

Down at the Wargames Club by Donald Featherstone (1988)

The Gang who formed the Wargames Club knew each other pretty well, being fully aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses they are always ready to wind-up anyone for the sake of a laugh. When things are quiet it isn't difficult to get an argument going on the respective merits of figure of board wargaming, on scale, fantasy, uniforms, etc., and, as in most groups there are one or two well-known 'stirrers' like Pete or Alan. The other night Pete came into the clubroom and showed us some photographs he had taken on his recent motoring holiday in Spain. He passed one to Billy Phillips: 'Know where it is, Billy?' Everyone watched closely wondering what was going to happen next, because it was well known that Billy firmly believed British Military history began with and revolved around the 95th Rifles and the Light Division in the Peninsular, and that he could always be got going by anything concerning them. Quick as a flash, Billy said 'It's the Lesser and Greater Arapiles on the Field of Salamanca ... fought on 22 of July 1812'. Then Pete started raving about how marvellous Packenham's 3rd Division had been, and how the 4th and 5th Divisions came over the ridge and helped roll up the French – '... 40,000 Frenchmen beaten in 40 minutes!' 'But, Billy ... I've often wondered where the Light Division were whilst all this was going on?' Billy choked and went red: 'You know perfectly well where they were ... they were on Wellington's left flank along with the 1st Division ... the best disciplined and controlled divisions the Duke had ... waiting to take up the pursuit when the French began retreating!' Pete looked thoughtful: 'Is that so? Funny, I don't remember hearing much about the French getting badly beaten-up in the pursuit!' Billy waved his arms like he always does when he's excited: 'that was because a Spanish force under D'Espana placed by Wellington in the castle at the bridge at Alba deserted their posts and allowed the French to get away!' Pete laughed sarcastically and the argument got fierce and furious, until the President came over and said they were disturbing the rest of the wargamers.

To quieten things down and keep the peace Toby hastily told us about a film he'd seen on a friend's video the other night: 'It was supposed to be the British Army on their way to the Battle of the Alma in the Crimea, and they had this lot marching with a high knee action and arms going across the chest ... like foreign soldiers ... it was a damned insult to the British Army!' 'That was the film Charge of the Light Brigade, wasn't it?' said Billy, forgetting about the 95th for the moment: 'They used the Turkish Army as Extras.' Then Fred said someone he knew who'd worked on the film told him that the British Director, offended by Turkish cavalymen playing the Light Brigade slumping in their saddles, lashed lengths of broomsticks up their backs to keep 'em upright!' Billy laughed bitterly: 'That was the same director who insisted on one of the British cavalry regiments in the charge wearing scarlet overalls and when the military advisor protested that they wore blue, he said it was his army and he could dress them how he liked!'

'In the film Waterloo all the Allied and French units were formed of real-life soldiers of the Russian Army ... there was one scene where the so-called Gordon Highlanders had their tartan stockings down around their ankles ... they didn't look anything like Scotsmen!' Fred expressed sympathy and said: 'Of course the thing that spoils all military films is that there are never enough soldiers in the regiments ... they can't afford to pay sufficient extras to make a unit look realistic. They show you a spaced-out column of about 40 men marching in three's and it's supposed to be a full battalion.' A guy we hadn't seen in the Club before sniffed and broke our rule of never bringing politics into a meeting: 'Obviously they can't use as many men as took part in the real historical battle ... the only time enough money can be found for is when one country makes up its mind to kill all the soldiers of another country!' Not fancying the turn of conversation, Fred said: 'I thought the Russians had pretty large units in their version of War and Peace ... made without thought of expense and used as propaganda, I suppose.' Pete

agreed: 'I've always thought about the most realistic film of horse and musket fighting I've ever seen was in Barry Lyndon ... the attack in line was just about how it must have been in those days.'

