

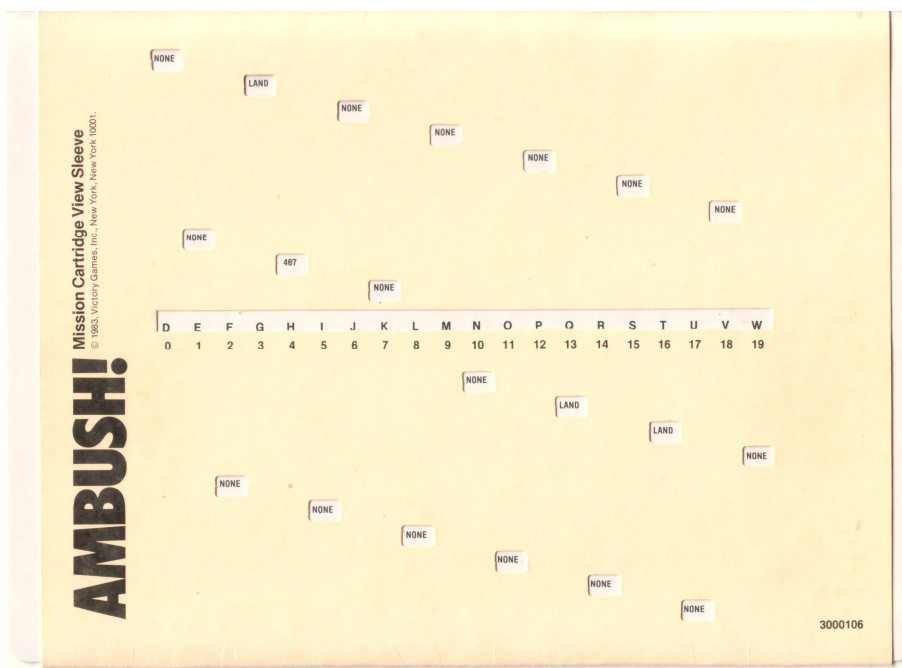
## Blasts from the past (2)

### All on my own—*Ambush!*

Other people take books on holiday with them—I take games. In particular, this time I took my copy of *Ambush!*—another secondhand acquisition, as my original game disappeared a long time ago. It was only afterwards that I realised the parallels with *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (the first in his series). Both games are from the Eighties (*Ambush!* was published in 1983 by Victory Games), both have a paragraph system at their heart and both are an experience as much as a game. What's different about *Ambush!* is that it is, by design, a solitaire game. Its subject matter is rather different, too: a squad of US soldiers in France just after D-Day in World War 2.

*Ambush!* is fairly typical of board wargames—it has lots of cardboard. It has two cardstock maps, lots of cardboard counters, a couple of dice (10-sided in this case), rulebook and paragraph book. There are also cardboard boards that provide the references to the paragraphs. A sleeve with holes hides the boards, making it harder for the player to second-guess the system. This is the really ingenious part of the game as this mechanism is simple to use, but provides the challenge of an ever-changing situation and an enemy with its own objectives. Nowadays, of course, the whole thing would be done on a computer, but this is a triumph for cardboard.

The first thing you do is set up and equip your squad of eight soldiers. A series of tables and die rolls give you the squad's overall strength—carefully balanced so that a weaker squad can have better weaponry. Each soldier has a number of stats that



The card in this sleeve slides back and forth to identify the paragraph to read

will affect his performance and some are commanders, able to boost the morale of their men. Each also has specific weapons and ammunition, according to how you spend your weapons points. This can be quite important—I still remember the heart-in-mouth feeling I had the first time a Panzer IV rumbled on to the map. Who hadn't given his squad any anti-tank weapons? Luckily they were able to hide while the tank went past (and then run away!).

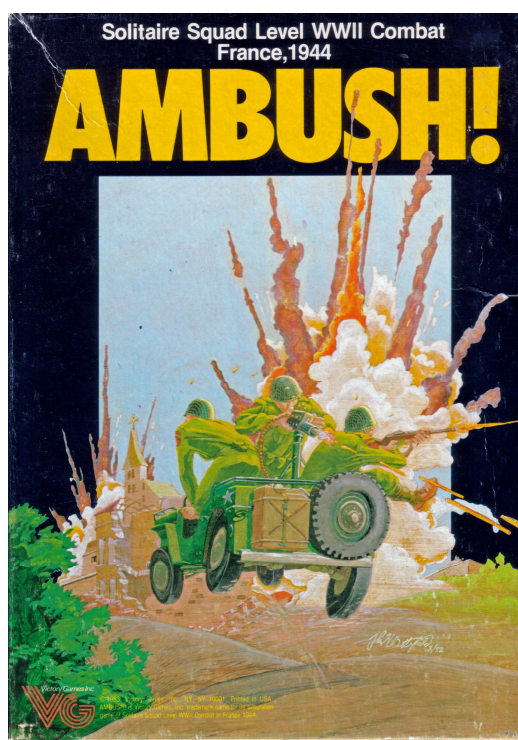
The rules include a series of missions (scenarios) for the player's squad to undertake. One of the nice touches to the game is that you can build up your squad between missions, improving soldiers' abilities and changing their equipment (bazookas are useful). And you need to, as the missions get tougher and tougher. They introduce new things too—like that Panzer IV—and include things like a parachute drop and a mission by boat.

Playing a mission involves moving your soldiers (there's a counter for each one) across the board, checking the paragraph boards for each hexagonal space they enter. You cannot afford to be complacent—the action can start at any moment. However, there are plenty of red herrings scattered about. You catch sunlight glinting of something metal, set up covering fire and approach cautiously only to find a discarded tin. Then the next time you catch a metal glint, a German machine gun opens up on you!

Another clever touch is that each mission has several 'conditions'—different paragraph boards to go into the cardboard sleeve. At some point, you will trigger a change in condition, giving you a different set of paragraphs and a change in enemy activity. Usually this means they get more aggressive, but taking out the German commander, for example, can mean they're heading for the hills. This is another way of adding variety and changing circumstances to the game.

Each mission has its own goal, which will usually involve scoring victory points for achieving various things. You also get points when German soldiers (and tanks!) appear and lose them if any of your soldiers dies. Enough points and you win the mission. However, the missions are tough. You can expect to lose members of the squad each time. I aborted my first mission with one of my squad dead, three incapacitated and one wounded. Not a good result (and there weren't even any tanks involved).

I spent several happy holiday afternoons (well, the weather was bad) completing three of the missions. I was pleased that *Ambush!* remained as challenging and as enjoyable as



it was when I first played it. Just like *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, it is an absorbing experience to play, though it is more of a game. That is, the game's mechanics are more obvious as they take up a large part of your attention. The system does have its limitations—in particular, the German soldiers' movements are inflexible—but it's good enough to offer a real challenge and make success a real achievement.

Now, I wonder if I can get my hands on the expansion sets...

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