

SUN AND STEEL: THE TACTICS OF FEUDAL JAPAN IN SAMURAI

by Jim Werbaneth

When it comes to tactics of classical Europe, GMT's *Great Battles of History* series is the standard for the wargaming industry. Not just critically, but commercially, it is a stunning success. Making its achievement even more impressive, much of the series does not rely on marquis personalities such as Alexander the Great, Hannibal or Julius Caesar, but on equally interesting commanders with, outside of ancient war cognoscenti, second-tier name recognition. Often the real stars are the likes of Scipio Africanus and Pyrrhus of Epirus.

Likewise, the battles may be great, but lack instant recognition on the part of even experienced gamers. For every Gaugamela or Cannae, it seems, there is a Chaeronea or Ausculum.

Until this year, there was one *Great Battles of History* venture outside of the classical world, *Lion of the North*, which deals with two of Gustavus Adolphus' battles in the Thirty Years War. It is noted for introducing gunpowder weapons, and for accenting actual casualties as much as losses to unit cohesion, which is normally the yardstick for a unit's health in the system. However, despite an undeniable appeal, *Lion of the North* is something of an evolutionary dead end, as it has not spawned any expansion modules, which are a staple of the other titles. Additionally, on America Online codesigner Richard Berg has recently expressed a dissatisfaction with the game's method of simulating casualties.

Now, *Samurai* joins it as a simulation of great battles in which no one spoke Greek, Latin or Phoenician as a native tongue. More strikingly, it is the first time that the series has left the battlefields of Western history for those of an entirely different military tradition, that of sixteenth century Japan.

Actually more so than in any of the other games, *Samurai* covers subjects, both battles and commanders, that are fairly obscure, at least outside of Japan. There is no superstar leader on a par with Alexander or Caesar; the most famous in the west is Tokugawa Ieyasu, and even he is better known as the inspiration of the Lord Torunaga of James Clavell's novel *Shogun* (and its incarnation as a TV mini-series).

Even he is not the real star of the game. That would have to be his ally and mentor Oda Nobunaga. In *Command* Issue 23 (July-August 1993) Berg called him "as greedy, cruel and brutal a hatchetman as ever strode through Japanese history, but... also a fairly capable general and politician."

Likewise, there are no great battles that could be termed as famous by most Westerners. Sekigahara, Tokugawa's great and decisive victory over Ishida Mitsunari is present, but few in the United States or Europe are liable to put it in the same category as Gettysburg or Waterloo. Instead, its other scenarios are Okehazama, Fourth Kawanakajima, the Anegawa, Mikata-Ga-Hara, and Nagashino.

They further point out another new aspect of the game. After years of struggling with the Greek and Latin names in the deluxe *Great Battles of Alexander*, *SPQR* and *Caesar*, players now have to attack the vagaries of a vastly different set of names, with unfamiliar sounds

SAMURAI

Designers: Richard Berg
Mark Herman

Publisher:
GMT Games
PO Box 1308
Hanford CA 93232

Price: \$45.00

Scale:
Turn: 20 Minutes
Map: 100 Yards Per Hex
Unit: 100 Men Per Strength Point;
Individual Leaders and Samurai

Components:
2 22" x 34" Unmounted, Backprinted
Mapsheets
528 5/8" Counters
420 1/2" Counters
1 Rulebook
1 Scenario Book
4 Charts and Tables Cards
1 Ten-Sided Die

Packaging: Bookcase Box

and devoiced vowels.

HEADING EAST

Samurai takes place long after the last battle of *Caesar*, and a century before *Lion of the North*. But there is more than time separating this game from its *Great Battles of History* brethren.

There is more than just an overlay of Japanese names on a tried and proven game system. *Samurai* represents, instead, a dramatic transformation of the *Great Battles of History* classical norm. This goes so far that many of the resemblances between the new game and its predecessors are more matters of design philosophy than adherence to established practices in the system.

SPQR and deluxe *Alexander* gamers are accustomed to an elaborate division of military labor, in which a wide range of missions calls for an equally extensive assortment of unit types. There are skirmishers for screening and harassment, phalanxes and legionnaires for the infantry battleline, light cavalry for flank protection, and heavy cavalry for shock. Some units rely on the bow or the sling, others on the spear, and others on the sword. All have their place, and the best players tend to have the best grasp of how to use each



to the best advantage.

