

Over the past five years I have played more than a dozen ASL scenarios by email over the Internet. To some, ASL may seem unsuitable for play-by-email (PBEM), because players must interact constantly throughout its multiple phases. However, the invention of VASL by Rodney Kinney has drastically altered that reality. Playing ASL by email using VASL is easy, fun, and, dare I say, sometimes an improvement over face-to-face play (FTF).

Of course nothing can replace the camaraderie of getting together with a buddy for a face-to-face game. But playing by email has some tangible advantages. Foremost is the ability to fit a scenario into a busy schedule. Can't ever seem to get a game in due to lack of time? You and your regular FTF opponent can't seem to coordinate your schedules? Well, PBEM allows you to spend about 10 minutes a day playing ASL at your leisure; e.g. during lunch at work, or before going to bed at night. With as much daily effort as most of us put into reading the ASLML, or reading Annuals, or clipping counters, over the course of a few weeks or months you eventually will have played a scenario that you would never have played otherwise!

The other big advantage to PBEM is that, because your opponent is not sitting there waiting for you to decide on your move, you have plenty of time to contemplate strategies, try different tactics, look up rules, etc. In other words, you can learn a *lot* from a PBEM game that you normally might skirt over in a FTF game. PBEM games can often be more fruitful than FTF games in this regard.

These advantages are in addition to the typical advantages of VASL: terrain modifications, HIP units that you can see but your opponent can't, labeling counters, no clean up, and child- and cat-proof maps.

The biggest disadvantage to PBEM is that it disrupts the flow of the game somewhat. To some players, this change of pace is a disconcerting change to the ASL dynamic. All I can say is that, if most of your quality ASL time is spent reading past Annuals in the latrine, then beggars can't be choosers. It really isn't that bad, and is a small price to pay for the benefits received. However, this change of pace does mean that large scenarios with lots of movement tend to become unwieldy. "Clash Along the Psel" is not an optimum VASL PBEM scenario.

General PBEM Procedure

The foundation of playing VASL PBEM is the Honor System. In the name of expediency you must let your opponent resolve the effects of his attacks on your units. Some find this strange at first, but once you are involved you will realize how benign the concept really is. It's surprisingly easy to trust your fellow ASL comrade to do what's right and not cheat you out of DRs.

Given that we will roll for each other's units, a Player Turn can be broken down into as few as 3, usually 4 to 5, mailings. Each email has attached to it a log file. A log file is a record of all moves and comments made from the time he clicks VASL's "Write Logfile" button to the time he clicks the "End Logfile" button. When your opponent opens up this log file, he will be able to move through it line by line by hitting the "Step" button. In this way, it simulates the real-time, sequential nature of ASL during any given Phase.

An important concept to grasp is that you can step through an existing log file while writing a log file of your own. The log file records not only the comments/actions of the player writing the log file, but also the opponent's comments/actions that appear when the "Step" button is pressed. This probably sounds more confusing than it is. A short examination of the example coinciding with this article should go a long way in making the log file format clear to the reader. Note how some of the German's actions are repeated in the Russian's log file.

So how are Player Turns broken down into log files? It can vary, but it usually follows the outline shown below. Note that each file name below would normally include an indication of the current game turn (e.g. "A1" for the American's first turn).

1. "RPh-MPh1.log" The ATTACKER's Rally Phase through (partial) MPh.

- *The ATTACKER rolls for WC, and conducts his RPh activities.* The DEFENDER would have done his RPh at the end of his turn, normally (unless it is the first Player Turn of the Game, in which case he usually doesn't have any activities; if he does, he would usually do it before the game).
- *The ATTACKER conducts all Prep Fire activities,* rolling for effects on the DEFENDER's units when applicable.
- *The ATTACKER moves his units.* He moves them one at a time, announcing MF/MP expenditures after every action. In most cases, the MPh needs to be broken down into a number of log files, as the ATTACKER needs to see the results of previous moves before he can decide his next moves. This is the trickiest and most time-consuming part of PBEM games – how many units should the ATTACKER move before saying "I'll pause here, I want to see what happens before moving more units." He needs to use his judgment, as he doesn't want to make a mistake, but he also does not want to bog the game down by moving one unit per log file.

2. "DFF1.log" The DEFENDER's Defensive First Fire.

- *The DEFENDER conducts his First Fire* on units that moved in the ATTACKER's first MPh log file. The trickiness of the MPh/DFF continues, as the DEFENDER may get effects on his opponent that will change the ATTACKER's future moves. How does the DEFENDER know when to say "I'm going to stop reading now, and send this back to you?" Fortunately, PBEMers have created an elegant system for dealing with this question. Before moving his units, the ATTACKER will give instructions to his opponent as to when to stop reading the log file. For instance, if it is a crucial part of the game, and every move counts he may say something like "Stop reading if you reveal any units or fire at anybody." But if he is just scouting with half-squads, he may say, "Don't stop reading, no matter what happens to any of my units." Usually it is somewhere in between: "Stop reading if you break or pin anybody, or if I move into a location containing residual firepower." The DEFENDER then reads the MPh log file step-by-step until the end, or until the conditions set by the ATTACKER are met. As long as the instructions are clear to your opponent, then the game runs very smoothly. Any fire is recorded in the DEFENDER's log file and sent back to the ATTACKER.

