

VIII Corps: The Somme 1916



A Card Wargame of World War I

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Acknowledgements

To Kevin Tucker for his enthusiasm and help in developing this project.
Perhaps you will get some of your own games developed now?

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The cover photograph is of Ernest Brooks who was with the
29th Division at Beaumont Hamel on 1st July 1916.

1. Introduction

This two player card game covers the experience of the British VIII Corps on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, July 1st 1916.

The game follows the course of the pre-battle preparation and the first day of the battle itself. One player is commander of VIII Corps, Lt. General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston. The other player is his opponent Lt. General Hermann von Stein commander of the German XIV Reserve Corps.

This is not a balanced game and one where the British will find it very hard to win.

2. Historical Background

On July 1st 1916 VIII Corps comprised the 4th, 29th & 31st infantry Divisions. It was one of five from Lt. General Sir Henry Rawlinson's Fourth Army that attacked German positions on the Somme in an attack supported by a diversion created by 5th Army's VII Corps against the village of Gommecourt.

VIII Corps had three separate objectives; all to be achieved by lunchtime of the first day. They were to take the German Front Line (three separate trench lines), their Second Line (or Munich trench), and finally their incomplete Support Line. This did not happen. Of the five Corps in the initial attack VIII Corps was the only one not to hold any of its objectives. It is thought that none of VIII Corps' troops reached the German lines.

The German Second Line incorporated the villages of Beaumont Hamel and Serre. The former was located in a hollow whilst the latter was fortified as it sat on a slope overlooking the British. To make matters worse, all three German lines were on forward slopes facing the British lines. Each German line overlooked the one in front in such a way that all three could fire on an attack. This was one of the reasons why VIII Corps failed on the day.

Prior to the attack the British originally planned five days of bombardment to weaken the German lines. They hoped to so debilitate the Germans troops that they would simply have to walk over and occupy the trenches without any serious fighting.

Bad weather reduced the intensity of the bombardment, which was extended for a further two days. Even so the bombardment made little difference to the German defenders. The British heavy batteries were not used on the German Front Line, where they could have neutralised the enemy dug outs, and instead their fire was scattered piecemeal throughout the Second and Support Lines. The German artillery did little in reply. This led the British to believe, incorrectly as it transpired, that they had succeeded in suppressing the enemy artillery.

Furthermore the bombardment failed to cut the wire in most areas. Trench raids were sent out to determine the state of the wire and the German lines. In most cases they failed but those that succeeded reported that the wire remained intact. The reports were ignored by the higher command.

The Germans had built significant fortifications on the Hawthorn Ridge facing the 29th Division west of the village of Beaumont Hamel. In preparation for the attack these had been mined by the British. On the morning of July 1st the British Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt mine was detonated 10 minutes before the infantry attack was due to begin at 07:30. This gave the Germans time to recover and reorganise their defences.

The British infantry attack began at 07:30 as planned with three divisions walking slowly towards the German Lines. Much to their surprise they found themselves walking into significant German machine gun fire. Not just from their front but from both flanks. The British bombardment had failed. The Germans survived in deep dugouts all along the front.

As the British attack began the German artillery opened up targeting the troops moving in the open to the British start line. The German barrage was very effective causing the majority of British casualties that day: most British troops did not get past their front line.

Such were the British losses, and complete lack of progress, the offensive was called off by 12:30 including the attack on the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt crater. The British losses were such that the High Command was in a state of high anxiety. They knew they were very vulnerable to a swift German counter-attack and withheld the third brigades of all three Divisions from the attack to defend the original British Line.

3. Game Overview

To win the game the British player must capture two of the three German Support Lines. To do this they must overcome the First and Second Lines of defence in sequence before succeeding in attacking the final German line of defence.

The game is turn based. The early turns consist of just one phase solely concerned with strategic actions by both sides. Later turns consist of a strategic phase followed by a tactical phase. A tactical phase consists of British attacks, and the much rarer German counter-attacks, played in sequence.

The switch to multi-phase turns represents the end of the initial bombardment and the beginning of the infantry battle. The exact timing of the switch depends on whether the British player decides to prolong the pre-battle barrage or not.

Attacks, be they strategic or tactical, are made by playing a selection of cards. Strategic cards can only be played in the strategic phase and likewise tactical cards can only be played in the tactical phase. Furthermore, many strategic cards must be played immediately in the turn in which they are drawn so players do not have a totally free hand in deciding which cards to play.

The British player always takes the initiative unless the German player has chosen to counter-attack at the end of the tactical phase when the playing order is reversed.

Once the turn contains a tactical phase and the infantry battle has commenced, the British player must initiate at least one attack in every tactical phase. If they cannot attack, this counts as a failure. Only when the British have completed all their attacks may the Germans counter-attack.

To reflect the difficulties faced by the British on the day, the game ends with a German victory if two consecutive British attacks have failed. Failure to defend a German counter-attack does not count toward victory or defeat.

Plan your tactics carefully!

4. Setting Up The Game

The game uses one six sided die (1d6) and three different sets of cards: 9 Terrain, 39 British, and 29 German cards.

The British and German card decks contain a mixture of strategic and tactical cards. Sets of cards are supplied in the accompanying pdf and are sized to fit commercial card covers.

To start the game, shuffle the British and German decks. Do not mix the British and German decks.

Next lay out the numbered Terrain cards in a three by three grid to represent the three German defensive lines and the axes of the three British divisional attacks. The trenches run top to bottom and the divisional attacks run left to right.

British	Terrain Cards		
31st	#1	#2	#3
4th	#4	#5	#6
29th	#7	#8	#9
German	Front Line	Second Line	Support Line

You are now ready to play the first turn.

5. Turn Sequence

Players start the game without any cards but acquire cards as the game progresses.

Each turn players draw a mixture of strategic and tactical cards and these are best sorted into separate hands. You will be unable to play tactical cards until later in the game. They should be saved because they will form the basis of attack or defence in the coming infantry battle.

As not all cards are played at once there is no limit to the number of cards a player may hold. When a pack is used up, shuffle the discarded cards to create a fresh deck. Each player should keep a separate discard deck.

As noted above the number of phases in a turn changes as the game progresses. The timing of the switch is governed by the British player as follows:

Turn	British Attack As Planned	British Delay Attack 48 hrs
1-4	Strategic phase only.	Strategic phase only.
5-6	Strategic & Tactical phases.	
7 on		Strategic & Tactical phases.
The decision to delay the attack must be taken at the end of turn 4.		

The strategic phase must be completed before the tactical phase begins.

Finally, it is important to keep track of the number of turns played using a piece of paper or some other indicator like a large dice.