



ANALYSING THE KAISER'S BATTLE

FIRST IMPRESSIONS BY DOUG DAVIES

One of the best games that SPI has ever produced was 1918, on the subject of the initial German offensive on the western front during that fateful year, but unfortunately its primitive graphics have long since consigned it to the great cardboard graveyard deep in the recesses of old gamers' cupboards. I was therefore highly delighted when SPI announced that they intended producing a new game on the subject which was eventually published in S&T 83 under the evocative title of *The Kaiser's Battle*.

My keen anticipation was somewhat blunted upon listening to designer Joe Balkoski explaining that the S&T format had prevented him from simulating the whole of Operation Michel as it had been portrayed in the earlier version, and that counter limitations had severely constrained his design — he had hoped for separate artillery units and greater detail than eight pages of rules would allow. Nevertheless I was attracted to the game much more than other recent S&T games and within weeks of receiving the issue I had several playings under my belt and was encouraged to share my initial reactions of what I consider to be a reasonable effort in the circumstances, with the Phoenix readership. Expert players who have glanced at the game a couple of times can safely ignore the rest of the article for they will naturally have spotted the simple points I intend bringing out within minutes of reading the rules. For the rest of you (and the more modest) I hope that, even after the passing of a couple of months, I can show you some new twists to the system, or at least rekindle some enthusiasm for a game which has many excellent features and, if nothing else, helps to improve your ability at mental arithmetic with its novel combat system.

WHERE IS THY VICTORY?

After the drudgery of learning a new game system your first consideration will be, or at least it ought to be, "How do I win?". Careful study of the victory conditions — only the marginal triumph need

bother you at this stage — will reveal several interesting points. To achieve a victory in *Kaiser's Battle* the German player must garner 26 victory points (VP's) which are obtainable from two sources — exiting units from the map and capturing town hexes. You should note that the Germans get 3 VP's for each unit exited, not each division and that it is therefore advantageous to break down each of the large units before moving them off the mapedge. A simple count reveals that 48 town hexes are available to capture but that these are scattered all over the mapboard in such a manner that approximately three quarters of the total area illustrated would need to be overrun in order to obtain a victory by just acquiring such hexes. Such a huge acquisition of territory would indicate a German player heading for a massive win, for the other victory condition would almost certainly be within reach and it would therefore seem more likely that the designer intended a combination of the two VP conditions to be necessary for victory. This in turn indicates that strategically the German player should aim at a concentrated punch across the map — probably in the northern sector for this is where the majority of his strength sets up — with the objective of capturing 12 — 18 town hexes and exiting the map.

The Allied player gains VP's by reducing German divisions in combat, a process which depends on the opposition's luck, or lack of it, with the die rolls and by occupying trench hexes at the end of the game, but of course his main concern will be denying VP's to his opponent. The one positive method of inflicting step losses on the enemy divisions which the Allied player should consider is the use of ground attack by his Air Force for these big units have the highest stacking value and such attacks are therefore rolled on the higher column of the relevant result table. Also the German player will usually be forced to leave several such units in clear terrain where they receive no defensive benefits. It should be impossible to hold onto any trench hexes without German acquiescence and the main point in letting cut off units hole up in such

hexes is that it forces the enemy to maintain a mopping up force thus delaying deployment to the front line. Another possible use for such cut off units is for sneak attacks on enemy HQ units plodding their way slowly forward, a prospect which can be a nightmare to unwary German players. As I've stressed, however, the main Allied concern is denying VP's to the enemy and this requires a study of the terrain and the strengths of the opposing forces in combat.

GOING INTO THE LINE

The entire combat system in *Kaiser's Battle* is unique. PGG and its vast progeny have taught gamers something of "the fog of war" with the untried unit system making it frequently impossible to calculate the exact odds of a particular battle before resolving combat but even so most players were probably shocked upon encountering the *Kaiser's Battle* system in which the unknown element can vary so much and applies equally to both sides. To refresh your memory, the strength of each side in combat is decided by multiplying the nominal value of each by a random factor determined by a die roll, plus other modifications for terrain, supply, weather, and artillery support. The ratio of the two strengths is then compared to the defenders morale level to produce a result of which there are only two — either the defender or attacker takes step losses. The large variation and uncertainty produced by this method might appear ridiculous to some at first sight but when one remembers that there were instances on the western front in WW1 where a single machine gun point held up or even defeated whole brigades or divisions its validity can be seen.

