

From Vietnam and Cambodia to Nieuw Friesland

Where historical and non-historical gaming meet has always been an interesting area for me. It's something I've explored for over thirty years and, in the late eighties, I came across a series of books called *Hammer's Slammers*. To say I 'devoured' them has become a fairly hackneyed *cliché* but it was quite close to the truth: my SF interests previous to that had been a mixed bag: lots of *Star Trek* with a smattering of other, fairly non-military themed stuff. Certainly, few of the gaming interest areas I had then could be deemed 'Military SF' (*Starship Troopers*, sure, but a lot of other stuff – like Gerry Anderson's *Stingray* – was more my cup of tea!). But David Drake – the author of the *Hammer's Slammers* stories – really opened up my eyes to a whole new gaming world, I have to say.

There is something, it seems, that often puzzles many people about non-historical wargaming. A common feeling amongst historical gamers is, as it's 'not *real*', why can't you just make stuff up? I find that strange. Perhaps it shows a lack of imagination on my part, but I'm usually happier playing in someone else's make-believe 'sand pit' than making my own up completely from scratch – I guess I'm not that confident of my imagination! In addition, I enjoy *research* as a part of both my historical *and* non-historical gaming and – without that element – I think I miss out in producing or playing a game. One of the things that attracted me to gaming in Dave Drake's created world – the same as it has to gaming in other created worlds of everyone from Tolkien to Gerry Anderson - is that I could *research* what he'd done and written about. I'd miss that in something that was 'imagineered' – albeit by me – on a whim.

So how did Drake get to where he wrote those books? In 1969 Dave was conscripted out of law school, trained as an interrogator, and then assigned to the 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment. During his time in Asia (including the invasion of Cambodia) he obviously absorbed an awful lot of what he went through and – when he returned - began to write fiction. On his own admission, the stories weren't so much about his experiences in Viet Nam and Cambodia but more about the experience of being a member of an elite armoured regiment – the *Black Horse* - in a war which didn't make much sense to him.

What came across in the books to me as a reader, was simply the verisimilitude: frankly, the very *real* feeling that he'd *been* there, *seen* that (and *done* that) and how he had translated a lot of what he'd at least lived amongst into something that an SF enthusiast like me could pick up and see - pretty directly - through the author's eyes. That, for me, was a rarity in SF and it shouted out 'play me as a table top wargame' in a big, loud voice.

So – inspired as I was - I was pretty determined to see if I could play some actions set in his worlds and so I read, and *re-read* anything and everything he'd done to date. I then discovered a *Hammer's Slammers* board game by Mayfair games – obviously I was not alone in my enthusiasm! - and I eventually got a copy. I was also gifted another gaming variant: a 'programme paragraph' book that allowed the reader to play a tank commander in a *Slammers* company which seemed ok (although the author was patently more at home with *Centurions* than Drake's 'Blower' tanks).

This was all quite encouraging, though, and my project looked to me like a real possibility. But – to game Dave Drake's worlds - what sort of vehicles could I use? By now it was the mid 'nineties and – as far as I could see - no one made *anything* that resembled my vision of the vehicles in the stories.

Like the book covers and the game box graphics, the artwork was the usual fare: lots of highly detailed tanks which bore, I had so accept, little relationship to what Drake was describing in his books. Dave said later that "*I didn't even have a clear memory of the M48 tanks and the ACAVs on which I'd ridden daily during my tour of duty. What I remembered was the countryside of Southeast Asia, viewed over the sights of a machine gun*". The tanks and combat cars of his stories are, technically, a mixture of helicopters and M48s and ACAVs and I wondered what I could do to reproduce them. I did want quite desperately to play some games set in the 'Slammaverse'!

At the time, the main focus – pretty much the *only* focus – of my table top gaming was 25mm miniatures. I contacted Jon Tuffley at GZG who was a fan of the books too (I mean, SF tank warfare: what's not to like...) and we set out some plans.