Samurai's armies are much more homogeneous. There is just one type of foot unit, a kind of light infantry called *ashigaru*, and one type of cavalry, *kibamasu*. The latter is actually a combined arms force, in which the horsemen are supported by light infantry organic to the formation, reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian chariot runners of *Kadesh* (*XTR/Command 7*-----November-December 1990).

Two other types provide the missile power. *Yumi* are the archers, and *teppu* are the arquebusers, and both are entirely unsuited to melee unless accompanied by the sturdier units.

The standard *Great Battles of History* treatment of stacking among combat units is to prohibit it. There are some major exceptions, most notably for Roman legions, but even moving through a friendly unit is seldom easy or straightforward.

As in so many other ways, *Samurai* departs from the norm. *Ashigaru* and *Kibamasu* cannot stack with each other, but each can stack with one missile unit. In addition, two *teppu* or *yumi* are allowed to stack, though this is not always a good idea if there is a threat of shock attack.

Calling them infantry, cavalry, and missile units does not entirely reflect their functions, however, something underlined by *Samurai's* reliance on Japanese terminology. For example, the *kibamasu* can charge, but not in a way similar to the devastating manner of *Alexander's* Companions or *Adolphus Gustavus'* horsemen.

Japanese cavalry charge is called *norikuzushi*. Those engaging in it are immune to pre-shock troop quality checks, though their presumably intimidated opponents suffer a disadvantageous die roll modifier when they make theirs. In addition, the charging cavalry resolves the combat on a column of the combat results table three columns higher than normal. However, this is done at the cost of halving their effective strength, as their foot escorts are left behind.

There is one countermeasure as distinctive as the charge itself. It is the *babo-saku*, a kind of anti-cavalry palisade. Actually, there is a parallel in Western military, though not in the *Great Battles of History* system, in the lines of stakes that medieval English bowmen drove into the ground before them. In *Samurai*, the *babo-saku's* value is most apparent in the battle of Nagashino, in which the death ride of the Takeda cavalry against the palisaded battleline of Oda's bow and musket-rich army makes it a kind of Oriental Crecy or Agincourt.

The game's counters reflect the different

approach to unit function. The *ashigaru* and *kibanasu*, the mainstays of the *daimyo's* armies, are represented by 5/8" counters, and the supporting missile troops by the more conventional 1/2" ones. Thus a player can immediately know the general role of a unit simply by its size.

The organization of the armies is far different than that of the other games of the series, once again illustrated by novel concepts and Japanese nomenclature. For all of its differences between it and the classical titles, *Lion of the North* adhered fairly

closely to their norm. But *Samurai* departs from it dramatically.

The highest organizational level is that of the clan. It is analogous to the state armies of deluxe *Alexander*, *SPQR*, and *Lion of the North*, and the Roman factions of *Caesar*. Every battle in *Samurai* pits at least one clan against another, though it is quite common to have two allied clans cooperating in the same scenario.

Clans are comprised of contingents, the personal armies of the clans' supreme leaders

THE RUGGED INDIVIDUAL

One of the most distinctive elements of *Samurai* is an extreme emphasis on individual combat. Leaders can fight each other during normal combat, as in the deluxe *Alexander*, but that is just the starting point. The game includes samurai. Not the members of the combat units, these are individual warriors who are the hitmen and bodyguards of the leaders.

Instead of activating a contingent, a player can randomly draw a samurai counter, representing a single warrior. Then he can challenge enemy leaders and samurai to individual combat to the death. Refusal of the challenge results in loss of face; acceptance often means loss of life.

In the other games of *The Great Battles of History*, killing the enemy's leaders undermines the other army's morale. *Samurai* takes a much different approach. Eliminating a *busho* or samurai wins the player a *bundori*, one of the most interesting markers in the game. It is a severed head, portrayed as a gory head stuck on a pike. Gaining a *bundori* does not diminish the other side's cohesion, but increases one's one.