3. "MPH2.log" The ATTACKER continues his moves (there can be from one to three or more MPh log files, depending on the situation). If the ATTACKER finishes his MPh, he should state so clearly in the log file.

4. "DFF2-DPh.log" The DEFENDER continues his Defensive First Fire. There can be any number of DFF log files, but the last one will include the Defensive Final Fire Phase in its entirety.

5. "AFPPh-CCPh" The ATTACKER's Advancing Fire Phase through CCPh.

- *The ATTACKER conducts his Advancing Fire Phase.*
- *The ATTACKER conducts his Routs.*
- *The ATTACKER conducts the DEFENDER's Routs.* If the options are too great for the DEFENDER then often the log is kicked back to him to do his routs. The DEFENDER may wish to explicitly instruct the ATTACKER to do so, especially if the DEFENDER intends to voluntarily break and rout a unit. But if the DEFENDER has no broken units, or if his options are few, or if his routs are inconsequential, then the ATTACKER can proceed with his turn and let the DEFENDER conduct or modify routs later.
- *The ATTACKER conducts his Advances.*
- *The ATTACKER conducts his Close Combat attacks.* This can get sticky, as CC is a simultaneous event, and both sides have to declare

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their attacks. Fortunately it is made simpler by the fact that the DEFENDER has a log file coming up (his RPh). Thus, the ATTACKER can often roll for Ambush, announce his Attacks, and roll for results. Then the DEFENDER can, at the start of this next log file, step through the log and announce his attacks after the ATTACKER announces his, but before seeing the results. Sometimes there are surprises, such as when the DEFENDER wants to retain Concealment, or if there was a HIP unit. But usually it's very smooth, and often the ATTACKER can execute the entire CCPh himself.

- **Concealment Gain.** At the end of the CCPh, the ATTACKER may conceal eligible units. However, it is not uncommon for the results of the CCPh to change who is or isn't eligible. A good solution is for the ATTACKER to conceal his units, with the expectation that the DEFENDER may deny (or even grant additional) concealment depending on his CCPh actions (if any).
- **The ATTACKER conducts his RPh activities.** This is not official ASOP order, but does it really matter? It's speeds up play.

6. Repeat until Game End.

Bear in mind that the above is merely an outline. If both players are flexible and use common sense along the way, then the log files will simply create themselves.

Pre-game log files consist of 1) Defender setup; 2) Attacker setup and Concealment Gain; 3) Defender sniper placement and Concealment gain. The Attacker sets up his sniper in his first RPh.

Email Protocol

PBEM is no different than live VASL (or FTF, for that matter) in that there is certain etiquette that enhances communication between the players. Not only do they speed up play; they also minimize the chance of hard feelings later on. Here are just some of the customs that I have encountered in my PBEM gaming:

- Decide on special rules ahead of time. IFT vs. IIFT, BI, Interrogation, etc. Remember, as opposed to most FTF games, you are often playing opponents that you have never met before. Be forthcoming about your preferences, and do not have hard feelings if your opponent does not want to play with your pet optional rule.
- State up front your expected pace of the game (“I average 1 log file per day” or “3-4 mailings per week”). Once the game starts it can become very uncomfortable if one opponent is constantly anxious for a log file because you told him you could send three logs per day! Go easy on your opponent regarding pace. Sure you should expect him to meet the pace that you agreed to before play, but these games can go on for months. Life *will* get in the way from time to time. If he's slammed at work for a week, cut him some slack. On the other hand, if you find that time has gotten crunched, it is your obligation to let your opponent know about it.
- Decide upon a log file naming convention early. The one I have presented in the example is the one that I like, but there are others. As long as both players agree that you can keep track of the game much more easily. I recommend as well that you create a defined folder for each PBEM scenario, with subfolders for each player turn (e.g. in Gavin Take, “A1”, “G1”, “A2”, etc. folders in it. “A1” would contain all the log files from the American's Turn 1, etc.). This will facilitate finding the latest log file when you want to open it.
- Once play starts, communicate as explicitly as possible. Always declare AM, CX, armored assault, etc. before moving the unit. Also, it is very important to type in the MF/MP after every expenditure. This way the DEFENDER knows that, when he reads the MF/MP, he can fire on the unit. Otherwise, he doesn't know if the move was intentional or not (sometimes a slip of the mouse will accidentally move the wrong unit).