The main 'hero' vehicles of the stories are the 'Blowers' I mentioned earlier. Before we start, I have to say that they are *not* hovercraft. Sure, they have some resemblance to one, in the same way that an auto-gyro resembles a helicopter. But they are *not* what at first glance they may appear. Reflecting back on 'Nam, 'Blowers' is a term like 'Choppers': a ubiquitous slang term for a style of vehicle which the US forces used. The vehicles Drake describes in the books are very heavily armoured in a way that is not overly 'modern' in appearance, if - by modern - one means the last thirty years of AFV development: slab sided, flat faced vehicles with composite armour like a Challenger 2. Design wise, they come from an earlier paradigm of big, rounded castings: the world of JS3s, T55s and – of course – M48s. This is hardly surprising, considering when Drake first started writing his Slammers stories...

They are powered by multiples of jet engines (usually eight) blowing straight downwards to achieve lift but which can be swivelled and flared like a helicopter's rotor-blades and so, what they are, in effect, is very heavy, cast iridium, low flying (less than a metre) attack helicopters with huge AI systems to help with communications, moving and firing. They also have a fusion power plant and energy weapons with to-the-horizon range.

The back up for the tanks is not an APC, as such. Infantry in the stories move around on one-man jet-bike things called *skimmers*, but the supporting vehicles for the tanks are, effectively, Vietnam era ACAVs in all but name. They have an open top – remember ACAV crews sat, effectively, on the roof – and, just like an ACAV, have three weapons mounts with which to liberally spray the countryside on the accepted precept that the best form of defence is attack. Called 'Combat cars', they are open-topped - like a WWII era *Hanomag 251* is open – with some overhead protection against shell splinters but they are certainly no more of an APC than the 113's that Drake was used to in Vietnam.

Well enough with the theory, what about some gaming...

Drake's Slammaverse is set, of course, *not* in the actual jungles of Vietnam. It's set in the jungles, deserts, cities and planes of far flung worlds that – to be honest – are a lot like Earth. In the Slammers books, there don't tend to be battles on lava fields or in hard vacuum (how would the blowers work!). They tend to be punch-ups on worlds colonised by humans which – for obvious reasons – are quite earth-like in their climates. Most of the conflicts involve mercenary companies (of which the Slammers, ex-patriots from their Dutch colonist homeworld of Nieuw Friesland, are just one) being hired to put some muscle onto a local government or some rebels that a planetary authority don't like and can't deal with. Very often – if they are rich enough – those rebel or governmental forces hire their *own* mercenaries and so it becomes

somewhat of a *Renaissance Italian* analogue: mercenary versus mercenary in *one* fight who – a year later - may be supporting each other in the *next* fight. After all, nothing changes much in warfare when it comes to human drives and greed.

So, back at the game I was trying to do, it was the late nineties and I did some conceptual drawings for Jon at GZG and he came up with some vehicles. He fiddled with them a bit, to make them better sellers to non-Slammer's enthusiasts as much as anything else, but we were both pretty pleased with them. My group painted a load up and I feverishly started rule development...

I'm a great fan of not reinventing the wheel if I don't have to. Bearing that in mind, I have a favourite space ship combat game: **Iron Crown's** *Silent Death*. In my honest opinion, it uses a truly *great* combat system using polyhedral dice to smash through a ships damage tracks and other defences with critical-hits for added spice. I had already made an adaptation of the system for a 'Nam helicopter game we ran at Salute '97 called *Low Level Hell* – I figured helicopters flying around and not landing much was sufficiently like space fighters flying around each other and not landing at *all* – and so, my reasoning went, can I translate the 'real world' Vietnam helicopters to SF with – effectively - very, very low flying helicopters and using the same rules (or a variant of them)?

In consequence, when we played *Hammer's Slammers* in public for the first time at Salute '99, we used a set of rules cooked up by me based on *Silent Death* (via *Low Level Hell*) in 25mm using almost exclusively **GZG** vehicles and figures. And it was... *ok*.

