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NEWS: Figures, wargames, websites, and more.

Kobold Caverns: The *D&D* Adventure Continues

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Books I've Read

Solomons Air War: Volume 3 (Nov-Dec 1942)

The Stand: Final Flight of Frank Luke jr

Savage Skies, Emerald Hell: WWII Air P-NG

Pigs, Missiles and the CIA: V2 LatAm 37

Midway: Pacific War's Most Famous Battle

The First British Army: 1624-1628 (CSold114)

Allied Neutralization of Rabaul: WWII

Model Dioramas Handbook

Back Into Focus: Real Story Capa's D-Day

Panzer Aces: Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS

The City Who Fought (sci-fi novel)

USN Submarine vs IJN CV: Duel 139

The Athenian Army: 507-322BC (Elite 259)

South Atlantic 1982: Air Campaign 51

Black Star Renegades (sci-fi novel)

AH-1 Cobra Gunship vs NVA Armor: Duel 140

US Air Power 1945-1990: Vol2 TechAtWar 3

The Story of the Spitfire: History

Beachhead Assault: Royal Naval Commandos

Night Fighter Aces of Luftwaffe 1940-43

Panzer Crewman: Casemate Illustrated

Of Kerns and Galloglasses: Ret to Regt 24

Hitler's Miracle Weapons: Vol 1 – Nukes

Hitler's Miracle Weapons: Vol 2 – Rockets

The Waffen-SS at Kharkov: Feb-Mar 1943

Soviet Battle for Berlin 1945

Spying for Hitler: Nazis Infiltrated America

The Farthest Valley: Chosin Korean War

Pilots and Painted Ladies: WWII 493 Bomb Sqdn

American Experimental Fighters of WWII

The Kraken Wakes (sci-fi novel)

Star Corpsman: Bloodstar Book One (sci-fi novel)

Star Corpsman: Bloodstar Book Two (sci-fi novel)

Make Germany Great Again: 1930s-40s

Kamenets-Podolsky Pocket 1944: Camp 411

WWII Firepower: *Chain of Command*

by Russ Lockwood

Comrade Lieutenant Steve and I sat down to look over our Red Army forces: Lots of basic infantry, a T-34 and a T-26 tank, and lots of supplemental teams of MGs, mortars, and snipers. We even had a partisan squad and MMG team.

A T-34 enters to oppose a PzIV as Soviet and German squads hug terrain on the far right flank.

Germans Dan and John probably had the same number in this meeting engagement game of *Chain of Command* (CoC). We'd know soon enough after the cardboard fog burned away...

The table. Soviets from right. Soviet left flank at bottom; right flank at top.



WWII Skirmish Gaming

Per usual, we drew random cards to determine sides. There were only four of us as last-minute circumstances forced at least three to four players to cancel their gaming plans. Each side had about a company -- Dan's recap below lists the forces in case you want to duplicate the scenario.

One thing we don't do is the patrol phase. Yes, I know the movement of the Jump-Off Points (JOPs) is an important mechanic, but we've found that allowing the players to simply place them results in about the same effect. As troops enter the table at JOPs, and capturing these are important victory conditions, where you place them on a 10x5-foot table is important. You can always move a JOP if you roll enough 5s to earn a Command Chip and then spend the chip as one of the options.

We spread out across the entire table, me generally on the left Soviet flank and Steve on the right. Once we placed our JOPs, the center dividers were removed, and the Germans won the initiative roll to go first.

Wehrmacht On The Move

The Germans poured onto the table via all their JOPs. John deployed one squad of *Panzergranadiers* on foot and another in a halftrack driving down the trail in the woods on the Soviet left flank. Dan deployed a squad in the middle, another towards the right Soviet flank, and a third on the far right Soviet flank. He also rolled a Pz IV up the road on the right. That would need some Soviet attention.

Dan (left) deploys the Pz IV and German infantry while Steve contemplates his seizure of a patch of woods.



On the Soviet side, I deployed two squads on my left in the woods, and a third in the center behind a hill. That probably wasn't the best place as it could be caught in a crossfire, but the JOP needed defending, and that's where I placed it. Steve brought out squads across the center and right flank, sort of opposing Dan's squads.

I also brought out the T-34 to oppose the Pz IV. Here I made a mistake. As the PzIV was back from the "edge" of its hill, I thought it could not shoot, so I didn't take a shot.

You guessed it. The Germans won initiative and the Pz IV could shoot and did at my T-34.

John gets ready to deploy Germans as my Soviet infantry (bottom of photo) pop out of the JOP (red star marker). Note that I thought the wooded templates were Heavy Terrain and the rest was Light Terrain. Incorrect...

Tank vs Tank

In CoC, the tank that fires rolls a number of d6s equal to its AP rating (I believe a Pz IV is 8d6) and looks for 4-5-6 for hits. The target rolls a number of d6s equal to its Armor rating (T-34 is 6d6) looking for 5-6 to cancel any firer hits.

