

Seeing “The Big Picture”

BULGE 20 is not intended to be a detailed simulation of the Battle of the Bulge itself.

Rather, it presents a “Big Picture” view, providing insights into actually running a World War II campaign. The Command Staff system the game simulates is the “spine” of modern armies. A key design goal of **BULGE 20** is to get players to think in terms of how real armies work, as opposed to the convoluted sequencing used in most wargames.

This is why Antwerp and other major German strategic objectives are included – to address important questions such as: Could the Germans have achieved a strategic victory? Were there alternative Grand Strategies that each side could have employed?

The Allied player will not know what the German intent is, at least not at first, so he will have to carefully gauge his response. In **BULGE 20** the German player is given the opportunity to exploit strategic level fog of war – to maneuver the Allied player into the wrong response; the same challenge that Eisenhower and other Allied commanders faced in December of 1944.



Historically, the Ardennes Offensive took the Allies by surprise. Allied High Command initially thought that the Germans were going for Liege, a major Allied supply dump. But Hitler had ordered the panzers to avoid Liege and eschew a city fight. There was still some debate about this until the end of the war, as the Allies were not altogether sure of the German objectives. So the fog of war factor is heavy here. Although in retrospect the Germans lacked the capability to get close to Antwerp, at the time the Allied High Command did not know this. The Allies reconsidered their entire strategy in the West, thinking the Germans might have additional reserves behind the forces in the Ardennes and that the war could be prolonged.

They also did not realize that Antwerp was the German objective until the campaign was well underway. If nothing else, the critical decision to shift Patton’s Third Army to counterattack against the southern flank of the Bulge could have had serious ramifications for the ensuing campaigns in the West if the Ardennes Offensive had not committed all of the German strategic reserves on the Western Front. The game’s objectives reflect this uncertainty.

If the Allies bring in their reinforcements too late, then the Germans may be able to reach the Allied depots on the Meuse and thereby put themselves into the position to strike for total victory. If the Allies commit their strategic reinforcements and the Germans are only going for a “small” victory, then they disrupt their own time table for 1945. The

point is, the game can be won or lost not simply in the on-map battles, but mainly with the higher decision making of the players.

Supporting the Staff

I had several reasons for designing **BULGE 20**. One was simply to see if a Bulge game could be done at the army level. But the deeper reason is that I have never really been satisfied with the way most wargames portray military operations – where players repeat procedures which *seem* correct on the game board, but do not model actual military procedures. Instead, the player is some sort of Supreme Warlord with total control of his forces, not having to be concerned with the subtleties of planning. Typically, players can do whatever they want with their forces each turn. Sometimes, supply and command control rules are included, which modify this situation, but do not deal with the *real issue*.

I consider this a critical shortfall of most wargame designs: their failure to model actual command and staff procedures.

“Most Bulge games ask if the panzers can reach the Meuse or not. I wanted to give the big picture. Can the Germans win? Yes, if they think Big Picture and not bean-count.” -JM

Take the German 1944 Ardennes Offensive, more popularly known as the Battle of the Bulge. The German High Command simply did not order its divisions in the West to move to the Ardennes and attack. It took *weeks* of planning, stockpiling of supplies, and training special units (e.g., Skorzeny’s brigade) before the operation could begin. All of this presumes good staff work: i.e., administrative (G-1), intelligence (G-2), operational (G-3) and logistical (G-4) planning.

The Germans were good at all of these, and the Allies in 1944-45 proved to be even better. Patton’s motorized march to the battle zone was a triumph of *staff planning*. It was not simply a matter of ordering units to turn from front to flank and drive north. It took a lot of hard staff work to get all of the units organized and ensure that they were provided with vehicles and fuel to get them moving.

The Staff Card System

The number of Staff cards in a player’s hand represents overall **command control** levels. The Germans initially have the edge here, owing to **preparation and surprise**. As the campaign develops, this advantage shifts to the Allies, largely representing the immense **materiel superiority** with which they were able to bring to the battle.

The Staff cards also represent **morale and perceptual factors**. The Allies start the game not knowing German intentions. If they guess wrong, and commit the wrong reinforcements, they can lose their chance for victory. So they have to use their G-2 cards to figure out what the Germans are up to.

