

# From PANZER LEADER to Pz44 and back again

by PATRICK A. FLORY



In *Moves* #28 I read about a *Panzer Leader* addict who was introduced to *Panzer 44* and subsequently "converted." In any campaign to establish primacy among competitors a convert from the clientele of the largest is something to be displayed in much the same way as an Indian brave would an enemy scalp. It is a hard statistic to dispute and I do not intend to refute convert claims in general. However, I am fairly knowledgeable in this specific case; that "convert" and I are one. I am not accusing the other writer of

making a false statement; he did introduce me to *P44* and I was, and still am, a *PL* addict. It is not true that I was "converted to *P44*" but I did pursue that game with such vigor that it did appear to others that SPI had a convert. In the weeks following my introduction to *P44* I became more familiar with it than the individual who wrote about the introduction. *P44* now sits in a drawer stacked with other games which I have also tried and now gather dust.

I did not write this just to refute a statement. I would like to use that

statement to establish the fact that the following statements are not based on prior prejudice since it can be seen that, in the case of *P44*, I not only played the game, but also studied it. "The last I saw of him, he was converting *Panzer Leader* scenarios to *Panzer '44* units." (*Moves*) I am not a hard-core Avalon Hill fan taking a cheap shot at SPI. *P44* is a good game but *PL* is better and those that I know who disagree, including the one who introduced me to *P44*, are not knowledgeable enough in both games to make a contrary statement. They in fact are not as familiar with either as I am. On what do they base these statements then if not personal experience? Could it be possible that many gamers are saturated with so many games that they do not have the time to pursue any individual one enough to formulate their own opinion and that they base their statements on what they read? Most pro-SPI statements come straight from the pages of SPI publications. A notable exception is a friend who likes SPI's version of the *Battle of the Bulge* better than Avalon Hill's; he knows both games and I cannot agree or disagree since I have played only one of them once.

SPI has established a track record with me. I do not buy games for the sake of buying them; I buy a game to play and learn it. This means that I am not one to buy a lot and those I do buy, I buy with the intention of playing a lot. I find that with SPI games, flaws are found when the newness wears off; flaws that cannot be excused for the sake of playability or simplicity. In *Moves* #28 Simonsen said, "critics of SPI game design are just SPI staff designers that don't work for us." One cannot disagree on that point since every issue of that magazine contains a section entitled "FOOTNOTES" where one finds the necessary corrections for his games and they are written by wargamers ("designers that don't work for us"). I do not advocate that wargamers should not submit changes but I am neither one to buy a T.V. set that I know I'll need to fix. In a recent issue of *Moves* all the designers of SPI's 1975 games had a critique of their games. Therein one finds the common cause for many flaws the lack of sufficient time allocated for development. *P44* was one of the few games which received good comments from its designer and it was justified; it is not as good as *PL* but a good game just the same. A sour note in the *P44* story was all the dismal failures leading to its development. I own a copy of *Kampfpanzer* and the designer in effect said that he learned from that mistake. I also learn from my mistakes, and today read about the problems in *Fast Carriers* and the suggested fixes; I don't have to correct problems in a game I don't own. Does this mean that I am now prejudiced towards new SPI games? Yes. I'll still play SPI games; I'd like to play *Terrible*

*Swift Sword* and after a few games I may buy a copy, but I will not put out \$20.00 for a SPI game till I see for myself that it is a good game. SPI products may be fine for those who collect games but I play wargames and SPI games are not the best for me. SPI can point with pride at their rules; they are good but an excellent tech manual is no justification for a system that does not work right.

It is easy to make unsupported negative statements about a wargame. A frequent description in *Moves* is "unrealistic and anachronistic." To say a game is unrealistic is probably the worse thing one can say. Anachronistic, on the other hand, is an impressive word which was probably used correctly by the first critic but rarely afterwards. Don't take my word for it, consult the dictionary. I have made negative statements about SPI games in general but I'll let SPI support those statements; you may refer to an article in *Moves* #25, titled "STERLING PERSONS, INCORPORATED CHEW ON WHAT THEY DID IN 1975." To support my statement that *Panzer Leader* is better than *Panzer '44* I will review an article in *Moves* #24 titled "COMPARATIVE EVALUATION: PANZER LEADER & PANZER '44."

In reviewing Phil Kosnett's article I'll start at the end with his conclusions and then look at the text to determine if it supports those conclusions correctly. He stressed *PL*'s enormous potential for fun but added "what it lacks in realism it makes up for in playability." For *P44* he says it "maintains a reasonable enjoyment level, it is far more realistic than *PL*" and he adds "it is informative and entertaining — an excellent game." I am surprised that he did not put himself on record by declaring which is the better game. On the other hand, he appears to have alluded that *P44* is better, and in discussing *PL* he uses such adjectives as "typical," idiotic, and dumb. Was his impartiality a facade?

