

GAME PROFILE

WACHT AM RHEIN

A Well-Rounded Bulge

by Jim Govostes

For some strange reason, *Wacht am Rhein* is not getting the attention it deserves. I have a sneaking suspicion that the fact that it is a *good* big game is so absorbing its devotees that they don't have time to write about it. Could it be that I've discovered the Catch-22 of articles on interesting big games? Of course, what I'd like to see is a good *little* game on the whole battle — of which there are presently none. As with many a WW2 gamer, the Battle of the Bulge is one of my faves, but I just don't have the time for *WAR*. Don't, however, let my lack of times stop you...

Perhaps the most popular battle in recent history, the "Bulge" has been the subject of innumerable game efforts. *Wacht am Rhein* (hereafter *WAR*) is SPI's third and, far and away, the best effort on this topic. While the basic game system is from *Panzergruppe Guderian*, its application to this setting has opened new realms to other situations such as the battles around Monte Cassino, Anzio, Sicily, Metz-Nancy...

This game was to incorporate all the previous knowledge of this battle that would have "dirtied up" *Bastogne* or was glossed over in *The Ardennes Offensive*. That it accomplished more can only increase the system's viability and usefulness for future games. The game is designed down to battalion and company levels with each hex representing an area one mile across. The regular a.m. and p.m. Game-Turns represent 4½ hours of real time, while the night Game-Turn represents 15 hours (with provisions for a special Night Bonus Turn). The game is played on four maps covering from Prum to the Meuse River. In all, the maps cover the front of the U.S. V and VIII Corps.

The terrain is broken into clear, broken, and woods hexes with towns, villages, rivers, creeks, and both primary and secondary roads. Woods, towns, and villages affect artillery Barrage Strengths. All other combat effects are incorporated into the Combat Results Table. The key elements within the terrain effects are stacking, Road Mode, and the Zone of Control (ZOC) rules. The growing sophistication of simulations has led to the natural intertwining of terrain, movement, stacking, formation, and combat. *WAR*, which incorporates this perspective, must be analyzed juxtaposing all these factors.

Prior to examining these basic design features, a short note on the unit counters is in order. The majority of combat counters are on a battalion level, with U.S. units having company level breakdown possible. Units

are backprinted with reduced Strengths for most battalions. Most units have both an Attack and Defense Strength reflecting both staying power and doctrinal differences. Artillery has Barrage and FPF (final protection fire) Strengths with ranges up to 16 hexes. In addition, there are Headquarters (HQ) units (supply function), bridge counters, improved positions, entrenchments, Isolated and Fatigued counters, and March Mode counters. In all, there are some 1600 counters included in the game.

The functional mechanics are designed to recreate the "grand tactics" feel of this battle. While we are accustomed from past games to terrain and ZOC affecting movement, we are less familiar with stacking, formation, and logistics lines having effect. Incorporation of these variable elements makes the Player consider not only moving a unit, but also the shape of the unit prior to, during, and after movement and combat; its strength; its mobility; and supply prior to and after moving. Tactical/operational planning becomes the foremost item when playing the game.

Units are broken into Class A (six movement points or less) and class B (seven or more movement points). Formation rules allow units to assume Tactical Mode (normal) or March Mode. March Mode requires a special counter and costs four Movement Points to place it on a unit. Up to three units may stack normally, while units in March Mode may not stack. March Mode immediately spreads a division out, creating the long lines of vehicles traveling on the road nets. March Mode is not allowed in woods (which represent the bulk of the hexes) except on roads, which leads to tremendous little fights occurring at key road junctions. Formation and stacking rules have an enormous impact on artillery units. To date, other than *Highway to the Reich*, this is the best I have seen modern artillery handled. The need to consider the artillery unit's state (in/out of battery) can have a great import upon current Game-Turn's attacks or defense. Artillery plays its critical role with U.S. units being able to call down tremendous barrages /FPF and erase German unit combat superiority. Anyone having played the game and having tried to crack the Elsenborn Ridge can attest to this fact.

