

review: TacOps

by Karen Kaye

Type: Contemporary Tactical Wargame

Publisher: Arsenal Publishing, Inc. (703/742-3801)

Retail Price: \$69.95

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Requires: Color and Monochrome Macs (Mac Plus or newer), System 6.0.5 or later, 1 HD disk drive and a hard drive, RAM Requirements: Monochrome 2MB, Color 4 MB recommended (required with System 7)

Protection: None

remember the day I first saw Tom Clancy's "Red Storm Rising." I had been thumbing through Barnes and Noble, with no particular aim. I picked up the red book, read the first few lines and started to move toward the register. I continued to read as I paid for the book and even on the way home on the subway. I was really absorbed by the military details of the story as it unfolded. About 10 PM I ordered Chinese, and inhaled the food without putting the book down. I knew that I was going to read it in a single sitting. I went to bed around four in the morning.

The following day, and many times since then, parts of the book have haunted me. Particularly the descriptions of various battles, where I wondered if I could have done better than the protagonists. There are few places in the world where the situations from the novel could have been recreated or simulated so that alternate plans of engagement could be tested. Recently the number of these places grew by one. Believe it or not, it is your own Mac.

First Effort. In order to turn your Mac into this sophisticated contemporary and near-future tactical ground combat simulator, all you need do is equip it with a piece of software called TacOps. The game is the first product by retired Marine Corps Major I. L. Holdridge (a biography and an interview are also included in this issue). Remarkably it is distributed by an unknown as well: Arsenal Publishing.

The game ships in a green box. The artwork on the cover is fairly uninspired, and is guaranteed not to win Arsenal any awards. Inside, the game arrives on three HD disks. The

150-page User's Guide is exceptionally thorough. Little space is wasted by pictures with a cosmetic appeal. Instead the game and menus are thoroughly described, tips are provided on creating custom scenarios, and the designer even provides a discussion of some length on his philosophies and experiences which influenced the operation of certain aspects of the game. Two identical reference cards are also included, since the Major believes that the game is best played over a network by two human players.

As I sat down to write the review, I faced the difficulty of succinctly describing a product so broad in scope, while providing enough detail to allow the reader to make an educated purchase decision. During the interview with the Major, I came across his own answer to the above dilemma. It was accurate and to the point. Therefore, I provide a slightly edited version of the Major's response to . . .

What is TacOps? TacOps is a simulation of tactical ground combat between U.S. Marine Corps/Army and Soviet style forces (OPFOR). Vehicles, unit organizations, and weapons are those expected to be in place through the year 2000.

TacOps may be played solitaire against an automatic OPFOR enemy or between two players on one computer or between two players on two Macintosh computers. The game may be played on two computers either via an AppleTalk network or by modem or by exchanging data disks.

TacOps is played in turns. Each turn consists of two phases: an orders phase and a combat phase. In the orders phase you give orders to your units using buttons in windows and by tracing the intended movement of your units with mouse clicks on the screen. Once all orders have been given, the combat phase begins. During the combat phase the units of both forces, under computer control, simultaneously carry out their orders for movement

and combat in four fifteen second pulses. You only observe during the combat phase; you cannot give or change orders until the next order's phase.

TacOps offers a hidden movement feature to replicate the uncertainty or "fog" of war. The simulation may be set up so that you can see enemy units on your screen only if they are within a realistic observation range.

The game includes 60 scenarios and nine maps. Two custom template scenarios are also provided which allow you to build your own scenario using any factory-provided map. Custom scenarios cannot be played solitaire against the computer.

The battle area is represented by a map-like display on the computer screen. The battle area is up to six times larger than the segment that can be viewed on a typical monitor. The computer screen acts as a window onto the larger battle map.

Units must be given instructions during the orders phase in order to move or change their tactical disposition during the combat phase. Orders are given to units by clicking on buttons and icons in the Unit Orders window and by clicking on the map. A unit may be given multiple orders during the orders phase. Some orders take effect immediately, others are delayed until an appropriate time in the combat phase. Delayed execution orders are automatically stored in the unit's computer record in the same sequence as given by the commander.

