

# BASING FIGURES FOR DEATH IN THE DARK CONTINENT BY CHRIS PEERS

When I decided to write “Death in the Dark Continent”, one of the biggest changes from my previous African set, “In the Heart of Africa”, was the switch from singly based figures to larger multi-figure bases. There were several reasons for this: large armies were now easier to move about, and of course differences in troop types and fighting styles could now be incorporated, distinguished by varying numbers of figures of each base. Just as important, though, was the opportunity to produce some diorama type bases decorated with suitable vegetation etc. and to evoke the exotic and rather threatening terrain of tropical Africa.

Having gone for multiple bases, though I decided to go all the way and make the base, rather than the individual figure, the basis of the rule mechanisms. So, for example, all shooting and hand-to-hand fighting is between one base and another, and it is bases – not figures – that are counted in combat and removed as casualties. So the figures attached to a base are only there for aesthetic reasons and to indicate the type of troops it represents, and it does not matter in practice how many figures there are, or in what formation, as long as you explain to your opponent what you are doing. Neither are the exact dimensions of the bases terribly important, as long as both sides use the same – or approximately the same – frontages. However the rules recommend 60mm x 30mm for 28mm infantry,

with varying depths to accommodate cavalry and artillery, and this is what I assume you will be using.

There are also recommended numbers of figures per base, but these are by no means written in stone, and in my own armies I have happily bent these particular “rules” to suit myself. There are several reasons why you might want to do this. One is purely practical; a tribal army consisting of a lot of bases which are individually cheap in points is quicker and cheaper to produce if you are prepared to reduce the number of figures needed. This is especially useful if you are using plastics, which tend to come in boxes of 30 to 40 – annoying if you have to buy an extra box because you are short of a couple of figures. To be honest, in a period where fighting was generally done in very loose formations, bases with fewer figures than normal also often look more realistic. This is especially true for tribal types who fought in no particular order at all, taking advantage of cover and often remaining completely hidden until the last moment. You can assume that the missing figures are “really” there, but are just temporarily concealed behind a bush or something!

Another advantage of varying the numbers on a base is to provide room for landscaping, or for features which help to identify a particular unit in armies which did not have uniforms. The men in my Ila army, for instance,

*Below. “The most distinctive feature of Ila warriors was the extraordinary hair cone or “isusu”, which was allegedly designed to allow the members of hunting or war parties to see each other over the tall grass of the Kafue floodplain.” Here Ila’s bases are loaded with scenery and animals! See Kevin’s basing article for details.*





Above. The men in my Ila army, for instance, have no shields and so cannot be distinguished by their patterns like the Zulus or Masai, so instead one base in each unit includes a different animal model, enabling me to refer to the "Ostrich unit" or the "Warthog unit" and be immediately understood by other players. The distinguishing animals here are mandrills.

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So instead of sticking rigidly to three Warriors per base, for example, mine are a mixture of threes and a few twos. Skirmishers are either one or two to a base, while on the other hand my Wazungu (explorers and similar white men) tend to be accompanied by servants, gunbearers, dogs and others who have no function in the game, but simply look good. I have sometimes toyed with the idea of taking this idea to its logical extreme and fielding an army with no figures at all, or perhaps just the barrels of a few muskets sticking out of dense vegetation. Absurd as it sounds, this would reproduce pretty well what Wolseley's men saw of the Ashanti in the 1874 campaign, for example. I have never actually gone this far though (yet), perhaps because I don't want to upset the figure manufacturers too much.

Of course the fewer figures you have, the more effort you will need to put into decorating your bases. Don't worry about overdoing this. If your figures get lost in dense bush or simply appear overwhelmed by the terrain, well, that's what Africa is like. I think of this as the "Chinese landscape" school of wargames terrain. You know, those old Chinese paintings where a couple of tiny human figures appear on top of a precipice or at the bottom of a ravine, reduced to utter insignificance by the grandeur of nature. Exactly what you put on your bases is up to you, but the "home terrain" which is given for each army in the lists might give a few clues. You could go for the desert look, with lots of rocks and a few bushes and clumps of yellow grass, or the jungle, with more and greener vegetation, or just lots of grass. Parts of the Central African jungle look surprisingly like the plastic aquarium foliage you can get from garden

centres. Tropical soil tends to be reddish in colour, so some sort of rusty hue would be suitable for the ground itself. African troops are often predominantly brownish in both skin colour and costume, so don't show up very well on this sort of base. So much the better. Ambushes will look more convincing, and the general difficulty of distinguishing your warriors will add realistically to the stress of combat for your imperialist opponents, lost in a country they don't understand. Remember how the Zulus in the film of that name blend into the landscape, detectable only by the sound of assegais clashing on shields, and building up the tension until they appear suddenly out of the ground at close range?

Once again you might think this is taking things to an extreme, but I also like to garnish my bases with some local wildlife. In addition to the bigger creatures used to indicate the units, smaller birds, snakes and even insects can be added to good effect. Some of the animals in the North Star Africa range are small enough for this purpose, and others can be found in the Busch "Kleintier" set available from model railway shops. This includes owls and other birds, rabbits, frogs, snakes, fish (cut them in half and have them leaping out of a small pool), and even butterflies. At 1:87 scale they are a bit small for 28mm, but animals don't come in standard sizes anyway, and they can be painted in bright colours to make them stand out and liven up the expanses of greenery.

I hope these brief comments will inspire people to be a bit more creative with their basing. Much more useful, though, will be Kevin Dallimore's pictures, which show what can really be achieved if you have the talent. If you are not as clever as Kevin, though, don't worry. Here you are depicting wild nature, which is usually a bit rough round the edges, and a few glued-on bushes will cover up all sorts of mistakes!