- Use abbreviations as much as possible. Many are defined ASL acronyms, but many are improvised for PBEM. For instance “TTB” means “top to bottom”, i.e. I'm rolling for a bunch of units starting from the top down. “AM,” means “assault move” and “NAM,” means “non-assault move.”
- Respect the rules of Right of Inspection; you are not allowed to inspect stacks before play commences, and after that you can only inspect stacks to which you have LOS.
- If rolls are lost due to truncating a log file, then they *must* be re-rolled! Ex: The ATTACKER has two units: a squad and a tank. He instructs the DEFENDER to stop reading the log file if the squad breaks. He moves the squad, then the tank, which Bounding Fires and scores a kill on an enemy tank. The DEFENDER, while stepping through this log file, shoots at and breaks the squad. As a result, the DEFENDER stops reading the log file and bounces it back to the ATTACKER. At this point the Bounding Fire shot *never happened*. If the ATTACKER still wants to fire the tank, he has to roll again in the subsequent MPh log file.
- Point out any anomalies you see in the scenario. Examples include concealed stacks with an unconcealed unit or SW in the middle, or an odd stacking of counters such that a SW appears unpossessed, or a unit appears to have another unit's SW. VASL confusion regarding which player “owns” which counters can sometimes be to blame.
- Be a good sportsman. Don't complain about the VASL dicebot as if it is not random. Trust me, we've been over this a million times – it's random!!!
- If the worst happens and your opponent needs to bow out of a game due to life constraints, except his decision gracefully. I mean, c'mon, it's a game for crying out loud. Likewise, if you need to bow out don't string your opponent along because you feel guilty. Be a man and fess up early and get on with life. He'll understand, trust me.

Conclusion

If the above looks daunting remember that when you are actually playing the scenario, the funny mechanics become second nature. Often you end up *really getting into the scenario*. This is the best part of PBEM – I find I typically become more engrossed in my email games than I do my FTF games! Because you have more time to think about the scenario, your strategies tend to coalesce more. Plus you have plenty of time to look up those funky rules sections, so you can play scenarios that you normally wouldn't play FTF.

I highly recommend playing by email on VASL if you haven't tried it yet. If anybody needs help installing VASL, or getting a PBEM game going, drop me a note at matt.romey@terumomedical.com. Till then, roll low. For *your* units, that is, not for your opponent's!

For Matt's great example of a VASL Board and a series of log files, just turn the page! -ed.

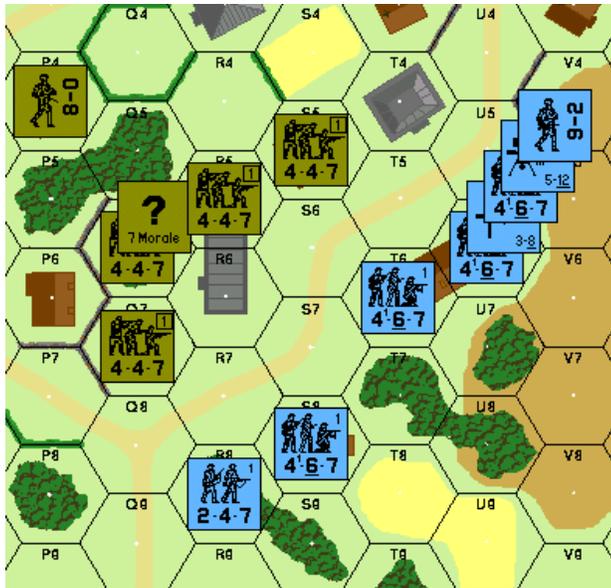


Words That Echo...

"They told us we had to hold and by God,
we held."

Major Willie Jones, USMC, Betio, Tarawa, D+2.

Sample VASL Board By Matt Romey



ASL Challenge! A Word Find By Rob Stai

There are 38 ASL words in the grid. Can you find them all then unscramble the unused letters for the 39th word? **Answers on Page 13.**

R E T S I N A C I R E M A I B
M O L O T O V T E C K C O H S
D E R O M R A S N S Q O A J E
C K O G M L I A U U M T A S E
I O U M I D V R I Y T P E D C
T M T A U D O R R A A N E O N
A S N A A H E E C N I D W U K
N D L P P D L K E H N E R I R
A P E S A L E S C U R R H U E
F A O F I R E P O W E R S B S
W H I T E I T W Z V P S I R R
P O R E H N F I O L I R N O E
N A M R E G D T S A N C N K B
C O N C E A L E N A S P I E I
B R I T I S H Y R T N A F N I

Sample Log Files

Note:

Ivan is Russian and his logs are in **red**.
Jerry is German and his logs are in **blue**.