Each unit can have a maximum of 20 stored orders. This allows you to provide fairly sophisticated route and disposition instructions for each unit.

Units move during the combat phase according to their orders. Movement speed is effected by terrain, and the suppressive fire of the enemy. Movement is fastest on a road, less in clear terrain, much less in rough terrain, and slowest in woods. Suppression further reduces a unit's speed.

Combat is decided by the computer after a comparison of the characteristics and tactical disposition of the firing and target units. The combat result is influenced by a variety of factors to include: weapons effectiveness probabilities, armor effectiveness, personnel and equipment strength, tactical disposition, terrain, unit direction or facing.

Direct fire is flat trajectory fire delivered at a target visible to the firer. Direct fire is the only fire possible for most ground units. Units will generally automatically engage the nearest enemy unit in sight with direct fire from every weapon having the potential of destroying or suppressing the target. However, a unit whose main weapon is primarily an anti-armor weapon will usually ignore infantry targets in preference for more distant enemy armored targets or ATGMs unless the infantry unit is very close: in other words units will try to select the most threatening enemy unit in sight.

Indirect fire is high trajectory fire delivered at a target which may or may not be visible to the firer. Only artillery or mortar units may use indirect fire. Indirect fire attacks every unit within its burst radius. If a unit symbol in the impact area represents three vehicles or three squads, then every supplement will be attacked. If there are several symbols in the impact area, all will be attacked. Target selection and firing for indirect fire is not automatic. You must plot indirect fire during the orders phase using either the off map artillery support window or an on map unit's indirect fire control menu.

Air combat includes air to air, air to ground, and ground to air engagements.

The time scale varies in relation to real time for the players. If the computer isn't working too hard, one minute of scale time can pass in ten seconds of real time. If the computer is processing heavily, a scale minute may equal a several minutes of real time. The scale clock in the map window advances in fifteen second increments. Internal simulation calculations are based on one scale second being the smallest possible measurement of any activity.

During the combat phase, every unit is examined by the computer to determine if it is eligible to do something (attack, move, change disposition, etc.). If eligible, it does one to 15 scale seconds of some activity. If not eligible, it is skipped and the next unit is examined. When all units in both armies have been examined, the control timer is advanced 15 scale seconds. 'Eligible' means that enough scale time has passed for the unit to accomplish its next ordered task. Example: if a unit is moving in terrain that requires several scale seconds to move the distance of one pixel on the screen, then the unit will pause until the appropriate time has passed and then its symbol will be redrawn at the new location, one pixel distant. When one scale minute of combat has been done, the game returns to the orders phase.

[he Gunnery Range](#). TacOps consists of scenarios of various sizes and complexities. "Task Force" scenarios tend to be much larger, and typically come with eight variants. "Team" scenarios are smaller and come in only one version. All scenarios can be further modified: by adding or deleting units on both sides, by modifying the major weapons systems in use (i.e. degrading the unit from M1A2 tanks to M60A3s), by changing the air and artillery support available to both sides, and even by changing the goals of the scenario itself. One of the most challenging games, even in its basic form, is Task Force DeGoey, which simulates an attack by a Marine Expeditionary Brigade against a smaller nation attempting to develop nuclear capability.

The game runs in a maximum of 16 colors, and gives the player a simple interface with which to configure the system on launch. On "quit," the game automatically restores the system to the previous condition.

Once the scenario is selected, the players get to deploy their forces. This is a wonderful feature for those who dislike set-piece engagements. An assessment of the terrain and the objectives is very important, since a poor set-up will result in a defeat even before the scenario starts. Following any modifications to the Order of Battle which the players may want to make and prior to the start of the first combat phase, the game asks for the preferences to be set. These preferences have a major impact on game play. They include such items as the availability of thermal sights for OPFOR tanks and ATGMs, the ability of

smoke to defeat thermal sights, and whether or not firing units are always spotted. (These factors have been the source of much debate in the forums, and novice players will find as much info there to influence their choices as in the User's Manual)

The maps are basic displays which depict the general terrain types and the two levels of elevation. The unit counters, which can depict anything from a single soldier or vehicle on up to larger formations, come in two different sizes. I would much prefer the larger, "thicker" counters, but on the scale of map provided in the game they obscure too much terrain. The graphics on the counters are pictorial representations of vehicles and troops in profile. Some work better than others: the BTR-80 shows up as a six-wheeled vehicle, while the LAV-25 looks like a 1960's four-wheeled armored car.

