

War and Sense

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 25 Nov 1998

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1274>

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m.driussi — 25 Nov 1998, 00:45

Paul,

This seems the time for my recent thoughts on the "absurdity" of certain units at the battle front. I know this is something you keep turning over, the tallman riding dwarfs, the daughters of war, and so on.

I think we all agree that they are surreal, at least, and that there are such weird units on the friendly side as well as the enemy side just adds to the dream-like quality.

Beyond that level: While I don't want to argue that tallmen units "make sense" (i.e., I don't have any new insight as to how they would work, let alone work out), even in the sense of "put mx missiles in fiberglass sailing boats" (an idea floated in CASTLE OF THE OTTER, I think), I do want to put a bit of question into the underlying idea that warfare is always rational, especially when there are new technologies introduced, and/or mixtures of wildly different groups.

Witness the massed charges in WWI trench warfare. Why on Earth did it have to happen more than =once=? As predictable as feeding men into a sausage grinder, making them run across open ground toward fixed machine guns. And yet the generals kept ordering them. Senseless and un-learning of mistakes.

Sayings like "armies are always prepared to fight the previous war" remind us that each new conflict (especially true in the modern age) involves a lot of untried tools and techniques. The French thought they'd built an invincible wall; the Germans just went around it. If stressed ice battleships had saved the Allies during WWII, their plans would be enshrined; if the atomic bomb failed to work, it would have been yet another kooky pipedream. But just because the tool becomes enshrined doesn't mean that it will be adequate or appropriate for the next conflict, and yet it will still show up as "old trusty, the one thing we can count on" when the new conflict starts.

So. My point being that these weird units serve to highlight the senselessness. Honor guards, marine bands, even the Salvation Army out there battling it to the death, while giant shirukens and martian tripods play "Stars (pentadactyls) and Stripes (tripod flame beams) Forever."

We know that the Daughters of War are an important cultural thing for their people. We see an earlier stage of the same process happening with the semi-naked horseback riders (Tarentine?)--each one who survives is convinced that his personal magic chant was the key. Presumably the tallman riders developed as a response to some other conflict, somewhere else, somewhen else, under conditions where it might have somehow made sense. (I'm reminded of Vaughn Bode's robot series, the early history of which has a German unicycle bot of 1911 that went amok in a lightning storm and was finally defeated by a farmer with a pitchfork--a statue stands in his honor.)

=mantis=

Peter Stephenson — 25 Nov 1998, 09:21 · follows m.driussi

m.driussi at genie.com wrote:

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Haig's theory was that the Germans were suffering more by this, and the only way to win the war was by attrition. Maybe he just subtracted the population of the Central Powers from those of the Allies to see who would be left standing (think of all those gallant natives from the Empire, delighted to be slaughtered for Britain). You have to add lots of other things before it begins to become believable. For example, he may have thought that if they got bogged down in a passive, rather than an active, stalemate, it would give the Germans time to come up with a Secret Weapon (TM), or something. In any case, he was not living in the world he thought he was living in.

There's an important difference between the Commonwealth/Ascan war and most wars, although I'm not sure it's got much to do with unusual units. Most modern wars change through technological progress, such as tanks and related developments in 1917--18 which (unexpectedly, needless to say) altered the face of the war. In the case of Urth, the technology is going the other way; the more powerful weapons are relics of an earlier age. It's bound to change the picture a bit.

corncrake

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Peter T. Cash — 25 Nov 1998, 21:57 · follows Peter Stephenson

From: Paul C Duggan <pduggan at world.std.com>

And the Ascan "roll to see how many of your troops commit suicide before the battle" beats GW's Commissar kills Sergeant to prevent squad from routing for "dark and gothic" ruleswriting.

Careful, the Sergeant is sensitive to proposals involving fragging of noncoms; they undermine discipline. He does not recall Mr. Wolfe suggesting anything like this, but he will investigate. Mr. Wolfe may have to do some push-ups.

Kind of reminds me of the (probably apocryphal) comment attributed to a Russian general in the Winter War against the Finns upon greeting a trainload of replacements: "Shall we march them up to the front...or just shoot them here?" I'm sure he was purged by the commissars.

From: m.driussi at genie.com

Witness the massed charges in WWI trench warfare. Why on Earth did it have to happen more than =once=? As predictable as feeding men into a sausage grinder, making them run across open ground toward fixed machine guns. And yet the generals kept ordering them. Senseless and un-learning of mistakes.

Well, there was a problem you see: the generals thought it was important to win the war, and they couldn't think of anything to do, except charge the enemy lines. Haig and French et. al.

knew very well what happens when you charge entrenchments held by machine guns. (Indeed, French at least had some pretty bitter experience just charging entrenchments manned by guys with repeating bolt-action Mausers during the Boer War). But you're seeing the past through the eyes of today; they thought differently in 1915 than we do now: the generals on both sides simply did not consider massive casualties an unacceptable price for victory--and neither did the public. Our thinking has changed since that time, partially as a reaction to the slaughter of both world wars.

We may have gone to an extreme. Today's US army will do almost anything to avoid casualties; indeed, that army is notorious for its expenditure of firepower (mostly air and artillery) over risking a frontal attack against a prepared enemy; this policy is quite heedless of civilian "collateral casualties". The problem with such doctrine is that there may come a time when sacrifices must be made, when there is nothing to do but assault enemy positions with whatever resources are at hand. And that means a lot of casualties. The Marines might still be able to do this; the Army...no. Well, perhaps we'll be lucky; maybe the world has become a better place since 1918 and there'll be no more serious warfare involving the major Powers. No, I'm not betting on it.

Sgt. Rock