

PROFILE & AFTER ACTION REPORT

KAISER'S BATTLE

A Playtester's Report

by Philip Marchal

We strained mightily in the Art Department to liven up the spotty and dull terrain of the game map we received from the designer. No reflection on the designer; the map is an accurate reflection of the blasted and devastated terrain on which the battle occurred. Nevertheless, gamers expect a certain show of effort on the map — we tried to give it to them in the elaborate treatment of the trench lines. The author is one of the main playtesters of the game and was with it through most of its development. —RAS

The Kaiser's Battle is an unusual operational game of mobile World War I combat, with some interesting tactical flavor added. The game simulates the last major German offensive of the war that nearly broke through the lines of the British 5th Army in the Somme River Valley.

In some ways, this last German gamble was similar to the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. In both offensives the Germans had planned and prepared for the coming campaign over several months. In 1918, as in 1944, the Germans maintained the all-important element of surprise. The 1918 offensive was among the most mobile battles of World War I, as was the Battle of the Bulge in World War II.

The overwhelming German numerical superiority easily smashed through an unprepared British line that had already been severely weakened by a massive artillery barrage. The German *stosstruppen* divisions had been specially trained in infiltration tactics to exploit the small gaps in the British line. The Germans hoped to drive their lightning offensive straight to the sea, thereby cutting off the British in the north from the French in the south. In the battle, after a long and bloody fight, the Germans were barely stopped.

The Map

One of the most striking features of *The Kaiser's Battle* game map is the complete lack of roads and railroads. By 1918, all the roads and railroads in that section of France had been totally destroyed. The Battle of the Somme (1916) had been fought in this same area, producing extensive damage to the area that was compounded by the 1918 German offensive.

Much of the terrain on the map is not really what it appears to be. For instance,

woods are not truly green forests, but masses of twisted and splintered stumps. These stumps were definitely a hindrance to movement, a fact that is reflected in the game by the movement point cost to traverse such terrain. Yet, the shattered woods provided no real defensive benefit; no die roll modifiers are given to units defending in woods.

The continual artillery pounding was as bad on the towns as on the woods. Many of the communities depicted on the map as towns were actually nothing more than devastated ruins. However, these towns did provide excellent defensive positions.

Because of the small scale of the map, there is room for additional specialization of terrain features. There are three distinctly different types of fortification: wire, fieldworks, and redoubts. Each type provides slightly different advantages and disadvantages in movement and combat. Hilltops are represented on *The Kaiser's Battle* map, since artillery is more effective if the target can be observed from a height.

It should be made clear at this point that *The Kaiser's Battle* simulates only the southern portion of this major offensive. The southern sector was, however, the area through which the Germans historically did best — the attack in the north stalled after only a few days. The German plan for a major breakthrough was almost achieved in the south.

The Counters

The Kaiser's Battle has an extremely varied and interesting countermix. The most startling aspect of the mix is that the units'

sizes range from company to division. Such a wide variance is unusual in a simulation game because it is not easy to simulate fighting accurately using such a gamut of scales. However, the unique combat system allows *The Kaiser's Battle* to account easily for this great difference in unit size.

Several special units are particularly fascinating. The German *stosstruppen* divisions are capable of extraordinary advances through narrow gaps in the enemy lines. On the other hand, the British service companies are patchwork units, thrown together from army cooks, doctors, and other personnel who were at hand.

One feature not included in the countermix is artillery, which is represented abstractly by tracks on the game map. Though the use of artillery is of primary importance to the game, the abstract method of representation provides a great deal of unpredictability, as each player tries to guess how his opponent has allocated his artillery points.

The Rules

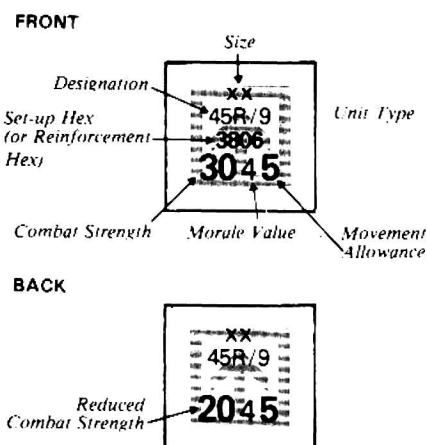
There are also a number of unusual features in the game's set of rules. Most unusual is that the game uses no Combat Results Table. Instead, the players multiply the combat strengths of the units by a die roll and find their quotient, which is then compared with the defender's morale value to determine whether or not the attack was successful. This system gives combat a quite different feel that is particularly well-suited to *The Kaiser's Battle*: predictability is lost. A German division can, with some unlucky die rolls, be reduced extensively by a mere battalion of the British. Finally, the combat results allow only elimination or reduction results. This accurately portrays the lightning advance by the Germans that allowed no retreats.

Supply is also treated in a new way: supply status makes absolutely no difference for the defending unit, but all the difference for the attacking unit. Out of supply attacking units increase the combat die roll multiple for the defending unit. Other rules in the game system cover such items as gas, artillery, advance after combat, and air power.

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Game-Turns 1 and 2: On Turn One, the German artillery pulverized the British line. Although the German player bombard-

German Stosstruppen Division



ed a great number of front line British units, he succeeded in creating only one gap between Castres and Urvillers. The barrage had, however, seriously weakened the secondary British line who were holding out in the fieldworks.

The German player, after advancing only a few hexes through this gap, made a series of successful attacks. He attacked even in the south where he had no real power. After each attack the German player rolled the die for advance after combat, and with luck on his side, managed to sweep past what was left of the front line, not stopping until he had reached the secondary line entrenched in the line of fieldworks.