The game worked - and still *does* work – quite well if you have two or three tanks on a team with maybe some ground-pounders. A good skirmish game. In the same way that *Silent Death* works very well if you are running two or three gunships of the same type and a couple of fighters. The problem is not knowing when to stop... At Salute we must have had the best part of 50 *vehicles* and loads of infantry and – eventually – your brain just overloads.

But we were younger than and – apparently – had more spare neurons than we knew what to do with and we took the game to a lot of shows, I did a lot of web work about the game on the Salute site about it and it was pretty well received and garnered a lot of favourable comments.

Amongst the many emails I'd received I got one from a fellow called John Lamshead and I later met him at a show and he said "*do you fancy writing a game together, only I know the author*". Of **course** you do, I thought to myself, and largely ignored the offer, but John was quite persistent and eventually we met up and I found out that he was *exactly* what he *said* he was.

One thing led to another and, to my delight, Dave Drake got on board with John and myself and we selected some people to work with for a proper published *Hammer's Slammers* game. We had to have new rules from scratch rather than me simply 'borrowing *Silent Death*' and we had this grand idea of doing an 'Osprey' and approached that publisher with the idea. "*Made up stuff?*" said Osprey: "*no we don't do **that** sort of thing*". Gosh, haven't things changed in the last ten years!

But the ideas stuck and that's the reason that the first two volumes of the rules – even though they printed by Pireme Publications *not* Osprey - were produced in exactly the same size,

format and layout as an Osprey (or certainly an Osprey of the nineties), complete with colour in selected pages only and a key to the illustrations.

But I'm jumping ahead of myself. Before we even got as far as layout and printing, I had to ask Dave Drake the big question: *does any of the stuff I've designed so far look like what you had in mind?* "Er...No" was his (I have to say) very disappointing reply.

"How about the front covers of your books – are any of them what you had envisioned?" Still no.

Well, I said to Dave, this is your chance to actually get what you *want*. There then followed a long process via email of drawing, re-drawing and more re-drawing of every hardware component I could. Tanks, Combat Cars, weapons, rank insignia, body armour. From stuff that had only been mentioned by Dave in an almost throwaway line to elements that he had really sweated over and even material that he'd never actually considered at all. For Dave to get a handle on this, both for size and shape, I had to do comparisons: side by side shots of what I was drawing next to an M48... it was a long process but we got there.

Meantime my partner John had found us a publisher, a resin manufacturer and a metal designer: Ian Dickie of Pireme Publishing (once owner of Miniature Wargames), Old Crow for the resin vehicles and – since he was getting out of resin production all together – GZG for the metal components and figures. Rather than outsourcing it, I offered Ian to do the design work for the books myself (I'd already done the illustrations and I was, and am, a graphic designer by trade and had been staff photographer on Practical Wargamer for a number of years) and he said yes. So I started working with Jon at GZG and Jez and Old Crow on the design work for a 25/28mm range of stuff. I was determined to get this one right, I thought. I'd done (what I fondly imagined was) all my research I wanted to get it *exactly* as Dave Drake had visualised.

In what turned out to be the first volume, we brought out a set of quite basic rules which John had written and a lot of background 'fluff', as it's called, that he and I had written for (what we thought at the time) was to be an end product. *The Hammer's Slammers Technical Manual*.

It seemed to go well and – after a couple of years – Ian Dickie asked me to write another. For various reasons, I pretty much did that one on my own: *Hammer's Anvil* had rather *more* rules to really flesh out the set plus more opponents and some more fluff. The important thing for both myself and John Lamshead was that pretty much *all* of the material written down had to be taken from Dave's stories with the very minimal made up by us. In addition, in the end it all had to be approved by Dave Drake.

Things went quiet for a while. Old Crow had done some 15mm versions of the vehicles which, I confess, I didn't get much of a look at as I was concentrating on the larger scale games. And then Ian sold Pireme to Andrew Hubback.

