





# OPERATION CRIMSON DAWN

# AFTER ACTION REPORT

Two of Fight Club's 'Warrior Council', enabled by *Evocatus Consulting*, recently completed a distributed head-to-head using *Combat Mission Shock Force 2*. The aim of the exercise was to identify best practice for future distributed games (in the light of the continuing coronavirus pandemic) and to understand how competing against a thinking human opponent changed the gameplay experience. Playing against the scripted, in-game AI is useful when time is short and the learning focuses on the tactical mechanics according to doctrine rather than critical thinking. UK Fight Club has used this method for 4 of 5 missions in its campaign of learning 'Op RISING MOON'. Introducing a human opponent creates a situation familiar to chess players of 'playing the player, not the pieces' switching the focus from individual soldier/platform capabilities to trying to outwit the other player.

## The Scenario

The scenario for Crimson Dawn saw a separatist militia (around 2 reinforced platoons) defending Imber village on Salisbury Plain with a British light role infantry company as the attackers. Contrary to Fight Club's other internally produced missions, Crimson Dawn had no orders to either side. The players would, instead, be forced to decide what mattered most to them in terms of outcomes and contemplate what they could achieve given known time, space and resources. In the case of the latter, they would also be able to pick from several 'support cards' that changed the battlefield dynamics by adding force elements, affecting situational awareness, changing the in-game scenario parameters and so on. Each card cost a set number of 'points', generally, the more powerful or higher technological cards were very expensive. The range of support cards on offer was shared on social media to create a wider debate. Both players had to think about what their opponent might choose, how that might shape their plan, what their plan should look like to counter this and then what cards would be the most useful to achieve that. There was a lot of second-guessing, doubt and biased assumptions. This is a simple, yet powerful example of the depth that having human opponents instead of the AI can bring to the game. It also enhances re-playability by turning a single scenario into one with multiple branches as cards are added or removed from each side.

<p><b>FIGHT CLUB</b></p> <p><b>All Source Intelligence Fusion</b> <span style="border: 1px solid blue; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px;">3</span></p>  <p>BLUFOR command invests in SIGINT, HUMINT, OSINT and IMINT to fuse together a greater understanding of the REDFOR composition and laydown.</p> <p>Game Effects:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Increase early intel setting to 70%</li> <li>2) Informed of what capability cards REDFOR has played</li> </ol>	<p><b>FIGHT CLUB</b></p> <p><b>Night March and Dawn Attack</b> <span style="border: 1px solid blue; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px;">1</span></p>  <p>BLUFOR conducts a night march towards the objective, gaining tactical surprise over a less prepared enemy.</p> <p>Game Effects:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Starting forces arrive in waves at 10 min intervals (from the approach march) W/N/S sides of map</li> <li>2) Mission start time 0500</li> <li>3) Cannot use with Joint Operation card</li> </ol>	<p><b>FIGHT CLUB</b></p> <p><b>Hire Local Scouts</b> <span style="border: 1px solid red; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px;">1</span></p>  <p>REDFOR hires willing locals to provide knowledge of the surrounding terrain and to scout for the arrival of BLUFOR.</p> <p>Game Effects:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Add 2x spy teams to your starting forces with REGULAR skill and motivation</li> <li>2) Increase deployment zone</li> </ol>	<p><b>FIGHT CLUB</b></p> <p><b>Donovian Special Purpose Forces</b> <span style="border: 1px solid red; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px;">3</span></p>  <p>REDFOR requests the aid of deniable Special Purpose Forces from a supporting neighbouring state.</p> <p>Game Effects:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Add a Conventional Forward Observer Team to your forces with ELITE skill and EXTREME motivation</li> <li>2) Add a battery of SP Howitzers to your starting forces</li> </ol>
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## The Plans

