First Saratoga 1777

First Saratoga is a boardgame from the mini folio series by Decision Games. In late summer of 1777, Burgoyne's Northern Army had become isolated. The game covers Burgoyne's attempt to break through American defences at Bemis Heights to reach Albany.

The system uses a quick play version of the Musket & Saber rules that are found in the larger folio games. I have previously found the full rules hard to hold in my head, so the quick play version is most welcome. It is a bit of a shame, but this game published in 2015 did not come with the latest series rules (4 pages) that have existed in amended form since 2013. Likewise the 2 page specific scenario sheet has not been printed to reflect some changes to the combat results - again known since 2013. The changes to the series rules are available on the DG website (Also see resource section at the foot of this article). One assumes that perhaps the series is gang printed with future release dates included. I can understand that for expensive parts such as counters and maps, but the simple rules should be available in an up to date format with the game.

The game has a small footprint with a map of 11" x 17" and just 40 game counters. The map looks nice and has large hexes (small counters) but the difference between heavy and light woods terrain types is not immediately apparent, though these areas do not really get played on. You can see them once you have scanned the map for them in good light and some Q&A identifies an additional heavy wooded two hex ravine.

The system has mostly been used for Napoleonic and ACW battles, so to come to AWI the specific rules include a 'Battalions' rule to reflect the smaller formations deployed here, together with the nuances of skirmishing and rifles. The resource section (below) has a link to a blog AAR that highlights the full system.

Setting up -
The American forces are largely behind earthworks on Bemis Heights, with some capacity to put units further forward, which I used to block the British advance.

The British start off map in three columns, arriving on three different trails.

Opening turns -
The game starts with fog, which significantly slows the British movement. As the game progresses, there are differing chances (including 100%) for the fog to lift. The British will be aware that they are up against the clock as there are 7 turns.

In our game, they get lucky and the fog lifts on turn 2. The left and right British columns are almost certainly always going to use the roads to get them onto the enemy flanks. The early decision for the British player is where to send the centre column. It can advance through the centre, which is lightly wooded, which looks like an obstacle, but in practice is not. Or it can move over to either flank to support one of the two other columns.

I chose to push through in the centre.

By turn 3, the British had reached the first American positions. On the left Riedesel attacked successfully, having outflanked the earthworks, but a counter-attack, supported by artillery on Bemis Heights pushed them back over the stream.

As well as supporting attacks, artillery can also bombard alone and are quite powerful in this regard as they simply uses their firepower value on the differential table without deducting the enemy defence from that value and likewise skirmishes and rifles are powerful as they use their movement factors on the combat differential table

While the Colonial forces include a couple of battalions, all the British forces are battalion strength and they are single step units so are fragile. Also, if battalions retreat, they are flipped to their ineffective side (like artillery and leaders), which basically gives them much reduced operating values and they will take at least a turn to recover. By contrast, the Colonials have several regiments (strength 7) and a couple of militia regiments, which are double steppers and so more resilient.

On the right, the British were just getting into position to assault. Combat is not mandatory, but if a player doesn't attack a valid unit, then that unit can counter-attack at double strength against any unit and that can be quite punishing. Note in the above photo, the unit with a yellow counter is a Colonial battalion that has just routed from this situation, leaving the New York Regiment exposed to envelopment if it does not retreat.

Mid game -
The attack on the left wing had ground to a halt, but over on the right the British were pressing on the high ground east of Bemis Heights (victory location). Within a couple of turns, they had routed the defenders and taken the high ground.

Colonial units started to move across to this flank, but it took time, especially as the militia units (pale blue) have to pass a morale test to go adjacent to an enemy. The one in the photograph failed its morale test twice before taking its place in the line.

At this point, British casualties were higher than the colonials, but holding this high ground would give them the game if they hang onto it.

End game -
In the last two turns of the game, the colonials were successful in pushing the British off the high ground. The British took heavy casualties and the retreats forced their battalions to flip over to their ineffective side.

In the final turn, the fog returned, curtailing Riedesel's attempts to push through the Colonial centre onto Bemis Heights, not that there was enough time for them to reach the two hexes up there that would give the British a sudden death victory.

As time was called, it went to casualties. The British had lost 7 units, the Colonials just 3, making them clear winners.

Conclusions -
I really like the idea of the small format game combined with enough system to make the play interesting and the nuances that crop up are very engaging. However, the rules still feel awkward at times. It was not helped that I had to download the latest rules, which are formatted into an 11 page text, this is against the convenience of the 4 page official rule folder, which actually holds the same volume of text. It would be easier if the game had included an updated CRT, as this more than anything else is what I had to keep diving into my downloaded rules for.

Despite the 'awkwardness', I like the small footprint and what the rules set out to achieve, so I have ordered the sister game 'Germantown'. The inclusion of battalions, skirmishes and rifles does help bring Saratoga a period feel.

Solitaire value - This is a two player game that plays fine solitaire.

Time - The rules read quickly, but the first game will be spent with quite a lot of rule referencing. A second game will go more more smoothly and my games have been taking around an hour to complete.

Size - It doesn't come much smaller than this, making it suitable for many domestic situations and ideal to take away as a vacation game. My downloaded sheets, home made cheat sheet and the official rules became a bit messy to manage. If they could only get their included rules updated to avoid the downloads, then this would be perfect.

Complexity - The quick play version is rated as low (1 out of 5), which I feel is an underestimation of what the player faces. Despite being the quick play set, that is a relative term compared to the clunky full rules and this shortened version still has quite a lot of system (the rules plus scenario information comprise 6 pages in a 3 column format and are without illustrations). You get an engaging game, but the there is quite a bit trucked away in one liners and there is ambiguity that still needs to be written out. This creates a certain awkwardness that can be conquered after an initial play, but if you put the game away for any length of time, there is a re-learning curve. There are quite a few games in the series now, so it may be the case that a typical player will become increasingly familiar with the rules due to repeated play potential. I would rate the game as complexity 2 (out of 5).

I find myself pleased with the system and wanting some more and I am pleased that Decision Games put out a Quick Play set, but this is tainted by some frustration that there is still some awkwardness that results in more rule referencing than I care for. It should also be mentioned that these games can be had for around £10 or less and at that price, gamers may well feel it worth getting just to see whether the system suits them.

RESOURCES -
1/ A write up of the full system using the Shiloh folio game LINK HERE
http://battlefieldswarriors.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/another-shiloh-game.html

2/ The following are the main rule amendments that will interest players of this game;

7.5 Combat Results. Change the definition of Ax or Dx to read:

Ax or Dx = Attacker Loss or Defender Loss. The affected unit loses a step (7.7); no advance or retreat is made.

Also, bombardments satisfy the need to attack an enemy unit.

7.6 Retreats & the SLR. Under the Unsafe Line of Retreat, a unit takes a loss before it routs again. Change the Unsafe Line of Retreat to read:

Unsafe Line of Retreat: This is identical to the SLR but passes through an unnegated EZOC and/or ends in an EZOC. In this case, the unit takes a loss (7.7), then routs from the unsafe hex. A unit may take a loss and rout any number of times until it no longer has a line of retreat or retreats off the map.

3/ I run a wargames website called COMMANDERS - LINK HERE
http://commanders.simdif.com