



COLORADO MILITARY HISTORIANS

NEWSLETTER

XVII, No. 10

October 2016

Continuing Utility of Dumb Munitions

Article by John Brown

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Historically Speaking: The Continuing Utility of Dumb Munitions

We live in an era of precision guided munitions. Time and again we are reminded of the awesome accuracy and effectiveness spawned by the advent of the micro-chip. Yet both we and our adversaries continue to find dumb munitions – those without microchips – useful. This makes financial sense. For example, in FY2000 an M107 155mm HE round cost less than \$200, whereas a Block 1A ATACMS PL 38 cost about \$650,000. A cruise missile could run costs up an order of magnitude more. There is a lot one can do with 3,000 rounds of 155mm HE that one could not accomplish with a single ATACMS.

Historically, the purposes served by heavy munitions have involved some mix of material destruction, lethality, suppression and special effects. Material destruction came first. The late medieval bombards ancestral to modern artillery were designed to knock down castle walls. Sultan Mahomet II's famous cannon "Basilica" was 32 feet long, had a barrel 8 inches thick, and fired a half-ton granite ball. It proved entirely capable of smashing the walls of 1453 Constantinople, but actually hitting anyone directly was fortuitous. Generations of siege and naval artillery continued this trend, battering fortifications and ships through the weight and volume of their munitions, but only incidentally killing people. As engineers scattered, distributed and buried defenses, single aim points became ever less consequential in land siege craft, and volume of fires more.

By the mid-seventeenth century field artillery was sufficiently evolved that King

Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden and others could contemplate maneuvering it on the battlefield and directing its fires for lethal effects. From that period through the Mexican War in 1847-1848, steadily improving mobile massed artillery played an ever more important role in the direct fire battle. However, its capacity to suppress an adversary was always at least as important as its capacity to kill one. Suppression is the use of fires to reduce the effectiveness of the enemy without necessarily killing him. It succeeds because troops receiving fire instinctively act to protect themselves – exposing themselves far more briefly to take aimed



shots, for example. Its effectiveness is reinforced by an old NCO principle that once a unit takes its first incoming everybody's IQ is reduced by half. The beauty of suppression is that it does not have to be accurate to be successful. Close enough is good enough.

Beginning with the American Civil War, routine participation in the direct fire battle without the benefit of fortifications became too dangerous for artillery. Radically improved rifles picked off artillerymen at extended ranges without the riflemen presenting much of a target themselves. By the end of World War I indirect fire was the norm for artillery, requiring

increasingly elaborate communications to be effective. Suppressive fires became even more important, with tanks and infantrymen advancing close behind curtains of fire intended to degrade the aim of their opponents until they could close. Special effects rounds introducing smoke, incendiaries or poisonous gases furthered the confusion of the enemy. Tankers took over the direct fire role with respect to heavy munitions on the ground. Airplanes briefly participated in the direct fire battle, but increasingly effective air defenses forced them to ever higher altitudes. By the time of the 1999 Kosovo Campaign, bombings from above 15,000 feet rendered precision guided munitions not so much a virtue as a necessity.

Precise engagements require precisely identified targets. These have become ever less common as warfare has evolved. Dispersion, camouflage, the spoofing of sensors, suppressive fires, smoke, terrain, vegetation and the fog of war make targets hard to identify and harder to kill. My colleagues specializing in the Vietnam War assert that over two thirds of the American shellings and bombings could best be characterized as suppressive since too little was known about the target area for them to have served another purpose. Less than a fifth of the shellings and bombings had a reasonable expectation of inflicting significant lethality, with the remainder about evenly divided between the material destruction of buildings, bunkers and fortifications or special effects such as smoke or incendiaries. This emphasis on suppression is not a bad thing if it enables maneuver elements to accomplish their missions. Sean Naylor's recent account of Operation Anaconda graphically illustrates the difficulties that ensue when one does not have much capable of suppressive fire – or when your enemy seems to have more than you do. Indeed, virtually every munition above 7.62mm that our adversaries in Iraq fire at us is best characterized as suppressive. They are not accurate and they do not kill often, but they do degrade our ability to go about our business and divert appreciable resources into efforts to counter them.