The Pz IV's first shot had two more hits than I had saves, and so rolled 1d6 on the "2" table -- all bad for the target mind you. The end result was the 76mm main gun was put out of action. Being a skirmish game, there is no repair roll for damage to vehicles.

So much for the vaunted T-34. Dan's PzIV's first shot with its 75mm gun put the T-34's main gun out of action.

Now, we Soviets had no AT gun in our inventory, although we did have a T-26 tank with its 45mm gun and an Anti-Tank Rifle (ATR) team.

Steve brought out the ATR team and pinged the Pz IV's tracks. Amazingly, the Pz IV was immobilized.

So, the T-34 could move, but not shoot the main gun, but could still shoot the hull MG. The Pz IV couldn't move, but could still shoot all weaponry. I know which damage I would rather have. The Pz IV dominated the valley.

The forces hug terrain as they seek to advance.

In The Woods

I tried to move the squads up. One squad was fine and drifted towards the center. The other squad rolled its 2d6 and rolled a 3, i.e. 3 inches. It shifted forward a bit. The next turn it rolled a 2. The next turn it rolled a 3. The next turn it rolled another 3. Ugh.



Here was another mistake I only learned midway through the game. I thought the tree templates were forests (heavy cover in CoC parlance) as opposed to the green cover which was woods (light cover), so I stayed inside the forests. Alas, I had misunderstood. All of the left flank was woods -- the forest templates were eye candy. So all those turns of trying to cross the light cover woods into heavy cover forests were wasted since there was no heavy cover.

John's Panzergrenadiers hop out of the halftrack.

As a point of rules, infantry that move (1d6) can fire, but infantry that move 2d6 do not fire. In the woods, the sighting/firing distance was 12 inches. Not that John was moving quickly, but he was in a firing line along the stream and then spread out when he disembarked from the halftrack.

John's German firing line conforms to the stream. My Soviet partisans are atop the hill, which apparently has purple flowered bushes. One of my riflemen is killed (right side photo).

On The Far Right

Steve and Dan traded shots on the far right flank. Both were in light cover and both were happy to do so. The T-34 added its inept MG fire. Then Steve brought out a second squad and the T-26. The T-26 stayed behind the T-34, which advanced until another Pz IV shot immobilized it. So, it became a MG pillbox.

Steve started to move one squad across the valley towards the German squad. The Pz IV shelled it with little effect, so Dan brought out an armored car. I'm not sure of the sequence, but the ATR and T-26 made the German armored car very cautious and it hunkered on the side of the hill. Meanwhile, something hit the T-26 and now that main gun was out, too. It scuttled behind a hill outcrossing and headed for the center.

Dan sends out his armored car as Steve's T-26 bypasses the disabled T-34. Steve's infantry begins its advance (bottom right corner) to come to grips with Dan's infantry in the woods.

Central Nervous System

I stuck my NCO on the side of the hill to call in mortar fire on the German teams. It was successful, although that never seemed to diminish the German firepower much. Something was at work here I did not know...

I deployed a MMG team on the other side of the hill to bring fire upon Dan's Germans in the woods. It was targeted, so I moved it off the hill next to my own squad.

Alas, that squad took so much damage, it became pinned.



Ooops: Tracks In The Woods

I was pecking away at the lead *Panzergranadier* squad so much so that half the remaining Germans moved around the halftrack to get out of the line of fire from my Partisans.

Germans advance across the stream against fewer and fewer Soviets.

So, that was the right time to charge the halftrack and blow it up. The partisans rolled poorly for movement -- only two got to the halftrack. No problem. Two on one? Sounds good. The rest of the partisans were spread out between the vehicle and the hill. My other squad remained behind for fire support.

That's when I learned, or I should say relearned, about the 4-inch melee rule. All troops within 4 inches of a melee join the melee.

Uh-oh. The *Panzergranadiers* clumped on the other side of the halftrack within 4 inches were equipped with lots of automatic weapons. Good as my partisans might be, they were outnumbered.

The ill-advised partisan charge into melee.

The die rolls scattered across the table and sure enough, the Germans proved victorious. My four remaining partisans ran back 12 inches with three shock, but oddly enough, remained in A-one fighting condition.

The *Panzergranadiers* targeted my remaining squad, which took so much shock, it routed.

End Of Game

Steve was in relatively good shape, but faced significant firepower on the far right and in the center. I was teetering. I figured I wouldn't be able to hold out for much longer, so Steve and I conceded.

Need I say more?



Lessons To Be Learned

I admit I did not play a very smart game. The concept was fine: hold the center and push the left flank, but many little mistakes on my part added up to defeat.

Steve's Soviets take a pounding crossing open ground.

First, I didn't intersperse my specialty teams (MGs, Mortars, etc.) with a regular infantry squad. Dan did this on his firing line in the center. I used my teams as independent entities.

The difference is that each loss in an interspersed line is taken by the regular squad members. Or put another way, crew losses are replaced by regular infantry members. No wonder Dan's crescendo of fire never abated.

