

## David Burden

### VCOW 2024

#### Onside: Cityfight2024

*Cityfight* is a 1979 game from SPI looking at contemporary small unit urban warfare. Forces are platoon to company in size, with 2 or 4 soldier manoeuvre elements/counters and a hex map with a variety of dense and less dense built-up areas meant to be representative of a town in western Germany. The key element of the game is that it is meant to be played double-blind, and so includes two maps and two sets of counters. The detection mechanism uses “megahexes” – groups of 7 hexes, each with an alphanumeric code, and a detection rating (typically from 20 to 70) which has to be rolled over on a D100. If the enemy has a unit in a successfully searched megahex they just reveal its location, but not the type of unit. The best way to describe it is as a (land-based) game of Battleships, but one where the ships can move each turn! In my initial plays a number of potential issues with the game became apparent:

- The map uses hexes, which just don't seem to sit well for urban games given the more rectangular nature of most buildings and many street layouts;
- The detection system uses a D100 roll, whose mechanics may put some people off (2D10), and many potential players may not have access to D10s; and
- The rules are written in the usual dense SPI legalese.

#### Initial Changes

Having committed to run the game at VCOW over Zoom I started to work on adapting the game to make it easier to play, but without losing the key detection mechanic. My first change was to use squares (and mega-squares) for the map. I like to work off of real terrain so used a housing estate on the southern edge of Birmingham as the focus for the map. Each square is around 10m (the original *Cityfight* used 15m – but against an imagined terrain). Then I replaced the D100 with 2D6. Since there is no published logic to the detection I created a simple algorithm to count the number of building or cluttered squares in a megasquare and convert that into a target number.

#### Technical Set-Up

In terms of the technical set-up I wanted to keep things as simple as possible. Zoom would provide the voice chat, and a break-out room for each side would allow private chats about tactics and questions to me. I uploaded the map and counters to a Google Slides “presentation”, and then created unique Blue and Red copies of that – so each side only had their own counters, but they also had generic enemy counters to mark located units, and also to flag whether megasquares had been searched and what the result was. How they actually used these was up to them.



The co-ordinator's technical set-up for the game – Red on the left, Blue on the right.

## The Test Game

A test game with Nick and Pete went pretty well. The tech all worked fine. The key lessons in terms of the game itself were that:

- The 2D6 detection mechanism and squares works fine – although it still throws up the odd anomaly of being able to see through windowless buildings – but perhaps that could reflect sounds or information from other sources;
- The pre-allocation of orders took a lot of time and broke the flow. In the VCOW game if there was discussion on this every turn in the break-out rooms it would really slow the game down;
- The Cityfight CRT was overcomplicated, with multiple results in many cells and crucial variations (such as for cover) buried in the text;
- Without an umpire it was perfectly possible for two opposing units to be in the same square without ever knowing it; and
- There was no ability to put “overwatch” on a particular part of the board, e.g. to detect the enemy coming round a particular building corner.

## Cityfight2024

From the experience with the test game I decided that whilst the detection system essentially worked as-is, almost everything else needed to be changed! My principles changes were:

- Remove the allocation of orders. Every element (including the PI Comdr) still has 2AP, but they are only spent and assigned as needed.
- I completely replaced the combat system and CRT with one of my own design. Rather than use a CRT this just had one target number for Suppression, and a slightly higher one for a Kill, and with DMs for building protection level.
- I also implemented a slightly different combat mechanism for HE and AT weapons such a grenade launchers, RPGs, Carl Gustav/Matadors and NLAW. I've always hated HE and AT

shots that miss and just disappear into the ether – particularly in a crowded urban environment. In the new mechanism there’s a roll for accuracy/deviation, and then as well as a damage test against units in the resultant target square there are also blast effects against neighbouring squares.

