

SOMME 1918: A REVIEW OF *BLACK DAY OF THE GERMAN ARMY*

by Jim Werbaneth

There are reasons why prepublication offers have a bad name. One of the biggest is Pacific Rim. The publishers of *CounterAttack*, a quarterly magazine that might appear once a year, and *The Grenadier*, published once per decade if the readers are lucky, Pacific Rim extends its touch to its Just Plain Wargames series.

In theory, Just Plain Wargames is a welcome idea. The line is of highly affordable folio games, with at least adequate components, accessible but interesting systems, and generally good gaming value for a low price. However, the delays and absolute contempt for both the customer and the bare minimum of business ethics infecting the company's magazines are present in Just Plain Wargames.

Black Day of the German Army, Ulrich Blennemann's game on a climactic World War I battle, is an excellent example. First offered in 1993, the promise was for publication in May of that year. Pacific Rim eagerly solicited advanced sales.

But May came and went. So did June. Then 1993, and 1994. The next year started, and still no game. Eventually, in July 1995, over two years after *Black Day* was promised to the paying customers, it arrived.

Despite all of this, *Black Day of the German Army* is a good game, on an important but neglected subject. It is the Anglo-French offensive near Amiens on the Somme on 8 August and 9 August 1918. The collapse of the Imperial German army in this sector was a major step toward the defeat of Germany in November.

SYSTEMS AND WEAPONS

The core of the game system is the familiar move-fight sequence, with the attacking Entente forces going first. But there are some important twists.

Any World War I game has to profile artillery, and this one does, along with nascent

tactical air support, on which the Entente has a monopoly. Both are vital to achieving a breakthrough.

In the first step of a turn (except the first, when the number is fixed), the Entente player rolls the die to see how many airpoints he receives. Then he receives a set number of artillery points. The German player also receives some at the beginning of his player turn, but far fewer than his opponent.

Artillery has two functions, counterbattery and drumfire. Counterbattery comes first, and affects the number of artillery points the other side gets in the next player turn. Drumfire is executed against maneuver units on the map. It can call for a step loss, but the most likely result is a pin, which diminishes combat power and mobility.

BLACK DAY OF THE GERMAN ARMY

Designer: Ulrich Blennemann

Publisher:

Pacific Rim Publishing Company
PO Box 23651
Oakland CA 94623

Price: \$12.00

Scale:

Turn: 5 Hours
Map: 1 Kilometer Per Hex
Unit: Divisions, Regiments and Battalions

Components:

1 22" x 34" Unmounted Map
100 1/2" Counterse
1 Rulebook
1 Turn Record Card

Packaging: Envelope

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Airpower works in two ways. An air point added to a counterbattery or drumfire attempt to support the artillery yields a die roll modifier. The other alternative is close support of friendly attacks. One air point can be added for five combat points.

The last technological asset in the Entente arsenal is armor. The British, along with the Canadians and Australians, have heavy tanks on and near their frontline trenches, with Whippet medium tanks further back. The French have two battalions of Renault FT17's.

Tanks represent a high concentration of firepower. Two companies are the equal of any single German infantry division, and are more powerful than some badly worn done ones.

But armor can be a frustrating weapon for the Entente. It can traverse trenchlines without any problem, but is inferior to leg units when it comes to crossing natural obstacles. Also, each time a tank unit is about to move, the player rolls the die. On a roll of 6, it breaks down. The first time, if the battalion is at full strength, it loses a step. If already reduced, it is immobilized. Repair is possible at the end of 8 August

PRESENTATION

The components of *Black Day* are not the flashiest in wargaming. They are wholly adequate, but without the striking appearance of GMT's latest titles, or the *Stonewall Jackson's Way* series from Avalon Hill.

The nationalities of the Entente counters could have been made more clear. There is no mistaking the sole American division; the counter has red, white and blue stripes. But adding an "A" to the Australian and "C" to the Canadian counters would have differentiated them better than their colored unit boxes do alone.

In addition, the setup lists in the rules are not as clear as they should be. They do not distinguish between British, American and French units, although players setting up the game for the first time quickly learn to tell them apart. In addition, the German 246th Infantry Regiment of the 54th Reserve Division is misrepresented as the 245th Regiment. These are not fatal or even crippling lapses, but nonetheless should have been forestalled by better proofreading.

only, but is far from certain.

This is one of the keystones of the *Black Day* system. It is also consistent with the emphasis on mechanical reliability of Perry Moore's *Landships!* (Clash of Arms), the current standard for Great War tactical games.

STRATEGIES

With its highly attritional combat results table, stress on artillery, unreliable tanks, and lack of mechanized infantry, *Black Day of the German Army* is not to be mistaken for a game on the following world war. Therefore player strategies should not slavishly follow a *blitzkrieg* model.