Unit frontages have been taken into consideration in that, while three battalions may stack in a hex, only two of these may attack (or two battalions and one company sized unit) from that hex. Combat is mandatory in Enemy ZOCs. However, disengagement is

allowed in that one can move out of an Enemy ZOC to avoid combat. Zones of Control do not extend into cities, towns or fortified hexes (improved and entrenched). This allows the defender to turn a couple of companies backed up by artillery in such terrain into a veritable fort.

The benefits of integrated combat reflect the superiority of regimental attacks as well as attacks supported by armor and artillery. A Regimental Integrity Bonus shifts the odds one column if at least two of the units in the attacking/defending stack are from the same regiment. A Combined Arms Attack Bonus — offered if armor (pure) is stacked with infantry, mechanized infantry, parachute, glider, engineer or recon forces — shifts the odds one column in the Attacker's favor. A Combined Arms Defense Bonus is possible if armor (pure) or antitank is stacked in a hex where a CAAB attack is occurring. The Defense Bonus negates the Attack Bonus; it never applies to any other type attack. The net effect of the Regimental Integrity Bonus is to force a Player to keep a division together and conduct attacks in regimental strength. As with the Combined Arms Attack Bonus, the units that qualify the stack for this bonus need not be attacking/defending; they need only be stacked. This stipulation represents the build up of reserves for any attacks that would be conducted in the real world. The rule adds a nice touch and reflects current tactical doctrine as well.

One of the more subtle rules prohibits the "soaking off" that became prevalent in older type simulations. In this game, minimum odds must be met for a particular type of attack or instant elimination takes place (FPF fire does not affect this rule; i.e., the defensive player cannot create instant elimination by dropping the odds below minimum through allocation of FPF points). So now we have fewer suicide attacks that can be affected by lucky die rolls.

Another innovative concept is the Night Bonus Game-Turn. This rule allows a Player to move units (except HQ and artillery) at the risk of "fatigue"; i.e., they don't get to sleep. Any night attacks also fatigue a unit. Recovery takes the better part of the following day, initially halving movement and attack factors, and a slow recovery process allows a unit to be upgraded during the following day. The rule allows for a trade-off of combat and movement for the ability to exploit an opening with what is essentially "stealing" a march. It reflects the staying power of a unit nicely over the course of 24

hours and confronts the Player with hard decisions about time, distance, and combat power.

These specifically designed rules coupled with German artillery ammunition depletion, river/creek bridging, and armor river crossing rules nets out to a reasonable facsimile of the problems facing the two sides in the Battle of the Bulge. Road nets are crucial to fast paced advances; road junctions (especially communications hubs like Bastogne, St. Vith and Manhay) become centers of tremendous action. The gripping tension of trying to achieve or halt a breakthrough in the first three days (10 Game-Turns, not counting any Night Bonus Turns) is created by the design system. Clerveaux slows the 2nd Panzer; St. Vith requires a huge expenditure of time and resources before it falls; and Elsenborn Ridge is well nigh impossible to crack. I would classify these first three to five days a study in frustration for both players — it should bring out the best (and quite often the worst) in simulation Players.

Two problems exist in the above design that should be rectified. First is the no-stack rule of March Mode units; second is the effect of woods hexes on March Mode units. If a unit is forced to retreat while in March Mode into a hex where another unit is in March Mode, the first unit is eliminated; it cannot violate the no-stack rule. However, a rule states that after combat, a unit must lose its March Mode marker if forced to retreat. Elimination seems too harsh and unrealistic. A unit can be forced to retreat as much as three hexes (three miles). To condemn a marching unit to annihilation because it must stop in a hex with another unit in March Mode over that much distance is too difficult to believe possible. And the caveat that says after movement the March Mode marker is removed does condemn the unit. A dual disruption due to route seems more in order here. A condition in which both units become incapable of movement for the next Game-Turn with some sort of combat reduction seems more in line with the basic tenants of the game design. It is easy to conceive of a recon battalion being driven back upon the vanguard of the division causing an intermingling of the units and a loss of unit cohesion, unit effectiveness, and command until the lines are "tidied up." Perhaps even a recovery step might be included.