Even without this benefit, killer samurai can outperform large units when it comes to denying the initiative to the enemy. If a player has a small contingent in danger of being overwhelmed by a nearby, much larger hostile contingent, the weaker side can prevent immediate disaster by having a samurai issue a challenge instead of a normal activation. If the *busho* of the superior opposing contingent does not have a ready samurai of his own, and he declines the challenge, he loses face. Besides having his ratings lowered, the next time he is challenged, he must accept. But if he accepts the first time, and is killed, then his contingent is paralyzed for that turn, until a replacement leader takes over.

This situation also illustrates the importance of keeping samurai on the map to prevent a *busho* from facing death or humiliation. A samurai can shield his leader from dangerous challenges by dueling the other side's individual warriors.

In addition, there are provisions for *hara-kiri*. Sometimes the task of a warrior is not to kill the enemy so much as himself.

One of the keys to playing *Samurai* well is to skillfully individual combat, orchestrating challenges in lieu of activating contingents. Unlike any of the other titles in the series, in this game the armies can look like audiences while single warriors temporarily do the real fighting. Yet the operative word is temporary; sooner or later, the battle will be decided by units, with the individual samurai playing an important but secondary role.

Many experienced players will see that the emphasis is unprecedented, but the elements are not. Deluxe *Alexander* not only includes leader-to-leader combat, but allows for the possibility that it will help decide the battle. Specifically, at Issus and Gaugamela Alexander the Great can charge directly at King Darius, a far less imposing warrior, and decapitate the Persian army with one clash of their swords.

Even the element of suicide has appeared earlier in the series. In the Ausculum scenario of the *Pyrrhic Victory* module to *SPQR*, there is a special for an act of *devotio*, in which a leader sacrifices himself to the gods so his army might triumph. The scenario gives the Roman player a number of morale and activation benefits to the Roman side if one specific leader, P. Decius Mus, makes what is termed, in quintessential Bergese, "the Kevorkian Charge."

and their vassals. Generally, they consist of both *ashigaru* and *kibamasu*, with varying support from *yumi* and *teppu*. Contingents are subject to flight under the pressure of combat, as their *samurai* opt for the better part of valor.

One of the game's shortcomings is in this area. *Samurai* sometimes uses the terms clan and contingent interchangeably, which can be slightly confusing. For example, a collective exit from the battlefield is called "Clan Flight," when it is more properly contingent flight.

Leadership comes on three levels. The leader of a clan is the *taisho*; if there are allied clans in a battle, the supreme commander is the *so-taisho*. Then, for each contingent, there is a *busho*.

The addition of the *honjin* is an important one. In the other games, the chief commander's role is generally a very active one, either personally leading the decisive attack, or moving throughout the battlefield from crisis to crisis.

The *taisho* and *so-taisho* in *Samurai* behave very differently. The *honjin* is an immobile headquarters, from which the Japanese commander runs the battle. One outside his *honjin* functions at a much lower level of effectiveness. In some scenarios the leader lacks a *honjin*, and therefore has a reason to command in a more active, by system standards more Western, way. But in most other cases, the *taisho* and *so-taisho* sits passively in his banner-bedecked *honjin*, allowing this *busho* to execute his orders.

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LEARNING SCENARIOS

For the player first immersing himself in *Samurai*, even the most experienced *Great Battles* gamer, one cogent question is where to start.

Some players begin with Nagashino. It uses a half-size map area, does not have too many units, and is the most linear of the battles, and therefore offers some familiarity. However, it is an anomaly in that the historical battle pitted a massed cavalry charge against a more infantry-oriented army, protected behind *babo-saku* and well-armed with guns and bows.

Nagashino is actually better left for later, when one has a firmer grasp of the system and tactical vagaries of the game. A Takeda player who fights like his historical counterpart, which was like the French at Agincourt, will achieve a similar level of self-destruction. A more experienced player is more likely to see other, more appropriate options.

Mikata-Ga-Hara is another smaller scenario, and has the advantage of presenting more typical Japanese armies, relying more on *ashigaru*, in less linear, but more representative, formations. On the negative side, it is very imbalanced against the foolhardy and outnumbered Tokugawa. Historically the future *shogun* was able to salvage a draw against Takeda Shingen, but that was largely through guile after the battle was over.

Much better than either is the Anegawa. Two clans fight on either side; Oda Nobunaga's and Tokugawa Ieyasu's against those of Asai Nagamasa and Asakura Kagetake.

