Converting the Skirmish Campaigns ™ Series of Books for Look, Sarge, No Charts: WWII ™

By Scott Fisher and Buck Surdu

A Bit about the Skirmish Campaign Books by Scott

In the late 1990s there was a big growth in skirmish WWII Wargames. This growth was fueled by several really nice rule sets like Battleground WWII and Buck's Beer and Pretzels Skirmish rules. In some discussion with Nate Forney, we decided that it would be really great to do a series of linked WWII skirmish scenarios in a campaign format, similar to other joint ventures we had worked on for naval gaming. At the time, Nate had just finished an excellent naval campaign focused on the invasion of Norway in 1940 – we naturally agreed that Norway would form an excellent background for our WWII skirmish campaign. After we wrote a series of 15 scenarios in about 1998, we contacted the folks at Battleground WWII and asked if they would be interested in publishing the Norway campaign scenarios under the Battleground name. Initially they said "yes," but after some amount of re-formatting on our part, they decided that they did not want to publish the book as they (at the time) did not offer any miniatures for that campaign. After a small crisis and a late night conversation about publishing with Buck, Nate and I decided to create SkirmishCampaigns™. Our first scenario/campaign book was published in 1999 and I am proud to say that the price has not changed since! (We decided that we would share our passion with the rest of the gamers at a reasonable price – basically enough to cover our costs plus some research material!).

Over the last seven years, SkirmishCampaigns™ has formed the basis for several authors to create campaign books, with over 25 now in print. For the complete list see www.skirmishcampaigns.com. In 2005, we launched the Skirmish Elite series allowing several other authors the opportunity to publish on WWII topics. In 2001, I wrote a set of skirmish rules called ARC of FIRE™ and am now writing a set of WWII air rules called Watch Your Six!

Each SkirmishCampaigns™ or Skirmish Elite™ book has a historical background and introduction to the campaign, special campaign rules, a map and from 8-12 scenarios that can be linked together to form one or several campaigns. The scenarios represent units historically available to each side in the battle and gives morale and training ratings for each. It is important to note that having these ratings in generic SkirmishCampaigns™ format allows for some interesting combinations (like high morale, low training 1941 Soviets!). Since the ratings are offered in a generic format (see below) each scenario can be adopted to any set of rules (Skirmish or some other level). Each book takes about a year to research and playtest depending on how easy the information is to find. The details in each book are painstakingly researched – we have made it our passion to make sure the TO&Es, units and terrain are as historically accurate as possible. In fact, several books have missed their publication dates pending historical answers to some key questions! (I will never forget the joy we had finding out what units in the German Army in 1940 had one instead of two LMGs in each squad.)

In the past, I have made several trips to Normandy to research the three Normandy books that are in print (a fourth focused on British Paras in Normandy will be out in 2007) – these are some of the most interesting instances of seeing the real thing and being able to compare it to "game board" terrain. While writing for

SkirmishCampaigns™, we often have very good maps of the battle locations but there is clearly no substitute for seeing and walking the real terrain. I think most gamers would be astounded by the terrain in Normandy for example – it is hard to imagine real Norman hedges until you see them (and not the cut ones near most roads – find a back road and see the uncut version to get an idea about the hedges from 1944 since they were often not cut in wartime).

A couple years ago a rumor was started that SkirmishCampaigns™ had "gone out of business" – nothing could be further from the truth. We now have a group of authors who have more projects going that can be put in print. Currently (Jan 2007), the following books are either waiting printing or in final production: British Paras in Normandy, Ausies at Bardia, Americans in Sicily, and Dunkirk.

The units in each SkirmishCampaigns™ or Skirmish Elite scenario are taken from direct information about what types and how many units of a given type were in the battle. One of the more popular aspects to this approach is that the battles can be easily scaled-up, as we are suggesting in this article. Players of several battalion-level rule sets, such as Battle Front, have used the SkirmishCampaigns™ format to generate scenarios.