The same comments apply to units forced to retreat into woods hexes while in March Mode. Rather than elimination, a harsher disruptive effect should take place. A unit simply does not disappear because it is forced off the road and into the woods while in column march. That it may be reduced in strength and rendered totally ineffective for a period of time is surely possible. Design mechanics should not simplify such effects; rather they should multiply them.

The Game-Turn sequence was designed to enable either Player to block exploiting forces of the opponent (exploitation exists in the advance after combat/path of retreat rules). Supply is judged for *both* Players at the start of each Player Phase. A unit in sup-

ply in one Player's Phase can be out of supply during the other Player's Phase. The sequence forces a Player to commit units to a tactical formation prior to any movement, thus affecting maneuverability. Bridge blowing/construction follows movement, forcing a Player to plan ahead. Combat is last. The sequence is innovative and well matched to the basic developmental aspects of the game system.

The Combat Results Table integrates terrain, and the odds are progressively worse for the defender in less covered terrain. The system of allowing retreats — which can be followed up by victorious forces — or step losses presents the Players with further choices. While the Combat Results Table is not "bloody," the cumulative effects of having to constantly take step losses to hold key terrain features or road junctions soon saps the strength of the defender, while the need to seize these points causes the attacker to take excessive losses. Simple in design but brilliant in conception (thank you, Mr. Dunningan), this Combat Results Table fits the game system as it reflects the real problems facing those who attack or defend. For instance, 2:1 odds across a river will only bring an attacker grief, while at 5:1 he has a 50-50 chance. This is one of the few games out that reflects poorly on the old 3:1 superiority adage and admits that one can never be too strong at the point of attack.

Supply is centralized around division, corps, and army HQ units. This seems derived from *Highway to the Reich*. It represents a more realistic view of supply, admitting that units on the same road in the same division may well be in different stages of supply, depending on their distance from a central supply point. Supply and road nets are what this game is really all about. Different unit types are handled in various ways. The U.S. player has more freedom in that every division has a HQ unit (from which supply radiates to the divisional units). He also has several Corps HQ units, which eases his supply headaches. The German player has Division HQ units for his Panzer and Panzer Grenadier units only. All other units draw supply from Corps or Army HQ units, which are limited in number, and this complicates his supply problem. Eventually, supply considerations channel the German attacks, allowing the buildup of U.S. forces to exploit weak areas.

Several new twists have been added to supply. Units can be out of communication and remain unaffected by supply rules until they engage in combat. These units then become unsupplied. Such a state affects movement of Class B units and halves attack strengths. Isolation results from being unable to trace any sort of supply line to a HQ unit. There are two steps to isolation, the second stage again resulting from involvement in combat. During the a.m. Game-Turns, there is the possibility of Stage 2 isolated units surrendering. This is the only case where supply can eliminate units.

The impact of logistics upon combat is nicely shown in these rules. The free-

wheeling days of not worrying about this crucial element in war are hopefully now over for simulations. *Wacht am Rhein* certainly has state-of-the-art supply. The next step would be a supply class breakdown into ammo, food, and fuel. The inclusion of at least Class IV (fuel) and truck units would make the game more interesting. The HQ organizational set-up is excellent. One comment is in order, however. Supply lines are chains. HQ units should be considered and included for every division in the game. Supply at any given moment is limited, and its dispersal down the chains is an operational decision. Thus, while all divisions of an army may be capable of being unsupplied (as required by the supply chain rules — whatever those may be), the commander must decide how to apportion his supply and take into account the delivery of that supply. We will then get into stockpiling, prior logistics (as well as tactical planning), striking for opponents' dumps, etc. The potential of the expansion and inclusion of supply has been greatly enhanced by these new concepts.

I am not impressed with the air power rules. These are an extension of the old *Kursk* system. With such an advance in game design having been made, these rather pathetic rules seem out of place. It appears that the lessons were learned as *Atlantic Wall*, based on this same game system, has updated air power rules. As I have not seen the game, I cannot comment other than to hope that they are up to the standard of the game system in general.

