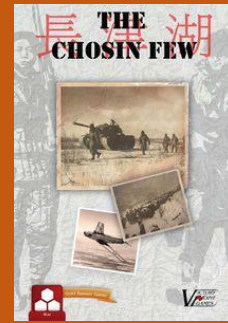




# THE CHOSIN FEW

## REVIEW



Review by: "Nanking Defender"

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The **Chosin Few**, published by **Victory Point Games**, is a game whose physical components may well be better than its design—an affordable game in terms of time and money spent, but one that also exposes two problems in simulations of this sort.

The first problem is a solitaire design that depends less on decisions made than dice rolled. **Nathan Hansen** has provided an intriguing way to think of US X Corps' predicament: holding the line long enough to develop a line of retreat, and then using it. As some reviewers have pointed out, air assets were crucial historically and they are critical here as well. And obtaining them and choosing how they are to be employed are difficult choices.

But those decisions — tough as they sometimes are — make the player at best into an air commander, instead of someone fighting off the Chinese hordes. In the game, deciding to use "actions" to stand fast, move, attack, or harness air support are allocating resources more than making choices about overall strategy. Various accounts of what X Corps faced and was forced to do appear to align rather well with the game in spirit at least: the player in **The Chosin Few** is essentially holding on and holding out, to see what hits you next. As the Victory Point Games series has it, you are under a "state of siege". But the mechanisms that make the game playable — cards are pulled, dice are rolled, the odd decision is made—also create an inevitability, an inexorability about the exercise that inspires passivity instead of creativity, monotony rather than dread. For a solitaire game, there is a remarkable lack of randomness, at least in the sense that the unexpected makes the game interesting. There is a sense of siege, but not the spirit. The dice determine an enormous amount, and the cards do the rest. As with some more recent and complicated solitaire designs, you are not the pilot so much as the passenger.

The reason for this "design as a ride" choice is probably that Mr. Hansen wanted a quick, playable game. He has achieved that goal very well indeed (and done so without even a glimmer of chrome). But like the player's perspective gazing at a finely rendered map, one feels an observer more than a participant. That the game is rather difficult to win adds to the frustration—not because it is a tough call to know what to do, but that there are few real calls to make. The dice tend to compensate for the stupidity of the commander or undermine what few decisions must be made. What really should be tense often slides into simple tedium.

The second problem with **The Chosin Few** may also hint at a solution. There is of course something in the American psyche that endears many players — and perhaps not a few designers — to Alamo-like situations. Ordinary soldiers become heroes just by holding out, running out the clock, dying on cue at the very end. So we have simulations about sieges in which one's outnumbered countrymen, faced with enormous odds, are asked to hang on and hang in, and solitaire games (some of them quite good) are designed around that sentiment and the strategy that accompanies them. Wargaming has often been accused of being an American-centric hobby (so we get Euro-games that are deemed to be largely cooperative in nature) and this sort of romantic draw only adds to that perception. One might argue that simulations of Rorke's Drift, Dunkirk, Khartoum, and even Rhodesia show that this is perhaps an Anglo-American sentiment.

But why not a design of the siege of Chosin (because that's really what it was, according to most accounts) in which the player is the Chinese commander, trying to find a way of either destroying X Corps or driving it down the peninsula? Then the solitaire player really has to make some choices about line of attack, resource distribution, weather, nighttime assaults versus daylight rushes, and dealing with terrain that handicaps the defender but also presents challenges to aligning forces and timing attacks. We now have excellent sources (even in English) about Chinese military efforts, as well as the political considerations that helped drive them. As designed, The **Chosin Few** is a game of hope that the dice and the card draw might go your way as an American commander looking down from afar. Developed as a challenge to the Chinese military command about who to attack, where and how — knowing full well that you may not succeed — the design might have become a better simulation, in which one feels in solitude instead of simply in solidarity.

The **Chosin Few** is a handsome-looking game and a handy one to have. As presented, it tells us much about the challenges of solitaire design and the choices one makes about how to address a particular historical episode. The result deserves praise, if only by prompting us to consider if the way some solitaire designs are being done might be upgraded — not by adding another player, but another perspective.

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