***Look, Sarge, No Charts*™: Humorous Title but *Serious* Rules by Buck:**

Look, Sarge, No Charts: WWII™ was written by Chris Palmer, Dave Wood, and me. In designing a set of war-gaming rules, my basic approach has been consistently to enumerate a list of goals before beginning. We wanted to create a set of WWII rules that gave infantry a role on the battlefield and allowed for rapid play. The objectives for this set of large-scale WWII rules were to reflect that:

• Reconnaissance is important,
• Infantry matters,
• Making large formations do what you want is hard, and
• "Realism" is gained through simple mechanics that stress the players' decision making, not intricate mechanics.

So while we went to great lengths to remove as many charts as possible, we have also spent years "reducing," abstracting, and tuning the underlying data so that this does not become "lots of modifiers, but sixes always hit." Hopefully all that effort to reduce lots of information to the essence of WWII maneuver warfare and reduce the number of charts needed to portray a reasonably realistic battle is apparent in the end result.

In addition to their major objectives, we wanted to ensure that these rules did not feel like skirmish rules. There are many good sets of skirmish rules on the market, including *Arc of Fire* and *Beer and Pretzels Skirmish*, but we were trying to create a set of rules that felt different from a skirmish game and provided "tactical," rather than "skirmish," challenges to the players. We worked very hard to not let "skirmish" modifiers show up in this "tactical" game.

We actually did not set out to design a set of rules with no charts, but once we figured out how to handle some design criteria for the direct fire combat, a lot of the rest fell into place. Let's be clear: the title means that there are no chart *cards* to clutter the gaming table and defy understanding. There are, in fact, many charts in the game. Many things that might show up on chart cards with lots of modifiers are reflected in *Look, Sarge* with specially made dice that the players can make out of the wooden blocks commonly found at craft stores. In addition, there is a small label affixed to the rear of

the platoon bases containing information about movement, defensive ratings, and offensive capabilities. As these little labels are comprehensive, there is no need for modifiers – or a card to list the modifiers. Some people on various Internet sites – *some* of whom have actually *seen* the game – have objected to this notion, but the point is that the information you need is always where you are looking – at the platoons involved in the fight, not on some card that has to be found and cross-indexed. Once we decided that a game without a chart card was in our grasp, it became a driving force in some other game design decisions.

The designer of *Arc of Fire* (WWII skirmish rules) has said that designing rules for public consumption and criticism is difficult. Designing a set of rules that is easy is harder to do. Designing a set of rules that is simple, elegant, and also has some realism is very hard. There was quite a bit of statistical analysis behind the various mechanics in *Look, Sarge*. Trying to eliminate the chart card made us really think about what was important to represent at the tactical level and helped us resist the temptation of including a lot of "skirmishy" modifiers and mechanics. Having special dice made it very impractical to have lots of modifiers. When we were looking at morale, we were tempted to have a small number of modifiers, but we feared that morale modifiers would require a small chart and that once a chart card was available, the temptation would be there for the number of modifiers to grow. Even if we were able to avoid this temptation, there is the temptation for people using the rules to add "just one more" modifier.

Look, Sarge uses a unique card-based activation system. "Right!" you say, "Card-based systems aren't unique!" This one is. At the beginning of each turn, 1d6 is rolled for each headquarters base (company, battalion, and brigade). Then a deck of cards is shuffled that has 1-6 in red, 1-6 in black, and a reshuffle card. Cards are drawn from this deck. When a card is drawn, every headquarters that has the same number on its 1d6 as the number on the card performs actions. There are other nuances and rules, but this is basically how it works. The double randomness is quite effective. Unlike many card-based systems, however, 11 people aren't watching 1 person do stuff. In creating *Look, Sarge*, we experimented with many different activation systems, and none seemed to achieve the speed and playability we were seeking. The double randomization used in this system (the 1d6 for each headquarters and the random game deck) is important. Without the 1d6, players could predict which units will move simultaneously each turn, possibly making the coordination of multi-group attacks easier. Without the game deck, one could look at the six-sided dice around the table and predict the order in which units will act in the upcoming turn. Both of these phenomena run counter to the objectives of these rules.