The critical thing is that, using this Staff card system, players cannot simply make up their strategy as they go along. They have to *think ahead* about what cards they will need in the short term (to use during the opponent’s ensuing Player Turn) and in the long term (to use on their own following Player Turn). Additionally, players also have to decide the right moment to play their card’s Events.

Another innovation in the **BULGE 20** Staff Planning game system is that it does not use a traditional, structured Sequence of Play. It was better to integrate actions into the play of the Staff cards, which works well because of the small number of units on the map.

Staff Planning: Being a G-Whiz

The G-1 cards represent some critical administrative factors. One is how you organize your armies; you have to put the right units in the right place.



Another is cohesion; keeping units propped up, fully supported and coordinated keeps them at maximum fighting trim after the wear and tear of battle. Unfortunately, rebuilding a shattered (eliminated) corps size formation requires careful evaluation (i.e., the expenditure of a G-1 card) and often takes several weeks; thus we have added a Delay Roll to render the verdict in determining that assessment of “how badly was it mauled” and “how quickly it can return to active duty?” Often the answer will be, “not for the duration of this operation, sir.”

G-2 allows you to examine enemy forces and try to garner their intentions, both in the short and long term, by examining the enemy’s cards and OOB mat. Of course, it can also be used as a shield in the form of counter-intelligence to *prevent* the enemy from ascertaining that information.

Staff planning for battles is very important and can be a real drain on your Staff cards. It requires the right mix of G-2, G-3 and G-4 cards to orchestrate all of the advantages needed to ensure victory on the battlefield; it is no longer simply a matter of piling on more combat factors. And before and after a battle, it is G-1 administration that is there to clean up the mess and keep things organized and optimally efficient so that the campaign can continue to that side’s advantage.

For battles, there is also a Fog of War card. It prevents the enemy from the sure knowledge that their opponent has nothing additional to commit to a battle; one can never be sure of these things, as von Moltke teaches us “no plan survives contact with the enemy” – especially no *battle plan*.

Wargames generally lump all sorts of logistical functions under the term “supply.” But logistics also includes transportation,

administration, medical and much more. With this game system, you can employ G-4 cards to make your combat units more effective in movement and combat. G-4 cards can also be used reconstitute shattered formations that were in supply.

The mix of G-type cards that both sides have available to them in the game represents the overall capabilities of each side. The Allies get more G-4 cards (particularly the generic ones), representing their massive superiority in logistics – and the German deficiency in this area. The Event cards represent one time major events, unique historical incidents, and help tell the “story” of the campaign.

You will note that some German Staff cards can be played only if they have chosen the *Wacht Am Rhein* objective. This was done mainly to give the Germans a reason to choose their most difficult objective and reflects a “maximum effort” potential to it. In other words, if the Germans wish to risk more, they get more with which to execute it. The “Small Slam” objectives are balanced by these cards (representing extraordinary effort and commitments) *not* being available.

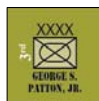
And allow me to interject a note about the weather, as it was critical to the battle; and not simply because of the ability to utilize airpower. Bad weather meant that it was more difficult to move men and supplies along the already overcrowded and decaying road network, so if weather is clear both players draw an extra Staff card to simulate the improving conditions on the ground.

Order of Battle

The game gives each player command responsibility at the Army Group level. The German front here was under Model’s Army Group B. The Allies were largely under Omar Bradley’s 12th Army Group. This Bulge game is unique in that it includes The Big Picture, from the Westwall to Antwerp.

It takes one Operations card to conduct movement or attack with one unit (regardless of its size). What this means is that it is more efficient to keep your corps together in armies rather than dispersing them across the map as detachments. This game mechanic neatly simulates this command control issue. Of course, sometimes you will have to detach corps, simply to cover more ground, or to exploit an opportunity – and it is those sorts of evolving dilemmas that make the puzzles in life and games so interesting.