Second, I misinterpreted the woods terrain. Dan placed more intense woods terrain pieces on the green cloth. I thought them to be forests and tried to hug them for the better cover. Alas, no. All woods were the same -- the terrain pieces were eye candy. John understood. I did not. So my big push turned out to be a tentative creep. Mechanics-wise, woods was woods was woods (light cover).

Third, I was ignorant of actual shock removal. I used one order to remove one shock, however, it was really one order removes two shock. So, I had a hard time rallying troops. By the time I understood that, it was too late.

John and I played that 5s and 6s hit in the woods, but it was really 4-5-6 hits. That actually worked to our favor as it kept our forces relatively intact for most of the firefight. We finally played it properly and that's when the casualties increased.

Fifth, I failed to recognize that the partisan squad was the most powerful squad on the Soviet side. Why? They had captured German automatic weapons. I had four of the 10 behind the hill doing nothing for most of the game. If I had interspersed the partisan MMG team, that would have evened out the firepower John had using the halftrack MG.

Sixth, I didn't realize melee was all troops within 4 inches of the contact. The partisans essentially launched a suicide charge.

And seventh, I didn't ask about line of sight from my T-34 to the PzIV, so I missed my shot.

Great Game

I like a large part of *Chain of Command*, especially the cascading command and orders if you set things up right. Next time I play *CoC*, I'm going to re-read this recap. I may not do any better, but I could hardly do any worse.

Thanks Dan, for hosting and GMing and the gamers who made it an enjoyable afternoon.



Company Level Battle: *Chain of Command*

by Daniel

I had planned a six-player *Chain of Command* game, but last minute sickness left me with three players, so I filled in as the fourth player. Today's action would pit a well-armed German company against a larger, but less well-equipped Soviet company. Random draw determined Russ and Steve would command the Russians, while John and Daniel would play the Germans.

Each player had a three-squad platoon with two senior leaders and plentiful support:

Germans

- 4 Senior Leaders
- 1 Adjutant
- 2 *Panzergranadier* squads
- 4 Grenadier squads
- 3 Light Machine Gun teams (belt-fed)
- 2 Medium Machine Gun teams
- 1 81mm Mortar team
- 1 75mm Infantry Gun team
- 1 Pz-IID tank
- 1 Pz-IVF2 tank
- 1 PSW 222 Armored Car
- 1 Flamethrower team
- 2 Entrenchments
- 1 SdKfz 251/2 Halftrack

Russians

- 4 Senior Leaders
- 1 Adjutant
- 1 Partisan squad
- 7 Rifle squads
- 3 Light Machine Gun teams (magazine fed)
- 2 Medium Machine Gun teams
- 1 82mm Mortar team
- 1 50mm Mortar team
- 1 T-26S tank
- 1 T-34C tank
- 1 ATR team
- 1 Sniper team
- 4 Entrenchments

Russian squads were slightly larger than German squads, with the Partisan squad unusually well equipped with several submachinegunners (similar to a *Panzergranadier* squad). The Germans had more submachinegunners and overall firepower, but with six infantry squads against eight slightly larger squads, the Germans had to be careful how they were committed.

Both sides had tank support. How that was used impacted the battle significantly.

The Russians had choice of table side and they selected the "left" side of the table shown. The table was then divided by the cardboard fog-of-war barrier that allowed both sides to place their Jump-Off Points in secret. Then the barrier was removed and a dice-off determined that the Germans would start the game.

The table before play. The Russians chose the left side. Trees depict woods with other green features representing brush, which provided light cover unless fired at from higher elevation. Photo by Dan.

Meeting Engagement

This was a company-sized encounter battle to drive the other side off the table. All platoons started at a Force Morale of 10. All troops were considered regular, but an off-colored Command die was added to each player's Command Dice that was limited to *Panzergranadiers* or vehicles (Germans) or Partisans or vehicles (Russians). A '5' or '6' on an off-colored Command Die could not be used for any purpose.



Both sides placed their Jump-Off Points in reasonable locations across the table. Both sides eventually tried overwhelming the opposite side's right flank to capture their Jump-Off Point. Steve deployed two Russian squads on the right and one at the center, following up with an LMG team on the right. Russ held the left, which was dominated by light woods and 12-inch visibility, eventually deploying two squads with a third squad near the center.

I deployed my weakest squad on the left in some woods. Although only 11 men, it had four SMGs and after seeing more than twice as many Russians, decided to stay in the woods and let the Russians come to him. I committed a Pz-IVF2 on the left side to intimidate the Russians.

Tank Vs. Tank

In response, a T-34C showed up on the opposite side, which swiftly lost its main armament from the panzer's first shot and then a tread from the second shot. The Russians doubled-down by bringing up their T-26S and an ATR team to try to neutralize the Pz-IV. The T-26S also lost its main armament to the panzer's first shot at it, but the ATR team knocked out the panzer's tread, immobilizing it – but the PzIV still dominated the hill and could fire upon the Russian infantry on that side of the table.