Don't usually hear much from Chris Blake, known as a deep-thinking lad with a degree in some electronic subject, but he came into the conversation: 'The nearest you can get to realism is in tabletop wargaming, where a unit can be as big as you like if you can afford to buy the figures.' Fred interrupted: 'And if you can find an opponent with a similar sized army.' Chris nodded: 'Table size means regiments always have to be drastically scaled-down, but that's not the main trouble ... the real fault of wargaming lies in the fact that the figures don't move of their own volition ... they have to be moved.' Someone said what we were all thinking: 'Of course they can't move on their own ... they're only metal or plastic.' Chris shook his head: 'I'm convinced there is a way to make them move on their own!' That aroused a general free-for-all, with everyone talking at once, then someone reminded us of a recent film at the Odeon about a couple of American teenagers who fed vital statics into a computer, to make their very own glamour-girl. 'Miss Frankenstein, I suppose,' said Billy. Chris smiled: 'I'm working on an idea ... I'll let you know when I come up with something.'

It made us a bit uneasy, you never know what these electronic wizards are doing – and there were all sorts of queer rumours about the factory on the Industrial Estate. Anyway, the weeks passed and we forgot it until Chris invited some of us round to his lodgings, to see a video film he'd made. It really made us sit up and take notice, this short and not particularly clear clip showing what were undoubtedly blocks of model wargames soldiers of the Napoleonic period jerkily moving towards each other, until blotted out by clouds of smoke as they fired volleys! We saw it through half a dozen times without being really convinced before Billy said: 'They are mounted on a large base with a flange underneath moving in a channel ... controlled by radio like model cars or aircraft.' Chris was indignant: 'How do you account for the firing then?' 'Some sort of a firework set off by radio signal!' Chris shook his head sadly: 'You don't know what you're talking about ... I'm afraid you are out of your element! 'Alright then tell us how it's done!' 'I'd like to', said Chris 'but I can't ... there's more to it than you think, it's part of a much larger affair ... Ministry of Defence involved ... Official Secrets Act ... you know how it is.'

We told the bloke who owned the Model Shop about it and he laughed, saying he hoped Chris would let him have exclusive sale of his patent figures – 'Could be trick photography ... I once saw a TV film being made of a cavalry charge on a gun ... by moving the figures and the gunners a fraction each shot they made more than a hundred and fifty frames that showed for a few seconds on the screen and looked very realistic.'

A week or so later Chris Blake came into the Club; he had his arm in a sling. 'Had an accident?' He smiled and gingerly took his hand from the sling and carefully removed the dressings, holding out his hand for our inspection. Both sides of it – back and palm – were peppered with angry little wounds! 'Twenty-five each side ... count 'em if you like ... I was playing a solo-game with my army and put my hand in the way of a volley – not a man missed!' We still don't know what to think – there's no way a guy would give himself fifty regularly spaced painful wounds – just to prove a point, is there? Or is there?

Down at the Wargames Club Part 2

One of the most enthusiastic members of the Wargames Club was Billy Phillips, whose Dad had been a Regular Soldier in the Rifle Brigade with a lot of service in the Western Desert, France,

Cyprus, Palestine and Borneo. For some of his earlier life Billy had lived in Army Quarters but now Mr Phillips was out in Civvy Street and they lived in a fair-sized house on the Estate that was a real military museum. When you went through the front door into the hall the first thing you saw was a huge framed reproduction of Beadle's painting 'The Rear Guard', depicting the 95th Rifles covering the retreat to Corunna in 1808/09 – you know it, they used it for the dust-cover of Bryant's book *Jackets of Green*, and the original is in the Greenjackets Museum at Winchester. On the walls were a fine assortment of weapons including a genuine Baker Rifle that must be worth a lot; and the house always echoes to recorded music of the Regimental Band playing Light Division tunes, like 'I'm 95' or 'Over the Hills and far Away' and Lutzow's *Wild Hunt* – it was really stirring! Billy was brought up a real little Rifleman, taken every year by his Old Man to Winchester for the Sounding of Retreat Ceremony, then spending the rest of the evening in the Sergeant's Mess when they made a real fuss of little Billy! One year we all went to the Massed Band show at Wembley and were all very impressed when we discovered Billy actually knew Bugle-Major Colin Green, the little man with the fierce moustaches who strutted along at the head of the band.