Corps are essentially the “strength points” and “damage markers” that make up the armies. Each corps represents three to five



divisions. Allied corps are stronger due to their generally superior combat experience and firepower, as well as higher divisional strength. In some cases, I readjusted the number and type of corps to give the correct balance of forces for better gameplay.

For example, 1st SS Panzer corps included two armored and three infantry divisions, so I “moved” a couple of the infantry divisions to some of the under-strength German infantry corps to balance things out. Overall, the numbers total up correctly. On the Allied side, US armored corps represent formations which had either additional armored divisions, or more aggressive leadership. Bear in mind that the US Army did not have an armored corps echelon; they are in this game to allow these units to represent a functional distinction.

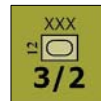
The Map

The map is not a point-to-point system. It represents what are termed the “main supply routes” (MSRs) and “axes of advance.” These are not necessarily identical to the road network but rather where both sides had their logistical nets set up for army level formations. MSRs, by their very nature, are difficult to shift about on the Army and Army Group levels, especially in terrain like the Ardennes, and especially in winter. Look at how the Sicilian campaign hinged on the possession of a couple of key supply roads – and this was in summer without all the usual problems of a winter campaign. Remember, you’re doing *staff planning* now!

There is no cost in movement points to enter different types of terrain. Movement costs are actually built into the number of spaces designed onto the game board. In the Ardennes, there is a higher density of spaces, representing the difficulty of moving through the forests and ridges. Northwest of the Meuse River, the terrain opens up, so there are fewer spaces; thus it is two spaces from the Meuse crossings to Antwerp and Brussels, compared to the three or four spaces it takes to reach the Meuse via the Ardennes.

Probably one of the most critical factors in the Battle of the Bulge was traffic control. The Germans could not deploy their panzer formations because armored units were bunched up on the roads that deteriorated into muddy quagmires. This is one reason that 6th Panzer Army attempted to use its infantry divisions to make the initial breakthrough.

This is also the reason that rough terrain and rivers restrict the number of attacking units. This forces players to make decisions about keeping some of their corps in reserve that their historical counterparts had to face. Although it is largely because they could not be used up front, it also was better to commit



fresh units later when you could see which of your armies has made a breakthrough, if any. Note that you have to control a space to run a LOC through it. This represents setting up supply routes, forward support points, etc. Historically, German spearheads faced considerable logistical shortfalls (and thus have a shorter LOC range in the game). The problem was not so much a lack of supply, but a lack of *transport*. They lacked the vehicles to move supplies, spare parts and replacements forward – and even where they had sufficient transports, the abysmal road situation made such support problematic. The massive Allied logistical “tail” proved itself in this campaign, especially during the first part in which the Allies were falling back on their own lines of communications.

Air Operations

The Air rules owe a lot to Matt Caffrey’s “AirLand Battle of the Bulge” thesis. His research indicates that both sides actually committed large numbers of aircraft to the Bulge campaign, right from the start. This is contrary to the usual view, which is that the weather kept the Air Forces from operating until December 23rd or so. Actually, what the weather did was to *restrict* close air support. Throughout the campaign, the Allies made considerable efforts towards interdicting German rear area traffic, and attacking depots. It also provided air cover against the Luftwaffe, which made this campaign its one last great aerial offensive of the war.



In the game, players cannot conduct close air support until the weather clears. Otherwise, their air force cards are useful in cutting down the efficiency of the enemy support system by causing Staff card discards.

The Presentation

Alan Emrich came up with the graphic design for **BULGE 20** – trying to capture a WW2 “war movie” Headquarters look and feel. Ably assisted by Tim Allen, this dynamic duo has greatly enhanced this board game’s verisimilitude and storytelling ability.

And that, dear wargamer, is **BULGE 20**. It’s something of an experiment, in that I have invented the Command Staff game system to make it work. And, if you like it, there are many more wargames that can use this same system, and on different subjects and at larger scales. One possibility might be the Breakout and Pursuit campaign in France following the Normandy landings and ending with Arnhem. The Allies would have to breach the Rhine before winter sets in. Or maybe the American Civil War or Napoleonic? Wherever staff planning can really shine, this system is designed to take wargamers there. – *JM*