The game has several nice touches that I truly recommend. The German variable reinforcement rule makes the game more enjoyable and places an added burden on the Allies, as does the German ability to select variable objectives unrevealed to the Allied player. It does not unbalance the game. The German will find his many columns getting tangled up, causing traffic jams and lost time. The rule improves the German chances of success in the 7th Army area, where a good Allied Player can upset the whole tempo of the German attack. The Green Unit Rule is one that should be definitely included. It requires a certain amount of bookkeeping to record which units have been involved in combat, but it adds the element of doubt.

I sincerely recommend the use of the new artillery rules, the German engineer rules, and the morale rules (which necessitates combat factor changes) that were in the errata in *MOVES #34*. These rules clarify some anomalies while simplifying the handling of certain aspects of the game. They also make each move more involved, but they benefit the overall system.

One missing element is leader counters. There were several prominent men who affected the outcome of the battle. To have included these leader units, as in *Highway to the Reich*, would have added to the system. Leader units also could have been allowed the addition of benefits from combined assaults *a la Highway to the Reich*. Hopefully, this is an element that will be included in any future use of the system.

the superpowers are making sure nobody else has a monopoly on whatever important finds may be made. In the science fiction scenarios of *WITI*, those finds are several tens of thousands of Ice People soldiers emerging from suspended animation beneath the ice to fight a long-forgotten war — and joining in a new one.

This game is being designed for two audiences: a science fiction group and strictly serious modern gamers. The scenarios without Ice People are simply late-20th Century battles in a very weird environment. The combat system has separate air-to-air, anti-aircraft (both laser and ballistic) and land combat systems, all making heavy use of electronic warfare capabilities as well as the terrain, incredibly rough weather, and the effect the Magnetic Pole has on communications and electronics. There are extensive rules for locating these thousand-man units in 22,000 square km hexes (the counters are on the map at all times, but cannot be attacked until "detected") as well as a simple logistics system where the amounts of supplies carried by vans and transport aircraft, and stored in bases are recorded on an off-map display. My favorite part of the game is that players choose every unit and Supply Point. Thus a Player may win the war by capturing his opponent's bases (of which there are no more than nine on the whole continent) but lose because he has built too large an army and lost too many units in doing so. It is purely an economic war rather than a "Crusade," and players must plan ahead to build a balanced force suited to their own strategy and tactics. *Phil Kosnett*

Bloody April

Initial feedback to the Civil War games has been exceptionally strong, and the next game using the *TSS* system to appear will be *Bloody April: The Battle of Shiloh*. Using two game-maps and 1200 counters (approximately 340 of which will be regiments and brigade-level and up commanders) *BA* will utilize the basic system started in *TSS*. However, that system will be further honed and modified to fit the Shiloh situation. Plans are made for more extensive melee rules, the problem of the segmented Union Lines of Communication and the resultant Confederate surprise, and modified artillery and cavalry rules (all dependent on the remarkable terrain features of Pittsburg's Landing). Scheduled for mid-'79 release and plotted in at \$15, *Bloody April* will be the first in a line of Major Civil War battles to be covered on a grand tactical level. *Rich Berg*

Trafalgar

This is to be the first in the new *Great Battles of History* series. I can tell you almost nothing about the game as of now, other than that its system will be somewhat simple. I can do virtually no work on the game until I've knocked *Cityfight* Mark III out of the way (something which all of you are looking forward to, I'm sure). Al Nofi is beginning to do extensive research on Trafalgar in preparation for an article on the subject to be pub-

lished with the game. We have been discussing the general nature of sea fighting in the age of sail in order to pave the way toward a new game-system on the subject. Incidentally, about one month ago I was aboard *HMS Victory* in Portsmouth — it was an incredible experience. The only problem was those low deck beams... *Joe Balkoski*