By this time, Steve had already decided to advance against the lone German squad defending their Jump-Off Point. The panzer fired with minimal effect, prompting me to bring on a PSW 222 armored car that was better suited to deal with infantry. The height advantage robbed the Russians of the cover the brush would otherwise have provided and the first wave of Russians started to take losses as they advanced.

The ATR team tried to take out the armored car, which repositioned out of the ATR's field of view after a ping warned it of the danger, but the armored car continued to harass the Russian infantry.

Panzergrenadiers On The Battlefield

On the opposite side, John loaded his *Panzergrenadiers* onto the halftrack and advanced along the road in the woods to join a Grenadier squad that deployed on a small hill. Russ had one Russian squad deployed at the time, which was quickly joined by a second and both sides started to form a firing line. John's third squad held a small section of woods to his left that acted as an anchor against the center as it got into a firefight with Steve's third squad.

I deployed his second squad in the center and reinforced it with an 81mm Mortar team and an MMG team to bring some fire against Steve's center squad. This prompted Steve to deploy a partisan MMG team to bring fire against my position in the center. I won this firefight and drove off the partisans, routing them.

I committed my third squad of *Panzergrenadiers* to help John's attack in the woods, which quickly engaged a third squad that Russ deployed. The *Panzergrenadiers* firepower was starting to thin the ranks of the Russians, prompting Russ to commit an MMG team, which balanced the firefight briefly. John added some firepower from his anchor squad and some good dice pinned the Russians.

Meanwhile John's *Panzergrenadiers* and the partisans were tearing into each other. John started to refuse his right flank, prompting Russ to charge into close combat around the halftrack. Both sides took losses but the partisans got the worst of it – although they remained on the battlefield in good order. John brought his Grenadiers closer and soon Russ had a second pinned squad.

The sniper team deploys atop the hill.

Last Gasp

Steve brought in a Sniper team and his fourth squad in the center to relieve the first squad, which was worn down significantly, and renewed the firefight against John's anchor position. While this started to have some effect, the Russians saw which way the winds of war were blowing. Steve's Force Morale was down to '8' and Russ was down to '7,' while both German commands were still at '10.'

Steve was not so confident about reaching Daniel's German infantry while the tank and AC still covered the battlefield. Russ was convinced John would be able to capture his Jump-Off Point, so the Russians agreed to concede the game.





Dan (left) and Steve at the start of another exciting three-player game of *SpaceBase*.

***SpaceBase*: Enthusiasm**

by Russ Lockwood

After the *Chain of Command* game, Steve, Dan, and I had some time and Steve immediately suggested a game of *SpaceBase*. He was currently hot on the game, as we still were.

That's a good sign for a game -- replayability. The combo of many cards and dice per player per turn makes for a virtually unlimited number of options and decision. You could have the exact same cards in the exact same order, but the ever changing nature of 2d6 die rolls means you'll have a different game. Of course, given the number of different cards, a simple shuffle means you are unlikely to generate the same card layouts twice.

Best of all, the basic game is really simple to understand. No big spreadsheet decisions here, just roll and see what you can buy.

We included the expansion *Shy Pluto* in our game, but not *Mysteries of Terra Proxima*. I like *Shy Pluto's* introduction of new cards, small dice, and mechanics -- really adds to the game without increasing complexity by much.

Alas, *The Mysteries Of Terra Proxima* seems to add too many notes, options, and considerations. By the end of our *TMOTP* campaign, we were staggering under "analysis paralysis" as Dan called it. We just had too many options and too many decisions and too many mechanics to weigh.

Game The First

That said, we dove into a *SB* game with enthusiasm, rolling dice, picking cards, and trying to amass the 40 Victory Points for the win.

It's hard to recap a game given all the choices, so I'll just note that I had built up a nice little package of interlocking cards that could generate lots of cash. That's the good news. The bad news was a severe lack of VP cards and a worse lack of my opponents rolling the magic number that triggered all that goodness.

Still, my basic income could buy just about any card in the third tier, and a special card that allowed me to save cash after purchase let me head into VP card purchases for my slots. I was mighty pleased with my strategic purchases.

Alas for me, by the time I started to look at direct buying of VP cards, Dan had run up his score with his own package tour for the win. Steve came in second.

Game The Second

We reset, adding in more of the interlocking "arrow cards" to the decks. Unlike my first cash rich game, I was cash poor in this second game, limping along for the longest time with low-rent cards. Indeed, Steve looked to be in the best position.

As we built our package tours, I had many chances to cash in with the right opponents' rolls, but they avoided rolling the correct number like the plague. I mean, best I can figure the percentage, rolling a 6 or a 7 on 2d6 is about a one-third chance and adding an 8 to the mix is about a 50-50 roll. With two opponents, I should hit the 50-50 with one of them, right?

