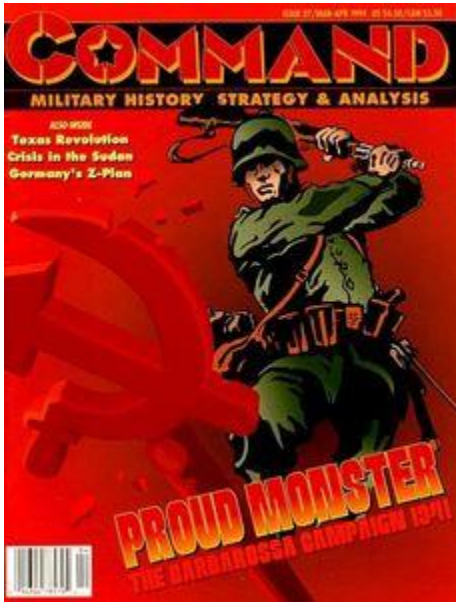


A Cursory Review of Ty Bomba's Classic, Playable Monster Barbarossa Game, Proud Monster

by Lou Coatney – 26-Mar-2017



All yesterday, 25-Mar-17, my Norwegian grognard wargamer friend **Fred** and I played 3 full turns of **Proud Monster** including setup for roughly 9 hours. (He also treated me to Reindeer Stroganoff for dinner, which is *excellent* 😊) It was the first time I had ever played this 1994 game, although I have a still-mint copy of my own. I was the Russians - the easier side to play although not necessarily win with - and fortunately Fred has played the game and knew how to keep track of the strengths of his German armored/panzer groupings. I had read some reviews.

Overall, **Proud Monster** is indeed an enjoyable, brigade-to-division level treatment of the campaign, streamlined for speed and playability. Each of us had over 100 pieces to move and attack with, each turn. While 4 players may be preferred, team play does not necessarily speed up gameplay. The 2-sheet 44"x34" map is optimally configured and scaled - canted a bit for more, relevant terrain and 20 miles per hex. At that geographic and unit scale the units' adjacent hexes do not stop enemy movement, further simplifying gameplay.

The game system features Mobile Assaults which can initially overrun units during movement. Interestingly and correctly, German infantry divisions can be attached to the panzer groupings for strength, as was done historically to some German panzerkorps. Then, there are regular, prepared combats. With no movement-stopping zones of control, all hexes of the front line must usually be occupied by friendly units to prevent even single-hex breakthroughs, but in the last/3rd turn of the game with Fred concentrating his panzers in the south of the Ukraine heading all the way east to Stalino and up at Kiev to finally take it, there was indeed a gap in our lines in the central Ukraine, even with the threat of the German panzers' 12-hex movement. Such high movement factors cover the more playable, large (for a division level game) time periods for the game, and they do enable the sudden, huge, and historically shocking kessels - surrounded pockets - to be formed.

In the first 2 turns of the game, I already had Fred pretty well stalled, but then he got a 1-hex opening crossing the Dvina and then up next to Novgorod, which now threatens isolation if not the taking of Leningrad. And he finally similarly got 1-hex openings down in the Ukraine, when I foolishly concentrated most all my tank divisions to knock down (the units of) a panzer grouping only a few levels.

(When I left, it looked to me like Fred was going to take enough victory cities soon enough to indeed win.)

Russian reinforcements and replacements are historically huge, but the option of German units to retreat instead of taking a single level loss tends to make attrition-intended Russian counterattacking futile and unhistorically discourages that.

Being a Russian Front wargame designer myself, I have more concerns about the design. Regarding the units, overall they show the disparate nature of the different armies' units - including those weaker ones of the Axis allies, Romania, Hungary, and Italy. If I remember correctly, **Ty** was in U.S. Army Intelligence, and his concern for order of battle characterizes his game designs. As in the classic PanzerGruppe Guderian system games - an idea lately credited to Richard Berg when he was working with Simulations Publications Inc. (SPI) - the Russian units' combat factors are unknown to both sides, until they are attacked and revealed.

However, it is odd that Panfilov's immortal 316th Rifle Division - which held up 3rd Panzer Group at Volokolamsk during the Battle of Moscow historically - has attack and defense factors of only 2, when there other Russian rifle divisions in the game have them as high as 6-7. (By contrast, all the first-line German infantry divisions are 6-8s, while the second-line ones are 5-7.) Meanwhile, Polosukhin's 32nd Rifle Division, which single-handedly bloodied, battered, and stalled 10th Panzer Division and 2nd SS Division so badly albeit to its own destruction at Mozhaisk on the Minsk highway to Moscow is a mere 1-1. Rifle divisions can be promoted to Guards level, which is a known, uniform 5-6 and with a 4-5 reduced level.

This historical confusion extends to the Russians' emergency, wartime tank brigades. In PM, Katukov's 4th Tank Brigade - which broke 4th Panzer Division's spearhead/schwerpunkt at Mtsensk south of Moscow - is a mere 2-1, while those can go as high as 4-1 in the game.