In the introduction he notes that *PL* and *P44* are basically improvements of *Panzerblitz* and *Kampfpanzer* respectively. He then compared the package covers of both games and here one sees an old line "If you judge a game (book) by its cover," to sum up that *PL*'s cover is better. Is he suggesting that although *PL* has a better cover, *P44* is better? I fail to see how the author came to the conclusion that *P44*'s cover was more informative; perhaps one or both had different covers at various points in time.

Since SPI's feedback ratings were noted we'll see how these games compare. As of *S&T* #57 the acceptance rating of *P44* is 6.7 which is the lowest it had had in the past six issues; the highest was 6.93. *PL*'s latest is 6.8, also its lowest of the past six

issues with a high of 7.2. It looks like *PL* consistently rates higher than *P44* in a rating system which admittedly favors SPI products. The % played figures are also interesting. *P44*'s latest is 8% down from a peak of 17%. *PL*'s latest is 39%, a new high. Those of you who believe ratings to be the last word in wargaming need read no further; I don't believe this, and if anything in this article would be detestable to me it would be the use of ratings to support my statements. May the powers that control my die roll turn against me if I ever stoop so low again.

Getting into the text of the article we find a comparison of maps. The writer says, "*P44*'s is of a real piece of terrain in western France." I question what the Rhine-Meuse canal, that "real live river," is doing in western France. If the terrain is real it could not be the real terrain for every scenario. One scenario "Arracourt" has the same name as a town on the *P44* map but we find in the historic notes that in fact it occurred near the Marne-Rhine canal. *P44*'s map is no less typical than *PL*'s. Avalon Hill's claim that the four geomorphic map sections can be arranged in hundreds of different ways was disputed. I took pencil and paper and added them up; there are 192 four-board, 288 three-board, 120 two-board, and 16 single-board combinations for a total of 616. If one rules out different arrangements with respect to the compass then that total should be divided by four. However, when one takes a game and starts from the opposite side of the map with the same OB one does find a different game. *P44*'s map has north indicated; I suppose this supports their real terrain claim and they base the start positions correctly with respect to north. The *P44* map is more flexible when the compass is ignored.

The author's criticism of *PL*'s rivers being called streams is valid but I disagree with his criticism concerning the die roll required to enter. It is entirely possible for infantry to take more than six minutes to find a way to cross a stream or, in *PL*'s case, to cross a river. I am surprised that the article saw fit to note this while failing to mention *P44*'s panic rules. The one requires a die roll for those not too frequent times an infantry unit wants to enter a river while the other is required for every unit on every turn. Command control may be a realistic problem but the effect of these panic rules are far from it. In *P44* a player deploys his units with respect to terrain, enemy units, and hex number. Insuring that each unit firing at a common target is in a hex with a different number is not what I would call a realistic consideration.

While covering the organization charts the writer notes some differences between *PL*'s and *P44*'s units. The designers' notes do not shed any light on the rifle platoon

differences but *PL*'s notes does explain why the Br. Sherman unit has one Firefly and 3 regular Shermans; they decided to go with the historic unit instead of units of five tanks of the same type. *P44* on the other hand did neither; in British scenarios there are five-tank M4 and M4a units and four-tank Firefly units. The writer made an error by indicating that the British Sherman was the weakest tank in *PL* and the strongest in *P44*; the Cromwell is weaker in the one while the M26 is the strongest in the other.

The next item covered was the CRT. The author said it was difficult to compare the two CRTs and added, "Keep in mind at all times that most of *PL*'s rules were taken directly from Dunnigan's *Panzerblitz*, designed over four years ago." It seems peculiar to criticize a game because it is based on a system that is over four years old and not criticize one that is based on *Kampfpanzer*.

On range attenuation *PL*'s "drastic reduction" from double attack factor to normal at half range was declared "dumb;" the writer says you cannot draw a line at where this happens. One has to wonder why he called the *PL* system "dumb" when this only involves 'A' type weapons against armored targets and not the *P44* system where the same thing happens for 'M' type weapons against all targets and 'R' type against soft. In *PL*'s odds type CRT the reduction means a lowering of the odds by one or two columns (i.e., 4-1 to 2-1, 3-1 to 1-1, 2-1 to 1-1). In *P44*'s attack superiority it means a reduction in columns equal to the attack factor. M4a (Sherman with a 76mm long barrel) adjacent to a Panther can fire at it on the +8 column which has better results than *PL*'s 4-1; on the other hand, if the M4a is one hex further away when it fires it uses the -1 column which has inferior results with respect to *PL*'s 1-1 column. In *P44* the attack factor reduction, from double to normal, results in a shift from the +8 column to the -1 column; in *PL* the same reduction with the same units results in a shift from the 2-1 column to the 1-1 column. In both cases the attack strength was reduced by 50% but this resulted in a more drastic change in *P44* than in *PL*. I would not call either system "dumb" but Mr. Kosnett has, and it is a strong word to use for someone who appears to have done little more than read the rule books before he wrote the article. *P44* has other reductions due to range and this combined with the fact that units may not add their attack factors together against the same target results in such unrealistic situations as 24-M4s (Sherman 75mm) all at a range of 4 hexes (800 meters) from a Panther and unable to harm it at all with direct fire. *P44*'s 'H' class weapons do not suffer range attenuation so that although an M4 cannot harm a Panther at a 4 hex range, a 37mm AA gun can at a 20 hex range; an M16 with quad 50

