NAVAL GUNNERY AND CRITICAL HITS by John Bassett

I read with interest Rob Doel's article `Wings of Clay'. (Nugget #196. Ed.) Rob makes a number of good points, and I'm particularly impressed by his seemingly total recall of the 3.00 am sessions on both nights at COW. The point that most got me thinking is tangential to Rob's main argument. Discussing the shooting mechanism of `Wings of War' Rob writes:

'I oppose the cumulative 'hit points' vs. `defence value mechanism too. WWI planes are unlike ships-either you hit a critical part (engine, pilot, main beam...) or the bullets make an insignificant hole in the canvas.'

Fair enough for WWI fighters, but also, I think, a fair approach to damage in naval engagements in both World Wars. I make no claim to expertise in either naval wargames or naval history but a recent visit set me thinking. At the end of January I went round HMS Belfast, looking to kill 40 minutes before meeting colleagues. In the event, I ended up spending nearly three hours on board, and had to apologise profusely for my lateness!

In the fire control room, Roger Barnes turned to me and said: `All this cumulative degradation of damage points in naval games is nonsense. Everything we've seen today is either going to work or it's not.' It seems obvious. But it's an important insight. An hour on HMS Belfast demonstrates quite clearly that in terms of functionality in battle it's nothing more or less than a mobile gun platform. The elements of the ship are either critical to that function or irrelevant, and they are either working or they are not. There is of course a role for damage control parties, but ultimately that's at the margins (albeit sometimes critical margins).

I recall Ian Drury coming up with some interesting research on capital ship vs capital ship combat in a write-up of his Bismark game 'North Atlantic Raiders' many years ago that demonstrated that big gun hits were either very effective or almost totally ineffective. It is also interesting to note the way in naval gunnery in the first part of the 20th century, warships often took heavy damage to their armanents and relatively little to their movement ability, perhaps because the key elements of the gunnery systems are so much more exposed to gunfire than the engine room

So, enjoyable though John Curry's restorations of Fletcher Pratt's naval rules are, I'm not convinced that Pratt's damage system is an accurate way of representing damage. I recently looked again at Arthur Taylor's little book in the Shire Discovering series from the early 70s: Wargames Rules. In his naval rules, any hit that is effective causes the loss of some part of the ship's functionality. Interestingly, Taylor uses that most modish of game devices, a pack of playing cards, to determine what is hit. I suspect it might be possible to graft this on to the Pratt rules, while keeping the flavour and good points, such as estimating range. The trick would be to ensure that the game kept moving quickly. It might even be possible to build in simple rules for damage control parties, as Wayne Thomas and David Brock did in `Battle of the River Plate'.