

American Civil War Riverine Actions

The 'Noddy' Approach

by Andy Callan (originally published in *Miniature Wargames*, No. 14, 1984)

One of the troubles I've always found with most sets of wargames rules is that they assume the player is going to want to use them on a regular basis. Accordingly the authors feel obliged to try and cover every possible aspect of the historical period they are trying to represent with rules and odds for every conceivable tactical situation. This is all very well for rules designed for the Nationals (say) for a period in which the reader knows he's going to have a continued interest. But what about 'sideshow' periods? You know, the sort of thing that is going to grip your imagination for a few weeks only and then get set aside perhaps to be revived, equally fleetingly, only a year or two later. What you really need there is a set of rules that are quick to learn and give a fast moving and decisive sort of game.



The answer, of course, is to write your own set, tailored to your own particular requirements, and using what has been called the 'back of a postcard' or 'one braincell' approach. With such rules it is the *result* that is the important thing, not the calculations by which you arrive at it, so simple game mechanisms are preferred to complex ones as long as they still give a reasonably historically valid result.

The simple rules given here, that I designed for ACW riverine actions can be taken as an example of how you might go about quickly getting down to the bare essentials of a playable game. In fact these are so basic that I've christened them 'Noddy' rules, which I hope gives the right impression of simplicity and lack of too much seriousness. I don't for a minute expect they'll be everyone's cup of tea (see my 'final word for the purist' below).

Suwanee Ribber

I can't remember exactly what it was that first tempted me to have a go at wargaming the actions of the ACW freshwater navies but I think the *names* had something to do with it! I found irresistible the likes of USS Weehawken and Kickapoo or the CSS Tuscaloosa and Peedee, fighting on rivers like the Yazoo and the Tallahatchie. The vessels that fought on the rivers, at least in the early days before total Yankee superiority, were equally colourful, seeming mostly to have been a rag-tag collection of converted civilian vessels, variously protected with odd sheets of armour plate, railway iron, baulks of timber, bales of cotton or nothing at all, and armed with whatever guns the builders could lay their hands on. Equally attractive was the way that the naval commanders on the rivers seemed to go in for a 'brute force and ignorance' school of tactics, on the lines of 'if it moves, shoot at it; if it keeps moving, try to ram it; and if the enemy tries anything fancy assume it isn't going to work!' The reasons for this were quite simple: inexperienced commanders were dealing with new, untried military technology (steam and armour in an unfamiliar setting (rivers rather than the open sea) and so had to make things up as they went along. Such tactics led to a hectic, desperate and decisive style of fighting which sounded to me like it had a lot more potential for an enjoyable wargame than the intricacies of manoeuvre under sail or the endless firepower: armour equations of twentieth century naval encounters. What was needed though, was a set of rules that would reflect the slap bang wallop of the real thing.

My first thought, as a confirmed wargaming landlubber, was to run to commercially available rules, so I got hold of a couple of sets, only to find myself instantly disappointed. They were just far too complicated - one set I came across listed no less than 22 different types of gun, each with its own factors - and generally seemed to suffer from the fault of assuming:

a) that you had the time and inclination to get used to their cumbersome rule mechanisms;

b) that it was possible to precisely quantify every aspect of the (makeshift) technology of the time.

This was no good to an impatient wargamer like me. I wanted to get down to gaming as soon as possible but I also wanted to try and start from the same position as the commanders of the time, where nobody really knew what the best tactics were or how well any enemy ship might stand up to your gunfire or ramming. In short, I wanted a game where the players wouldn't be sure whether anything would work until they tried it.

So the only thing to do was to attempt to write my own rules. In the event this was forced upon me as, after half an hour trying to work out the ship points value for a single vessel according to the incredibly convoluted formula given in one set of rules, I realised that I would have to act fast if I was still to be able to start the game I'd promised to lay on that night. The basic set was written in about ten minutes and looked (and was) laughably simple but, to my surprise, it seemed to give a game that was fast moving, action packed and enjoyable, while still being broadly in keeping with what happened in the real thing.

Anyway, here is a 'perfected' version of the original set. It's easy to see where Noddy comes into it - measurements are in inches, only one type of dice is used, ships and guns are classified into a minimal number of categories and chance plays a major role in the proceedings....

NODDY RULES FOR ACW RIVERINE ACTIONS

Equipment Needed:

Rulers, protractor, 6-sided dice, 1:1200 models.