With all that background it wasn't surprising that when we all picked a regiment for a wargames campaign project, Billy chose the 95th Rifles. Mind you, he had opposition as another lad wanted them and it took a bit of pressure to persuade him to have the Connaught Rangers instead. When he heard of Billy's choice (not that he'd have dared make any other) his Old Man stumped up the cash to buy forty 25mm figures including officers and buglers. Researching uniforms and equipment, Billy painted them with real devotion and when he marched them onto the wargames table we were all full of admiration as they looked great in dark green tunics with black facings, three rows of silver buttons, black leather equipment, stovepipe shako with green cords and tuft, and silver buglehorn badge. The NCO's had white stripes, and all were armed with Baker Rifles and long brass-hilted sword-bayonets. On the underside of each figure's base was a little label bearing the soldier's name – there were officers Harry Smith, Johnny Kincaid and George Simmons; there was Harris, Surtees, Costello, Plunkett (the man who shot the French General on the bridge at Cacobellos) and the rest of them. They were commanded by a fine mounted figure labelled Colonel Beckwith and for good measure, Billy painted-up a realistic General 'Black Bob' Craufurd who died in the breach at Ciudad Rodrigo in 1812.

Wargamers being what they are, there was a great deal of argument over the campaign rules and no one gave more trouble than Billy – claiming the 95th to be '... a highly mobile elite regiment ...' he demanded special rates of movement to simulate their 140 paces-to-the-minute, high morale-rating, and no penalties for fighting in open-order. He wanted battles framed so that they fulfilled their historical role of skirmishers ahead of the main line, harassing the French tirailleurs, holding rearguard positions, and so on. You've got to admit that on the table they are a revelation, fighting furiously and never routing, perhaps because Billy had the most fantastic dice luck! On the other hand, maybe it was his unflinching confidence that got through to their little metal hearts, as he ordered them about the table by name, in time he knew each one without even having to turn up their bases to read the labels!

Then we were invited to go to London to take part in a big Waterloo wargame, and Billy had to wrestle with his conscience about some of them being at New Orleans rather than in Belgium on 18 June 1815, but eventually the 95th were brought along to take part. The hall was crowded and the guy guarding the table at lunchtime never noticed the thief who helped himself to the entire 95th Rifles! Of course Billy went mad, wanting the Police called and everyone searched, using bad language when the organisers offered money to buy replacements; he had to go

home without them, sitting silent and unconsolable and trudging off into the darkness, a shattered man, without even saying 'goodnight'.

For nearly a year he never came near the Club, rumour saying he had left home and gone into lodgings, breaking his Mum's heart. Then, late on e Saturday night after a wargame, just as we were going for a drink, Billy rushed in and from a cardboard box took figure after figure and set the 95th up on the table! They were a battered, chipped and sorry-looking lot but the 95th alright, every man-jack of them, down to their original labels on the bottom of their bases. Words falling over each other, Billy told how he had gone to this Hobby Exhibition (he said the Rangers were playing away and he'd nothing else to do) and there, in a demonstration wargames were his 95th Rifles, controlled by a scruffy Wally who claimed he bought them off a guy in London. When Billy claimed them, the Wally demanded proof of ownership – '... as if I didn't know my own figures!' snorted Billy: 'I identified them by name ... in order of seniority of course ... Colonel Beckwith, Harry Smith, Johnny Kincaid, Sergeant John Lowe ... Riflemen Harris, Surtees, Costello, Leach, Howans, Jackson, Bugler Bill Green ... without looking at their bases, of course! Well, the Wally had no option but to hand them over, saying he didn't mind very much 'cos they never fought very well for him! I nearly hit him ... of course they wouldn't ... they didn't know him.'