As shown in Figure 1, the data labels on the platoon and headquarters bases have three areas on them: movement speeds in open, on road, through woods, and through rough terrain; defensive factors in the open, light cover, medium cover, and heavy cover; and attack factors against personnel and against vehicles at short and long ranges. Lots of analysis over several years went into the attack and defensive value numbers. This is not another set of rules based on the data values in some old Avalon Hill game. (I'm NOT bashing Avalon Hill; I still have lots of those games. I'm just a little frustrated with guys who base their games on some other game rather than on analysis.) To fire at someone, you say, "This base is firing at that base" and roll 1d10. You add the appropriate attack factor, read from the data label on your firing base, to the 1d10. If the modified roll is

greater than the defensive value on the enemy base's label, you get a hit. No modifiers; no chart cards!

Before you can fire at an enemy, however, you must spot them. The spotting rules involve the use of special spotting dice, which can be easily made from readily available wooden blocks from the local craft barn. The emphasis on spotting in the rules is to reward players for conducting effective reconnaissance. You can see by the chart below that

Figure 1: Data Label Example

vehicles blundering through closed terrain without infantry support are unlikely to spot hidden infantry before the infantry are able to spot them and open fire. Even units in the open might not get spotted. There are many folds in the terrain that are tall enough to hide a person or vehicle that are generally not depicted on the wargame table. While a unit is much more likely to be spotted in open terrain than in some concealed position, it is still not automatic.

Spotting is performed against areas, not units. This is because, within a given wood line, there might be elements of a company, a battalion anti-tank platoon, and perhaps something else. It would be highly contrived to rule that only a portion of the bases occupying an area are eligible for spotting, because a spotting unit must select one enemy target unit or another. The definition of spotted area is meant to be flexible to allow the players and GM to adjust to the conditions on the table. In addition, spotting an area, rather than a unit, means that the process for spotting hidden bases (that are not yet placed on the table) is exactly the same as spotting of those that *are* on the table.

Also note that the spotting player does not have to know what kind of units are in the area he is spotting. He rolls the spotting dice and may spot the infantry but not the armor, or vice versa. The spotting dice with the different number of faces for infantry and armor eliminated the need for lots of modifiers. Even with the **optional** modifiers to the *number of dice* rolled, there are few enough modifiers that we determined it was not worth creating a chart card just for these. After a game or two, you'll have those you choose to use committed to memory. As an added nuance, we have seen game masters using *Look, Sarge* make the spotting die rolls instead of the spotting player to add additional fog of war.

The math behind spotting demonstrates that *Look, Sarge*, is a serious rules set with a lot of analysis under the hood. Successful spotting rolls follow something called a *binomial distribution*. The probabilities of success are shown on the table below. The probability of spotting infantry or anti-tank guns that are 25 inches away is only 11%, but the chance of spotting vehicles in the open that are only six inches away is 94%.
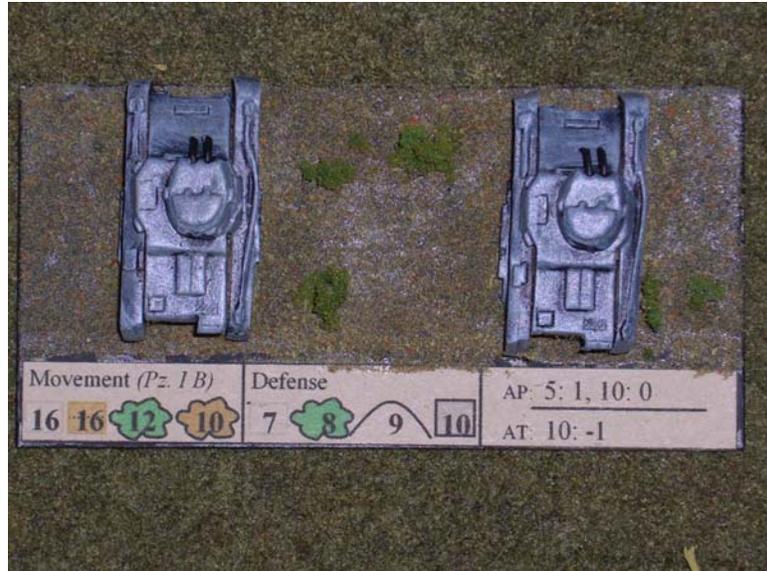
Target Type		Number of dice rolled					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
In Open	infantry	0.333333	0.555556	0.703704	0.802469	0.868313	0.912209
	vehicles	0.500000	0.750000	0.875000	0.937500	0.968750	0.984375
Con-cealed	infantry	0.000000	0.111111	0.259259	0.407407	0.539095	0.648834
	vehicles	0.000000	0.250000	0.500000	0.687500	0.812500	0.890625