Scales:

1 move = 1 minute.

1 knot speed = 1 inch movement. (At 1:1200 scale this means that 1 inch = approx 30 metres).

Movement:

Against current: $\frac{2}{3}$ top speed (to nearest inch). (Current is 1 knot always).

In reverse: $\frac{1}{4}$ top speed (to nearest inch).

Change of speed: Up to 2 knots per move (i.e. acceleration or deceleration).

Turning: Riverboats = up to 60 degrees per turn.

Ocena-going vessels or monitors = up to 45 degrees per move.

Ironclad rams = up to 30 degrees per turn.

Order of play:

1. Write orders.
2. Make $\frac{1}{2}$ move.
3. Make turn (if any).



4. Any vessel not turning may fire.
5. Complete move.
6. Any vessel not previously fired that turn may fire.

Running Aground:

Throw one dice to get free. Needs 6. Three attempts only.

Firing:

a) Only three classes of gun are recognised:

1. 'Baby-sized' (up to 18 pounder) (= 'light').
2. 'Mummy-sized' (in betweenies) (= 'medium').
3. 'Daddy-sized' (over 8 inches or 100 pounds) (= 'heavy').

Baby-sized guns fire once every move and have a basic fire value of ONE

Mummy-sized guns fire once every move and have a basic fire value of TWO

Daddy-sized guns fire on alternate moves and have a basic fire value of THREE.

b) Ranges (all calibres):

Point-Blank = 0-3 inches.

Effective = 3-18 inches.

Long = 18-36 inches (not Baby-sized guns).

c) Arcs of Fire:

10 degrees only. Turreted vessels may fire in any direction.

d) Armour Classes:

Best (e.g., monitor turret) = 12.

Ironclad or shore battery = 9, 10, 11.

'Tinclad' (i.e. thin iron sheet) = 8.

'Woodclad' or 'cottonclad' = 7

Unprotected = 6

e) To core a Hit:

For each gun firing throw one dice. Take score and add value of gun, plus or minus the following. Hit if you equal or exceed armour class.

+1 Rifled gun.

+1 Target stationary (not inc. shore battery).

+1 Firer stationary (not inc. shore battery).

+1 Point blank range.

-1 Firer on fire/filled with steam.

-1 Change of target this move.

-1 Target bow/stern on (= smaller target).

-1 Firer in shore battery.

-1 Long range.

f) Effects of Hits:

If hit is scored dice again:

6 = Special effect (see below).

4, 5 = Lose 1 knot speed.

2, 3 = Lose 1 gun (or half knot speed if no gun where hit struck).

1 = Lose half knot speed.

g) Special Effects:

Throw two dice.

2 = Freak shot penetrates magazine. Ship blows up and sinks immediately.

3 = Helmsman/pilot/captain, killed. Ship continues on present course for one move until someone takes over.

4 = Vessel holed and lists to port. Lose 1 knot speed. Guns on starboard side cannot depress enough to engage targets.

5 = As 4 but port side guns out of action.

6 = Single gun shutter damaged and will not open. Dice x moves to free it. Choose gun nearest point of impact.

7 = Steam pipes damaged leading to loss of pressure. Rate of acceleration/deceleration reduced to 1 knot per move.

8 = Smoke stack damaged. Lose 2 knots off top speed. Minus one on all subsequent firing throws as there's smoke everywhere.

9 = Screw/paddle jammed with debris. Vessel slows to halt. Dice x moves to clear.

10 = Steering mechanism damaged. Ship continues on present course for dice x moves before repaired.

11 = FIRE. Needs dice of 6 to put out. One attempt per move and total of four attempts only. If still on fire crew abandons ship. Minus one on all firing dice while vessel burns.

12 = Boiler holed. Ship fills with steam and drifts to halt. Crew abandons ship for dice of 1 or 2. Otherwise as floating battery.

h) Ammunition: Assume unlimited.

i) Musketry:

A regiment firing from the bank needs a dice of 6 to have any chance whatsoever of any effect. Dice for a special effect with only a throw of 3 (i.e., helmsman hit) counting for anything.

j) Shore batteries:

Ships firing on-shore batteries need to score a hit and then throw a 6 on the effect dice to knock out a gun.

Ramming:

Throw one dice.

+1 Rammee stationary.

+1 Rammer each knot over 6.

+1 Rammee side on to ram.

-1 Rammer without reinforced bow.

-1 Rammer each knot under 4.