For the Entente side, it is imperative to achieve local breakthroughs early. The German army is woefully thin at the front, and the Allies should use concentrated infantry and heavy tanks penetrate their trenches on the first turn.

The corollary is that the entire front cannot be routed at will. Even in its depleted state, terrain favors the Germans, and the Entente does not have the forces to be strong everywhere. Therefore they must pick their spots.

On the second and subsequent turns, they have to press to exploit any initial success. Besides their heavy tanks and infantry divisions, the British have three cavalry divisions and fast Whippet tanks. If the assault waves can achieve a sufficiently wide breakthrough, these can use strategic movement to tear into the German rear at triple speed.

From the Allied perspective, armor is a perishable resource, but one that must be expended. Breakdowns will wear down their tank arm; that is certain. So that player should treat his British Empire heavy tanks and French FT17's with a "use it or lose it" attitude; he can be satisfied to trade losses and breakdowns for breakthroughs. On the other hand, the follow-on Whippets should be conserved a little more, and generally held back for exploitation.

Infantry is similar to an extent. The combat results table to *Black Day of the German Army* is a bloody one, fitting for a First World War game, and casualties are inevitable. The Allies should not be overly alarmed, if their units pay a high price for a breakthrough; the victory conditions reward deep penetration, regardless of losses, so blood should be traded for penetration. In addition, since the Germans are relatively weak, a noticeable attritional side to what is really a mobile battle favors the Allies.

Finally, coordination of air and artillery is extremely important. Each has two roles

Consistent with World War I practice, employing aircraft to support the artillery is vital. The die roll modifier, adding only one to the roll, might not seem like much, but adds a great deal to the overall efficiency of the artillery, if done consistently.

At the same time, air support of combat can make a huge difference, considering that an air point is a little more powerful than a tank battalion and just slightly less than an infantry division. These are not stukas, but in the right place at the right time, can make critical battles into Entente victories.

Entente artillery greatly outmatches that of the Germans. This advantage can be made into a monopoly, or very close to it, through effective counterbattery. The Entente player should devote seven artillery points to this role on the first days' turns and three on the second, when both sides lose much of their artillery strength. Regardless, one of the game's few immutable strategic principles is that the Entente must engage in counterbattery fire every turn, and should use an airpoint to assist if one is available.



Drumfire amounts to preparatory bombardment. Since there will be no broad front offensive efforts, the Allied cause is best served by massing guns against the most crucial objectives, following them with strong infantry and tank attacks, ideally supported by aircraft.

German play in *Black Day* is essentially reactive in character. That player can do little or nothing to affect the timing of the battles, or where the most important of them will occur. The Allies have the initiative, and the Germans have no chance of seizing it; the best they can do is frustrate the enemy.

The first German decisions in the game come with deployment. The Germans alone have the ability to break down their divisions into regiments, and in fact three always begin in this form.

The player has to break down others. Otherwise Entente units, especially tanks, will be able to easily penetrate gaps in the defenses, and attack the Germans from the flanks.

In addition, the German army is a frighteningly small one. The German needs more units, any units, to hold back the Allied onslaught.

Defensive works and natural strongpoints have to be used to their fullest. The first line of trenches are the best for defensive purposes, but cannot be held for long against a storm of shells, aircraft and tanks. But there are fall back lines, and these should be used whenever possible, though they are, ultimately, no more lasting than those at the initial front.

There are other features-----villages, rivers, and hills-----and these are also of great use to the Germans. There will be times when a linear defense is impossible due to a dearth of forces, and then the German player should must engage in a more point-oriented effort. In such cases villages and hills are invaluable, not just against maneuver forces, but for shelter against drumfire barrages.

One event that the German player cannot bet his cause on seeing is the chance for counter-attacking. The disparity of forces is too great to allow this, if the Entente player has any skill at all.

Instead, the central task is simply to get in the way. The Entente cannot be allowed an easy route around or through the Germans, and more than anything, cannot be permitted to pour through to a quick and easy victory, through strategic movement. There are times when it is better to be a nuisance than a danger.

CONCLUSIONS

Black Day of the German Army is a small game, but a good one, with a classic feel. The central mechanics are hardly innovative, and yet the interaction of artillery and airpower present issues seldom present in other games. Only *Landships!*, albeit on a very different scale, currently offers anything similar.

Furthermore, strategy has its subtleties, and the game is not scripted. The air and artillery systems are highly randomized, and bad die rolls in these areas especially can cripple the Entente effort.

It is a good game, packing a great deal of value into a low-priced package. It is unfortunate that its release was delayed for so long.

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