

# A review of SPI's first & latest Bulge games: 1970 & 1980

Probably the most often simulated subject next to Waterloo is the Battle of the Bulge — Hitler's last desperate gamble in December 1944. It was a critique of Avalon's Hill's original Battle of the Bulge which started Jim Dunnigan off all those years ago and in a small, but significant way started a revolution in board wargaming which in turn led

to the present scene.....

The two versions I have chosen to examine here are the original SPI Bulge game *Bastogne*, published in *Strategy & Tactics* No. 20 back in 1970, and their latest ... *Bulge*, published as a boxed mini-game last year. Physically, they are worlds apart; *Bastogne* was produced in the era before SPI supplied die-cut counters — the counters were printed onto olive-green and light blue coloured paper and had to be pasted on to card (cornflake packets were favoured for this), and then cut out .... makes you wonder how the hobby got off the ground. Talking of colour, there once was an ugly rumour about, mostly voiced by non-SPI people, that Redmond Simonsen only recognised three colours: blue, gray and black ..... and these are the only colours used on the *Bastogne* map. *Bulge*, on the other hand has die-cut counters in dull green and gray and a Technicolor map. You pays your money .....

Both games, curiously, have the same game designer (Jim Dunnigan) and the same graphic art designer (Redmond Simonsen). But this is the only real point of contact: similar scales maybe, similar unit sizes — but the game systems are radically different.

The Zone of Control (ZOC) has become almost a norm in boardgaming; in almost every game it exerts some form of influence over the movement of adjacent units who have to enter it. In 1970, the ZOC was very much a standard in SPI games, so when *Bastogne* came out with a ZOC which did nothing to influence movement, it caused quite a stir. The rationale behind it was this: each player phase consisted basically of movement — combat — movement (the reverse of *Bulge*, it will be noted). Each large unit could be broken down for faster movement from a big strength unit with low mobility into a number of small strength units (at a cost in movement points) which had much higher mobility. The only way to get forward rapidly was to break down, and thereby lose strength e.g. a 7-8 would breakdown to three 2-16s. As JFD's analysis of the battle in the equivalent of the designers notes indicated, the basic problems of the conflict could be reduced to traffic jams, sometimes colossal ones, resulting in an inability to manoeuvre effectively *in time to reach the set objectives*. The result in the game is a number of fast German armour thrusts with low strength units, parried by small fast-moving American (and eventually British/Canadian) units appearing as reinforce-

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ments, who block the roads, which are the only effective means of movement. The resultant combat tends to be a little inconclusive, forcing:

- a) the Germans to waste time regrouping to gain the 1970 equivalent of "divisional integrity" to hammer their way through the thin Allied line (Three 2-16s back into one 7-8).
- b) the Americans to hold until relieved, or at least until other units can be deployed in a second, then a third line of defence.

It's a rough, tough game is *Bastogne*, but, I have always felt, a realistic one.

*Bulge*, on the other hand, has ZOCs which are part active, part passive. You can't ignore them but you don't always have to fight in them. The sequence here is fight-move-fight, as opposed to *Bastogne*'s move-fight-move, but the first combat phase is voluntary, only the second one is compulsory. This enables either side to build up an attack (or defence, if the attack fails and leaves you in an exposed position); it also hampers the German blitzkrieg at the outset, and turns it into a sitzkrieg, so a special German first turn rule is used to tip the scales and obtain a realistic German breakthrough. In contrast, there is no need for any such rule in *Bastogne*; the Germans simply by-pass those units who do not block their path. The Allies can, however, cut off supply, and there is an ingenious (optional) rule in *Bastogne* which enables both sides to carry their supply with them. This makes the battle much more fluid, and is really indispensable to enjoyment of the game.

Some things haven't changed — von der Heydte's little band of Paras still take their chance of appearance on identical dice rolls in *Bastogne* and *Bulge*. I have gained their services twice in either game, and have yet to be convinced of their value to the German player *in the turn assigned* — a delayed entry of one to three turns could reap dividends once the Allied player is more committed in defence. I accept that they were committed according to the standard Wehrmacht practice for the use of paratroops — a small point, perhaps, but isn't simulation about trying to do better?

One big bone of contention about *Bulge* which has no equal in *Bastogne* is the Combat Results Table particularly the Exchange and Attacker Eliminated (AE) results. The Exchange result allows the big German Panzer Divisions to advance like the proverbial meat-grinder against weaker Allied units. All you budding von Manteuffels need to do is to ensure that your force is always made up of units individually stronger than each enemy force you attack, and you never lose a unit. Unlike most "EX" results, which say "at least as many strength points as the defender", *Bulge* has a modification which says if your weakest unit is bigger than the enemy force, you stay intact, and he loses.

A subtle change to the norm also appears on the "AE" result: *one* attacking unit is eliminated, *attackers choice*. Both these rules enhance the realism, as does the German first turn rule, but I can't help thinking they were not built into the original game system, but added afterwards because the original system didn't simulate what actually happened. (Compare *Bulge* with its contemporary, *Leningrad*: there you have a simulation which works even without the only special rule, and from the uncanny realism it creates when played, shows a very sound design, indeed.)

Which of the two — *Bulge* or *Bastogne* — would I choose? For a quick bout of major-generalship, *Bulge* is a good, fast simulation and very enjoyable, but for a company commander's 'fox hole' viewpoint, *Bastogne* is superb — after all these years, I can't fault it.

Last word to my son, who pointed out that the lush greenery of the *Bulge* map was singularly inappropriate to a battle fought in snow and ice — maybe Red Simonsen had it right the first time!