Their shared "balanced yoke" deployment is somewhat linear, in that each clan is arrayed in lines of contingents, one in front of the other, with the personal contingents of the *so-taisho* and *taisho* of each clan in the rear, as normal. It is representative of *Samurai*'s type of battle, and relatively unburdened by special rules, making learning the system fairly easy.

From the Anegawa, gamers can move on to Nagashino and Mikata-Ga-Hara. Arguably better than either, however, is Okehazama, the young Oda Nobunaga's first victory. It is very movement-oriented, and accents the importance of command, as the heavily outnumbered Oda army is pitted against the poorly commanded one of Imagawa Yoshimoto. In *The Great Battles of History*, command is paramount, and Okehazama showcases most clearly.

It has more special rules than the Anagawa. Imagawa is not only an inept soldier, but more scholar than warrior, and the scenario presents the possibility that he will simply sit down and let events swirl around him.

More salient, Okehazama introduces siege tactics. By the standards of the contemporary West, in which Constantinople and Malta showed sieges to be epic affairs, those of *Samurai* are more like protracted assaults. Then again, the castles and forts of this game are smaller, predominantly wooden affairs, unlike the great stone walls and towers of the West, or of a later generation of Japanese castles. They can even be burned down by *yumi* shooting flaming arrows.

SAMURAI ERRATA AS OF 8/5/96

by Richard Berg

This is in addition to the errata supplied with the game.

(5.2.6) **CLARIFICATION:** Activation status is determined anew in each Status Determination Phase.

**First, all clans adjacent to enemy units are active; then

**all clans within two hexes of an enemy active unit, as above, are also active. The rest are inactive, regardless of what they did last turn.

(5.5.3) **ADDITION:** A So-Taisho may trump when he is outside his *Honjin*. However, in rolling for the Trump, halve his Initiative Rating, rounding down.

(5.7) **CLARIFICATION:** Only one attempt at Coordination is allowed per Orders Phase.

(7.1.3) **CORRECTION:** *Teppo* and *Yumi*, in the exception, pay one MP (not Cohesion Hit) for changing facing.

(7.1.4) **CORRECTION:** The rule is right; the chart (note "e"), while right, should apply to any change of face in woods/village.

(8.1.6) **CLARIFICATION:** *Yumi* and *Teppo* may be given orders by different busho during a turn. However, they may be moved by only one Busho per turn, and fire thru only one Busho per turn. They may not be shunted around like a bowl of peanuts at a party.

(8.1.7) **CLARIFICATION:** Ignore any references to "retreats" as combat results. They don't exist.

(8.2.5) **CLARIFICATION:** When "rolling to see whether a unit is Disrupted," the player compares the DR to the unit's TQ. If the same as or higher, the unit is Disrupted (or, if already Disrupted, Routed). There is no carryover of hits, though.

(8.28) **CLARIFICATION:** The reference to 11.6 should be to 9.2.5.

(9.4.6) **CLARIFICATION:** The AS doesn't "advance" (there is no raterat); it just attacks.

(10.1.1) **CLARIFICATION:** Samurai only engage

in individual combat in a Samurai Challenge Phase. They may not stand in for a Busho during individual combat engendered by Shock.

(10.2) **RECOMMENDATION:** Because of the nature of samurai combat, we recommend that players adopt the following restrictions:

1. Only one Samurai Challenge Phase is allowed per Busho activation.

2. Only two Samurai Challenge Phases are allowed per player, per turn.

(10.25) **CHANGE:** A Finished Busho may select a samurai to defend, if challenged. To do so, he must get a DR that is within his Initiative Range. If the DR is outside the range, he has Lost Face.

Sekigahara: The babo-saku should be in 2113, not 2103.

(10.3) **CLARIFICATION:** *Bundori* are awarded only for individual combat. Death by any other means, including a Samurai killed during a Samurai Charge, does not produce *bundori*.

(10.51) **CHANGE:** When a Busho is killed, the clan is not rendered inactive. It is still active, but, because it has no leader it can't do much of anything.