Bah! It seemed like there was a better chance of the proverbial thousand monkeys banging out a Shakespeare play on typewriters.

At least I edged out Steve for second place. You can play the odds, but sometimes the odds play you.

Still a great game and a great day of gaming.

SpaceBase: Genesis and Biodome

by Dan

I recently found out on BGG that *Genesis* is not a Saga expansion, but simply a variety of new ships and colonies for *SpaceBase*.

That disappointed me a little, but prompted me to open the expansion. Sure enough, it adds about 50-60 new ship cards (some Alien) and Alien colony cards. A significant number are VP cards. I think they exhausted all the permutations currently possible (which may not have been necessary to do).

The *Biodome* expansion that was out of print was back in print, and I received that recently as well. *Biodome* is a small expansion of about 25 cards that includes more "Alien" colonies and ships, plus ships that have a choice as to which sector they can be placed.

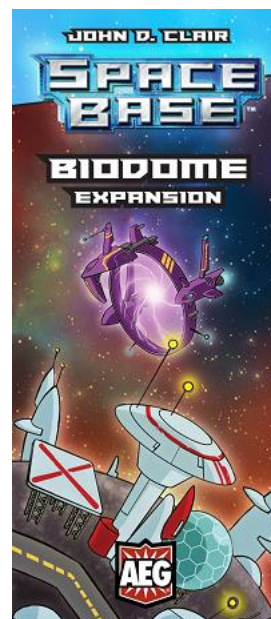
Much of these expansions remind me of the *Terra Proxima* Alien cards, many that had such potent effects, so you really have to look over everything on the table to assess what might be useful to you or too useful for your opponents. Some of the new cards are relatively underwhelming, but consistent with the base game mechanics and will prove useful in a standard core *SpaceBase* game.

Somewhat fortunately, I ran out of sleeves provided in Command Station. I really didn't want to sleeve *ALL* the expansion cards, as I thought many were redundant, too broken, or too weak. That forced me to exclude 48 ship cards I thought were "unworthy" of including in the game, but there are plenty left to provide endless variety.

I purposely left out the "variable sector" cards.

It also prompted me to put together some "Burkley Rules" on allowing players to "Call the Game" and determine what should and should not be included. Each choice will impact the nature of the game.

I'll have to look at BGG to see if anybody came up with some new Monsters for a Saga-like variant...



HMGS-Next Gen: Gaming A Plenty

by John Spiess

Battle of Edington 878: Rye, NY

In the teen center at the Rye, NY, Library, our first HMGS Next Gen event for 2025 was the Battle of Edington in 878 between the Vikings and the forces of Alfred the Great. This was the same scenario that I ran at the Pax Unplugged convention.

Gamers a plenty. Photo by John.

We fielded a mix of high school and middle school students. A lot of them play *D&D* and *Warhammer* and a few of them showed me photos of some of the models they had painted. I have to say that at least one kid was pretty darn good.

This scenario is always a great time since it's a very even game. There was a lot of screaming, which was good since most of the other kids in the teen center came over at some point to watch.

In one awful roll, one gamer needed 4s or better on d6s, but rolled only below that. That unit ended up crushed, but it was pretty entertaining nonetheless.

A straight-up battle. Photo by John.

The artistic photo of the group is a selfie by Jackson. I'm still not sure how I got it, but he said "I air dropped it, no problem." Uh-huh.

My favorite part of the event is actually giving the history lesson at the end. Sarah, the teen librarian, has everyone -- including kids here waiting for parental pickup -- come over to listen. And then everyone packed up for me. It took about 15 minutes -- pretty cool.

We'll be back here next month for a WWI trench game.

The artistic selfie. Photo by Jackson.

AWI Battle of Freeman's Farm: Larchmont, NY

We had 10 gamers playing in the Battle of Freeman's Farm, including Kim the Teen Librarian. I guess every school district has a different history course since these middle school gamers pretty much knew everything about the Battle of Saratoga. In fact, they had just finished a section on it, and that's why this particular battle was requested for today's game.

The beginning of the AWI game. Photo by John.



I'm not sure if it because they learned about the battle in school, or because they have played other games, but these kids actually knew column and line tactics.

Knowledgeable kids. Photo by John.

This game was a bit more complicated than my usual Dark Age slugfest or castle siege. They advanced in columns, broke down into lines when they got into firing range, and took advantage of any cover (like fences), when they could.

The British players knew they had better firepower and really took advantage of it. Then they launched textbook bayonet charges when the American militia was ready to break. The Continental regiments mowed down the British at point blank range, causing horrendous casualties, but in the end, they just couldn't hold and the British won the day.

American start. Photo by John.

We finished with a great discussion of what really happened and the larger implications to the outcome of the entire war. You can probably tell that I had fun with this one. It's great when the kids are excited about history.

I also spoke with Kim and a few parents after the game. They want to make a big effort to have future games reflect what is being studied in the classroom. I basically responded that's exactly what I would like to accomplish. Kim will liaison with the history department and see what options we might have. In the meantime, we have our next game scheduled for next month and just have to pick a scenario.

