

TACOPS — HARPOON ON LAND

By Kip Allen

I've been a military simulations buff for many years. My interests in the genre are multi-environmental — that means land, sea and air.

By far, Harpoon 3 is the best tactical/operational-level naval simulation in my experience. Everything from the formation editor to staff allowances, from the detailed database to Internet community of 'pooners put it in a class by itself.

But Harpoon 3 has a rival for my affections. It's called TacOps 4, designed by Maj. I.L. Holdridge, USMC (ret.). One of my gaming buddies calls it, "Simply the best tactical-level land combat simulation ever made." I agree with his assessment.

TacOps has all the elements that make Harpoon 3 so successful. As I earlier stated, everything from the formation editor to staff allowances, from the detailed database to the Internet community of enthusiasts.

As H3 places the player in command of a force of ships, subs and aircraft; TacOps places the player in overall command of a land force ranging in company size up to multiple brigades and regiments, complete with air strikes and off-map artillery. The forces may be American (both Army and Marine), Canadian, Australian, New Zealand or German versus various opposing forces ranging from the former Soviet Union to Middle Eastern terrorist training camps. Players may assume command of either the Western or OPFOR side.



Looking at a typical map in TacOps 4

aircraft and ships to aid the player in determining the best strategy and tactics given his existing force. The database is constantly being upgraded, as new information becomes available.

Mike Mykytyn of Harpoon HQ notes:

"Entries are added, updated or deleted as new information becomes available or improvements to the game are made. All sorts of open sources are used, compared and scrutinized to produce the most accurate model of each platform that the game engine will allow. We are currently working with Larry Bond, Chris Carlson and a talented team of database writers to get our respective data sets as accurate and as close together as possible."

Again, TacOps mirrors this ability. Maj. Holdridge included extensive databases, as well as official training manuals, that give the same information to TacOps players.

As is the case with H3, this database has different levels to aid in determining what weapon system is most effective against specific targets. Weapon systems from individual snipers to anti-tank missiles to T-80 tanks are available.

On the most basic level, both Harpoon3 and TacOps4 are true simulations — that is, they can mirror real-life situations as well as capabilities. As Harpoon addict Dimitris Dranidis of Harpoon HQ (known as "Sunburn" on the bbs) puts it, *"A simulation, no doubt about it. Many things that would please Joe Gamer were pushed aside so that the authentic feel of being stuck in a CIC could be preserved."*

The H3 player is in the virtual "CIC" as Dimitris notes; in TacOps, the player is in a virtual headquarters site, looking at maps. Both are somewhat abstract using NATO and other symbology.

The overall look and "fog of war" uncertainty principle are quite similar to Harpoon3. Extensive research has gone into both simulations, both in terms of hardware and capabilities. In H3, the database includes information on all the weapons systems,

Another similarity between the two simulations is the use of “staff.” In H3, the player may assign different tasks, such as formation and weapon selection to his “staff” who will then make the appropriate decision.

Again, the player has a somewhat similar ability in TacOps. While it is handled differently, the TacOps player has the option to issue certain doctrinal orders to all units, such as “shoot and scoot.”

The player may also give orders to specific units, just as in H3. Here again, doctrine plays a role. As an example, the player may order a specific unit to refrain from firing unless an enemy unit comes close enough to see it. Or, the player may order a unit to target a specific enemy unit or give targeting priority to a specific target class.

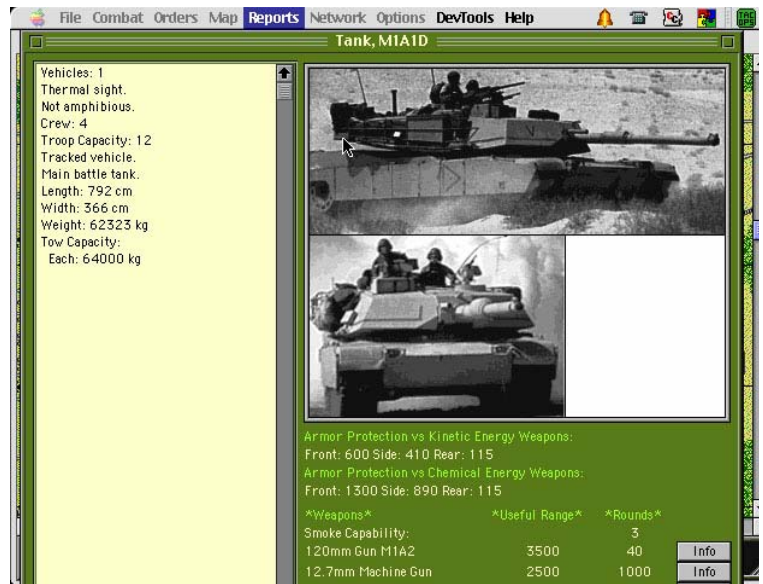
This behaviour control provides the ability to dictate an individual unit’s doctrine functions in much the same manner as the H3 mission editor.

The way both H3 and TacOps mirror real life may be measured by how much stock the professionals, that is the military, put in wargaming for training purposes.

