

## **DARK VICTORY: THE BATTLE OF THE ALAMO**

**By  
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*This article went through the circuit of submission to the various wargaming magazines of the period (the late 1990's). Unfortunately, nobody wanted to publish an article about a game from a defunct game company (XTR). Rather than letting it languish in my files, I decided to post it on Grognards.com then and give this game the proper review that it deserved. A lot of time has passed since then and so it was time to update the review.*

Every so often another game about the Alamo comes out into the wargaming hobby. The most current version (at the time this article was originally written) is DARK VICTORY, in Command Magazine #44 as part of that double game issue. It is the latest (in 1997) in a long line of Alamo games. The first was THE ALAMO, a bonus game found in CONFLICT Magazine #7 back in 1974. In 1981, SPI came out with a small boxed version entitled THE ALAMO: VICTORY IN DEATH as part of its line of easy to play "beer and pretzel" games. In 1982, TSR came out with REMEMBER THE ALAMO as part of its line of pocket sized mini-games. In 1994, a little-known outfit called the Conflict & Competition Game Company came out with a zip-locked version called PRELUDE TO VICTORY: THE ALAMO GAME, which was easily forgotten shortly after its release. In 1995, Decision Games released their repackaged edition of the old SPI game, which except for a new box and counter artwork, was basically the same as the old version. All of these versions, and many that have come out since, have had the same problem. They were so easy to play that after a few games they became stereotyped and players soon lost interest in them. With DARK VICTORY players will maintain their interest far longer than has been in the case with these other versions.

### **COMPONENTS**

DARK VICTORY is a magazine game that for its size could have easily been sold as a boxed game in its own right. All of the components are of the typical high quality one associates with COMMAND magazine and its games. There are 420 counters on a single full-sized counter-sheet and a half-sized counter-sheet that come with the game. These are divided into combat and information counters. The combat counters include infantry units, artillery crew units, leader units, cannon units, and a few miscellaneous counters for POWs and civilians. The informational counters include ladder counters, open door counters, extra musket counters, dead body counters, room ablaze counters, done/fired counters, flag counters, and markers for the Game Turn and Mexican Losses columns. Of the combat units, all Texan units have a gray back-round and all Mexican units have a white back-round. All infantry and artillery crew counters have three values printed on them, these being the attacking value, the morale value, and the numerical designation of the formation that the unit belongs to. Texan counters have an additional fourth value which is a fire modifier. All leader counters have the leader's name, formation number, and morale modifier printed on them. Cannon counters have the cannon size and combat strength printed on them. All Texan and all Mexican leader counters are back-printed with dead body counters, whereas all Mexican non-leader counters are back-printed with reduced step versions of themselves with reduced morale and stacking values. The cannon units are back-printed with unloaded symbols to indicate their unloaded status.

There are two map-sheets in this game. The main one shows a bird's eye view of the Alamo and the immediate surrounding ground. The building and walls of the Alamo are slightly altered to conform to

the hex-sides on the map. There is a terrain key on the corner of the map. The other map is the internal map-sheet, showing the interior of all of the buildings to include rooms and interior as well as exterior doors. The interior is used when units are inside any of the buildings. The hexes are smaller on this map-sheet, so stacking units in adjacent hexes can get awkward. One will notice that there are three exterior doors missing on the main map-sheet that show up on the interior map-sheet. In this case the interior map-sheet is correct and players should behoove themselves to draw these doorways on the main map-sheet.

The rules booklet contains not only the rules to DARK VICTORY but also those to the other game included in the magazine. The rules to DARK VICTORY comprise the first 17 pages of the book and are very comprehensive and easy to understand, with only a few typos and mistakes. There is also a terrain effects chart included on a separate sheet. Two things which the rules say are included in the game are missing though. The Game Turn Record Track and the Mexican Casualty Track are nowhere to be found. (COMMAND magazine personnel said that both tracks were supposed to be on the main map, but were left off due to a printing error.) The rules can be read in a half an hour and are easy to understand.

