had planned would have fit, but it would have made navigating the room a bit more difficult.

We had two tables that could not be moved, one of which allowed for the players to walk around the entire board. The remaining tables all had a short end against a wall. Most of the tables were eight feet long, but we had a few that were only six feet in length. The loss of two feet was problematic for us. We are used to having that extra table space for setting up the troops before the game begins and for storing various gaming accoutrements. This is a problem worth addressing for future events. Even a small 2'x2' table next to each game board would help. Unfortunately, nothing can be done about the hard concrete floor.

Consider lighting, access to bathrooms, and general traffic patterns. Make sure that people can travel through the room without difficulty, they can see what is happening on the table top, and that the facilities are easily accessible will help make for some happy gamers.

THE PAIRINGS

Prior to the event, first round matchups were determined, allowing for possible last minute changes to the lineup. Our guiding principles were that players should be matched with fresh and challenging opponents within a Swiss-style system. A player should be given a variety of opponents, avoiding being matched to similar forces where possible. Finally, unless overall ranking dictated otherwise, blue-on-blue matches would be avoided.

These guidelines were translated into detailed guides for each round.

Round 1: Red versus blue, players from different "clubs", avoid matchups of players known to have played each other in past events, avoid pairing novices with experts, and avoid infantry versus infantry where possible.

Round 2 and 3: Using Victory Point totals, create red versus blue matches and maximize club versus club matchups where possible.

While minor modifications were made to the pairings in rounds two and three, the hierarchy was largely observed and worked out well. In the end, while some pairings were unavoidably lopsided, the top players found themselves facing at least two solid opponents.

The difficult part was assigning tables. The initial pairings were looked at in detail, but time does not allow for close examination of tables and pairings for later rounds. All in all, the results appeared to be decent, but some improvement could be made in making sure that the opposing forces are equally hampered by the terrain. We have already developed a theories about how we can make this decision easier.

THE SCORING

A simple system was desirable. Victory Points were used straight from the game results and formed the basis for the Overall Score. In addition, each player was allowed



to nominate one player as “Best Sport” and given four points to spread among their three opponents. Two of these points had to go to their nominee, the other two could be used for any opponent, including their nominee. Each Best Sport nomination netted a point in the Overall Score. Finally, eight simple checklist items made up the Hobby Points, with three going towards the Overall Score and five going only towards our Best Hobby Award.

A spreadsheet was created to help track the scores and do calculations. Using an adaptation of the system made popular by the I-95 gamers, tent cards were made for each player, giving them a place to record all of their scoring information. This information was then transferred to the spreadsheet with two pairs of eyes checking for accuracy. Even so, we had one mistake sneak in and additional measures (various check sums on the spreadsheet) will be added to make sure that we avoid any issues in the future. The cards can be used without the spreadsheet, but redundancy in our scoring and pairing system was preferred. While adjustments will be made, we were fairly happy with the results.

For the Hobby Scoring, our eight items were as follows:

Towards the Overall and Hobby Scores

- 1) Army List turned in by deadline
- 2) Fully assembled army with basic painting
- 3) No obvious proxy models

Towards the Hobby Score only

- 4) Painting and basing style is consistent
- 5) Exceptional modeling and/or painting
- 6) Identification of a historical unit
- 7) Presentation of a basic list background
- 8) Best Army Vote received (player vote)

Even before the tournament began, we decided that this would need to be revisited for future events. The basic format works, but there is room for improvement, including fleshing out the details of each item. The idea was to strongly encourage those items we saw as essential to the health of the hobby or for tournament administration. Lists need to be in early to provide time to check them for accuracy as well as help with pairings. Unpainted armies or armies where a Panzer IV is actually a Panther are not desirable, especially when the tourney is highlighting the hobby in front of an audience that includes people not already involved who are considering investing in the game. Putting

your best foot forward helps to recruit new players, so why have unpainted figures on the table?

The remaining five items allow a player to participate to be involved without threat of being left out of the top prize spots just because they have no desire, ability, or resources to complete an option. Not everyone is a great painter or has time for detailed modeling. Neither does every player enjoy the “book report” aspect of creating an army history even if they have extensive knowledge about their force. These items were deemed as desirable traits, but not required.