Because the attack values for a unit's weapons are on the data label on the unit's base and the defensive values of the target bases are likewise labeled, fire resolution is fast. The system is deceptively simple, belying the underlying analysis that went into the design of the system. All elegant designs appear simple after someone has designed them. In designing *Look, Sarge*, we wanted to just add some attack points in the firing company and roll against the defense factor of the defending company. The problem with this is that WWII units often had heterogeneous compositions. A formation might consist of several halftracks, some infantry, and other infantry with light anti-tank weapons. It is very difficult, without abstracting too wildly, to come up with a "composite" anti-tank value for such a unit. So, we decided to resolve fire by platoon bases.

Another issue we grappled with was the issue of "thresholding." We wanted to create thresholds at which no damage was possible. A 37mm anti-tank gun is very unlikely to ever penetrate the frontal armor on a Tiger tank. (Of course there is some small probability of this occurring, but we wanted to represent those combat results that are within a couple of standard deviations of the mean.) Just using attack values and die roll modifiers resulted in situations in which light weapons might possibly do damage to very heavy vehicles. Conversely, the right combination of modifiers made it unrealistically impossible to inflict damage. The mechanism we chose corrects that issue. At short range, a 37mm gun has an attack value of 3. A maximum die roll of 10 would yield a total attack value of 13. The defensive value of a Tiger tank in the open is 14. Since the attack roll must be greater than the defensive value, the 37mm gun cannot damage the Tiger.

The attack values for infantry against vehicles are perhaps a little higher than "physics" would indicate, and the ranges are a little long as well. The infantry values include close assault with grenades, light anti-tank weapons, sticky mines, etc. Note that most infantry have close-range attack values that would allow them to be effective against that Tiger tank in the previous example. In addition, we assert that the platoon base is merely the center of mass of the unit and that patrols, anti-tank teams, observation posts, etc. are in front of and on the flanks of the unit. We use this abstraction to explain the fact that short-range anti-tank values for infantry seem large when you *first* play *Look, Sarge*. The result is that tanks assaulting infantry in woods or in towns without their own infantry support often get punished badly.

When a base takes a hit, players place a little, green, glass bead (or other non-obtrusive marker) on that base's headquarters (e.g., the company headquarters when a platoon base takes a hit). When that headquarters next activates, it rolls two morale dice for each glass bead, applying the results. There are of course, addition details associated

with morale, but it has an impact on the game, is easily computed, and doesn't require a "morale phase."

We spent quite a bit of time – and some "animated Email conversations" – working through morale. It was difficult to create a morale system that is chartless, meaning that it has no modifiers. We argued about using cards for morale results versus dice. We debated what aspects of morale were most critical to represent. The modifier that is most glaringly absent is something related to the percentage of casualties the unit has taken. There is an intuitive sense that the more casualties a unit takes the greater its likelihood to break. This intuition is deeply ingrained in war gamer psyche through years of modifiers. One can find historical examples, however, of units fleeing at the first sight of the enemy and examples of units fighting to the last man. While there is no modifier for the percentage of a unit that has been hit, the fact that you make a roll for *each* hit marker accounts for this, however.

I argue that morale break is most accurately modeled as a simple uniform random number. Believing that we could reasonably represent two "modifiers" to morale in a dice-based mechanic without creating player confusion and the possible need for a chart, we determined that the two most important factors to represent are the level or morale, cohesion, training, and leadership of the unit (represented by the unit's morale value) and whether the unit is in cover. Since you make morale checks for *each* hit taken on a base within the unit, the number of casualties has an impact on morale as well.