## SETTING UP

The Texan sides is set up first. The Texan units are divided up into 13 different groups, reflecting the command structure that existed at the time of the siege. Each group is assigned to defend different sections of the Alamo. While some counters are assigned to specific hexes, others may be set up anywhere within the limits of the area where their group is assigned. With the exception of the few counters steps inside buildings, every other counter is set up on top of or behind walls on the outer perimeter of the Alamo.

The Mexican units are divided up into the five historical assault columns which attacked the Alamo and are numbered 1 through 4 with the unnumbered one being the Reserve. Each column is set up or enters the map in later turns in shaded hexes corresponding to the column numbers. Only the 4<sup>th</sup> Column is set up on the map at the beginning of the game, with the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Columns entering the map on the second and third game turns. The Reserve Column may only enter the map after the initial Mexican units have reached the Alamo outer walls and the entry of its units is dependent on a series of die rolls.

There is an optional rule which allows the Texan player to set up his units anywhere on the walls of the Alamo. The Mexicans in turns are allowed to control the placement and entry schedule of their four numbered columns anywhere along the edge of the map. When this option is used, the Mexican player usually brings all of his numbered columns in on the first turn of the game on one side of the map, quickly overwhelming whichever wall they are attacking, but taking massive casualties in the process and the game is over in about five turns, more or less.

## TURN SEQUENCE

The game lasts for a maximum of 18 Turns, which equals about 90 minutes of real time, the historical duration of the actual battle. The game can end sooner if either all the Texan units are eliminated or the Mexicans take an excessive number of casualties. Each turn is divided up into two Player Turns, the Mexican Player Turn followed by the Texan Player Turn. The Mexican Player Turn has three phases,

the Reserve Release Phase, the Action/Texan Reaction Phase, and the Melee Phase. The Texan Player Turn only has two phases, the Action Phase and the Melee Phase. The Mexican Reserve Release Phase is used until all of the Reserve Column units have been brought on the board, after which it is ignored for the rest of the game. The Action Phase is the phase where a side may move and fire its units. The Texans under certain conditions can react to Mexican moves during the Mexican Action Phase and move and fire their units in response. The Mexicans do not get the same privilege during the Texan Action Phase. The Melee Phase is where adjacent opposing units conduct melee combat.

## ACTION FACTORS

Each unit, with few exceptions, has 12 Action Factors (AF). These factors are what a unit expends to move and/or fire during the Action Phase. There is a chart that lists the Action Factor cost for such things as firing individual weapons and cannons, reloading and moving cannons, as well as basic movement. There are a few units such as cannons, ladders, and non-combat unit counters which have zero Action Factors. These units either remain where they are placed on the map or are moved by other units. Units can do a variety of actions such as move and fire, fire and move, or move, fire, then move again during their Action Phase, providing they have enough Action Factors to expend. Texan units which react to Mexican moves during the Reaction Phase also get 12 Action Factors to use each time they react, in addition to the 12 Action Factors they receive during their normal Player Turn.

## MOVEMENT

Units expend Action Factors for each hex and/or hex-side they enter or cross. Texan units may move freely, but Mexican units require the presence of an officer either stacked with them or adjacent to them at the beginning of the turn in order to move. The Terrain Effects Chart lists the movement cost for each terrain feature. Units also expend additional Action Factors for entering a hex with Dead Body counters in it. Texan units expend a variable amount of Action Factors to pass through a closed-door hex-side or enter a hex containing other Texan units that are not in the same numbered group as themselves. Mexican units may only pass through a closed-door hex-side by either spending 12 AF trying to break it down, firing a cannon at it so other units can move through, or having a friendly unit on the inside opening the door for them. Of particular interest to the Mexican Player are the wall hex-sides. The High Wall hex-sides may not be crossed except through doors, ramps, or stairs. The Low Wall hex-sides may be crossed by expending 6 AF. The Intermediate Wall hex-sides may be crossed in one of three ways; either a unit expends 12 AF to cross it, uses any door, ramp, or stairs if available, or uses a ladder for only 8 AF. Ladder counters are placed on the map-sheet when the first Mexican units use them and are left there for the following Mexican units to use later.