Result: 6+ Rammee crippled, drifts with current. Rammer loses 1 knot.

4/5 Rammee loses dice x knots. Rammer loses 1 knot.

2/3 No effect on either vessel.

1 or less Rammer loses dice x knots. No effect on rammee.

Endurance:

Any ship whose speed drops to zero as a result of enemy action drifts with the current (1 knot). If the speed drops below zero then the vessel will sink in dice +5 moves.

Morale Rules: there aren't any.....!

Notes on Play

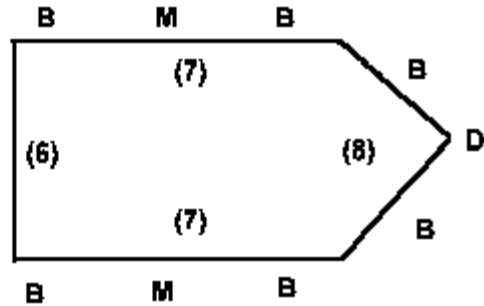
This is a game for two or more players, with an umpire taking an important part in things. Apart from being responsible for keeping track of mines, shallows' etc (see below), he's essential to resolve disputes about who's capable of ramming or shooting at whom, as well as stepping in to break down a move into short segment if it looks like a collision might occur. In all circumstances the umpire's ruling should be the final word on the matter and it's entirely in keeping with the spirit of the game if he chooses to penalise a recalcitrant player with a randomly chosen 'special effect'.



A certain amount of book-keeping is needed but, by comparison with most naval games, this is at a very basic level. To play the game you need a card or other record giving each vessel's vital statistics.

Something like this is quite adequate:

CSS BOJANGLES
Top Speed: 8 knots
Draught: 6 feet



'B', 'M' and 'D' refer to the (unbelievably sophisticated) gun categories given in the rules and the numbers refer to the armour classes. Strike off guns and reduce the top speed as the vessel suffers damage during the fighting.

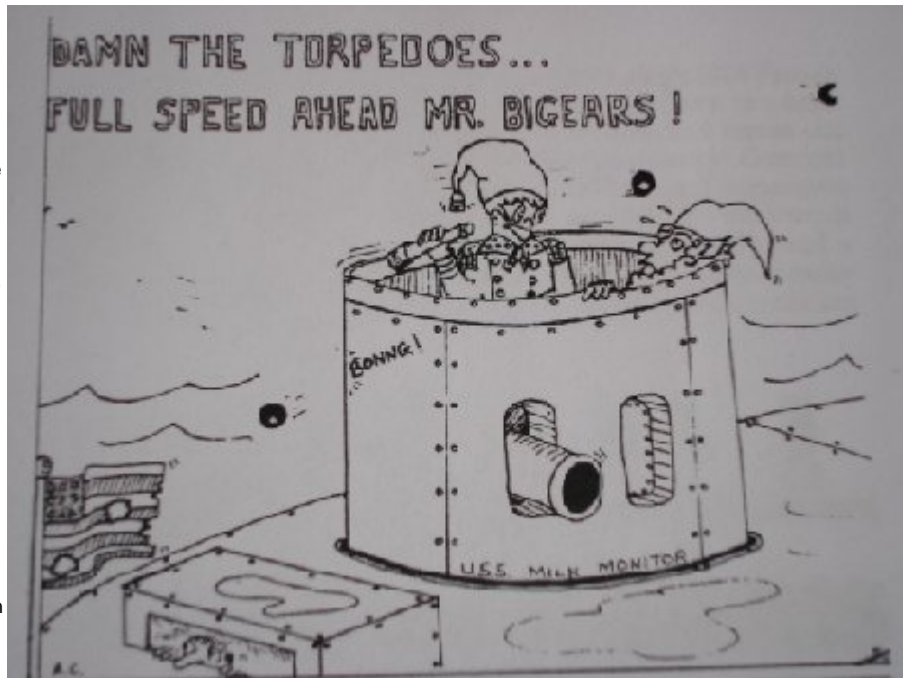
Orders need to be written for each vessel, for each move: an arrow with a note of speed and angle of turn (if any) will do, so the umpire can check up in case of dispute. There is no need to write orders for firing as it is assumed that everyone will fire at will at targets of opportunity. As for fire effects, the umpire will need a set of cards showing the various effects (e.g., *Lose one knot speed*) so he can flash the appropriate one at the player suffering the damage without his opponent seeing. The latter will then have to gauge the effect of his firing by the subsequent performance of the target vessel.