Blue sought to gain more information on Red's cards and dispositions in the village hoping this would allow them to adapt the plan as required. Noting the largely open terrain Blue decided to use the cover of night, and the lack of NVGs in the separatist force, to move into a position of advantage. Red chose a good combination of cards to gain access to 120mm mortars, their NVG equipped spotters and local scouts to push out and detect Blue's approach. This skilful combination of sensor-shooter would prove decisive later on. OC Blufor assessed the separatists lacked sufficient manpower to garrison every building. They deduced that Red would deploy a disruption zone to Imber Court and hold the majority of their combat power on the W edge of Imber Village to repel an attack from the W and N – the MLCOA. Blue planned to avoid the ML entry directions into Imber and use a night-time approach to move up the company on the Southern flank of the village. After establishing machine guns on the slopes, a platoon would seize the hamlet and

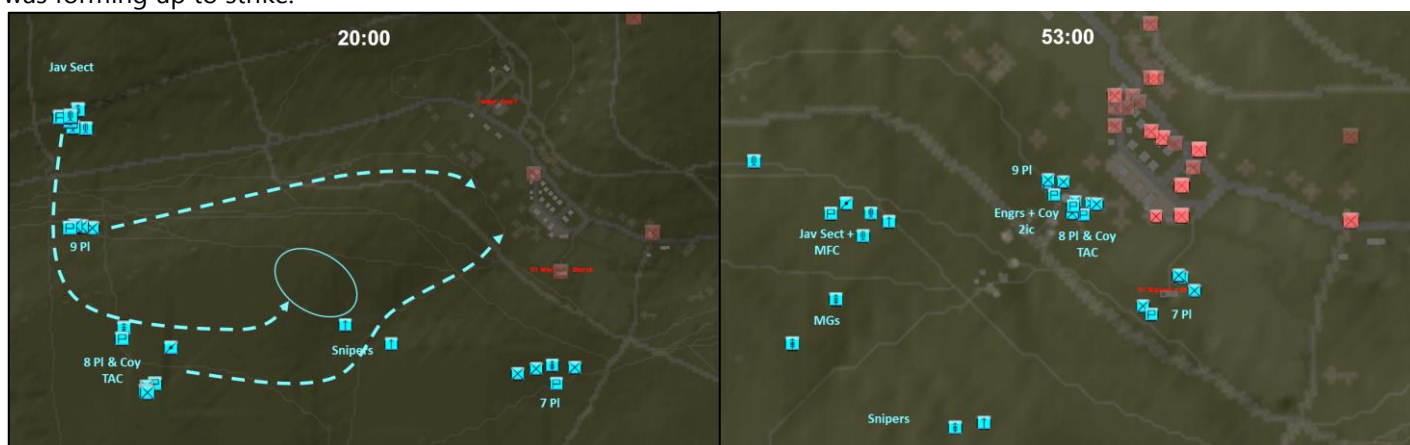
the church would be cleared to enable the two assault platoons to occupy the woods S of the village. This would all occur in rapid succession to maximise the dislocation of the enemy who would also be pinned by snipers and, where appropriate, mortar fire. The ideal outcome was the company rapidly establishing a lodgement in the village, within the cover of buildings thus denying the enemy free use of their mortars and using the infantry mass to overwhelm defenders in detail. Red's actual plan was indeed to have a disruption zone in Imber Court but also to garrison the Hamlet and have even coverage of the houses and alleys in Imber Village.

### The Battle

**Phase 1: Initial move into contact.** Immediately Blue could see that Red had some elements in the Church and the Hamlet which would probably cause the plan to be amended. Blue's forces arrived in a staggered manner over 30 mins with 7 PI leading the company towards the Southern Flank of the village. After less than 20 minutes one of Red's local scouts had spotted 7 PI and a small separatist fire team moved up from the area of the church to engage them.



**Phase 2: Blue establishing on slopes.** Having now blown the option of a surprise seizure of the hamlet Blue concentrated on establishing fire support position on the slopes whilst moving 9 PI into the FUP location from the W. Blue's fire support assets had good fields of fire from the high ground but, due to the civilian density in the village, couldn't identify Red's elements unless they moved in the open or fired. Red was still unsure, at this point, of where Blue was forming up to strike.