The number of units that may stack in a hex is based on the stacking value of the hex, which is 4 or 8, and the stacking values of the units in the hex. Mexican units may only stack or move through a hex with other friendly units from the same Column. Texan units may freely stack or move through hexes with friendly units of other formations not their own but with an Action Factor penalty. Leaders may stack free but may only stack with units of the own column or formation, except for unassigned leaders who may stack with any friendly unit. Mexican units must stop when they move adjacent to a Texan unit, unless a wall hex-side is between them. Texan units may move past adjacent Mexican units but at an increased AF cost.

## COMBAT

There are two types of combat, fire combat and melee combat. Fire combat occurs during the Action and Reaction Phases of a player turn. As with movement, Texan units may fire freely but Mexican units may only fire if they are stacked with or adjacent to an officer. Both side's units may melee freely.

A fire attack is executed by the phasing player announcing the target hex that is within the Line of Sight (LOS) and range of the firing unit. It costs a Mexican player 8 AF and a Texan unit 6 AF to fire. In addition, Texan units which are stacked with an Extra Musket counter may fire at a cost of 3 AF, upon which that counter is removed from the board. Leader units do not fire. The range of a Texan infantry unit is ten hexes, the range of a Mexican infantry unit is four hexes, and the range of the cannons are infinite (within the scope of the board). The LOS has a variable range depending on blocking terrain on the map and on the level of light/darkness based on the turn. The basic range for LOS is five hexes for the first five Game Turns, increasing by one per turn for the next five Game Turns, and infinite for every turn thereafter. This simulates the historical fact that the final battle for the Alamo started in the pre-dawn darkness and continued on through the dawn and shortly afterward. This makes DARK VICTORY the only Alamo game to recognize this fact in its rules. Only the top most unit in a stack in the target hex may be the target and only the top most unit in a stack may fire. The phasing player then calculates the "To Hit" number by adding the firing unit's stacking value, its Fire Modifier if any, and the total stacking value of all units in the target hex. The resulting number then has fire modifiers added and/or subtracted which account for such things as relative darkness, height advantage of the firing unit, and the terrain in the target hex. The final number is the "To Hit" number. The phasing player then rolls two dice and if the result is equal to or less than the "To Hit" number, then the top units in the target hex takes a step loss. When a Texan unit takes a step loss it is flipped over, showing a dead body picture on the other side, and is left on the board. If a Mexican unit takes a step loss, it is flipped over if at full strength, or removed if at reduced strength, and in both cases a dead body counter is placed in the target hex. In addition, if the die roll is a natural two, any leaders that are in the target hex are flipped over and left there as all leaders on both sides have dead body pictures on their reverse side.

Firing cannons require that a cannon be stacked underneath a non-leader infantry or gun-crew unit. That unit may fire the cannon at a cost of 12 AF and may not fire its own weapons when it does so. The "To-Hit" number consists of the cannon's combat factor, plus the total stacking value of the units in the target hex, plus or minus any additional modifiers. All cannons in the game are on the Texan side. They start the game loaded and when fired, are flipped over to their unloaded side. Although any non-leader unit may fire the cannon, only an artillery gun-crew unit which is stacked with it may reload it, which costs 12 AF. Since there are 11 cannons and only 8 Texan gun-crew units, some cannons will probably be fired only once during the game. When a Mexican unit enters a hex with a cannon in it, it is considered to be captured and they may use it. There are only four Mexican gun-crew units who are brought in to reload the captured cannons and they may only do so when their officers are stacked with them or are adjacent. In addition, cannons which are located in intermediate or high-level hexes may not fire into adjacent ground level hexes, thus creating a dead space where enemy units cannot be hit by them. Only Four and Six Pounder cannons may be moved by a unit, at a rate of 2 AF per hex, and may only be moved into clear and/or ramp hexes. Mexican unit may move cannons adjacent to door hex-sides so they can be used to blast them open when they are later fired.