He spent weeks repainting them, but when they paraded for battle again they weren't the 95th we remembered; they fell-back, wouldn't advance, then Billy threw a 1 and they all routed back to the base-line – we thought he was going to break into tears! He took them away and it was generally believed solo-wargamed with them, to get them reacquainted with his command and, as weeks passed, slowly they began to improve, became steadier. Then one sunny afternoon in May when some of the Gang felt it was too nice to stay indoors wargaming but got talked into fighting a Napoleonic Peninsular game, they came good again. Charlie, our President who had a real sense of military history, had planned the battle and in the light of what transpired, it was probably no coincidence that we were re-fighting the Peninsular War battle of Fuentes D'Onoro and Charlie had taken command of Captain Ramsey's Troop, Royal Horse Artillery. The game was designed to allow the guns, just as they did on that immortal day, to make a fighting retreat across the table, limbering and unlimbering as the riflemen fired and doubled back, fired and doubled as they held off the hordes of prancing French cavalry. Skilfully and realistically, Charlie and Billy fought their way across the Spanish plain – aided by some damned good dice-throwing – and the 95th were never better, they had regained all their former glory!

After the game, Billy said 'I had no doubts ... I told them that today the 5th of May is the 175th Anniversary of the Battle of Fuentes Donor ... and, knowing what they did then, how could the 95th be anything else but magnificent?' You had to admire his confidence, didn't you? It must have sent his old man mad when Billy preferred the Art College to joining the Green Jackets!

Down at the Wargames Club Part 3

Most of the time we all got on very well down at the Club- there was always a lot of kidding and winding-up but it wasn't taken seriously and we were really all good mates. It carried on like that until Sharon joined us, the first girl we'd had in the Gang –not because we were male chauvinist pigs but simply because none of the opposite sex ever came along – but the experience was enough to cause us to hope she will be the first and the last. In the beginning we heard of her through Sam Russ raving about this girl he'd met – 'I was having a quiet pint in the Dolphin when this couple sat at my table ... she was a real cracker but the guy with her was a dreary Wally who seemed to be boring her to tears and after a while she really let him have it, saying:

“ ... I don't know why I'm wasting my time with you when I could be at home reading the third volume of Oman the library got for me today!”

Sam repeated ‘ The third volume of Oman ... that's what she said ... I couldn't believe my ears ... so I leaned across and asked her if it was Oman's History of the Peninsular War she was talking about?’

‘The Wally pushed his face into mine and told me to mind my own business ... but the girl told him to keep out of it and looked me up and down: “Of course, it was, although I suppose you could have thought I was talking of his other books, say The Art of War in the Middle Ages or War in the 16th Century ... I've read those too”’

Sam took a deep breath: ‘You're telling me you've read books like that ... about history and wars?’ The girl's eyes flashed in what we later got to recognise as a danger signal: ‘And why shouldn't I? Those books ... that sort of writing isn't for men only, you know! Of course I've read them although my main interest is the Peninsular war.’

‘What else have you read on that?’ asked Sam.

‘Oh most of them ... Jac Weller, Michael Glover, David Chandler, Rogers, Riflemen Harris, Kincaid, Surtees, Costello, Harry Smith, Julian Rathbone ... and Napier too ... but not all of his-only the single volume edition.

Sam had never met a girl like her and they chatted merrily away until the Wally got fed-up and went. Of course he had to bring her down to the shop, to show off this quite exceptional member of the fair sex whom he introduced all round as ‘Sharon’ and basked in the reflected glory of the astonishment and respect she aroused by knowing as much as any of us about the Peninsular – even Billy Wright hadn't read Napier! It wasn't long before she made it quite clear she wasn't going to be regarded as a pet parrot saying its piece; she stood there looking around at us and, as breezily as you like, said:

‘Sam tells me you fight wargames here. I've never had the chance to do anything like that before ... when can I come and fight a Peninsular wargame?’