For those interested, the chances of green, regular, and elite units receiving a bad morale result while in cover are 25%, 16.7%, and 8.3%, respectively. The chances of receiving a bad morale result for green, regular, and elite units in the open are 33.3%, 22.2%, and 11.1%, respectively. Given that, the chances of a bad morale check given the number of hit markers on the unit are:

Cover	MV	Number of Hit Markers (Morale Checks)							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
In Cover	Green	0.2500	0.4375	0.5781	0.6836	0.7627	0.8220	0.8665	0.8999
	Regular	0.1670	0.3061	0.4220	0.5185	0.5989	0.6659	0.7217	0.7682
	Elite	0.0830	0.1591	0.2289	0.2929	0.3516	0.4054	0.4548	0.5000
In the Open	Green	0.3333	0.5551	0.7032	0.8021	0.8680	0.9119	0.9413	0.9608
	Regular	0.2222	0.3950	0.5294	0.6340	0.7153	0.7786	0.8278	0.8660
	Elite	0.1111	0.2098	0.2976	0.3757	0.4450	0.5067	0.5615	0.6102

You will also notice from the chart above that there are only three morale grades in *Look, Sarge*. This is because we argue that rating the morale of various units is a scenario decision, not a rules decision. In practice, three morale grades are enough to distinguish the units in a given scenario.

Look, Sarge, No Charts: WWII is a serious set of rules that gives serious results without chart cards, stacks of modifiers, and complicated mechanics. (Incidentally, we are working on using the same basic mechanics for other historical periods; hence, the colon in the title.) *Look, Sarge* doesn't feel like many other games, so there is a mental paradigm shift that players have to make. In convention play, and in play tests using kids as young as nine years old as well as gaming grognards, we have found that within two turns the players have the game mechanics mastered and can concentrate on fighting the

battle, not the rules. In Wargame Illustrated 230, Andy Copestake's offensive, acrimonious railings about how gamers are stupid nonetheless correctly stated that many rules sets promote poor tactics. We worked hard to build a system that did not reward poor or anachronistic tactics. Unlike other rule sets that tell you to ignore all the strange results until the end of the game and then judge the rules based on the final result, there are surprisingly few anomalies during play that detract from the "immersive" experience of commanding a battalion on the table top.

Converting Skirmish Campaigns Scenarios of LSNC by both of us:
　　　　Since the Skirmish Campaigns books were meant to be used by many rules sets, using the books involves making conversions from the generic ratings presented in the book and the specific ratings used by any particular rules set. These generic ratings provide morale, training, and leadership attributes for the various sides in a skirmish or battle.

　　　　In *Skirmish Campaigns*, morale comes in six bands: A+, A, B, C, D, and E. When using a *Skirmish Campaigns* scenario for *Look, Sarge*, morale values of A+ or A are considered elite. Morale values of B and C are considered regular. Morale values of D and E are considered green in *Look, Sarge*.

　　　　In *Skirmish Campaigns*, training ranges from T1+ to T5, where the difference between training levels within a scenario tends to be no more than three. The training level in *Skirmish Campaigns* is used to determine the number of extra cards provided to one side in the game deck used to activate units in *Look, Sarge*. This should be done *after* rolling for variable attachments. Compute the average training level for each side. For instance in the "Arras I" scenario in the *France '40 – The Ghost Division* book, the British force consists of four squad-sized units that are T3. With the variable attachment of a T2 mechanized infantry platoon (three-squad sized elements) and a T3 Daimler Mk I scout car (a squad sized element), the average training is 5x T3 and 3x T2, or a training rating of 2.62, which is rounded to T3. Having computed the average training ratings for both sides, compute the difference. In that same Arras I scenario, the average training of the Germans is T2, yielding a difference of 1. The side with the better (smaller) average training rating with get extra cords in the game deck. The number of extra cards is computed by the following formula $T_{worse\ side} - T_{better\ side} + 1$. So in the Arras scenario, the Germans would get $3 - 2 + 1$ or two extra cards in the game deck.