The German player can usually remove this uncertainty in the early stages by committing so much force to an attack that the die rolls are irrelevant, but of course the drawback to this splendid state of affairs is that it allows many potential victims to escape destruction and thus delay matters to a future turn when they will

Tables showing percentage chance of Victory in combat

		Die Roll Modification +1 to defender						Die Roll Modification +2 to defender						Die Roll Modification + 3 to defender							
		Attacking Strength						Attacking Strength						Attacking Strength							
			10	20	30	40	50	60	10	20	30	40	50	60	10	20	30	40	50	60	90
Defence Strength Morale Level 3	1	81	94	100	100	100	100	72	92	97	100	100	100	67	89	94	100	100	100	100	
	2	50	81	89	94	97	100	36	72	83	92	94	97	25	67	78	89	92	94	100	
	3	28	67	81	86	92	94	17	56	67	81	89	92	8	44	61	75	83	89	94	
	4	14	50	67	81	86	89	6	36	58	72	81	83	0	25	50	67	75	78	89	
	6	6	28	50	64	75	81	0	17	36	56	67	72	0	8	25	44	58	67	78	
Defence Strength Morale Level 4	1	75	92	97	100	100	100	67	89	94	100	100	100	58	83	92	97	100	100	100	
	4	11	42	61	75	81	86	3	28	50	67	72	81	0	17	39	58	67	75	86	
	5	6	25	47	61	75	78	0	14	33	53	67	69	0	6	23	42	58	64	78	
	10	0	6	14	25	42	47	0	0	6	14	28	33	0	0	0	6	17	22	50	

Combat Units		German Stosstruppen Division	
FRONT	BACK	FRONT	BACK
	Headquarters		
	Stosstruppen		
	Infantry/Service Company		
	Cavalry		

whilst withstanding divisional sized attacks before eventually helping to bind the front line together by either stacking among themselves or with brigade sized units. Although they are too weak to hold the line on their own they will cause some damage to the enemy and once freedom of movement is obtained on the third game turn they will reveal a versatility which makes them invaluable. They can join together, split up, and delay the enemy by clinging onto redoubt hexes, all of which is enhanced by the fact that their loss is not the disaster that that of a larger unit would be. A three battalion stack can help bolster the line of brigade units later in the game and these stacks can be made even more formidable if they incorporate a unit of higher morale. The bulk of the infantry battalions possess an average morale level but notice the couple of units of poorer standard who must be stacked as quickly as possible if they are to survive. The rule then for battalions is simple — stack, stack, stack.

The cavalry battalions are of tremendous value, possessing a high morale level, the highest movement factor of any unit in the game and a combat factor larger than that of the infantry. They will at first be useful as a 'fire brigade', rushing off to reinforce threatened sectors of the line but as soon as possible they should be split up and put into stacks with the infantry, thereby conferring the advantages of their superior morale on the whole stack, making it the equivalent of a brigade.

On the face of it the lowly company units seem mere cannon fodder but paradoxically their very weakness can be useful and converted into a source of strength. Because they are weak their loss will not worry the Allied player unduly and yet their presence inhibits German movement just as effectively as a full brigade; they are therefore ideal for forming a line which will delay the enemy advance for a full turn. The Allied player should gather this type of unit together, moving them up as near as possible to the front line to throw them in the path of the German steamroller, watching with pleasure as a full scale assault has to be mounted to clear a way past them.

Service companies are not as useful in this way because they don't possess ZOC's to inhibit movement. They are therefore better employed beefing up the strength of threatened stacks where they can be used to absorb step losses — a tactic which can be infuriating if they keep reappearing, springing Phoenix like out of the dead pile. Note that rule 15.22 must take precedence over 15.4 with regard to this capability — a service company is only available as a reinforcement if a new battalion has been eliminated, it can't regenerate itself ad infinitum.

While HQ units are not as valuable to the Allied player as they are to his opponent it is still wise to keep a fair number of them available in order to gain a measure of flexibility in the employment of artillery barrages. You should note, however, that they do possess a combat strength and a higher morale than infantry battalions and can therefore be employed in a stack to increase overall morale — and, if plenty are to hand towards the end of the game, they can even be used to absorb casualties.

WHO FIGHTS FOR GLEAMING LANDSCAPES?