The gamers in the WWI trenches (top) and a French tank on the move. Photos by John.

WWI Battle of Verdun: Darien, CT

Most students are studying for midterms now, so they moved our game to the sound proof room. Jim Stanton was able to stop by and help since Wednesday is the off night for Stamford's after school program.

WWI is always a favorite with this crowd. I really don't even need to explain the rules much anymore. They are all familiar. One funny incident occurred when a German player was firing his tank at a French bunker. The French were getting hammered on this flank, so they made a last charge from the bunker towards the German infantry firing from shell holes in front of them for a melee. Cass asked if he could fire the tanks machine gun into the French troops in the melee. I told him yes, but he would also might hit his own troops. The classic response... "I'm OK with that."



WWI: An Attrition of Souls

by Russ Lockwood

Renaud set up *An Attrition of Souls*, a game of WWI on a grand scale. Each turn is six months, each counter is about a corps or fleet or air army, and point-to-point movement along restricted lines regulates attacks. It takes from an hour to two hours per game. By random die roll, I became the Entente and Renaud the Central Powers.

Unusual Mobilization Mechanic

Each side gets Industrial Points based on spaces held: The Central Powers starts with eight and the Entente with 12, but the Central Powers goes first.

Each side tosses their units into a pouch and draws blindly, with one unit

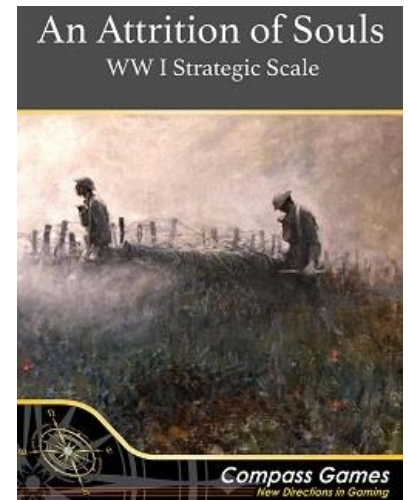
drawn per Industrial Point. Central Powers start with German and Austro-Hungarian units in the pouch. When Turkey enters the war, the Turkish units are tossed into the same pouch. When Bulgaria enters the war, those units are tossed in as well.

The map. Pardon the glare.

On the Entente side, British, French, Russian, and Serbian units go into their pouch. When Italy, Greece, Romania, and the US enters, in those units go.

The result is a random draw of units per turn. It is possible to draw few units of one country and many of another. Planning is not one of the strongpoints of the game.

Granted, we only played twice. Generally, you'll draw an even amount among the countries, but sometimes not as such. When Paris was contested with a massive German invasion, I drew a measly one French counter. That was helped by more British counters.



The Entente play mat in the process of placing counters. Note that the top row of Serbian, French, British, and Russian counters will be placed inside a pouch for blind draws – except for two Serbian units that start in Serbia.

Movement Mechanic

All units drawn from a bag may be placed on the associated capital. Only those units that start in a capital can move. All others stay put, whether enemy are in the same space or not.

That's different from most other games, although it's a shade of *Admirals' War* which returns ships to ports. Fortunately, each player can pick one space and "rail" units ultimately back to the capital so they can move with the newly drawn counters.

The Germans attack Belgium in Fall 1914.

That's actually a nice decision mechanic: What forces do you use do you hold a space? Since you only rail a maximum of one space worth of troops, which space do you choose?

As for movement, units move along the lines through as many friendly spaces as you want, but must stop on an enemy-controlled, enemy-held, or enemy-contested space.

Most moves into enemy spaces trigger mandatory combats.



Combat Mechanic

Each counter has a small die face on it: Infantry a 1, Artillery a 2, and Aircraft a 3. That's the exact number needed to roll on a d6 to get a hit.

Later in the game, the Austro-Hungarians mount a counter-attack in the Ruhr as the Russian armies hold out. Meanwhile, the Entente tries to rid France of the Boche.

The attacker rolls a number of dice equal to the number of units from one country he has attacking. Thus, if British and French counters are attacking, you roll dice only for British counters or French counters, not both.

The defender does NOT roll any dice, but instead uses the attacker's roll to inflict casualties.

So, if you have a "combined arms" attack, so to speak, with infantry, artillery, and air units, you'll hit on rolls of 1, 2, and 3. If the defender only has infantry, he only hits on rolls of 1.

Yes, I understand that each particular counter only has a one-in-six chance of a hit, but combining them instead of using three of the same some, offers a better chance of a hit.

That said, you can only inflict hits equal to the number of dice rolling that number. You can have a dozen infantry (hit on 1s) in a location, but if you roll a dozen dice and only roll a single 1, you only inflict a single hit. You need multiple rolls of 1s to inflict multiple hits.