It was at Colours wargames show in 2008 that Andrew – the new owner - approached me and said: *Hammer's Slammers – do you want to do a third volume?* I really *didn't* want to but what I did do was make a counter offer. I said that I'd like to do a *new* product that superseded the older two, amalgamating them together and adding yet more 'stuff'. I also said I'd like to do it 'properly'. When asked by Andrew what that meant, I said *"Full colour, hard back, probably 200 pages or so. And I'd still like to do all the internal design work myself. It's something I'd like*

people to be able to leave on their coffee table and not be embarrassed about it when their friends came round...”.

To give Andrew his credit, he said yes.

So here we are then. The rules *Hammer's Slammer's: The Crucible* were launched at the Birmingham Wargames show in the summer of 2010 with what will probably be the last – for the foreseeable future – of my very large 28mm games. Dave Drake had written a special introduction to a scenario within the rules - the only bit of Slammers fiction outside of the Slammers stories themselves. Old Crow had promised quite a lot of new material with the re-launch (now in three scales including 6mm) but – as of 2013 – the increasingly important 15mm Slammers vehicles are newly sculpted and available from *Ainsty* castings. My group from the Warlords – with help from other Slammers fans from other clubs – put on a huge 36ft long 15mm game at Salute 2013 called *Hammering Route 66* and my objective from here on in will be to give gamers the chance to experience the Slammers books on the table top (primarily but not exclusively) in the now very popular 1/100th (ie 15mm) scale with as many options as is possible, so not only the new Slammers ranges from *Ainsty* but - because of the very rich background Drake wrote – many, *many* different opponents with vehicles and figures sourced from many manufacturers: *GZG, Brigade, Critical Mass, Antenociti, Old Crow, Khurasan, Rebel* and more besides.

In short, if you want to play a near future, military SF game with lots of armour on the table that's quite quick even with sizable forces, and if you like Drake's work and have some other manufacturers models that you'd like to use as opponents, my ambition is to give you every chance I can.

In Conclusion

The Editor asked me to write down my thoughts on this whole design process: how the rules came to be and to see if there was anything others could get from this process. My thoughts are these:

The problem, for me, with knowing a period well enough for a project like this is how to actually get at all of the information. With a historical period, it can be a never ending chase and knowing when to actually stop reading and start writing is problematic. Different opinions on whether, for example, Wellington was a light weight and only survived Waterloo through very good luck and the timeliness of Blücher, or whether the Iron Duke was a genius who saved the British from a French monster... well, it's all a matter for debate. You can spend a life time reading books on the subject, *never* come to a conclusion, and *never* be able to write a set of rules that 'accurately' reflects combat of the period. So how do you satisfactorily game it?

If you try a non-historical subject – say *Star Trek* – it's *still* hard. After 6 TV series (if you include the animated one) and 12 films (if you include the last two – which of course I *don't*...), who's to say what's 'canon' and what's not? Not its creator Gene Roddenberry, certainly, because – other than him not being with us any longer – he changed his mind and made it all up as he went along more than anyone of the thousands of writers, directors and producers he employed.

Picking your subject matter is a tricky business, whether it's a historical or a non-historical topic.

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Drake's work – and I'm lucky enough to have met the gentleman a few times – is, however, now a complete, finished thing. Sadly (for those who like it) Dave's *not* likely to publish anymore Slammers stories, but he's still with us and has been very helpful in clearing up any very minor inconsistencies in a body of work that, to be fair, has spanned more than four decades of his life and were never written to be picked apart by people like me!

The works are available as a three volume set in hard copy and as e-books (and which – I'm flattered to say - have *my* illustrations in them as the now accepted and approved source of visuals for his work) and it means that it's a *closed loop*. It can be gamed - and gamed well - as there is a mountain of detail but it's all there to be had.

So my advice, ultimately, is pick your subject: whatever the genre, the right choice at that stage is hugely important.

Dave Drake: thank you very much for the years of entertainment that your books have provided, both on and off the gaming table.

John Treadaway 2013