

X Corps: The Somme 1916



A Card Wargame of World War I

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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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1. Introduction

This two player card game covers the experience of the British X 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 the commander of the X Corps, Lt. General Sir Thomas Morland. The other player is his opponent Lt. General Hermann von Stein commander of the German XIV Reserve Corps.

Unlike the first game in this series, VIII Corps, this is a balanced game. X Corps builds on the core rules from VIII Corps and introduces:

- The concept of “No Man’s Land” reflecting its importance to both sides.
- The German use of artillery in tactical defence and in support of their counter-attacks.
- The British use of counter-battery fire rather than pure area bombardment.
- The consolidation of captured trenches against counter-attacks.
- Balanced victory conditions for both sides.

The increased chance of the British winning reflects their greater success on the day. Having said that this game sees the Germans unleash the power of their artillery as the British penetrate the German lines and both sides engage in a brutal fight for the trenches.

2. Historical Background

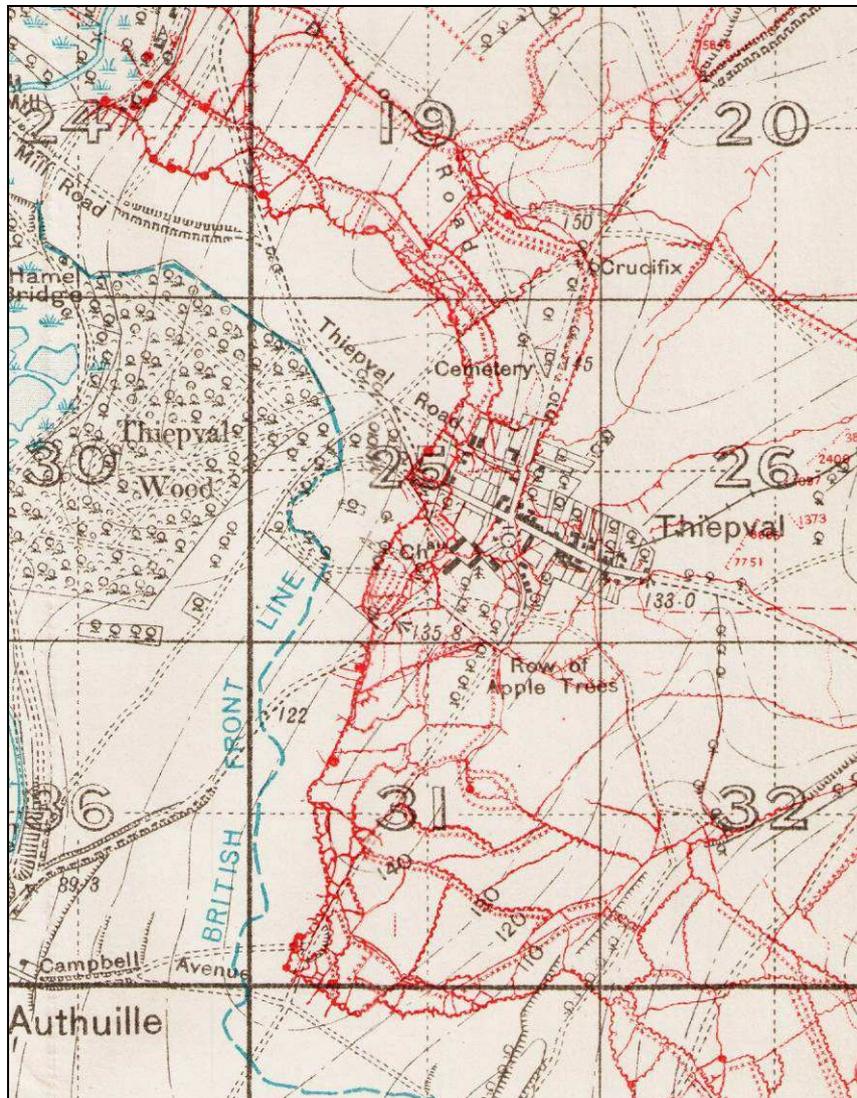
On July 1st 1916 X Corps comprised the 36th (Ulster), 32nd and 49th infantry divisions. The 49th did not take part in the first day’s attacks. As with VIII Corps it was one of five from Lt. General Sir Henry Rawlinson’s Fourth Army that attacked the German positions on the Somme. The attack was supported by a diversion created by Fifth Army’s VII Corps’ feint against the village of Gommecourt.