These strengths are not changed/corrected in PM's second, deluxe edition.

In my setup, I was able to concentrate my tank units very unhistorically, and there should be a rule that certain groups of 2 tank divisions and a motorized division - a 1941 Russian mechanized corps - should be spotted every so many hexes within 3 hexes of the 1941 border. (Fred pointed out that I *could* be gamey and position my best forward echelon units right along the rear echelon deployment line, to combine the echelons contrary to the presumed game's intent.)

As to the map, it is accurate in the overall sense, but there are concerns: the Pripet Marsh seems far too vast and movement-inhibiting. A (loud in the hobby) criticism I also had of Ted Raicer's point-to-point Barbarossa-to-Berlin was the absence of any direct connection between Baranovichi near Brest on the border in the west and Bobruisk in the east: the route Guderian's go-to 24th Panzer Korps took to unexpectedly - like through the presumed-impassable Ardennes in 1940 - hit, break, and flank the Russians' Dnepr River defense line at Rogachev, well south of Orsha and Smolensk. At a cost of 4 movement factors per swamp hex, it is impossible for such terrain-unexpected, stunning panzer breakthroughs in PM. (Because of the lack of roads through the swamps, a severe stacking penalty for motorized/mechanized units would be better instead.)

Although PM's German Attenuated Supply line/system had initially seemed artificially/arbitrary to me, it *is* an ingeniously simple, effective solution to simulating the supply rubber band effect.

The PM layout of Russian forests in 1941 conflicts with my own Russian sources, but every designer has his own opinion of that. However, there is no river south of Lake Peipus/Chad, which caused Army Group North such trouble that von Manstein's 56th PzKps had to cross it south of Pskov - and historic, transportation point Pskov isn't on the map. Neither is the strategic junction town of Velikiye Luki on the map, and if there are no rail lines on the map, a simple abstraction would have been to allow 1 or 2 units to be transferred via the RVGK Holding Box to small dot reference towns as well ... and to have more of those on the map. (PM's 2nd De Luxe edition does appear to have more towns - Velikiye Luki is there and Roslavl SSE of Smolensk - but Pskov still isn't there, and Bobruisk is misplaced over on the Dnepr River instead of on the Berezina SSE of Minsk! And as remote as it was, the Rybinsk Reservoir *was* filled. AGAIN, for a free copy of the published game, I would be happy to help proof Russian front campaign games' maps! ☺)

There is a fundamental flaw in the unknown strengths mechanic of **Proud Monster**. Regular Red Army units could be expected to perform much better than those hastily organized, and those should have been given better and strength/reliabilities and have been denoted by a different color/symbol. Similarly, some of the Russian tank divisions and brigades had the more powerful T34 and KV1 tanks and could clearly be expected to do better by the Russian commander/player. (So maybe the Russian player should be allowed to look at those?)

And the units' overall combat factors concern me. Dropping German infantry and Russian Guards rifle divisions a strength level of only 1 factor seems too small, even if much of a division's power was its artillery/heavy weapons more than its personnel paper strength. And typical of **Ty's** games, the combat factors are much too - unnecessarily - high for computing odds in your head, even by those of us in older generations who have better-drilled arithmetic skills. Although I brought along my Combat Odds Calculation Tool (good for a defense factor strength up to 30), younger generation Fred preferred his calculator while using pencil and often-erased paper to monitor his panzer groupings' ground and air support strengths.

In my own division level Battle of Moscow game Barbarossa's Climax, I keep the numbers MUCH smaller and even with my mind-blowing combat odds expansion dynamic/rule, its computation can be done quickly and easily in one's own head.

There is also the question of just how speedily playable a *division*-level game *should* be. Having lower level units so freely combined is - at least for the Russians - quite unhistorical, considering their early lack of command coordination/control, thanks to the prewar purges and their lac (compared to the now-veteran Germans) of combat experience.

My latest Moscow game - 15 hexes from Smolensk to Moscow - 16 miles per hex which is also the Europa scale - Moscow in Peril, which is a simplification of Barbarossa's Climax, encourages German infantry and Russian rifle divisions to be sopped/built up into corps and armies, with breakdown into divisions to cover factor/exchange losses and magnify the Disruption effects of losses.

I have LONG considered doing a "division level" Russian Front/Barbarossa game, of course - I showed Fred my now-yellowed 30-year-old drafts of games at both 20 miles per hex (so 36 or so hexes from Warsaw to Moscow, like **Proud Monster** and War in the East) and 24 miles per hex (giving 29 hexes from W to S like Alesia-designer Bob Bradley's now-ancient Fall Barbarossa did, albeit it with MANY turns and far smaller movement factors) - and for greater playability and more command realism, I prefer the division-sopping approach.

In any case, I enjoyed my long-overdue introduction to **Proud Monster**, and I yet again congratulate **Ty Bomba** on having SUCCEDED in crafting a (relatively) fast, playable, and enjoyable division-level Barbarossa game.

And my thanks to **Fred** for a great day!