The AI is only able to play the OPFOR. Each scenario has several different opening moves, which should keep the scenarios from becoming predictable. The players take the role of the senior battlefield commander, and are more responsible for the positioning and maneuvering of the troops than the sighting of a tank's main gun. As such, they also call in air strikes and artillery support.

The Exercise Area. TacOps is a game of some complexity, and while I normally recommend that novices play through the tutorial of any wargame, in this case I will be more specific. All players need to follow through the tutorial in order to prevent frustration with the game. It will point out that there are many things which occur beyond the players' control, and some which they can influence only to a small degree. Once players understand the basics, they are ready to delve into the such subjects as target reference points, as well as priority unit and target types.

The interface is friendly, and the game can be played with the mouse only, but it will progress a lot faster if the mouse and a few keystrokes are combined. Music and sound are both basic, but do an acceptable job of adding to the experience. The game has its own integral volume control.

The giving of orders is reasonably quick, and efficient. Orders can even be copied among units moving along a road or in formation. The game has a "Hide if Checked" option: this hides any units which the player has checked that turn, and conversely helps prevent players from starting the next minute of play before a unit has been given orders. Orders to artillery reproduce the inherent wait time and the adjusting fire fairly well, while air support missions are handled somewhat abstractly. Do not expect to be able to reproduce the carnage of the "Highway of Death" here, A-10s are not yet modeled in TacOps.

The game tracks and displays a fantastic amount of info on the units. Every round of ammo, every smoke grenade is tracked. Players can even call up pictures on the systems under their own and the adversary's command. They can reference, from within the game, Basic Hit Probability Charts and Armor Penetration values for the weapons in use by their units. Regular and Thermal Line of Sight checks can be conducted between any two points on the map. Finally, Standard Operating Procedures can be specified for each component unit, ranging from what to do when encountering a minefield, to how to respond when fired upon.

Combat resolution is fast, in some cases so fast that it becomes hard to read what has just happened. At times I even attempted to slow the game down, but I still missed some information. Be warned that if sound is turned completely off, the game will really take off, and it may be impossible to read the information captions at the bottom of the screen. There is no option for night combat. Clearly, the designer felt that the U.S. has such an overwhelming advantage in night combat situations, that it was probably not worth simulating.

Helicopters are an integral part of the operations in TacOps. Not only do players get access to the devastating firepower of the modern attack helicopter, they can also recreate Air Mobile operations. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) are also included in the database, and they can turn a battle simply with their tremendous reconnaissance potential. Airborne operations, more specifically the actual air drop itself, are not modeled.

Network and PBEmail really opens players' horizons. Both perform equally well, although the network option is by far the preferable of the two. My favorable experiences on this subject seem to be borne out by others as well, and I have not been able to find any pleas for help in the forums.

[he Debriefing](#). TacOps has great potential. Even though it is not the recreation of a historic situation against which the simulation can be judged, it has received favorable comments from military service members who live the life which the game offers to reproduce. In all honesty, the Major repeatedly stresses the word game; TacOps must first and foremost be enjoyable. I agree, and I must say that TacOps entertained me. But I also found a few things which detracted from the experience.

The major — no pun intended — weak point of TacOps is the graphics, which the manual describes as “subdued.” Bland and lifeless also come to mind. While they certainly speed up the game and allow many older Macs to do good service, the price is a rather nondescript map. In addition, the map is not scalable. This is a pretty major sin for a tactical game. Units invariably get stuck on top of one another, and it becomes difficult to see exactly what is where. The game compensates through a hierarchical “counter menu.” When the player clicks on a stack of units, the stack is displaced laterally so that all units are visible. This

solution is in itself a further complication, because the “counter menu” can extend over adjacent units which appear to become part of the “menu” itself. With practice, this becomes more of a nuisance than a defect.