We looked at each other and you could read it in their faces that she could bring a bit of glamour to that dreary school-hall. ‘It's alright with us ... if Charlie agrees (the Club President).’ Well, Charlie agreed, saying ‘Perhaps it'll make some of you watch your language when the dice don't fall right!’ So we set about preparing a fairly straightforward battle, using an example from history and we had a full house next Sunday with most of the Gang more respectable than ever before.

Sharon astonished us straightaway by recognising the battle as soon as she heard the narrative: ‘ That's Maida ... 4th of July 1806 ... when Stuart beat Reynier ... yes, that's a nice little battle with the red-coated Swiss being mistaken for Watteville's men ... and Ross coming ashore with the 20th Foot and winning the day ... yes, I'm going to enjoy this!’ We stood open-mouthed with Sam Russ capering around her as though she's just won an Olympic gold medal. At first we were all helpful and chivalrous, giving her the benefit of the doubt and acting like perfect gentlemen, then she got the hang of the rules and began knocking hell out of Toby Role's force. Mistakenly he carried on treating her with exaggerated courtesy long after most of us were desperately fighting for our lives! Oh yes, before the game was halfway through we had

all abandoned that flippant flirting style, but Sharon had got the bit between her teeth and by the end of the afternoon had done a better job than even Stuart did in 1806! It might have helped if we could have got the odd curse or swearword in, but whenever one of us opened his mouth to do so, Charlie glared a warning and it was his Club, after all, wasn't it?

From then on she became a regular Sunday player, coming each week with Sam, although he was getting a bit fed-up with Sharon and some said she only kept in with him to be able to carry on wargaming. Whatever you say, women aren't like men, are they? – when a guy wins a wargame or does something noteworthy he doesn't keep crowing about it, but Sharon did because she was a real Woman's Lib type and every wargame was a Battle of Sexes to her. Then she sprang her bombshell – she was going to paint-up a regiment of 25mm Amazons – women soldiers- and use them in our wargames! We kept our spirits up saying no maker did them, but Charlie said he'd look around although he didn't please Sharon when he recalled how Mike Blake of Individual Skirmish Wargames had once made a bevy of Western Saloon girls out of Airfix 1:32nd footballers.

The eyes flashed dangerously: 'I'm talking of soldiers, women warriors who could beat most armies they encountered ... until the controlled volleys of French repeater rifles defeated them in the 1890s.' And she went off full blast about this Corps of Amazons in Dahomey, a West African Kingdom, formed in bands of 400 with female officers, armed with muskets, rifles, bows and arrows, spears, machetes and swords, each unit designated by flags, drums and ceremonial umbrellas; they wore a loosely slit wide skirt and a cartridge belt over their bare chests. That made some of the younger lads snigger! The local Model shop produced female Fantasy warriors from Asgard and then Citadel's women-warriors, but she didn't like them so in the end to keep her happy, Sam converted some Ancient Egyptians or Hittities, gave them muskets and made bare breasts with tiny blobs of solder – when Sharon said some of them were ' unbalanced at the top' we all said they'd look alright when they were painted.

She did a good paint-job on them, and those Amazons turned up in every wargame we fought, although at first the younger lads didn't like firing and meleeing with them – 'Don't seem right ... with them being wimmin, does it?' But them 'wimmin' chased us all over the table and Sharon got more and more cocky, crowing when she won and the few losing occasions, accusing us of being chauvinist pigs. The numbers began dropping off on Sundays and we were at our wit's end wondering what to do, when suddenly Sharon stopped coming! After three peaceful weeks, we had all cheered up, even Sam Russ, then Fred walked in waving the evening paper: 'See this picture of Sharon in the Recorder?' It was on the back page, the sports page – there she was, dressed in football gear – she'd formed a woman's football team – called The Amazons of course – and was bitterly complaining because the local football association wouldn't let them play in the men's league! Understandable, you can't kick a girl up in the air.

We haven't had any girls in the Gang since Sharon, and most prefer it that way, although we all agree that if there was has got to be another sex, we'd as soon it was women as anything else!