By the way, that's exactly what Turkey did to the British at "Gallipoli" (technically, the space is called Istanbul). Renaud sent in four infantry to my two British infantry. He rolled 4d6 and rolled two 1s. Since he had at least two infantry, he inflicted two hits on my defending British. Since I had two British infantry, I used his die roll of



two 1s and inflicted two hits on his attacking force. Both of us lost two infantry counters, but I was wiped out and he lost two of his four. Istanbul was saved.

I think that's a clever mechanic to tamp down Yahtzee-like swings in die rolling and enhance the attrition nature of WWI.

You also only get one roll per battle. It's not like *Risk*. The attacker gets one roll and that's that. Even if it doesn't generate a single hit, the attacker only gets one roll.

As you can start to appreciate, might makes right. Larger combined arms forces can overwhelm smaller forces. That said, many is the time when we rolled six or seven dice and scored but a single hit.

In the second game, the Germans force a battle in Petrograd. The airplane used the Aerodrome rule to fly there.



And that should tell you that the initiative is held by the player pulling counters from the pouch because he can mass and move while the defender can do nothing.*

* I put an asterisk because of an advance rule called Aerodromes that allows a player to take aircraft counters from the aerodrome box and place them anywhere on the map at any time. The only restriction was that the plane used must be of the same country as the dice rolled. In essence, this is a combat reserve that can influence battles.

Overall, there's a bit more to the mechanics, such as dead units recycling back into the pouch, but not that much more. On to the basic game.

Basic Game

After the "Spring 1914" turn, which is a maneuver turn without attacks, we headed into the Fall 1914 turn.

Renaud sent German troops against Belgium held by French and British troops because Belgium doesn't have any troops and also against Serbia. He clobbered my troops in Belgium and took a one-space advance after combat into France. There is no combat after such an advance.

In the second game, the Germans and French build trenches (absorb a hit), but the 5:2 German counter advantage with better odds of a hit doom the French defenders. The British were stuck in London.



However, the advance turned France from a fully-functioning Entente space with 2 IPs into a Contested space where no IPs are produced for either side.

On my side of the turn, I reinforced France with what I drew and launched a Russian attack against Berlin. You see, Renaud left the backdoor open from Poland. Better yet, he didn't leave a garrison in Berlin, so it fell without a die roll. I used my advance after combat into the Ruhr for another 2 IPs. That's a 5 IP swing.

It was a slow death for the Central Powers. If you lose your capital, you can't deploy any units. His army in France held out while sending an Austro-Hungarian army to liberate the Ruhr. Stalemate there.

Turkey launched an attack into Cairo, but didn't roll well enough and so it became a contested space.

Line of Communications

Except for a specific mention in the Rail rules, we didn't see any LoC concerns in the rules. So the 1 IP in Belgium was used by the Central Powers even though my Russians held both Berlin and the Ruhr. The Austro-Hungarians attacked, but we stalemated. The Ruhr became Contested, so I didn't get the 2 IPs, but he didn't either.

The Serbians held out thanks to some no effect die rolls (4, 5, and 6s in combat are ignored -- except optional rules allow for special counters that hit on some of those rolls). France remained Contested.

It was interesting to see if the French and British could liberate France before the Austro-Hungarians liberated the Ruhr. But with the entry of Italy (2 IPs) and another front opened up that led to a Contested Vienna, the jig was up for the Central Powers.

Reset for Game Two

This time, we used all the optional rules, including the use of cards with special conditions on them, the special infantry that hit on more than a 1, and the aerodromes.

Spring 1916 and the Central Powers win.



And this time, Renaud sent troops into Russia as well as into Belgium and Serbia.

Once more, Serbia held out for multiple turns. German units overran Poland and the Baltic States. Once more, the German juggernaut roared into France.

However, Germany managed to draw many plane counters, which became a massive mobile reserve. He fed them into battles as needed or wanted.

As for me, I was unable to hold the Baltic States and thus Petrograd soon came under attack. Meanwhile, the Turks captured Cairo and then Austro-Hungary pushed into Kiev. The Austro-Hungarians took the Tyrol and roared into Rome -- another Contested IP space for the Entente.

I lost France -- thanks in part to a dismal counter draw of but one French unit and to Renaud playing a card that prevented British troops from leaving London. Well-played! So much for my counter-attack to take back Paris!

I was down to about a half dozen IPs and Bulgaria entered the war to push the Central Powers to the magic 17 IP amount for the automatic win.

Thoughts

I like the attritional aspect of the combat. The growing of the armed forces (drawing counters) is easy to understand and do, but the random nature of the draw prevents planning or balancing of forces. In *Axis & Allies*, you spend IPs to pick the units you want. Imagine playing that with a random selection of new units...

Leaving one counter in a space usually means it's dead with any sort of push by the opponent. Sometimes two are not enough. But as for more than that, as long as reinforcements keep going into a space, the attritional aspect is well represented.