The British player rolled the die for movement capabilities, but as a result of poor luck on these rolls, was hard pressed to consolidate the portions of his line that were in particularly desperate situations.

On Turn Two, once again massive artillery barrages blew gaping holes in the British lines, through which the *stosstruppen* divisions poured into the rear area. After mopping up what was left of the original front line, the German player prepared to attack the redoubt line. In the north and center, the Germans had already pushed beyond the redoubts and had reached the outskirts of both Vermand in the north and Castres in the center. Once again, the British player had little choice but to fall back as far as possible in the best order that he could manage.

So far in this playtest, the German advance was about average. He had made several important penetrations through the British lines and was continuing to advance at a steady pace. During Turn Two, he succeeded in clearing out the few British units that threatened his line of supply in the rear area. However, despite these strong initial gains, only one reserve German division had been able to move up.

Despite the heavy loss of British units and the sacrifice of much ground, the British situation was no worse than could be expected. The Germans were bound to make several decisive breakthroughs, and the British player had to fall back as best he could to maintain a solid line for as long as possible. In the event that lone German divisions manage to slip into the far rear area, the British player should let them exit the map; due to their isolation from supplies, they will be unable to attack at advantageous odds. The British player can give up half the map before suffering any adverse effects from German victory points.

Game-Turns 3-6: On the second day of the offensive, air and artillery operations began in force, continuing throughout the next day. The German advance gained all along the map, piercing the redoubt line on Turn Three and massing divisions for an assault on the Crozat Canal by the end of Turn Four. The British line was firming up nicely along the Canal, but could not hold out against the fierce German onslaught.

In the north the Germans reached the last line of British fortifications — the wire

— by Turn Three. On Turn Four, the German player attacked the wire. Three divisions were reduced near Roupv and Etreillers, blunting the drive in the north.

By Turn Five, the Germans reached Tugny-et-Pont, Caulaincourt, Beauvois, Cugny, and Flavy Le Martel. The British brigades that would make or break the game entered play and took their positions a few hexes in back of the current front line to await the German advance.

On Turn Six, the German player faced a problem: he could continue his lightning advance, hoping to keep the British from recouping their initial losses, or he could hold up, letting his lagging divisions finish mopping up the rear and join the lead element on the front line. Each strategy has its advantages and disadvantages. To continue the advance places the troops in a poor supply status, which threatens their attack ability. However, such an advance at this time could very well catch the British in an awkward spot and thus break open the game totally in the German's favor. Waiting for the lagging divisions — and, more importantly, for the headquarters — to come up provides the German player with mass and favorable supply status.

The German player now felt the effects of his own advance; it had been so rapid that the disruptive force on the cohesion of his forces was almost as great as on the enemy forces. The next several turns were important. He had either to advance out of supply or wait for reinforcements, thus allowing the British forces also to coalesce.

During Turns Four through Six, the British player suffered no movement restrictions and could thus consolidate his forces and form cohesive lines to block the German advance. The British brigade reinforcements had also arrived. The British player must make sure to use the brigades cohesively, as one unit, or watch them get cut up piecemeal by three or four German divisions acting in unison.

Game-Turns 7 and 8: The German player decided to try both strategies. On Turn Seven, he waited for the headquarters and rear division to catch up, while launching limited attacks on the British line. These attacks helped him establish a solid line through Ham, Brouchy, Ugnv Le Gay, Toulle, Douilly, Lanchy, and Tertry. The slight bulge in the center was offset by the southern flank, which lagged behind.

The British player meanwhile stacked the nine service companies he received with the powerful brigades in the center; the service companies would be sacrificed to absorb step losses inflicted by the massive German attacks. The British line now appeared to have steadied.

On Turn Eight, the German assault was launched. In the north the German divisions smashed through the British line, gaining more territory and capturing Guizancourt. The attacks in the south, however, made no progress. Although no German divisions were reduced, they only succeeded in barely capturing Villeselve. In the center the main

German force hit head-on with the main Allied force which consisted of seven powerful brigades. The slugging match resulted in a very slim German gain at the cost of two more reductions. The Germans extended their bulge only to Canizy.

The British solidified their already sturdy line on Turn Eight with the addition of four more service companies. Though the long German advance seemed contained in the center, the flanks were still very weak. The Germans could still exit the map during the last two turns and pick up extra victory points.

Game-Turns 9 and 10: The German player launched his last major attack with all the divisions he could muster. In the north the beleaguered British were totally overwhelmed and the Germans raced unopposed to the banks of the Somme River. In the center, on the other hand, the Germans crumpled in their attacks on the strong British brigades. Six German divisions were reduced, and the German forces were so weak that the British might have gone on the attack to recapture Ham. To the south the Germans continued to advance, though at a much slower pace. No town was captured in this last push.

The British player decided not to counterattack and take back a town. Instead, he shifted units to the north in hopes of limiting the continuing German drive.

On Turn Ten, the Germans attacked in the north only. Though the British player had moved in reinforcements to this area, they were not strong enough to stop the Germans, who punched through and exited five divisions off the map.

With those advances after combat, the offensive and the game ended. After counting up victory points, the British player succeeded in achieving a marginal victory. Keeping the strong divisions together in the center had proven crucial to the defense. As in most other playtests, the last two turns proved to be pivotal. Both sides had committed every last available unit to the do-or-die situation. In all tests the game teetered on the edge to the very last moment of play. ■ ■