When looking at the different terrain shown on a typical mapsheet both players will normally be considering the effect of each type on combat and movement. But in *The Kaiser's Battle* a third point assumes almost equal importance is the fact that units in certain types of terrain are not obliged to attack adjacent units in their combat phase, a point which is of particular importance to the Allied player as he struggles to maintain a front line. The value of the combat modification provided to the defense by various terrain features, is obvious and for this reason the Allied player will make use of river lines, fieldworks, hills, and towns to strengthen his line once the formidable redoubt hexes have been overrun. The delay imposed by swamp and river lines in combination will limit the German player in choosing his lines of attack while the hindrance of woods, trenches and hilltops will keep the advance of his important HQ's to a crawl. However it is the cancellation of the attack obligation which will time and again save the Allied player and for this reason those town hexes scattered across the map gradually become the focal point of the struggle. Even the weak wire line can be useful in this respect for the defender, especially where it is guarded by the presence of a river. The German player can gain a small benefit from occupying such hexes in that he isn't required to attack all adjacent stacks when assaulting out of them which means that the Allied player needs to be careful when arranging his defences round a town of more than one hex.

THE MONSTROUS ANGER OF THE GUNS

One of the most intriguing and attractive facets of the design of *The Kaiser's Battle* is the use of artillery. This presents both players with a variety of options a la *Green Fields Beyond* which will delight the type of player who enjoys planning things to the last detail before making a move. Although the German player enjoys a considerable advantage in terms of artillery support it is essential for him to extract every possible advantage from his ration of artillery points in order to have any hope of winning while the Allied player can, to some extent, afford to experiment with his — salvation for him depends on the men in the front lines.

The simplest variety of barrage to consider is drum-fire for it is only available to the German for the first two turns and indeed, they are compelled to expend all their artillery support in this manner on these moves. The only problem for the German is deciding exactly which of the enemy units he should attempt to eliminate and how many points he should allocate to each attack. The key word here is 'eliminate' — he should appreciate that the best odds of succeeding are only 50-50 so that it is pointless concentrating on a particular sector hoping to smash a path through; instead his aim should be to maximise the chances of inflicting casualties regardless of their situation. This means

going for units which will receive no modifications to the die roll for the terrain they occupy — obviously those in the line of wire, those whose total stacking point value results in attacks against them being resolved on the higher line of the drum-fire barrage table (only those in hex 2911) and those with low morale e.g. the unit in 2223 (why the state of your morale should effect the damage produced by having a 150mm shell fall on top of you is unclear to me but there it is). Finally, consider the actual loss of strength to the enemy liable to be produced by a successful barrage, concentrating on lone battalions or brigades rather than stacks which might be able to absorb the loss by eliminating a company sized unit. I would also advise leaving the units occupying hilltop hexes alone as it might be possible to surround these with advances after combat and kill them in this way. Remember that on the second turn the Allied reinforcements come onto the map before the Artillery stage, that the entry hexes are nice clear terrain and that the brigades of the 19th Corps, in particular, make a very tempting target.

Counter battery fire will appeal more to the Allied player than the German because its effects are in proportion to the total enemy artillery strength — obviously to inflict a loss of half 65 points is more attractive than causing the loss of half 14. The drawback is that it is a chancy business at the best of times for the Allies can never attain more than a 50-50 chance of counter battery fire succeeding — but if it does the results can be spectacular. Naturally both sides will employ field artillery for this type of fire and certainly the Allied player should consider using it early on when its effect is greatest. The German player should use counter battery after carefully calculating how many points he is going to require for other types of barrage, he will generally find he has sufficient points available on every turn to devote a proportion to disrupting the Allied artillery.

Only the German player can employ persistent gas fire and he will need to decide if the cost of 15 artillery points is worth the potential gain, which may come from two sources. A particularly suitable time to employ this type of barrage is during fog turns when points cannot be allocated to rolling fire and the cost is therefore not noticed. The first use of gas which should be looked at is to deny the use of valuable defensive terrain to the Allied player and make it easier for the German to obtain VP's — a marker deployed in the town of Ham for example removes a powerful bulwark from the centre of the line which could prove most costly to assault in the conventional manner. Because the Germans always move first after the terminal phase (an ominous term if ever there was one) they can dash into town hexes to obtain the VP's should the gas disperse, although of course if it doesn't he will have to accept casualties in order to obtain the hexes on the final turn. Secondly, gas can be used in an interdictive role for it doubles the cost of moving through terrain it affects and a line of gas markers can delay the arrival of reinforcements to a critical sector for a whole turn which might prove decisive. The prime spots for such an objective are, of course, the areas adjacent to the reinforcement entry hexes or around river-marsh hexes where the additional movement point cost can be crippling to the enemy.