X Corps had three separate objectives. They were to take the three trench lines that comprised the German Front. They were: the Front Line containing the Leipzig Redoubt; the Second Line containing the Schwaben Redoubt and the fortified village of Thiepval and finally the incomplete Support Line. The British were to have mixed success on the day.

The German line, south of the river Ancre drew a lot of comparisons with that facing VIII Corps to the North. Interlocking fields of fire could be created by trenches overlooking one another with the Schwaben Redoubt a central point in the defence. The village of Thiepval had been fortified and stood alongside the Schwaben redoubt in the centre of the X Corps’ attacks. To the south the Leipzig redoubt thrust out towards the British lines, and whilst in German hands, could flank any attack across “No Man’s Land” to the north and south.

The British originally planned five days of bombardment all along Fourth Army’s front 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. However, bad weather reduced the intensity of the bombardment, which had to be extended for a further two days.



The Germans in the area of X Corps suffered very badly from the British bombardment. German numbers were whittled down. Communication became almost non-existent. Supplies like food, water and ammunition were spasmodic. Many trenches were reduced to lines of craters. Nonetheless the bombardment had clearly sign-posted the British intentions to attack.

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.

The bombardment had failed to cut the wire in most areas. Trench raids were sent out to determine the state of the wire and the German lines so X Corps had a good idea of what has facing them.

X Corps had not mined the German Front line and the High Command had given much thought to the thorny problem of getting the British troops across "No Man's Land" safely. In the end, the first waves the 36th and 32nd Divisions were moved into "No Man's Land" just before the start time of 7.30 am and positioned as near to the German Front Line trenches as possible. This meant that, when the barrage lifted, they beat the remaining Germans to their defensive positions and succeeded in capturing the German Front Line.

The first wave of the 36th (Ulster) Division's attack swept through the German Front Line and on to the Schwaben Redoubt. They cleared most of the trenches that made up the Redoubt and consolidated their position. They had suffered comparatively few casualties, capturing hundreds of prisoners. It seemed success was theirs but the Germans began a bombardment of "No Man's Land" cutting off the first wave from the British lines. The 36th's subsequent attacks suffered heavy casualties as they tried in vain to support the first wave. The Germans then put down an incredible barrage on the Schwaben Redoubt and counter-attacked repeatedly. Gradually, the British were forced back and by 10.30 pm they had been pushed out of the German lines completely. Only a few returned to the British trenches; most were killed or captured.

Meanwhile the 32nd Division raced towards Thiepval. The village was a pile of rubble by the time the attack was launched. Unfortunately for the British this helped hide and protect many German machine gun positions. The Brigadier of the 96th Brigade attacking Thiepval had previously flown over the battlefield in an observation plane and knew the dangers. A football was kicked into "No Man's Land" and the men followed. The Germans were waiting for them. The 32nd were mown down and the survivors pinned down. Only a few reached the German lines and they retired towards the 36th Division's positions. Within minutes the attack had stopped, with no further troops getting beyond the British wire. A second attack at 13.50 pm failed.

In front of the Leipzig redoubt the 32nd Division had, 10 minutes before the 7.30 am start, begun crawling towards the German lines. Also kicking footballs, they surged forward and captured the German Front trenches and the Leipzig Redoubt. They pushed forward another 150 yards until they reached another German redoubt; the Wundt Werk. The surviving British consolidated their position in the Leipzig Redoubt but attempts to support them failed. Troops crossing "No Man's Land" were gunned down by the Germans positions on their flank because 8th Division to the south had failed in their assault. The Germans mounted stronger and stronger counter-attacks and gradually pushed the British back, by 8.00 pm only a small contingent of British were left holding on to a small foothold in the German trenches.

Both Divisions had taken horrendous casualties but they had breached the German lines, and by day's end still had a foothold. Thiepval was not to be taken until 26 September.

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.

In contrast, to win the game the German player must counter-attack and push the last British forces out of their Front Lines. This means that the British must press their attack with real vigour. With only one captured Front Line trench the British are one successful German counter-attack away from losing the game.

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 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.

To further reflect the difficulties faced by the British on the day, the game also ends with a German victory if two consecutive British attacks fail. 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 33 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		
36th	#10	#11	#12
32nd	#13	#14	#15
32nd	#16	#17	#18
German	Front Line	Second Line	Support Line

In World War I British attacks were supported by troops fed through from “No Man’s Land”. The Germans learnt that, once it was clear the British were attacking, a bombardment of “No Man’s Land” was very effective in disrupting the British attack. To reflect this, the Germans may bombard “No Man’s Land” later in the game. So leave space for German “Barrage” cards to the left of the Front Line cards.

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.

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