　　　　The leadership values associated with *Skirmish Campaigns* are accounted for in the other two ratings in *Look, Sarge*.

　　　　Next, the forces themselves have to be adapted from Skirmish Campaigns for use within a battalion-sized game, like *Look, Sarge*. Our paradigm is to scale everything by a factor of three. As an example, in the "Melee at Stonne" scenario in the *France '40 – Battles for the Meuse* book, the French have an under-strength platoon depicted by two infantry squads, a mortar platoon, and a platoon headquarters. This would be scaled up for *Look, Sarge* as an infantry company with its headquarters and a mortar platoon. Similarly, the French have a platoon of H35 light tanks, which would be scaled up to an H35 company with its headquarters, and a Char B1-bis platoon, which would also be scaled up to a Char B company with its headquarters. Note that as we scale up these forces, we add the appropriate headquarters elements. Of course, this scaling would create enough forces for a small *Look, Sarge* game, probably only one or two players to a

side, and players may want to scale the scenarios by a factor of six or more, depending on the number of players desired.

Finally, the terrain must be converted for use in *Look, Sarge*. If there are two or more buildings indicated on the *Skirmish Campaigns* map, convert that to a town for *Look, Sarge* and should be treated as heavy cover. Single buildings, including any nearby walls, should be converted into small built-up areas and treated as medium cover. Any woods in *Skirmish Campaigns* that are impassible to vehicles should also be impassible in *Look, Sarge*, but otherwise, there is only one type of woods in *Look, Sarge*. Stone walls become medium cover.

An Example Converted Scenario:

We will illustrate the use this method to "scale up" skirmish scenarios for use in battalion-scale battles using the Road to Stonne scenario from the *France '40: Battles for the Meuse* book. See Figures 2 and 3 for an example of the Stonne map as it appears in *Skirmish Campaigns* and as it was converted for use in *Look, Sarge*.
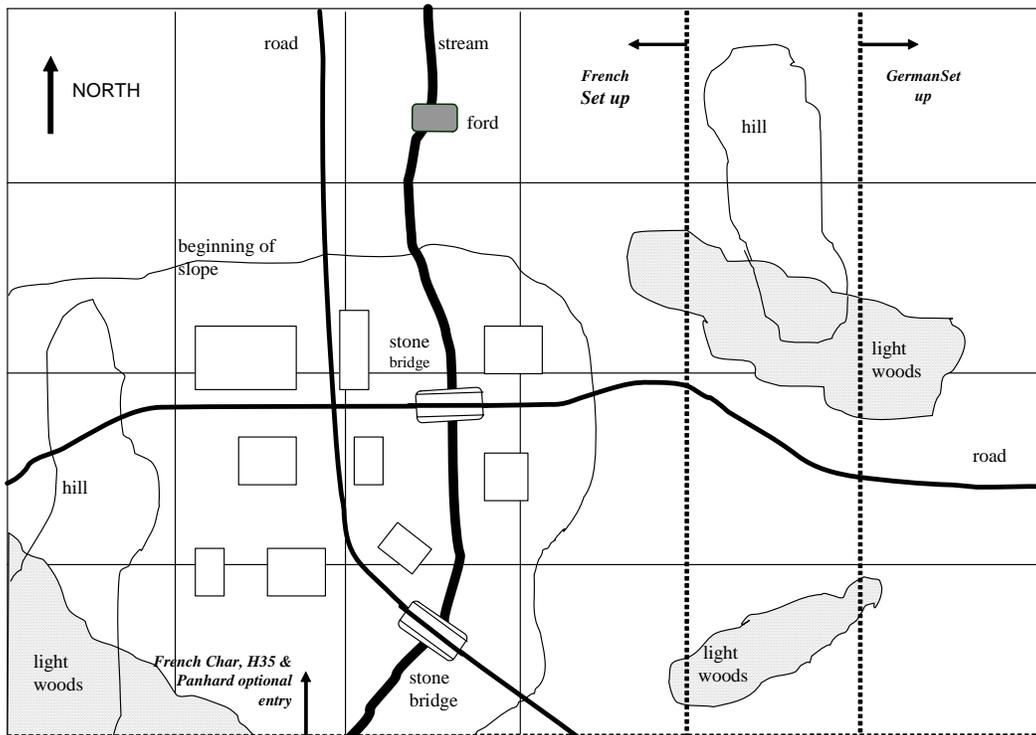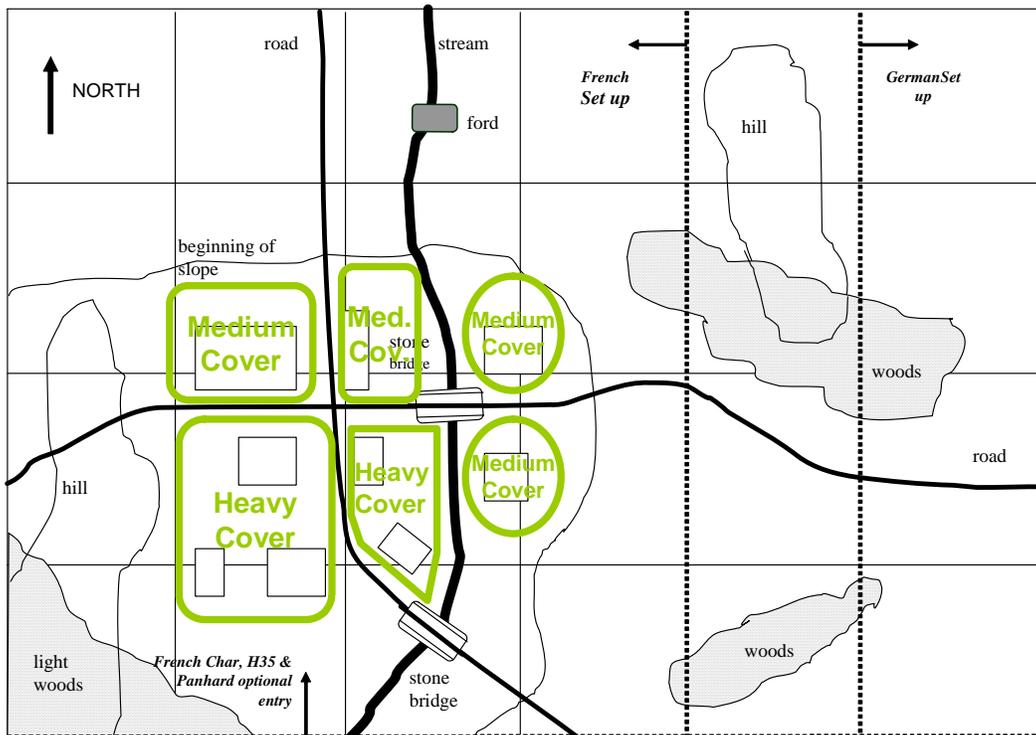

Road to Stonne
Figure 2: Road to Stonne as it Appears in France '40'' Battles for the Meuse

The basic German order of battle for this skirmish consists of:

- 4x PzKpfw. Ib
- 4x PzKpfw IIc
- 4x PzKpfw. IIIe

- 1x Mechanized platoon headquarters
- 2x Mechanized infantry squads
- 1x 50mm mortar team

The infantry represents an under-strength platoon, so we converted this to an under-strength infantry company (two infantry platoons and a mortar section) with half tracks and a company headquarters base. Each of the German tank platoons became a tank company, consisting of three platoons, with a company headquarters base. We added one more headquarters base for the overall German commander. For optional attatchments, the Germans rolled an addition panzer grenadier squad, which we

Figure 3: Map as Modified for a battalion-level game

converted to a platoon.