Melee combat occurs in the Melee Phase at the end of each Player Turn. It occurs between adjacent units and/or stacks of units, with the phasing player as the attacker. Melee combat is voluntary on the part of the attacker but the defending player may not decline combat if so attacked. A melee attack consists of all attacking units in a hex attacking all defending units in an adjacent hex. The melee

strength for each stack is the total morale values of all units in the stack, plus the morale value of one leader if any in the stack, plus a bonus point for every four stacking points worth of units in the hex. The defending stack also adds points to its melee strength for any terrain hex-side between itself and the attacking stack. Melee combat which occurs inside the interior rooms does not incur any bonus points for having four or more stacking points. Units behind intermediate or high walls can only conduct melee combat through those walls in hex-sides that contain doors, ramps, or ladders. Both players each roll one die and add the results to their respective melee strengths. The side with the highest total wins the melee and the losing side suffers a step loss from his stack. If both totals are tied, both sides suffer a step loss. If any leaders are in the melee, the owning player rolls two dice for each leader. If a two is rolled the leader is killed and flipped over. Defending units in a hex may be attacked more than once during the melee phase, but the attacking units in a hex may only participate in one melee combat per melee phase.

## TEXAN REACTION PHASE

During the Mexican Action Phase, the Texans have their own reaction phase where they react to Mexican unit movement. Whenever a Mexican unit or stack of units moves within the range and LOS of a Texan unit, the Texan player may order the Mexican player to stop the movement of that unit or stack, and the Texan player may then react with his unit. The reacting unit gets 12 AF to expend over and above the 12 AF it gets in the Texan Action Phase each time it reacts. A Texan unit may react more than once during the Mexican Action Phase to different Mexican units or stacks. However, it may only fire once during the phase, all over reactions must be movement only. A Texan unit may not react when a Mexican unit becomes adjacent to it and there is not a wall hex-side separating them. Also, if a reacting Texan unit moves adjacent to a Mexican unit and there is no wall hex-side between them, then the Mexican unit gets a free fire attack against the reacting Texan unit. The Mexicans do not get a reaction phase of their own during the Texan Action Phase.

## MISCELLANEOUS TRIVIA

There are certain counters which serve no other purpose but to add historical accuracy to the game. The “Women & Children” counter does nothing once placed on the board. Yet, if it is the only Texan unit left on the board at the end of the game, then the Texan Player can still claim victory, a decidedly unhistorical and absurd notion. The “Patient” counter also may not be moved once placed, but at least it can fire and melee. The “Slave/POW” counter may move and fire, but once it becomes adjacent to a Mexican unit it surrenders and is removed from the board.

There is also a rule for arson. Certain Mexican units may set fire to room hexes inside the Alamo. Although one would think that this is a bit of cinematic chrome from the movies, the Mexicans really did set fire to two rooms during the actual battle. Any Mexican sapper unit that begins the Mexican Action Phase adjacent to a room hex, and is within the Alamo's outer wall perimeter, may start a fire in that room by expending 12 AF. A flame marker is placed in that room hex and any Texan unit in that hex must make an immediate morale check to see if it will stay in that hex. If it passes its morale check the unit may stay there, otherwise, it must move out of the hex and if unable to, it is eliminated. Texan units which stay in a burning hex must make a morale check every succeeding Mexican Action Phase to see if they will continue to stay.

For a game which prides itself on its historical accuracy, there is one thing that was left out. There are

no rules for rifle armed units for either side. Granted, rifles which would give a unit a longer range for fire combat, are kind of wasted in the first half of the game as the pre-dawn darkness precludes using their longer range. But in the second half when it is full daylight they would certainly be of great use, especially when trying to pick off enemy artillery gun-crews. At the very least, the designer should have included a set of optional rules for rifle fire, but alas, he did not. So much for the game's claim to total historical accuracy.

## VICTORY CONDITONS

If at the end of the game the Texans still have at least one unit on the board they win. If the last Texan unit is destroyed before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Game Turn, victory is then determined by the number of Mexican steps that were destroyed up to that time. This number is first modified by subtracting the number of Game Turns before the 18<sup>th</sup> one that the final Texan unit was killed, and is then further modified by subtracting a variable number based on the Mexican Casualty Table in the rules. The final number of steps destroyed is the one used to determine victory. If the number is 30 or less the Mexican player wins, if the number is 31 or more then the Texan player wins. There is a Sudden Death Victory Condition in the game. If the Texans have killed 61 steps of Mexican units before the end of the game, then the Mexican morale is considered to be broken and the Texans win automatically.

