	# Urban Battles That Weren't
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This article originally appeared in The Nugget, Issue 346, Oct 2022, the Journal of the Wargame Developments Group. I wrote it to start to get my head around the idea presented, and comments welcome as I try and work it up into a more polished article/paper for more formal publication.

When I began my PhD I obviously also started building a list of the great urban battles – Stalingrad, Berlin, Manila, Hue, Fallujah, and perhaps more recently Mariupol. But recently I've begun to suspect that this may not be the right list, and that a better one would be Lodz (1945), Port Stanley (1982), Kuwait (1991), Stepanakert/Khankendi (2020), Kabul (2021) and perhaps even Kyiv (2022).

- In 1945 the Russian Army sent a forward detachment of regimental strength to seize vital ground overlooking over Lodz to dissuade the Germans from defending the city. When the Germans arrived and found the Russians already present, albeit not in strong numbers, they decided against setting up a defence in contact and withdrew (Whitchurch, 2019).

- In 1982 during the Falklands conflict there was much discussion about how bloody the Battle for Port Stanley may be, but in the end with the capture of the high ground around the town, such as Wireless Ridge, Tumbledown and Sapper Hill, the capital became untenable and the Argentines surrendered (Thompson, 2007).

- In 1991 in the First Gulf War the Coalition made the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait City irrelevant by the wide sweep to isolate it – Schwarzkopf's "Hail Mary" play (Tsouras et al, 1991).

- On 8 November 2020 Azerbaijani forces completed their seizure of Shusha, an important small city just 15km from the Artsakh capital of Stepanakert/Khankendi but considerably overlooking it and effectively cutting it off from Armenia. A ceasefire was agreed on 9 November 2020 (Spencer, 2021).

- On 15 August 2021 the Taliban seized control of an almost defenceless Kabul. In a campaign that had only started on 1 May 2021 the Iraqi forces had been defeated or just evaporated in the face of the Taliban advance and with the US withdrawal President Ashraf Ghani relinquished power and fled the country the same day.

- On 24 February 2022 Russian airborne troops landed at Hostomel airport on the edge of Kyiv. By 2 March there were reports of a 40-mile-long Russian convoy "stalled" just NW of Kyiv, and fighting in the surrounding suburbs like Bucha, Irpin and Brovary. By 29 March Russia announced that it was withdrawing its forces from the area around Kyiv.

Of course, what all these battle have in common is that to a large extent they never happened (or at least not in the way that people had expected them to). And surely that's got to be the best sort of urban battle – the one that you don't need to fight.

If we go back to John Boyd (I'd thoroughly recommend the ~5hr recording of his late 1980s Patterns of Conflict presentation on YouTube) and the roots of manoeuvrism then conflict should be focussed not just on avoiding battles but penetrating, disrupting, subverting and seizing centres that provide cohesion, lines of communication and command, and we should be exploiting ambiguity, deception, mobility, surprise, shock and exploiting mental elements to shatter cohesion, paralyse effort and bring about collapse (Boyd, 2015). Isn't that what many of these examples show?

Lind (1980) summarises, "*Manoeuvre conflict is more psychological than physical. Effort focuses more on the operational than on the tactical level*."

Even the doctrine-de-jour, Multi-Domain Operations, takes a somewhat manoeuvrist stance stating that "*Army forces employ deception and convergence with other domains to dislocate the enemy defence by physically, virtually, and cognitively isolating its subordinate elements*" and "*convergence leads to breaking the physical, virtual, and cognitive cohesion of enemy formations, causing their defeat.*" (TRADOC, 2018). It should be noted that MDO is more than just cross-domain fires and Multi-Domain Integration (which annoyingly is the term the UK seems to be using), and the Ukrainians seem to be demonstrating quite successfully how cross-domain fires can be achieved without multi-million dollar and multi-year development programmes.

So what does this mean for our wargames? How do we develop a wargame to take a city, when the best way to take the city is not to actually attack it? Wyly started to think about how wargaming should work in the service of manouvrism back in the early 1980s, "*Our war games should focus on meaningful things, such as destruction, not attrition. We destroy the enemy when we destroy his will to resist.*" and "*Let us use the war game and the computer, therefore, not to count casualties. Instead, let them help us to discover where the decisive point is, what disarms our enemy when denied him, and what dilemma can put him on its horns.*" (Wilson, Wyly, Lind & Trainor, 1981)

In thinking about this problem I can see a number of options, not necessarily all good and I'm sure that there are many more, which I would like to try out in some wargames over the coming years.

- A more unstructured game – Perhaps the "battle" needs to be conducted as a more unstructured wargame first. Involve a wider range of "players", a bigger space (in all domains) to "manoeuvre" in, lots more options to consider and see what happens. A free-ish kriegsspiel or even a matrix game might suffice.

- Set the game one level higher – Even if you want to do the "battle of X" then perhaps you really need to do "the campaign for Y", so that the battle for X (or even Z) need not occur if the player can find another way of achieving their objective.

- The cognitive/morale wrapper – I'm increasingly of the view that any but the most tactical games need some sort of wrapper that considers the cognitive and national will/morale components – something like that used in RCAT (Rapid Campaign Analysis Toolset). That also means that players need to the ability to influence that track through kinetic and non-kinetic means, and to have their own scope of action constrained or even dictated by it (which may be less palatable).

- The cognitive overload game – If achieving cognitive effects is at the core of much manoeuvrist thought then should those effects be achieved directly in the minds of the

players – rather than through abstracted mechanism? Mega-games and even double-blind kriegsspiels can certainly come close to this, amped-up versions of in-tray exercises. I shudder to think though of the ethics in designing a game to achieve the cognitive breakdown of one side or the other!

- The humble command point – If direct cognitive impact is unethical then should we abstract the cognitive element in the same way that we tend to do morale. Many games use Command Points to enable players to take actions, and often the number of points a player gets will reflect the cognitive capability of the commander, or the doctrinal flexible of the force, they represent. Could we develop this more and give each side a way to affect the Command Point pool of their adversary? The danger of course is that players start to resort to "the game wouldn't let me do it", rather than appreciating that we're trying to represent how they themselves might be stressed in a real-world situation.

- Hybrid games – Of course there is unlikely to be a single answer to this, so one approach might be the hybrid game, for instance running a matrix game to do the "shaping" operations, but then moving to a map-based game when things start to get kinetic?

In all of this I'm conscious that I want to create something that is playable and distributable, and which could no doubt be applied to non-urban as well as urban conflict. Achieving a good manoeuvrist game may well be do-able with an army of umpires and lots of space, but can we also do it in a way that a Brigade or even a Battalion could pick up and run with?

I'm sure I haven't covered all the options, and if you know of others, or know of wargames which are already tackling, or have even solved, these issues, then please let me know.

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