Our approach garnered the desired results. There were no unpainted hoards on the table and the only proxies were so minor (transports and air support models that were not quite right) that it is doubtful anyone would have noticed or cared if they did. Everyone had their list in on time as well. Upon review, however, it may be that we need to shift more items into the Overall Score category to help further differentiate player rankings in a short tournament if we continue using this system. There is always room to improve.



PRIZE SUPPORT

To my knowledge, all of the previous tourneys were handled locally. I contacted Battlefront early on with the basic details of our event and was quickly offered gift certificates for their product to be awarded to our top three players. This put us well ahead of what I had expected. Having become used to the generosity of other tourneys, I wanted to share the wealth myself as well. Finances being what they were, my options were limited and I was also unsure if the tourney would be successful enough to promote a second event. I hedged my bets and the prize support was largely limited to the Battlefront certificates. I bought a pair of destroyed tank blisters from the store to give to those placing at the bottom as a thank you for taking it on the chin and

being good sports about it. I also went to the extra expense of purchasing enough medals to go around. In the end, every player got a "Participant" medal. Our Tourney Champion, 2nd Overall, and Best General each got a special medal as did our Best Sport and Best Hobby winners. These were purchased in various metal color and pin drape combinations to help set each medal apart. These were to serve as a reminder of the event in the case we never repeated, but it was brought to our attention that we could follow up with oak leaf clusters at future events for those who already received medals.



AFTERMATH AND CONCLUSIONS

At the end of the day, we felt that the 1st Annual C.O.G.G. had been a success. All of our initial objectives for the tournament were met with the exception of having a full house. The terrain was well received although we did get suggestions for improving two problematic tables. Everything seemed to run fairly smooth and the adjustments needed appear minor. I have not heard from anyone who was unhappy with the event. If they are out there, they have held their tongue which is regrettable. I'd prefer to know about it and be able to address any issues.

In preparing for this event, I spoke with several experienced organizers, most from the *Flames of War* forums, read a lot of relevant posts, and processed it with my own, unique sense of organization. Ideas were blatantly stolen, adapted, revised, and improved (for me personally – what works for me may not work better for someone else). Lesson one is that there is a large pool of experience from which to draw. You only need to ask questions and actively listen to the answers. This is just as true after the event as it is before.

Second, some people repeatedly warned that I couldn't have my tournament here or there because of the store/employee/influential customer who consistently blocked anyone from doing anything constructive. My advice is to ask the individual relating this tale of woe how he "knows" this for a fact. If they didn't experience it personally, take it with a grain of salt. If they experienced it personally, take it with two grains. Somewhere in the tale is a true story, but all too often there was a misunderstanding and wires simply got crossed. It may actually be a case where the person who was blocked from holding an event had not proven themselves trustworthy. A store may hesitate to allow someone to run an event if they have no idea if they are responsible or not. If they don't know you, you need to approach them in a professional manner, preferably with references from people they know and trust.

In my case, the long-time staff at Game Headquarters knew me by name even though my visits have become more rare as I've moved farther away. I was also fortunate that the owner was there at the time of my visit to inquire about running a tournament. When he realized I was planning an event six months ahead of time, he didn't hesitate. Bottom line is treat hearsay as hearsay and don't give up just because someone tells you a certain place will not allow people to run tournaments. Just ask. But before you do, have a plan and be able to tell them what it is you are looking for: number of tables and participants, date, time of day, and when you want to hold the event. It is pretty simple and if they say no, more than likely they have their reasons and can suggest other options.

Third and most important, have fun! For some people, organizing and running things is fun. For me, it depends on the subject matter. Ask me to organize a wedding and I'll freak. Ask me to set up a tournament for a bunch of gamers? I'd rather play, but if no one else is going to step up, why not? Besides, you get to show off all your cool terrain, shout at people (to finish their games, etc – not just shouting in general), tell them where to go (tables) and what to do (scenarios). Just don't let them know you're enjoying the power trip and everything will go just fine. Unless you screw something up, but then, you've planned so thoroughly, that won't happen, right?

*This article is proudly brought to you by C.O.G.G.
For more articles, visit our temporary host at
www.bardsabode.com/tactics.html.*