SCENARIOS

There are some typos in the set-up hexes, the usual dyslexic stuff, where a 3113 becomes a 3131, or something like that. The key is that all units in a clan are always together. If they're not, that lone one out there is in the wrong hex.

Okchazama: During sieges, there is no Busho-to-Busho individual combat, and no Samurai charges. In addition, busho inside the castle may ignore samurai challenges without losing face, if they wish.

Nagashino: Oda's army:

1. Oda's own units set up in 1813, not 1913.
2. Oda's Teppo should be set-up as per footnote 'a'.

Sekigahara: The babo-saku should be in 2113, not 2103.

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SAMURAI COMBAT IN PRACTICE

Both systemically and tactically, the battles of *Samurai* are, necessarily, radically different from classical-era scenarios of the other games in the system.

One of the most definitive attributes of the series is the interaction of many types of unit and weapon, manifested through two charts. The Shock Superiority Chart determines if the attacker or defender has the advantage through the employment of the weapons/unit best suited to oppose the enemy. The other is called variously (it is the Initial Clash of Spears Chart in *The Great Battles of Alexander*); regardless of superiority, or whether neither side has it, this chart dictates the column of the Shock Combat Results Table, on which the die is finally rolled in the melee combat process.

The basic method of the series is based on a proliferation of unit types, and the employment of heterogeneous armies. *Samurai*, by contrast, simulates combat between forces with just four sorts of units, with very few types of weapons. Whereas a battle such as Gaugamela might look like an exhibition of man's imagination when it comes to killing, those in *Samurai* are epitomes of simplicity in armament.

As a result, the game's treatment of shock combat is simpler and cleaner. Since all forces use the same basic approach to organizing and arming themselves, no unit can get shock superiority over another, and so the Shock Superiority Chart is eliminated. However, attacking units can still gain positional superiority, by hitting the enemy in the flank or rear. In addition, the Clash of Arms Chart is dramatically shortened.

Fire combat in the classical games is fairly simple, and so is that in *Samurai*. This game does show the evolution of Japan's appreciation of the gun, as armies develop the prepared cartridge, called the *hayago*, volley fire, and tactics of immediate counterattack by shock-oriented troops when firepower disrupted attacking foes. In the ultimate development of the feudal Japanese adoption of firearms, *ashigaru* at Sekigahara have the intrinsic fire capabilities of *teppo*, as the orders of battle do away with separate missile units. Yet all of this is done without adding top heavy complexity.

Unlike *Lion of the North*, which uses a detailed system to keep track of casualties to the arquebusiers and pikemen in a formation, and *Caesar* and the second edition *SPQR*, which show the general depletion of units put in harm's way, *Samurai* returns to the simpler example of *The Great Battles of Alexander* to

simulate the effects of combat.

Cohesion is everything. The familiar cohesion hits, used in every game but *Lion of the North*, are present in *Samurai*, as are rout and disintegration of units. However, from *Lion of the North* it takes the intermediate stage of disruption.

Clan flight, or more properly contingent flight, simulates the failure of cohesion at a higher level. As a contingent's units become disrupted, routed or destroyed, the chances rise that the contingent in its entirety will leave the battlefield. As logic dictates, the larger the contingent, the greater the damage it can absorb before flight becomes a real danger.

There are few parallels to clan flight in ancient tactical games, including those of *The Great Battles of History*. However, this approach is very familiar to modern players, especially those accustomed to squad morale in the microtactical game *Firepower* (Avalon Hill).

The command system to *Samurai* is the most streamlined of any game in its series. The other titles use a fairly rigid progression, by which leaders are eligible for activation in ascending order of initiative. For exam-



ple, in *SPQR* the junior Roman tribunes and praefects sociorum move before the cavalry leaders, who are followed by the supreme commander.

Samurai does away with the mandatory order of activation. A player can activate any leader, regardless of initiative.

This gives the players much greater freedom of action, and with the proliferation of *busho*, the larger quantity of leaders gives them a correspondingly enhanced range of decisions. However, there is a cost. These same factors can make turns progress more slowly in *Samurai* than in the classical-era games.

There is also a need for action missing in them. Veteran *Great Battles of History* players frequently activate leaders to have them

do virtually nothing, in effect passing.

If a contingent is in contact with the enemy in *Samurai*, and its *busho* is activated, its units must attack or withdraw. There is no pass.