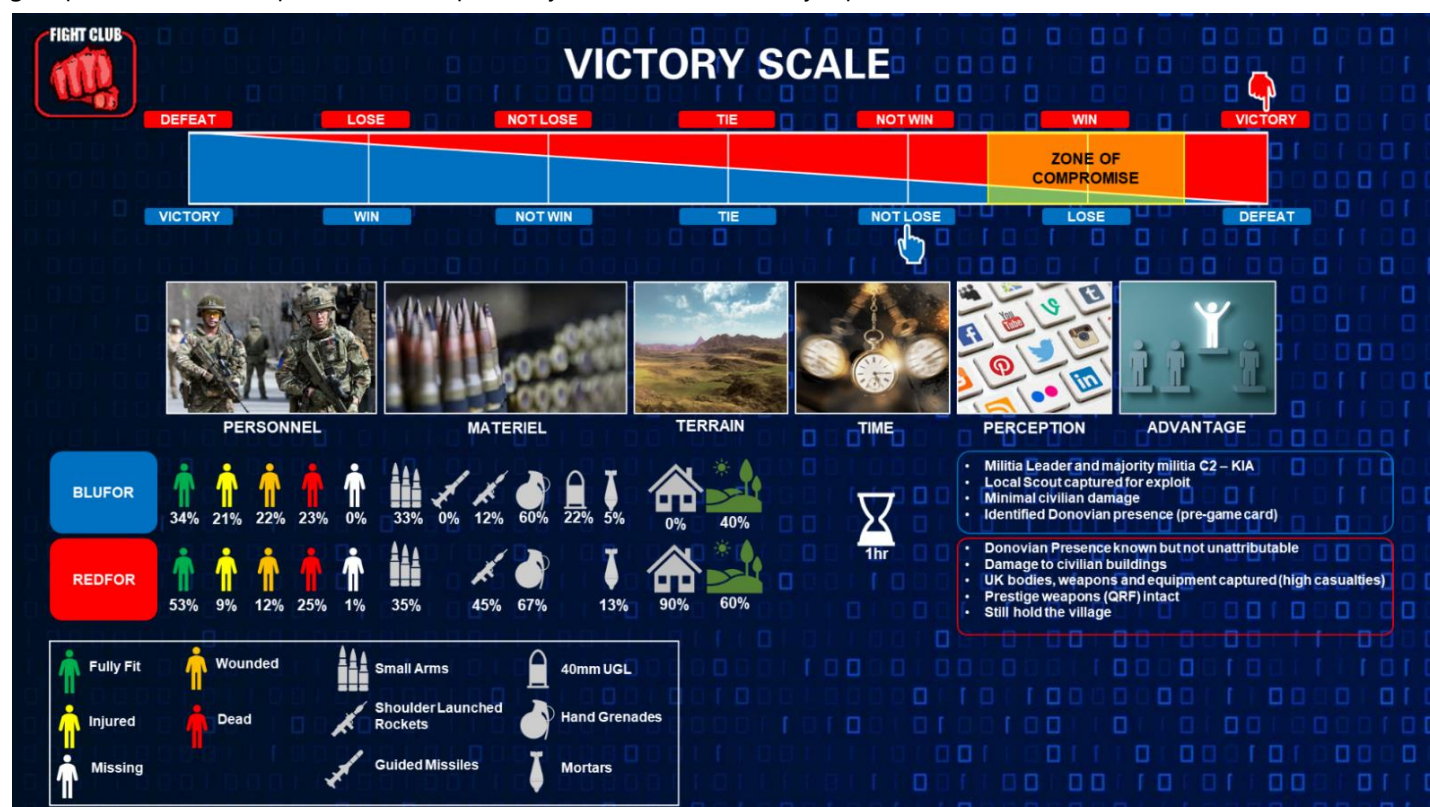
**Phase 3: Fighting to the FUP.** 9 Platoon's move towards the village was spotted by the Donovians and developed into a sporadic firefight. Red's mortars started to range in on 9 PI who dashed towards the link up with 8 PI, themselves sprinting from a re-entrant in the slopes. Red, now realising the point of Blue's main attack, began to collapse his disruption zones into the centre. In doing so they were seen and engaged by Blue's javelins, machine guns and mortars, causing the majority of red's casualties in the battle. In a change to their intended use, javelin missiles struck red firing points that were bringing the FUP under fire. In an example of low tech TTP defeating exotic superior technology, Red started to shoot and scoot from building to building. Lastly, a terrible 120mm mortar barrage killed over a dozen of Blue's troops as they formed up.