## GAME PLAY

DARK VICTORY takes about two to three hours to play. This is due to the large number of units and the excessive dice rolling to figure out every shot or event, but this is common in any tactical level game.

As the game starts the Mexican player maneuvers his columns so that all or most of his units are six hexes away from the Alamo walls, just out of the LOS of the Texan units due to darkness. This will take about 3-4 Game Turns. Then there will be a mad rush to the walls with the lead units taking the brunt of the Texan reaction fire. The follow up units behind them will move to within the maximum range of their muskets and start laying down a covering fire against the Texans on the walls. It usually takes about 3-4 more turns for the Mexicans to climb up and clear the walls which they assault. By this time, it is beginning to get light outside and Texan units further away from the fighting can join in the firing. After clearing the assaulted walls, the Mexicans will divide their forces into two groups. One group moves along the tops of the walls, clearing away any Texan units up there, while the other group goes down into the Plaza to go after the Texans in the rooms. The Texan units close to the Mexicans will use the Reaction Phase to employ "shoot and scoot" tactics to delay the Mexican advance while Texan infantry units in unengaged positions of the compound will scurry off of the walls to get inside the inner rooms for their last stands.

Once the outside walls are cleared, the Mexicans then have to break into the inner rooms and eliminate the Texan unit inside. It is here that the game begins to become a close tense situation. Although the Mexicans will use the captured cannons to shoot down the doors, once the Mexican artillery crews are dead, they will have to get in the old fashion way. While the rooms in the outer wall are relatively easy to clear, especially with the Mexican firebomb rule, the rooms inside the Chapel are a mini-maze and it is here where the Texans have their best chance of having a unit hold out until the end. I have seen many games go the last turn as the Mexicans try to kill those last Texans in the Chapel.

In all the games that I have played of DARK VICTORY, I have seen the Texans win only one automatic victory and one sudden death victory. In all other cases the games ended with all Texan units being killed before the end of the game with the Mexicans winning about two thirds of those. The real linchpin in victory determination is the Mexican Casualty Recovery Table. If the Mexicans can keep their casualties under 50 steps, they have a fair chance of having their permanent casualties reduced to 30 steps or below. I have never seen the Mexicans keep their casualties to below 30 steps in normal play, thus eliminating the need for the table. Given two equal players, the Texan side has the definite edge given their Reaction Phase and being on the defensive, thus the more experienced player should take the Mexican side in order to keep the game fair.

## CONCLUSION

DARK VICTORY is the most definitive game about the Alamo to date (1997). Yet, I can only give it a grade of B+. The missing Turn Record and Mexican Casualty Tracks and the lack of errata correcting small errors in the game have marred an otherwise excellent product. This is sad as XTR Corporation was usually diligent about publishing errata for its games, yet it refused to do so for this game, even after various players pointed out errors to them. (But then this was during the years of the decline of XTR and its treatment with its customers left much to be desired.) With the inclusion of errata this game would have certainly rated an A- rating. If rules for rifle fire were also included then this product would get an A+. For the historical gamer with a definite interest in the Alamo, this game is a worthwhile addition to their source materials on the subject.

## FACT BOX

Where: San Antonio de Bexar, Texas

When: 6 March, 1836

Who: Republic of Texas versus Mexico

Scale: 1 hex = 21 feet

1 turn = 5 minutes

1 unit = 1 platoon (Mexican),

1 squad (Texan),

1 artillery crew (both sides),

or 1 leader (both sides).

420 counters

Player Level: Army Commander (Mexican)

Garrison Commander (Texan)

Designer: Dennis L. Bishop

Development: Ty Bomba and Chris Perello

Graphic: Beth Queman, Cheryl Scollan, and Chris Perello

Publisher: XTR Corporation (Command Magazine)

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Grade: B+