Technological advance has somewhat muddled the distinctions between dumb and smart munitions. Dumb munitions are fired from ever more capable platforms. The M4 Tank of World



War II was lucky to hit a target much beyond 500 meters, whereas our current M1A2 comfortably engages at five times that range. Tube artillery has made comparable advances. Conversely, the JDAM initiative is essentially an add on kit that turns a dumb munition into a smart one at minimal expense – less the cost of deploying a GPS satellite system in the first place. Laser designators integrate low tech Soldiers using them with high tech systems firing in

their support. The expense and complexity of fielding and supporting platforms firing both dumb and smart munitions bears separate discussion; they are all pretty pricey and each has its advantages and disadvantages.



If past is precedent, suppressive fires will remain important in war, and dumb munitions will be the most cost-effective means of providing them. Material destruction and special effects arguably will be most cost effective when delivered by dumb munitions as well. Only in the killing or destruction of precisely identified targets will precision guided munitions enjoy appreciable advantages. If past is precedent, this will represent less than a third of the targets ultimately engaged.

Recommended Reading:

Dastrup, Boyd L. *King of Battle: A Branch History of the U.S. Army's Field Artillery* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1993)

Downey, Fairfax, *Cannonade: Great Artillery Actions of History* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1966)

UNIT OF THE MONTH (Not Sponsored)

Member Name	Scale	Manufacturer	Era	Unit
Dave Manley	28mm	Dixon	ACW	3rd VA Cavalry



GAME OF THE MONTH

Total Escape Games Sponsor



Member Name	Scale	Era	Rules	Description
Bill Daniel	28mm	19th Century	Congo	Treasure Search
Greg Skelly*	28mm	WWII	Bolt Action	Hill 621 Germans vs Russians 1944
Matt Vigil	15mm	Renaissance	DBR	Thirty Years War

*Denotes this month's winner

Each month CMH members host games at the monthly meeting. This award is for the effort put out by the host.





CMH October Scheduled Events

This table shows what events are scheduled for CMH. Next months Friday Night Fights (FNF) and the monthly meeting (MM) are listed. It is recommended to schedule your game for future meetings and will appear on this page.

Date	Meeting	Location	Start Time
October 7	FNF	TBD	7PM
October 9	MM	Baker Rec Center	12PM
October 14	FNF	TBD	7PM
October 21	FNF	TBD	7PM
October 28	FNF	TBD	7PM

TEG - Total Escape Games

6831 W. 120th Ave.

Suite C

Broomfield CO 80020

www.totalescapedgames.com

FNF (TBD) may or may not occur due to a lack of a scheduled host/location.

Upcoming Events:

October possibly BenCon in the Denver Area

November 4-6: HMGS Fall In “Poland Through the Ages: Duchy to Republic at Lancaster Host and Resort, Lancaster PA

November 12 & 13 Veterans Wars Baker Rec Center
(Saturday Nov. 12 we have the facility reserved 0900-2100.
Sunday Nov. 13 is 0900-1700.) Please contact Nate Forte or
Terry Shockey for game submissions.

Colorado Military Historians, Inc.

Colorado military Historians (CMH) is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to promote historical wargaming and the study of military history. Founded in 1965, CMH meets monthly on the second Sunday of the month, except in May when it is deferred to the third Sunday. The meeting starts at noon at the Baker Recreational Center, 6751 Irving Street (just a few blocks west of Federal Blvd), Denver CO. The club also hosts gaming at least one Friday night a month, called "Friday Night Fights" (FNF) at 7 PM. FNF will be held at several various locations. See previous schedule or view the website for latest information.

CMH maintains ties with numbers local, regional and national groups to help promote the hobby. CMH is governed by member-elected officers who serve on the Board of Directors (executive board). Terms are one year, with elections held at the May meeting. New members are accepted after attending three CMH functions and a vote of the membership. Dues are \$35.00 per year, payable in January. Members wishing to receive a snail-mail newsletter subscription must pay an additional fee of \$15.00 per year. Authors retain ownership of articles and graphics published. CMH reserves the right to edit or reject submissions to the newsletter.

One year Adult Membership: \$35.00
Half year Adult Membership: \$25.00
(For NEW members who join after June 30)
Family Membership: \$35.00 (one Adult and any number of offspring)
Student Membership: \$20.00 (16 to 22 years old)



CMH Newsletter

The CMH Newsletter is a monthly newsletter published by the Colorado military Historians. Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of all CMH members.

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Next Issue: November 2016

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