The basic French order of battle for this skirmish consists of:

- 1x H39 command tank
- 2x H35
- 2x Char B1-bis
- 2x SA34 35mm AT guns
- 1x infantry platoon headquarters
- 2x infantry squads

Again, the infantry represents an under-strength platoon, so we converted this to an infantry company, consisting of two platoons of infantry, and a company headquarters stand. We converted the two AT guns into a platoon. Multiplying everything by three

would result in six Char B's and six H35's, but we rounded up to two platoons of each kind of tank and a tank company headquarters. We also added an addition headquarters for the overall French commander.

To make sure that all this worked, we set up the scenario in Scott's basement while our wives chatted upstairs and our kids were busy knocking each other silly upstairs. Scaling this three to one as we described made this a pretty good two player game. Initially the Germans advanced headlong toward the town. The Germans hadn't spotted the French, so the French inflicted an early casualty on a German tank platoon. When they dismounted their infantry and returned fire, the Germans inflicted heavy casualties on the French defenders. At the same time, the German tanks tried to maneuver to the right across the ford and to the left across the stone bridge.

The French Char-B tanks pushed through the town and engaged in firefight with the Germans in the open area East of town. The French light tanks remained near their entry point near Stonne to stop the Germans from coming across the stone bridge. The Germans fighting the Char-Bs and the French AT guns took severe damage and eventually failed their morale rolls, forcing them to retreat back to a covered position. A lot of the German trouble stemmed from their difficulty spotting the French hidden in the town until after the French had opened fire.
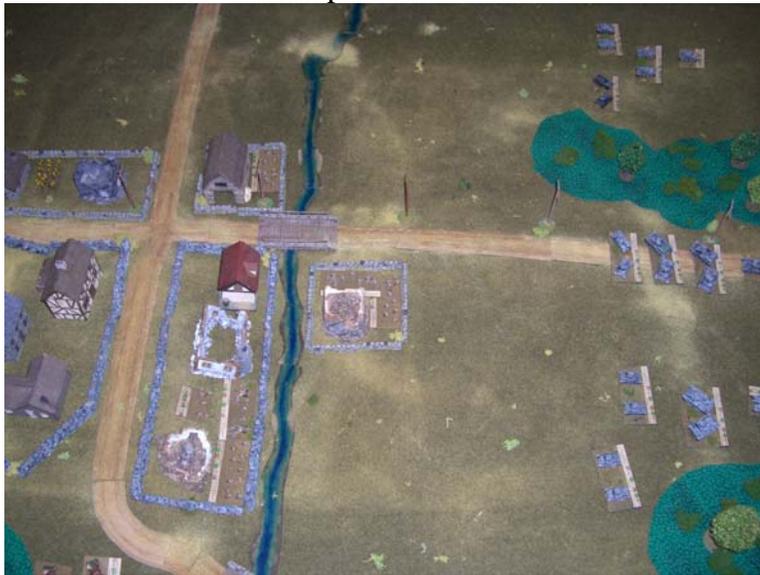
Figure 4: Early German advance toward Stonne

**Figure 5: German tanks in the distance taking a beating from
French AT guns and tanks**

It looked like a pretty easy French victory when the Germans received a dive-bombing run from some Stukas. To some extent this was too little, too late. You can see the German tanks on the right in Figure 6 retreating, but it helped the outcome of the battle not be so one-sided when victory points were computed.

Figure 6: German Stukas attack French defenders of Stonne

We feel that scaling the SkirmishCampaigns™ for larger-scale battles worked very well. In this case, the three-to-one scaling made a medium-sized SkirmishCampaigns™ scenario a good two-player game. Scaling these scenarios even larger would make good multi-player scenarios. The reader should keep in mind that the

scenarios in these books were initially scaled down from larger engagements in the first place, so scaling them back up doesn't result in any loss of historical accuracy.

A Bit about Figures

There are a number of manufacturers of 10mm and 12mm WWII figures. The figures used in this demonstration game were 12mm Minifigs. The tanks are quite nice, and the infantry of different countries are discernable; these are not just teeth of a comb glued to bases. Buck's next project is going to be Poland 1939, but he's going to have to improvise on the infantry, cavalry, and vehicles, since no one seems to make Polish in 12mm or 10mm. In addition, 1:285 scale WWII figures and vehicle are widely available