The second deficiency of TacOps is the lack of consideration for morale. The designer makes it clear that he does not like the imposition of morale rules on the players. While he certainly argues his point well, it is unquestionable that at numerous times the game feels as though the player has unquestioning robots to do his bidding.

Rarely, if ever, would a mechanized force continue to charge forward into a screen of dug-in ATGMs (yes, I am aware of examples in the Sinai, but I consider those anomalies instead of the “norm”). I also consider it very unlikely that a SA-16 team — the sole survivor of a motorized rifle battalion — would continue to move forward against several squads of entrenched defenders. Yet both of the above situations will occur when you play TacOps. The engagements in this game often result in the elimination of 100 percent of the AI’s forces. I suppose this makes it easy to see who “won,” but it does not result in what I would consider an accurate simulation.

The lack of “troop quality” is my third complaint against the game. It furthered my feeling of playing with robots. Every T-72, every M2, every squad of infantry in the game is essentially the same in capability. The US arguably has the most homogeneous armed forces, and can claim that, for example, the standard of performance is the same in all USMC Light Infantry Battalions.

For the OPFOR, this is quite different, since countries using this type of equipment spend varied amounts of time and resources on training, and the established chain of command of these forces may hamper the efficiency the units as well. The lack of a “GO-NO GO” standard in the former Warsaw Pact, meant that some conscripts were barely able to accomplish their tasks after the training period was over. Through my discussions with a Hungarian T-72 gunner, I found out that an experienced crew can likely hit a stationary target at 2000m 50 percent of the time (as in the TacOps Weapon Information Database), but that conscript crews will likely take three to four rounds at that range to register their first hit.

Gripes. The presentation of units on the map is not very user friendly. The counters give no indication of unit facing from a cursory overview of the situation. Each unit must either be individually accessed for this information, or the “Change Unit Symbol” command selected twice. This will provide arrows which indicate unit facing, but the unit type information is obscured. Neither method is very satisfactory.

While I enjoyed deploying my own units, on some of the larger scenarios this can get tedious. It might be nice, especially when I’m short on time, to have the option of starting a game with a pre-established deployment.

The Footlocker. The Major has released the first free update to TacOps, and by the time this article gets published, the second should be available. The first update fixed about a dozen minor cosmetic items and one game-play bug. Smoke on high ground was not consistently blocking ordinary line of sight. The bug was largely insignificant in games in which both sides possessed thermal sights.

The Major is aware that the combat commentary on the bottom of the screen flashes by too quickly on some fast machines. These comments will spool to a file which the player can reference between turns. Look for this and other improvements in Version 0.0.2.

As can be read in the interview with the Major, TacOps: WWII is on the horizon. With an expanded development team, and with the experience of this game behind him, it would be fair to say that we will likely not be disappointed with the next offering.

The Verdict. The Mac marketplace has been craving a tactical wargame for years now. I have read countless messages in the forums asking companies to develop such a product. The creator of TacOps listened. The product is well-researched, and well-executed. It may have aimed a little low on the graphics front for the sake of playability, but only the players can determine this. They will vote with their dollars and their e-mail to the designer. And they will vote again when TacOps:WWII goes head to head with ATOMIC's Beyond Squad Leader sometime next year. It's good to own a Macintosh!

I. M. Holdridge may have been a perfect unknown in the Mac software industry a few months ago. I doubt the same thing can be said today. TacOps delivers entertainment value, especially for those who are willing to tolerate its complexities. With refinements already published, and more on the way, the support for the product seems assured. Overall, an excellent tactical wargame for the enthusiast. A superb initial effort by a one-man team.

Pros

- Tremendous, detailed database
- Exceptional replay value — multiple variants per scenario
- All the options: modem, network, PBEmail
- Multiple AI opening moves per scenario
- Excellent, detailed documentation
- Fast, even on older machines

Cons

- Unassuming graphics
- No consideration given to morale or troop quality
- No ability to scale the map
- Presentation of stacked units is "awkward"
- No option for a "quick-start" game: players must always deploy their own units