cal. Mgs can get better odds on a Panther from 8 hexes away than a M4 can at 2 hexes. The 88mm anti-tank gun was used to demonstrate why the *PL* system of range attenuation is "dumb." This is an error because even when the 88 is not doubled it can get top odds on a weak unit. It should not have been compared to *P44*'s 88 since the one is a four-gun unit while the other is a two-gun unit.

At this point it is not surprising to see the writer chose German and Allied infantry units to compare which have the least parity in *PL* and the greatest in *P44*. It is possible to do just the opposite if one wanted to have *PL* look better; the fairest way would have been to do both.

The overrun rules in *PL* were declared "totally inaccurate." Again we see the use of a strong adjectives. I disagree with the writer even though it is true that infantry units on both sides had effective AT weapons at that time. In *PL* overruns are only allowed in clear terrain hexes and I don't think an infantry platoon caught in the open by a platoon of tanks had much chance to use its AT weapons. In *P44*, again because units may not combine to attack common targets, getting overrun is the only way some infantry units may close-assault some armored units. Although an infantry unit may not have a high enough attack factor to close-assault under any other circumstance, it is allowed to counter-attack at a minimum of -3 if it gets overrun. This means that a Panther tank in a town, with any number of Allied infantry units, is completely safe as long as it does not overrun any of them. I cannot imagine a company commander ordering a platoon out of town so that it can get overrun in order to be able to close-assault.

On infantry against adjacent infantry the article said, "It would seem *P44* shows the attrition problem with greater accuracy." This was said because, in the case of the two infantry platoons which have the greatest parity in *P44*, one can automatically disrupt, while the other has a 50% chance of a kill. This unwarranted change in relative strengths at a one hex range is again due to the Superiority CRT. If a British infantry unit were used instead of a U.S., it would have five chances in six of being killed in one turn because its defense factor is one lower than the U.S. unit. I think it is incredible that a platoon of infantry can have such a good chance of wiping out its counterpart in one to six minutes (*P44* turns represent one to six minutes in real time). Infantry units were not that easy to kill. The only sure way to kill them is to use artillery supported infantry, as is the case in *PL*, or with overwhelming odds. I agree with Mr. Kosnett that infantry fights are bloodier in *P44* but I think *PL* has more realistic results.

In the area of tank-to-tank combat Mr.

Kosnett said, "casualties in tank duels are much higher in *PL* than in *P44*. In *P44* it is very difficult to destroy a tank platoon with the fire of one tank platoon." In *PL* there is only one tank, the King Tiger, that can get top odds on any opposing tank in a one-on-one situation and there are a few that can on some. There are more cases of top column attacks in *P44*. *P44* has eight German and twelve Allied units that are either tanks or tank destroyers; this yields 96 one-on-one combinations for a total of 192 weapon/target relations. *PL* has ten German and ten Allied for 100 one-on-one combinations and 200 weapon/target relations. Of the 192 in *P44*, 145 are possible on the +8 column (*P44*'s +8 column is better than *PL*'s 4-1); of the 200 in *PL*, 64 are possible on the 4-1 column. When one compares *P44*'s 75.5% with *PL*'s 32%, it appears that *P44* is bloodier than *PL*. But this does not account for all possible combinations at all possible ranges. In *P44*, for the previously mentioned combinations at all possible ranges, 161 out of 786 are on the +8 column; in *PL* 336 out of 1,786 are on the 4-1 column. This is 20.5% of *P44*'s possible and 18.8% of *PL*'s. When all possible ranges are considered the top column attacks in *P44* only increased by 16, from 145 to 161, whereas *PL*'s went from 64 to 336. The reason this did not leave *PL* with a higher percentage of top column attacks is that there are many cases in *P44* where a tank/tank destroyer may not shoot at a target at all ranges (e.g., the M4-Panther comparison). In *PL* only the Lynx is unable to shoot at two Allied tanks at greater than half range. One-on-one tank battles are bloodier in *P44*, however, they are not that common and to get a good insight as to the relative blood flow we must consider multi-tank engagements and extrapolate into the following turn. In *P44* one may not add attack factors against a common target but any number of attacks may be made on the same target in a given turn. In *PL* you may only fire at any given target once per turn but you may combine any number of attack factors when you do. In two-on-one combinations *P44*'s results are very much in line with *PL*'s, the first having a wider spectrum. The best possible chance for a kill in *PL* is five in six; in *P44* it is possible to guarantee a kill. In *P44* any disruption short of a kill can be accumulated in following turns and could result in a kill if the owning player is unable to undisrupt them. This does not happen in *PL* although you may overrun a disrupted unit if it is on clear terrain. Units disrupted by opportunity fire in *P44* can be fired at again by the same unit with a good chance of accumulating the results. Disruptions due to opportunity fire in *PL* are cleared after the movement phase and the firing unit may not fire in its following combat phase. When you look at it this way, it makes *P44* look easier. After this evaluation of the probable results for all