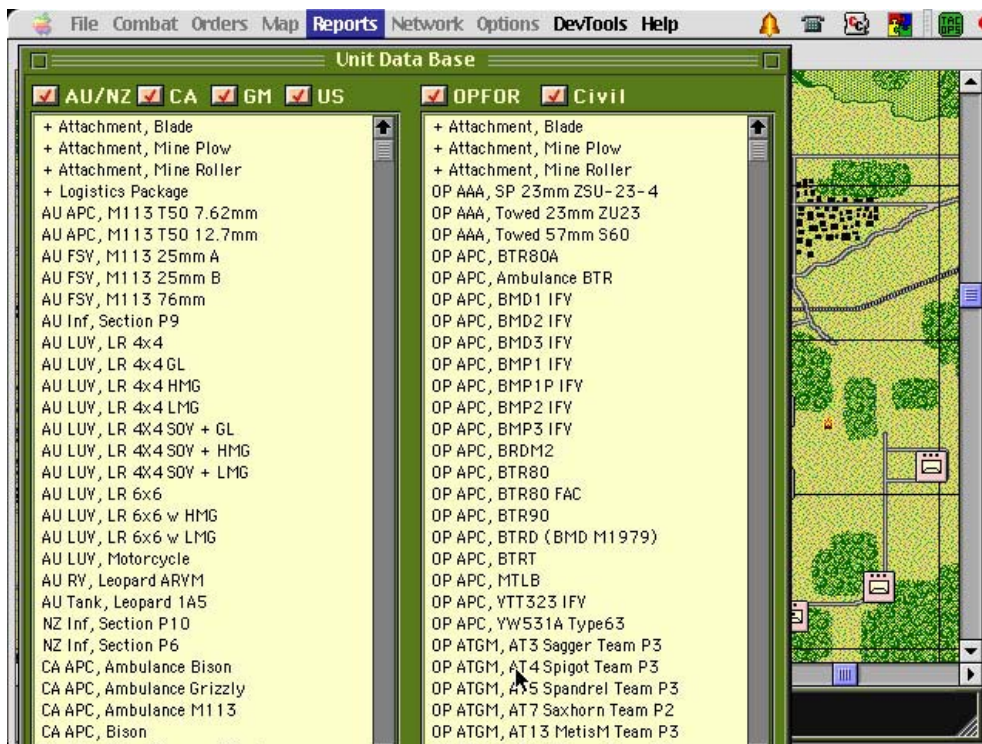
Jim Dunnigan, one of the fathers of modern wargames, is an author and a Defense Department consultant. Speaking at a recent DoD conference on wargaming as a training aid, Dunnigan said:

“When commercial wargames flourished in the 1970s, there were many examples of these games (or their technology) being used to address transformation or predictive issues. The game Sinai predicted the innovative tactics the Egyptians used to breach the Bar Lev line. Games like “The Next War” examined many, previously undiscussed, tactical and strategic options on the Central Front.”

Specifically, the U.S. military took a keen interest in TacOps. In fact, Dunnigan noted the military even utilized wargame hobbyists to help develop new tactics.



Now, what was the flank armor protection on the M-1A1 again?



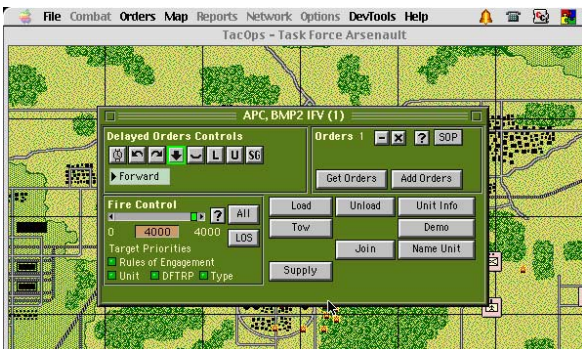
Browsing the database

“On the tactical level, you can use a COT (commercial off the shelf) product like TacOps (created by a retired Marine officer) for speculative experiments. This was already done to test Medium Brigade concepts (see After Action Reports for the “Team Trackless” project at <http://www.strategypage.com/t/msiepage.htm>)”

American, Canadian and other Western militaries now use TacOps for training purposes. Harpoon 3 has also joined those ranks. The Royal Australian Navy officially uses Harpoon 3. On a non-official basis, Dimitris noted that numerous naval training departments worldwide, as well as the Air Staff University at Maxwell AFB, USAF, are also using Harpoon 3 or its direct predecessor, H2.

Another similarity is that both games have good online sites for information, updates and exchange of ideas. For Harpoon, the Harpoon Headquarters (www.harpoonhq.com) and Jesse Spears' developer site (www.harpoon3.com) are the most familiar. For TacOps, TacOps headquarters at www.battlefront.com/resources/tacops is the premier site and Jim Dunnigan's www.strategypage.com links to the Team Trackless site.

The one area where the two split is the mode of play. Harpoon3 is currently strictly a solitaire simulation. TacOps may be played by up to eight players, either sequentially on a single computer, on networked computers or by e-mail. This



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gives TacOps a decided edge in playability. This difference is destined to disappear. Harpoon 3 is in the process of being converted to a fully multiplayer simulation platform – in fact, the underlying code has been fully restructured to facilitate this transition and all the latest executable versions of the program have doubled-up as test beds for this transformation.

Both TacOps and Harpoon3 are pushing the envelope as far as simulations are concerned. They are constantly evolving, and with each new incarnation become more and more true to life, thus blurring the line between a game and a simulation.

Regardless of this evolution, both TacOps and Harpoon3 mean many hours of informative enjoyment for their respective devotees.

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