“PBEM – RPh-MPh1.log”

<Jerry> - Hey Ivan,
<Jerry> - How was your weekend. I'm still recovering - ough.
<Jerry> - Ok, it's the start of my turn. RPh, WC
*** DR = 3,6 *** <Jerry>
<Jerry> - NE.
<Jerry> - I have no other RPh activities.
<Jerry> - PPh:
<Jerry> - U6 vs. R5. 16+1
*** DR = 4,3 *** <Jerry>
<Jerry> - IMC.
<Jerry> - 447 takes IMC:
*** DR = 6,3 *** <Jerry>
<Jerry> - Fail. Broken/DM
<Jerry> - That's it for Prep. Movement.
<Jerry> - (Please stop and send the log back to me if you pin or break anyone, or if I move into residual firepower)
<Jerry> - First: dash to R6
* R8: 2-4-7 moves R7 *
<Jerry> - 1
* R7: 2-4-7 moves R6 *
<Jerry> - 3
<Jerry> - Next: dash to R6
* T6: 4-6-7 moves S7 *
<Jerry> - 1
* S7: 4-6-7 moves R6 *
<Jerry> - 3
<Jerry> - next
<Jerry> - dash to R6
* S8: 4-6-7 moves S7 *
<Jerry> - 1
* S7: 4-6-7 moves R6 *
<Jerry> - 3
<Jerry> - Ok, let's see what happens.
<Jerry> - Jerry

Ivan interrupts

“PBEM – DFF1.log”

<Ivan> - Jerry,
<Ivan> - Your 247 just dashed into R7.
<Ivan> - I'll fire from Q7. 4-2
*** DR = 4,3 *** <Ivan>
<Ivan> - IMC
*** DR = 1,3 *** <Ivan>
<Ivan> - Pass. 2 rfp.
<Ivan> - ok, continuing the logfile...
* R7: 2-4-7 moves R6 *
<Jerry> - 3
<Jerry> - Next: dash to R6
* T6: 4-6-7 moves S7 *
<Jerry> - 1
* S7: 4-6-7 moves R6 *
<Ivan> - I'll fire at S7 from S5. 2-2
*** DR = 2,4 *** <Ivan>
<Ivan> - IMC
<Ivan> - 467 takes IMC
*** DR = 1,2 *** <Ivan>
<Ivan> - Pass. Dang. Continuing...
* R7: 2 FP splits into S7 *
<Jerry> - 3
<Jerry> - next
<Jerry> - dash to R6
* S8: 4-6-7 moves S7 *
<Ivan> - Ok, you just entered rfp, so I'll kick this back to you.
<Ivan> - Ivan

“PBEM – MPh2.log”

<Jerry> - Ivan, nice shooting.... NOT!
<Jerry> - Ok, I'll move my last unit in S8. He never entered the resid in S7, so I'll move him starting from S8 now.
* S8: 4-6-7 moves R7/R8 *
<Jerry> - 1
* R7/R8: 4-6-7 moves Q8 *
<Jerry> - 2
<Jerry> - That's it. Over to you for DFPh.
<Jerry> - Jerry.

Ivan interrupts

“PBEM – DFF2.log”

<Ivan> - Jerry,
<Ivan> - Your last unit just entered Q8. I'll FPF from Q7.
<Ivan> - 4-2
*** DR = 2,6 *** <Ivan>
<Ivan> - NMC and broken for me.
<Ivan> - NMC on your 467.
*** DR = 3,5 *** <Ivan>
<Ivan> - Fail. Broken/DM.
<Ivan> - I have no more Defensive Fire.
<Ivan> - Ivan.

“PBEM – AFPh-CCPh.log”

<Jerry> - Ivan, here is my AFPh:
<Jerry> - 467,247 in R6 vs. S5. 3+2.
*** DR = 4,3 *** <Jerry>
<Jerry> - NE.
<Jerry> - RPh. Me first.
* Q8: DM,broken 4-6-7 moves R8 *
<Jerry> - 2
<Jerry> - Yours are next. I'll let you do them in your RPh, as wherever your guys go will not effect my Advances.
<Jerry> - Ok, APH.
* R6: 4-6-7,2-4-7 moves Q6 *
<Jerry> - That's it. CCPh.
<Jerry> - Ambush roll in Q6. I'm +0, you are -2 for Concealment. Me then you:
*** dr = 1 *** <Jerry>
*** dr = 6 *** <Jerry>
<Jerry> - I Ambush you!!!
<Jerry> - Ok, revealing your unit, it's a 447. I'll go 3:2 vs him, -1 DRM.
*** DR = 6,4 *** <Jerry>
<Jerry> - Nope. Now you. 1:2, +1.
*** DR = 2,5 *** <Jerry>
<Jerry> - NE. Melee.
<Jerry> - No ? gain for me. Your turn. I have no activities in your RPh.
<Jerry> - Jerry.