**Phase 4: The fight to break in.** With an orderly assault sabotaged by the IDF, Blue threw fireteams into assaults in a piecemeal fashion. These proved costly, even when successful due to Red's intuitive defensive laydown of holding the forward buildings with minimal strength but covered from troops inside depth structures. Blue's fire support assets (MGs and snipers as all javelins fired) proved unable to suppress these emerging enemies because of the intervening buildings. A localised break-in was achieved by 7 PI on the SE tip of Imber Village but by this point OC BLUFOR knew there was little benefit in pressing further.

**Phase 5: Breaking Contact.** Salvaging the remnants of 8 and 9 PI Blue broke contact quacking using the re-entrant to withdraw onto the slopes. 7 PI provided an effective rear-guard before too pulling back. As Blue withdrew up the slopes now pockmarked with mortar craters the separatist Quick Reaction Force arrived.

## Victory?

In today's world of conflicting, overlapping and fake narratives why should victory/defeat be black and white? Commercial games often use a simple scoring process based on in-game objectives and casualties to provide an objective performance for each side and a definitive 'winner' unless a draw occurs. We opted instead to let both players 'sing for their supper' based on several criteria (Personnel, Material, Terrain, Time, Perception and Advantage) to argue for an outcome on a sliding scale (Victory, Win, Not Win, Draw, Not Lose, Lose, Defeat). The criteria should not be viewed as absolute but rather, relative to the context of the scenario. For example, whilst Blue can be argued to be casualty averse it has a large, professional armed force to replace losses and so can be considered to be able to 're-engage' very quickly. Red, in this example, cannot just create more trained militia from nowhere quickly and so, may in fact be less capable after this fight even though it suffered fewer casualties. The same could be said for material as Red is not sitting on an industrial base of munitions production. Also, consider the fact that the red commander asserts political power in this war-torn land due to the strength and arms of their militia group – they cannot avoid a fight or risk losing face but equally, they risk losing power if too many of their fighters are lost, potentially encouraging the remainder to desert to another militia leader or simply go home. All things considered, we chalked this one up as a Red Win/Blue Lose due to the scale of Blue's attributable losses (bodies left on the field) although in specific terms the militia group lost its leadership and has now probably become absorbed by a peer or rival commander.



## Human Lessons

**The value of modelling preliminary moves:** The first 20 minutes of gameplay (almost 2 hours of real-time) covered the initial move in and was mostly uneventful. This is often not simulated due to the risk of boredom or a desire to focus on the contact battle. Scenario designers that start gameplay from the Forming Up Point might be missing out on important learning outcomes. Our players found this stage to be the crucial shaping phase for what unfolded and indeed it was argued in the wash-up that at 20 mins in the whole plan needed to be amended and that itself was of significant value. Other options to speed this phase up if time is tight come in both manual and computer formats. The first is to run a map exercise that plots the route in vs defender surveillance and ambush zones and commencing gameplay where the two meet (if at all). The second is to create a pre-game in Combat Mission where the defender is static/basic AI scripting, thus allowing the attacker to play in real-time until they reach the start line or contact occurs.