The other games also have a basic pattern in which the players alternate the activation of individual leaders, broken only by successful trump. In *Samurai*, there is no theoretical limit to the number of friendly leaders who can be activated consecutively, due to the new concept of continuity. Once a leader is finished, the player can attempt to activate another of his leaders by rolling against his initiative.

The *taisho* and *so-taisho* are, if anything, more important than the chief leaders in the other games. They have the sole power of the

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trump, to start with. Also, such a leader ensconced in his *honjin* has an unlimited range for the purpose of activating subordinate *busho*.

But this does not apply to commanding his own personal contingent, which can be the largest in the battle. Given the immobility of the *honjin*, in *Samurai* these contingents often function as last-ditch reserves. They are, in this way, similar to the Roman *triarii* of *SPQR*.

Finally, *Samurai* embodies a fundamentally different view of an army's readiness to fight than that in the other games of the series. In them, all units are primed for battle, and ready to rush in at the word of a leader.

Not in this game. Contingents start the game inactive, and can be committed to battle only by the expenditure of a *taisho* or *so-taisho*'s very limited number of activation points, or if attacked. A contingent then stays active only if in close contact with the enemy, or at the cost of another activation point.

The overall effect is one of strangely passive armies, guided by the genius of George Brinton McClellan. Events happen more slowly in *Samurai* than in any of the other wargames, as players scheme and struggle to get their troops into the battle. It is much harder, as a result, to achieve a true battle of annihilation on the model of Cannae or one of Alexander's victories.

CONCLUSIONS

Samurai is not for every wargamer. In fact, it is not for every *Great Battles of History* player. Its dynamics are markedly different than the classical-norm games, with

their generally linear deployments and exceedingly varied unit and weapons types.

Also action goes much slower, and the resolution of the battle can take a lot longer than in *SPQR* or the deluxe *Alexander*. Whereas Alexander can demolish the Persian left at Issus in two or three turns, it can take that long just to get a significant part of a feudal Japanese army near the enemy. Then too, large parts of the army often stand by idly while an overworked minority decides the issue.

In consequence of this and the proliferation of leaders, *Samurai* games take longer to conclude than those of its brethren. The pace is slower, and the playing time frequently longer, and not just for new players.

Samurai therefore demands not just tactics, but perceptions and habits, that are different and even at odds with the rest of series. The rules might be simpler in some regards than the others, especially *SPQR*. However, fighting with an army of feudal Japan instead of the ancient Mediterranean can be much more complicated for someone with the habits and outlooks of the Western way of war.

Thus *Samurai* is by no means the best introduction to *The Great Battles of History*. The deluxe edition of *The Great Battles of Alexander* retains that honor, combining a more mainstream implementation of the system that is still fairly simple, and Western-style battles (even when Macedonia faces non-Western foes).

But *Samurai* offers something fresh to the veteran, in search of new challenges beyond the point of his *sarissa*. Ultimately, it offers a view of warfare in what amounts to a whole new world.

LINE OF DEPARTURE WRITER'S GUIDELINES

As always, *Line of Departure* needs articles. Payment is still in copies, plus my gratitude, and the knowledge that you'll be contributing to the hobby.

Needed most are short articles on game strategy, analysis, scenarios and variants. The maximum length is about 2,500 words (about 10 double-spaced typed pages), though longer projects can be considered if they are of special value.

Also needed are reviews of recently published manual and computer wargames. Reviewers should include a "fact box" inset, with information on the game's design credit, publisher, components, packaging and price. For specific information on the format of the fact box, as well as all *Line of Departure* articles, please refer to earlier issues.

Writers are further advised to use a modular approach to articles when possible. Insets are considered an excellent way to cover special subtopics, asides, and soliloquies.

Manuscripts should be neat and legible, and typed double-spaced. Normal rules of standard English apply, and spelling does count. An SASE must be included with each submission.

I highly recommend submissions on PC-formatted disks, either 3.5" or 5.25." Unfortunately, I still can't handle anything for the Mac. Also, aspiring writers with Internet or America Online accounts highly encouraged to send their work as files attached to e-mail; it is as easy to handle as that on disks, but much cheaper to transmit.