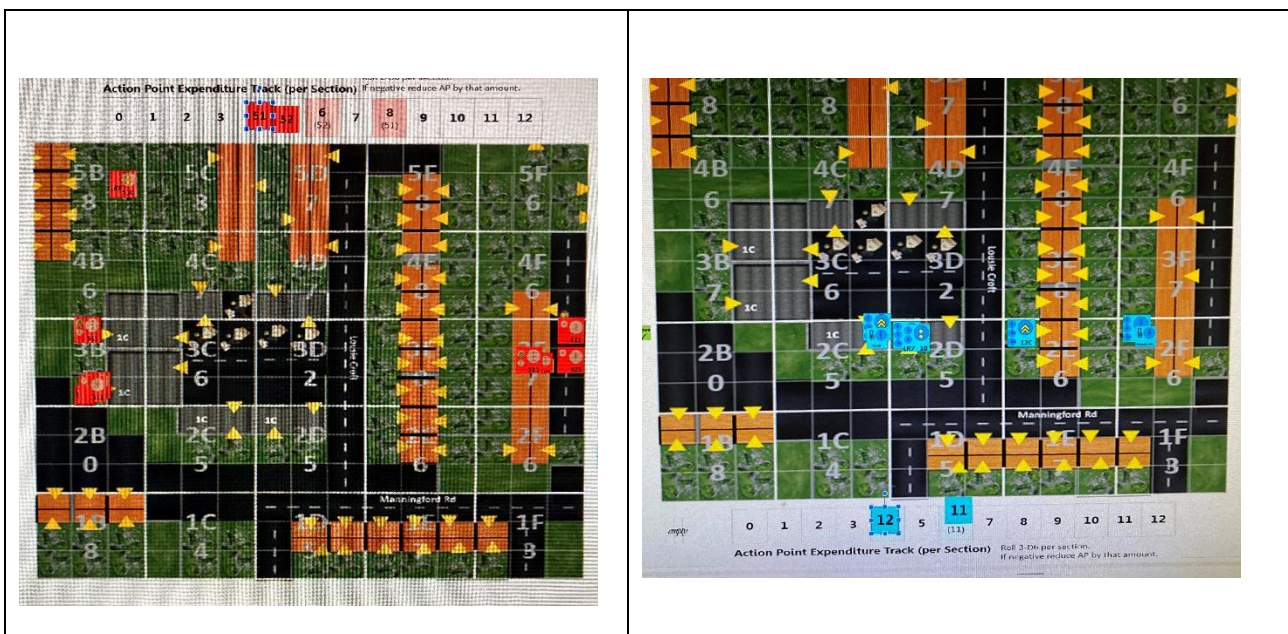
- *Cityfight* buried the “out of ammo” (OOA) condition as suffixes in the CRT which were easy to overlook. I was keen to maintain some element of awareness of ammo consumption so instead made OOA possible result of rolling doubles – MGs going OOA on any double, automatic rifles on double 4,5,6.

The resulting rules fitted on a 2-page QRS (although I know my QRS are dense and cryptic!) and a 6-page players guide.

### The VCOW Game

For the VCOW game my brave players consisted of Thomas and Matthew as Red and Ian and James as Blue, with Evan observing. Each Red player had 3 elements (3 man command and RPG team, 2 man MG team and 2 man manoeuvre team), whilst each Blue player had two 4-man squads (one with GPMG) Blue also had a Matador (modern Carl Gustav look-a-like) and an NLAW, Red had an RPG22 LAW. Although Red had more elements they had lower Command Ratings so would find it harder to activate them and recover suppression.

The new game was a lot slicker than the playtest. Since players only had to roll for AP at the start of each turn, rather than assigning and discussing them we only needed to use the breakout rooms when the situation demanded a rethink. I kept up a steady tempo of calling out who was next (there is a strict alternation of sides and rotation of players/sections) and we cracked on through the turns. Blue decided to sweep up both flanks of the housing estate to find the VIP, whilst Red went straight down the middle. Red was also moving quickly without doing much searching (about 7 searches in 8 turns), whereas Blue was making a far more cautious move then search approach (15 searches). The first detection (by Blue of Red) was in turn 5 (having narrowly failed dot spot the VIP in Turn 4), but in Turn 6 Red found the VIP. All hell then broke lose as in the test game with a rapid exchange of fire between all the Red and Blue elements in the area. Blue lost two units and Red one in the exchange. Time was now up, but since Red had the VIP and a clear exit route, and Blue had lost 50% of their force it was a clear Red victory and a good time to end.



c. Turn 5: Red screen on the left, Blue screen on the right.

In the debrief the game was described as being pretty intuitive and smooth, but probably wouldn’t go beyond platoon level, and the combat impressively bloody. The calling out of

activations helped to keep the tempo up. The presence of being out-of-ammo was welcomed, and the use of PI Sgt to help with ammo resupply discussed. There was a suggestion that the scale be dropped (say to 5m or 7.5m) to better model narrow roads and smaller gardens. The problem with the buildings not blocking line of sight within a megasquare highlighted – although it was accepted that could be explained away by “awareness” rather than actual sighting. The use of some form of noise factor to influence detection (as seen in Osprey’s *Black Ops*) was also discussed. All-in-all though people seemed to enjoy it.



ENDEX Turn 8 – Blue has lost 50% and Red has the VIP and a clear egress route.

## Next Steps

Overall, I was pretty happy with how the game played. The players made minimal use of the orders chits to show actions taken, but since each player only had at most 3 elements to track they possibly weren’t needed. Use of tokens to mark megasquares as searched was also patchy – but that is information which is more out of date with every interaction.

The key thing about the game is the detection mechanism. That, I think, is where players get the most value out of the game, just experiencing the issues that urban creates in terms of situational awareness. So I’m now trying to streamline the rules even further and hope to have a cardboard version available as a fill-in game at COW so it can be played properly back-to-back as the designer intended!

Cityfight2024 is being documented on my wiki at <https://taunoyen.com/games/cityfight2024>, which also has a more extended version of this OnSide.

## References

- Balkoski, J.M & Donaldson, S.A. (1979). *Cityfight*. New York, NY: Simulations Publications, Inc.  
Bowers, G. (2015). *Black Ops: Tactical Espionage Wargaming*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing Limited