Rolling barrages and their defensive counterpart, the SOS barrage, have the attraction that their benefits are definite, points allocated to them cannot be wasted by unfortunate die rolls, but unfortunately these benefits affect only a small section of the total front. The Germans will find it necessary to support every attack they make to the maximum extent with artillery for they need all the favourable modifications to the die roll that they can get in order to counter the effects of poor supply states, defensive terrain and the jumbling together of various corps. This necessity will result in the German striving to capture those hilltops needed to provide observation and, if need be, the commitment of aircraft in the observation role. SOS fire is costly when contrasted to rolling barrages and the Allied player is not blessed with large amounts of artillery to play with so its use should be reserved for key positions, especially if any other type of barrage is planned.

AND IN THE SKY

The air operations stages can produce unpleasant surprises for both players and indeed can be a nightmare for the Germans. Although on the face of it the Allied player is weaker in this department

than his opponent, in reality this is not so for he will rarely, if ever, need to consider using aircraft in their observation role and successful ground attacks both damage the assaulting forces and gain VP's. Ground attack is therefore a particularly attractive proposition to the Allied player for the enemy divisions will frequently be located in clear terrain, where they receive no defensive modifications, and will have the maximum stacking point value so that attacks against them are resolved on the higher line of the result table. However these undoubted attractions will need to be ignored on turns where the Allies have a weak unit which is vulnerable to enemy air attack holding part of the line and the entire air force should be used in its interception role to prevent a breakthrough.

The Germans have problems with air power simply because there isn't enough of it to carry out all the missions he requires. He would probably like to carry out ground attacks on every available opportunity, but can only afford to try it if it is possible to blow a hole in the enemy line prior to movement, creating a gap which his ground units can exploit. Once the headlong advance has outrun the groups of hills in the north the air force will be required for observation missions so that the artillery can give adequate support; always present will be the risk of having to leave divisions exposed in clear terrain and the consequent demands for interception of enemy ground attacks. Exactly how the poor German resolves these conflicting interests depends on the situation but I think it worthwhile considering the air force primarily as a defensive force — the blitzkrieg comes later Heinz — and the ground units will suffer enough casualties as it is without giving the Allied player cause for gloating with glee.

GOD HELP THE STAFF

The supply rules in *The Kaiser's Battle* are basically very simple but they realistically show the problems associated with the gradually lengthening supply lines which the Germans suffered — they don't however show the effect of a lack of supply on cut off units (several British units were forced to surrender simply by running out of ammunition). With supply being channelled through the slow moving HQ units it is vital to get them forward as rapidly as possible and the German player should certainly consider moving them on the second turn if a large number of units are freed by the special die roll. Advance after combat can also be employed to push an HQ forward, every hex gained can be crucial at a later stage for all the die roll modifications granted to the defender those in respect of supply can be the most punitive to the attacker.

With the gradually extending lines comes the need for the Germans to use divisional breakdown which will enable him to hold rear areas with regimental sized units thus freeing more divisions for deployment to the critical forward zones. I have also seen divisional breakdown used to exchange a division which has suffered a step loss and is therefore worth 20 for three regimental units each worth 10 — which is correct according to the printed rules — however I myself apply the common sense interpretation of only allowing two regimental units to be taken in such circumstances.

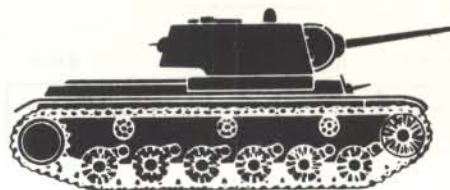
Corp attachment is difficult to maintain as units thrust forward over the map as best they can and the situation is not helped by the drab counters on which it is very hard to read designations — seeing that in this game the penalty for attacking with units of different corps can be drastic surely something could have been done to make the information stand out. You should of course endeavour to overcome this handicap, but in all probability the loss of attachment is something the German will have to learn to live with.

DOES IT MATTER?

I believe *The Kaiser's Battle* is a success as a game, it can be an enjoyable contest and is particularly suited to solo play where the illusive grail of the perfect German assault will no doubt attract some again and again. My article has concentrated entirely on the mechanics of play which should be useful if SPI use the system in other games, as seems likely, and it leaves me the option of regaling you in the future with my thoughts on the game as a simulation — always assuming of course that it *does* matter to some of you.

STALIN'S TANKS

A. McGEE



This is the third in Metagaming's new series of historical Microgames. Metagaming are of course renowned for their fantasy games, and I approached Stalin's Tanks expecting the same kind of fun game as they have produced in the past. As will appear from what follows, I was being unduly sceptical.

