

## Earthlings on Fire

by Pat Harrigan

It is June 1941 and I am feeling confident. I move my units up to hex line 25 on the map, battering the brittle and ill-prepared Red Army divisions. Their command and control structures are appalling, the Army having been purged of their best officers some years ago. Within two turns my Army Group North has amassed stacks in hexes 3619, 3620 and 3720, putting pressure on Leningrad. I have taken Kiev and shattered the Soviet order of battle. Moscow is next. My men are confident, as well they should be; the Wehrmacht is the best-trained, best-equipped fighting force the world has ever seen. A year ago we conquered France in six weeks and drove the British Expeditionary Force into the sea.

My opponent and I had flipped a coin to determine who would play which side. We both wanted to be the Germans. My opponent was disappointed, almost sulky, but that does not stop him from playing well.

Now it is November 1942 and my advance has begun to stall. My units are stretched out in a line from hex 3517 in the north to hex 3899 in the south. Despite Operation Typhoon, Moscow still resists. My opponent and I are both rolling badly on the Combat Results Table, taking step-loss after step-loss in the fight for Stalingrad. I have been bogged down here for six turns, giving my opponent time to recover from early setbacks and he has been intelligently managing production, spending resource points to bring in reinforcement units all along the front. My opponent is feeling the strain; he is pale and drawn, with a thousand-yard stare. He tells me, "To be insulted by these fascists, it's so degrading." Behind my line of advance, in the Victory Point hexes in Poland, Belarus and the Ukraine, my *einsatzgruppen* are rounding up Jews and other undesirables and murdering them in the thousands.

It is July 1943. The Battle for Stalingrad is lost, my best divisions destroyed. The Sixth Army is gone: 110,000 of my men have been captured; only 5,000 of these will ever return home, and those not for over ten years; they are all out of the game. And in the great tank battle for the Kursk salient, my opponent outplays me; it is our biggest and most complex battle to date, with four and a half million men and over 15,000 tanks, and we spend a great deal of time calculating odds ratios and maneuvering around each other's zones of control. When the dice have settled, I have lost again, and by January 1945 my opponent is just outside the Victory Point hex of Warsaw. He elects to have the single Polish unit present there do the fighting; this I easily eliminate, so when Soviet units finally enter the city there are no politically inconvenient armed Poles left to cause my opponent any problems. He salutes the valor of my fascist troops, and I do not know if he is being ironic.

It is April 1945 and my opponent is has advanced to hexline 0621-0734-0668, well inside central Germany. My armies are breaking apart. Some of the men are surrendering; more than a few are expending their movement allowance to flee west to surrender to American troops rather than the Soviets. As the Red Army advances, they rape two million women, one in eight of whom they also kill. As they occupy Berlin, I concede the game.

It is still early in the day, and my opponent wants to keep playing. He scans my shelves. He is looking at the GMT series called "Next War." I own *Next War: Korea*, *Next War: Taiwan*, *Next War: Poland* and *Next War: India-Pakistan*. But he says he's tired of science fiction. I say let's wait a few months, maybe they'll be history. He takes a carton of milk from my fridge and drinks directly from it.

We settle on Avalon Hill's *The Arab-Israeli Wars* of 1977. We play Scenario B-3, the Battle of Tel Maschara. It is a bloodbath: my Israelis wreak havoc on my opponent's Iraqi and Jordanian troops. His gameplay is dismal; he is bombed out of his mind, cutting cocaine right on the map, dusting his tank divisions with a white residue like pulverized stone. Next we play *Gettysburg*. We play *Bonaparte at Marengo*. He has pulled himself together. We are evenly matched and win many games each. The day stretches on, and I'm beginning to tire. My opponent, although visibly older now, almost skeletal, is having a whale of a time. We play *Red Poppies*. We play *Vietnam 1965-1975*. We play *Libera: Descent into Hell*. During lulls, he makes small talk: "On the day of execution, only women kneel and smile."

When I was a child I played Cowboys and Indians; I slaughtered three hundred women, men and children at Pine Ridge, leaving their bodies to freeze in the blizzard. I played Cops and Robbers, shooting a little black boy carrying a toy gun. My opponent has never been a child; he was birthed from an egg somewhere, sliding out of a broken shell in a rush of bright iridescent fluid. But he has proven to be a fast learner. By now I am envious of him. He is more human than I am.

He peruses my shelves again. Something has caught his eye, another Eastern Front game: *Red Star Rising: The War in Russia, 1941-1944*. Our flip determines that this time I will play the Soviets. It is too late in the day and I am worn out. My opponent looks as if he could continue this forever. I am sure that this time history will fail, the red star will be snuffed out. The sky outside is dark and I can barely see the board as he arranges the chits. My hands begin to shake and I am terribly, terribly afraid.

My opponent makes his opening move. "I'm a black star," he says, repeating it like a needle stuck in a groove. "I'm a black star, I'm a black star."