Setting up:

A riverine action needs only a minimal amount of terrain, of course, so it can be quickly set up on the table. I like to mark out the line of the riverbanks using carpet tiles (or odd sections of suitably coloured carpet picked up cheap as remnants) and gradual curves and confluences can easily be made using a small number of specially cut pieces. Sandbars can be made from sheets of sandpaper or roofing felt. The odd house or jetty adds to the visual appeal of course and 1/300 or Hair-roller figures can be used without looking too out of scale.

Hidden Nasties:

Mines (torpedoes as they were then called) and shallows often played a crucial role in these battles so they really do need to be incorporated in the game. Obviously, though, its no good marking them on the table as they would have been invisible in real life, so there has to be some provision for secrecy. One way is for the umpire to draw up a chart of the danger areas before the fighting and show it to the players, where appropriate (only one side would be likely to know the exact position of mines, for example), and then take it away again after an agreed period of time (a minute, say). It's amazing how often players (realistically) forget all about this in the heat of the action, and stray into their own minefields or run aground on a shallow. Opportunities obviously exist for shallow draught vessels to lure more ponderous opponents on to their doom....



I chose deliberately not to state any odds in the rules for the success of mines as I think it ought to vary from game to game. The mines of the time were notoriously erratic in performance and before the test of action it was impossible for anyone to predict how efficient any particular set of mines would prove to be. At Mobile Bay, to take a famous example, the vessel leading the Union

column, the monitor *Tecumseh*, struck a mine and sank immediately, but Admiral Farragut's gamble in 'damning the torpedoes' and ordering the rest of the fleet to steam straight through paid off as none of the other mines went off. It should be up to the umpire, therefore, to work out his own odds for each particular game and then judge how far he ought to plant seeds of confidence in the minds of those using mine defences and apprehension in those who might have to run the gauntlet, without revealing the *exact* odds to either.

The Ships:

Most of the vessels that took part in the well-known actions are available as 1/1200 scale metal models, but if you're stingy (like me) or like making models (me again) then you can get a lot of satisfaction scratchbuilding your own. Obviously there are standard modelling materials such as balsa which you can use, but for 1/1200 scale I found various household odds and ends particularly useful. Biro's, for example, can provide funnels (from the ink tube) and paddle wheels (from the casing) and I found I could even make the curiously modern, submarine-like shape of the *CSS Mannassas* out of the pen-cap. Various types of small nails can make excellent funnels and linotile is ideal for the low hulls of monitors and rams. Use your imagination and look at everyday objects in a new light and you'll find uses for all sorts of unlikely things.

Ship Data:

Commercial manufacturers usually include a sheet of basic data with their models but a good general history of the river war (such as John D. Milligan's *Gunboats Down the Mississippi*, published by the US Naval Institute, Annapolis 1965) will include some details of armament and performance. The last word on the subject, though, is *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series II, Volume I (Washington 1921) which lists everything known about every vessel and which you might be lucky enough to get through inter-library loan. Failing that, of course, all you really need to do is look at any pictures of the ship, read up how it performed in action, and make it up from there. It's only a game after all! As a *very* rough guide, these are the essential characteristics of the principal classes of ships used on the rivers:

- 1) US Monitors: Single or twin turreted. Usually 2 heavy guns per turret but early models capable of firing only one at a time. Slowish (5-8 knots), armour excellent, draught about 10 feet.
- 2) Confederate Ironclad Rams: (*Merrimac*, *Arkansas*, *Palmetto*, etc), slow and deep-draughted (10-15 feet) but heavily armed (generally 4-8 heavy/medium sized guns) and well armoured.
- 3) Converted River Steamers: Shallow draughted and manoeuvrable but speed varying according to the liberties taken with the original design. Armour of varying degrees of (in)effectiveness and usually a heterogeneous armament.
- 4) Union Ocean-going Vessels used on the river: Deep draughted and cumbersome on inland waters but very heavily armed (8-12 heavy guns in broadside).

A Final Word to the Purist:

I make no claims for the accuracy or completeness of these rules so please don't write in to complain that I haven't made special provision for the Erisson recoilless spar torpedoes on the USS *Gridiron* (or whatever). All I was after was a light-hearted game in which wargaming landlubbers could whizz around ramming, running aground and generally behaving in a spirit of mindless violence ... rather like the original protagonists in fact!

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