possible one-on-one relations and some multiples carried into the following turns, one can see that *P44* is much bloodier.

Statistics can be used to prove a point when all possible relations are considered but no one uses all possible relations. We must allow for the different tactics used in these two wargames. Opportunity fire for example: in *PL*, one avoids giving his opponent a chance to easily use this and when it can be used it leaves one at a disadvantage; in *P44*, it is the best way to start something when on the defense. The differences in play sequence and the CRTs are responsible for most of the different tactics. *P44* uses a simultaneous combat phase with sequential movement. Mr. Kosnett said, "It's also better than sequential combat (like in *PL*) when one side does nothing while the other gets a free shot." This is about the most wishy-washy argument for simultaneous combat I've seen. *P44*'s combat system gave birth to a tactical wargamer's bane. The low-down, unscrupulous, wide-open-throttle, screaming Kamikaze tanks make Panther tank commanders absolutely paranoid. Would I do that? Would I take that weak bucket of bolts known as the M18 Hellcat and park it next to a sleek, fast moving, hard hitting Panther, pride of the panzers, and undergo mutual annihilation with it? Only if it moves. In *PL* when a lunatic M18 pulls up to a Panther it gets its turret blown off. There is no defensive first fire in *P44* whereas in *PL* it is a natural part of the sequential combat system. Simultaneous combat can work; if the combat phase was after the movement phase, Kamikaze attacks would not work so well. Another hang-up with *P44*'s system is that there are distinct first/second player advantages/disadvantages on every game turn—for example: it is easier to use Kamikaze tactics as the second player. There are some more unrealistic tactical considerations. In *PL* the second player has an advantage but only on the last turn. What this all boils down to is that too much of what takes place in *P44* is not realistic but definitely bloody. Looking at the rules one might be misled to think that tank battles in *PL* are bloodier but that myth soon evaporates after playing both games.

In the area of artillery there are some nice words about Counterbattery fire. The writer said it is realistic. I do not believe that a battery had a one-sixth chance in 1944 of finding another just because it fired. It could be miles away with ridges and woods in between. For those who like Counterbattery rules I recommend a game that can be played with pencil and paper. . . that's right, "Battleship." Concerning indirect fire, the writer said, "*P44* lacks a rule for correction observation." For a fleeting moment it looked like he was going to say *PL* did something right but alas he claims it

"makes artillery too reliable."

*PL* was criticized for not allowing a unit in a woods or town hex to be spotted at a distance of three hexes as in *P44*. I guess they're supposed to jump up and yell whenever anyone comes within 750 meters. It was apparently because of this that Mr. Kosnett accused Avalon Hill of retaining much of *PanzerBlitz* that is "unrealistic and anachronistic." I've talked about realism throughout this article and as for anachronistic, little can be said since he did not say what that was, it cannot be determined if he used the word correctly.

The last two paragraphs of the text have good things to say about *PL*. The airplanes were described as "real, live airplanes." (The one time the word "real" is used in reference to *PL*; it's too bad *PL*'s rules manual said they are purposely abstract.) *PL*'s engineer rules received some well deserved praise.

Elevation rules were not discussed at all, maybe because *P44* doesn't have any. *PL* has many rules concerned with this, which make hills and slopes important. A tactical game without elevation is like *Monopoly* without Boardwalk.

Writing a review does not require much experience in the game being reviewed; readers know that reviews are normally based on first impressions and this is what they're looking for. An in-depth comparison is another matter. I have not done one; this article was written to present my opinion that *PL* is better than *P44*. It would be hard for me to compare the two because I prefer *PL*. What I have done is to discuss why *PL* is better. Mr. Kosnett's article is not a good comparison; he either lacked experience in playing both games, was biased, or both. I do not think he treated *PL* fairly, but, on the other hand, I may be as guilty in my treatment of *P44*. I did try both and my preferences came as a result of this and he may have done this also. The point is that there is no facade of impartiality in my article. You may or may not agree with me; if you do — fine; if you don't agree, that's what postage stamps are for.

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