The package, a rather flimsy cardboard box about 8" x 4" x 1/2", contains a map 14" x 12" of simple but clear design, a 24-page rulebook and 126 die-cut counters, marginally below SPI physical standards.

The title gives away pretty clearly the subject of the game — armoured warfare on the Eastern Front. The range of vehicles provided is fairly impressive: for the Soviets BT-7, T34/76 marks a, b and c, T34/85, KV1a and 1c, KV85, JSII, SU76, SU85, SU100, SU122, SU152. In addition there are anti-tank guns and a few infantry companies. The Germans are represented by PzIIa, IIIg, IIIj, IVd, IVf2 and IVh, Panther, Tiger I and II, Sturmgeschutz b and g, Hetzer, Nashorn, PzJg Vand VI and even an Elephant: again AT guns and infantry, plus half-tracks, complete the mix. Obviously it would be possible to quibble about the exclusion of particular vehicles, but cognoscenti will recognise that the above list provides a pretty fair sample of the AFV's used in the East Front war. Later I shall have occasion to raise a few doubts about the accuracy of some of the information on the counters.

First, though, to briefly explain the game-system. As usual the Sequence of Play is crucial. It runs: Movement — Stationary Fire — Defensive Fire — Mobile Fire — Second Movement. The movement rules are merely variants on familiar themes, but the problem of facing is well handled, vehicles being allowed to enter any of their three front hexes or to turn one hexside at a cost of one movement point. Since there are few terrain-types no significant difficulties arise in this area; additionally the game is subtle enough to distinguish among infantry, APC's and AFV's for Terrain Effects purposes.

In the Stationary Fire Phase the phasing player is allowed to fire any of his units which have not moved. Defensive Fire is carried out by the non-phasing player, and Mobile Fire is for phasing units which have moved in the current turn; it is less effective than either Stationary or Defensive Fire. In the Second Movement Phase all phasing units may move up to one half their Movement Allowance, whatever they have previously done during the turn.

The procedure for firing is reasonably detailed and the rules are passably clear, although I was for some time confused as to the exact differences between anti-tank and anti-personnel combat. The combat system involves the familiar two-stage test of seeing whether a hit has been obtained and, if so, whether the target has been destroyed. The chance of a hit depends on the range, the terrain and, in the case of anti-tank combat, the accuracy rating of the weapon firing. There is a penalty for firing in the Mobile Fire Phase. For anti-personnel combat range and Mobile Fire are the only considerations, although anti-personnel fire is inherently less accurate than anti-tank fire.

The principal criticism to be made here concerns the effects of range. The ground scale is 1 hex=50 metres and for firing purposes range is divided into a number of bands; but I believe that these are probably too wide. Thus the chance of hitting is the same at 100 metres as at 250, and the same at 300 as at 600, and I doubt the accuracy of these estimates. I am also dubious about the strengths and accuracy ratings of some of the other guns in the game; most surprisingly of all, the PzIIIj may

not perform anti-tank fire; my reference sources do not suggest that its 50mm gun was incapable of firing armour-piercing shot. In general, however, this part of the system is clear and sound.

If a hit is obtained by AT fire, then the AT factor of the attacking unit, attenuated for range, is compared with the target's Armour Class (normally reduced for a hit on side or rear) to find the number which must be thrown to destroy the target. In the case of anti-personnel fire there is no attenuation for range and a different defence factor is used to calculate the combat odds. Anyone familiar with miniatures rules for this period will recognise the similarities with this game, and the system works well, providing convincing results over a fairly wide range of situations.

The Advanced Rules introduce elements which would be standard in most contemporary tactical games — Close Assault, Overrun, Half-Track Transport, Off-Map Artillery, Mines and even a certain amount of hidden Movement. None of these sections has anything startlingly new to offer, but all have well thought-out and well-written rules; for all but the real novice use of these rules will be automatic from the start.

Five historical scenarios are provided, as well as two non-historical, and there is obviously great scope for players to invent their own scenarios if they wish. One great difficulty, to some extent inherent in all tactical games, but exacerbated by the simplicity of this one is the lack of variety in the scenarios, there are only limited numbers of variations on the theme of tactical armoured warfare, especially on so small and simple a map. In addition the game requires little more than a judicious balance between fire and movement, being too simple to bring into play more sophisticated tactics.

Stalin's Tanks is a simple well-designed game. It has obvious limitations, but the designer never makes the mistake of trying to go beyond these. For the experienced player it will fairly rapidly become stale, for it operates within a very narrow compass, but for the beginner it can provide an excellent introduction to tactical games. Alternatively it can be used as a pleasant change from more substantial fare.

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