**'Random' events dear boy events:** Due to a technical design oversight Red's mortars were not 'linked' to the spotters creating a long-time delay when calling for fire. Likewise, Blue's troops arrived on the map in places and groups that they did not expect. Scenario designers should consider adding random events that disrupt the otherwise ordered nature of the game to force hasty decision making. Examples could be the delay/reduction/arrival point of reinforcements (including artillery/air) due to navigation/interdiction; changing the weather (especially visibility); lengthening/shortening the time allotted for the mission and issuing a change of mission orders as the game unfolds. Also, consider providing inaccurate information to players on their opponents; example could be to say that Red

consists of a reinforced Light Infantry platoon when in fact it is a reduced Mechanised Company. This can be extended to the 'Remagen trick'<sup>1</sup> where information about a player's own forces is optimistic, forcing them to replan once the mission starts.

**Predictability and human foibles:** It is an unfortunate reality that our military training and doctrine can make us predictable to a fault. Even a maverick in the box is still operating within broadly understood conventions and customs. Military organisations, especially when at war, require everyone to know their place in the orchestra of battle – being too unorthodox can risk finding oneself without support, interfering in another's carefully crafted plan or opening a seam for the enemy to exploit. This conservative thinking was evident in the way blue conducted themselves – commanded as they were by a regular line officer and product of cognitive conformist education at Sandhurst, Battle Schools and both Junior and Intermediate Command and Staff



courses. Red, on the other hand, was much more fluid and flexible, mirroring their scenario role of an irregular force but also due to the mind of their commander – a reservist who has absorbed less dogma and tactical scripture and is junior enough to dare to be different. Cap badge culture can also play a part – the light role infantryman has an almost irresistible desire to close with the enemy with grenade and bayonet. This is a product of recruiting material, formal training and the hard-won heritage of respective regiments. Whilst there is absolutely nothing wrong with this in general terms, when it begins to restrict imagination, we have a problem. On reflection, blue admitted that sealing off the village with his infantry mass and using precision assets to neutralise the enemy when they moved or became identified would have yielded better outcomes.

**A contest of wills:** At various points in the battle one player was assessed to have had the upper hand. However, when listening to the players in the AAR, very rarely did they self-identify as having the advantage when this was the case. A couple of examples bear this out. Blue was adamant that his movement on the slopes was unobserved by the enemy, even to the point that when indirect fire started landing, he thought it was speculative. Ironically, later on when Red mortar fire crippled a blue platoon this was assessed as the location of the FUP being compromised when in fact it was predicted



fire on an assessed potential FUP location submitted many minutes beforehand. A series of screenshots shared between the players around the military use of the church by both sides became its own mini contest of the narrative – in the end, the building was not maximised by either side. Lastly at the final hurdle, both Red and Blue thought they were about to lose; Red's separatists had almost expended their very limited stocks of ammo but Blue was not aware and on the Blue side casualties had become unsustainable but Red (unable to see the bodies) didn't know Blue was hurting that badly. It just goes to show that you the old adage of 'more battles are lost through loss of heart than loss of blood' and you are only truly beaten when you admit it.

## Conclusions

This first head-to-head threw up a range of unexpected outcomes. As ever when expectations and reality diverge, there were a range of lessons to be taken from observations made by both the players and the umpire. Having a third party who can watch the action unfold from a detached perspective was particularly useful; it is easier to focus on understanding why virtual forces met with success or failure when free from the heuristics of competition, which then proves particularly useful for reviewing the action with the competitors. This head-to-head was played by fighters dispersed across Southern England, and the model works; it's not perfect, but it's adversarial, challenging and a great environment in which to practice execution against an enemy who really wants to ruin your day.

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<sup>1</sup> During the film 'Bridge at Remagen' German Major Paul Kreuger is briefed that he will have 1600 men to garrison the bridge (1x regular company, 1x reserve company, 600x Ostruppen, 400x Volksturm, 200x Hitler Youth and a flak battery). Upon arriving at Remagen he discovers in reality he has a composite force of 200 including army engineers who are committed to laying charges.