Quatre Bras

This will be an *S&T* issue game for fairly far in the future (Number 74). It will be based on *Wellington's Victory* and will have (hopefully) one map and 200 counters. For those of you who are not familiar with the name, Quatre Bras was the struggle between Wellington and Marshal Ney on June 16, 1815 — two days before Waterloo. The battle revolved around a critical crossroads that tied the British Army with the Prussians, doing battle during the same day with Napoleon at Ligny. *Joe Balkoski*

Wacht am Rhein [continued from page 26]

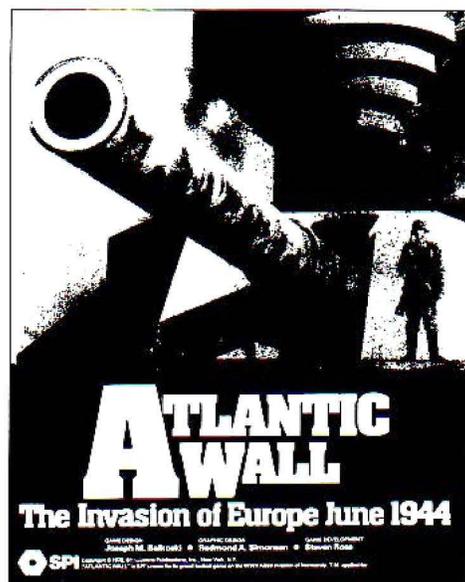
It is not the purpose of this article to go into the tactical/operational considerations of the system. Yet, because of the growth of "big" games, and the general lack of playing of the games by the buyers, I have a few hints to those interested in doing more than just looking at the game box.

First is planning. Sit down at the map and plan. Don't try to jump right into playing the game; there is just too much information to handle. I spend as much as three or four days planning. It makes the game go smoothly, as fewer stumbling blocks and mistakes are encountered. Write an operations plan designating objectives, resources, supply lines, time frames, etc. Then execute it. Usually a sequence of five to ten turns is all the plan is worth. But at least your strategy will be coherent.

Second, institute a system of periodic battle reports wherein you describe the days' action for each division, corps, or any convenient unit. Reviewing this battle report and the operations plan will indicate the progress and "feel" of the battle to you and provide generalized information at your fingertips — it tends to involve you and makes the game more alive. It becomes difficult to lose interest over long periods of inactivity. In fact, I find myself spending lunch hours at work planning for the weekend. Organization is the key to success and enjoyment. Big games are no more difficult than well designed smaller ones. They require more thinking, organization, and time (as well as space). When the game is a well designed one, like *Wacht am Rhein*, the experience and knowledge of the campaign or battle to be gained is tremendous and creates insights into why events transpired as they did.

I heartily and highly recommend *Wacht am Rhein*. While there are flaws, they are small. The guts of the game system is a thing to behold. The game can take one from the very heights of euphoria to the depths of utter frustration easily. It is one of my choices for SPI's best.

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Atlantic Wall simulates Second World War combat with all its complexities on every level, from quasi-tactical to operational to strategic. As a theater commander, you must make the critical strategic decisions: Which divisions should get the meager supplies arriving at the half-finished "Mulberry" artificial harbors? Should the Cotentin Peninsula be cut at Carteret followed by a drive on the all-important port of Cherbourg, or should an all-out drive be made on the crossroads at Coutances (a city which was to cost many thousands of lives when taken later during *Operation Cobra*)? Where should the German Player pit his fast-arriving Panzer Divisions? In the relatively open terrain west of Caen, or in the dense *bocage* on the American front?

Jumping-off from where SPI's *Wacht am Rhein* (the first true operational-level game covering the Second World War) left off, *Atlantic Wall* attempts to perfect the playable, yet detailed system of simulating this type of combat. The distinction of this system lies in its attempts to portray *all* aspects that might be considered crucial from anyone from a Regimental commander on up. The number of things to think about each Game-Turn are truly staggering, yet Players will soon easily adapt to the game-system as it is written in the rules. Any student of history with an interest in this period will not want to miss this simulation. \$28 (boxed) from SPI.