The optional cards go either way. The Central Powers blockade card stops British reinforcements from leaving London. The Gallipoli card that put two British armies in Istanbul was less effective because it had a one-turn delay, allowing the Turks to avoid Istanbul being immediately occupied, although there was a good chance of it being contested.

Another card put a US unit in the pouch in 1915. If the Entente player draws the counter, the US enters the war early -- the Entente can't get any other US counters on the map until 1917, but it does get an IP bump.

So, it's a cute strategic game that can be played in under a couple hours. It hits all the high points of WWI with a bit of cleverness, although the random draw seems odd, and has enough optional rules to toss in a few wrinkles.



The start of the 1915 turn. Cards on the mat are Armies deployed to specific zones and each counter indicates an attack or defense by those armies. To the right are Innovation and outside influences decks.

The Big Push: WWI Card Game

by Russ Lockwood

Renaud pulled out a two-player WWI card game called *The Big Push*, designed by...Renaud. It covers the Western Front with six abstract sectors: Flanders, Artois, Somme, Chemin des Dames, Compagne, and Verdun. Cards consist of Army cards with combat values (3 to 5), Air cards with combat values (1 or 2), and "tactical" cards that add to friendly combat values or subtract from enemy combat values (1 or 2 per Army card) or allow movements of cards into or between sectors.

In addition, Innovation cards represent technological breakthroughs and alter combat values -- more on the first turn of playing and less on subsequent turns. Finally, we have U-Boat, Russian Front, and Naval Blockade cards that represent efforts beyond the Western Front. These generally subtract cards from players' hands, although Russia Surrenders and US Enters War cards have special effects.

Each turn, the Entente and Germans draw a certain number of cards, altered by the U-Boat, Russian Front, and Naval Blockade cards. There is also a bidding phase for the initiative. You bid cards -- win or lose, you subtract your bid from the cards you are to draw.

Initiative forces the non-initiative player to place cards in the six sectors first. The player with initiative gets to see which sectors seem important.

Now the clever bit: Each turn has "political pressure" that requires a certain number of attacks on that turn. You can have more, but you can never have less. Of course, what cards you draw affects the effectiveness of your attacks. Defense in a sector receive an automatic 4-point boost to the combat value of a sector. A counter showing attack or defense is placed face down in each sector. You can do a little bluffing if you have the right cards.

You're not forced to place a card in a sector. You can leave the sector empty. Again, you can do a little bluffing if you have the right cards that switch sectors and allow for reserves to join a battle.

THE BIG PUSH
TRENCH WARFARE ON THE WESTERN FRONT IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR
A GAME BY RENAUD VERLAQUE



The Game

As I played, I started to see how card combos could work together. I picked up on some of the nuances of when to play what. For example, there's an Air Superiority phase where you deploy Air cards in secret. When revealed, the player with the highest combat value gains superiority -- this allows him to play Air cards in sector combats. No Air Superiority, no placing Air cards, and all deployed Air cards are put into the discard pile.

Think about that. If you don't get Air Superiority, you can't play Air cards in sectors, so any Air cards left in your hand are unplayable. But if you spend all your Air cards to gain Superiority, you have no Air cards left in your hand to actually play. It's a clever balancing act. Each of us managed to win Air Superiority once during the game.

The battle for "Champagne" on turn 2. I originally deployed a 5 CV card and then used a Redeployment Tactical card to bring in another 5 CV Army card. Rolling Barrage is an Innovation card that added CV to my attack and Mutinies decreased the CV of the German armies. Renaud deployed three German Army cards plus played a couple Tactical cards.

In combat, after all cards are played, compare the combat values. Highest wins the sector. Each successful attack generates Victory Points that escalate with more successful attacks.

Win one attack and gain 1 VP. Win two attacks and gain 3 VPs. The VP track goes to 15, so if you get 15 before the five turns are up you win. Otherwise, highest number of VPs at the end of the game wins.

In our case, Renaud jumped out to a slight lead, but I had one good turn that popped me out a little bit more in front. On the last turn, I tried a ploy to win two attacks in sequence, believing that would give me enough VPs for the win. The first succeeded, but as we played my second attack, Renaud had enough cards to change the combat values and thwart my attack. He won two attacks on the other four sectors. As the VPs tallied, we ended up with a 9 - 9 tie.

Of note: While Russia did surrender during the game, the USA never entered the war as the card was never drawn.

An Error

Afterwards, Renaud e-mailed and noted we made one rule error -- although he at least twice started to play it right, only to backtrack. Innovation card effects are permanent. So, for instance, someone who has already played Defense in Depth will always increase the CV of their army cards and of the sector by 1 when defending.

In the game, we only used Innovation card effects on the turn the card was played. If that was the only error we made, it applied to both sides equally. Next time.

The Big Push is a nicely balanced game with a number of clever mechanics.



The Big Push: Next Time

by Russ Lockwood

We tried a second game, this time remembering to include residual effects of Innovations. As you might expect, it was a smoother game since we have mostly figured out the mechanics in the first game.

In this game, we each had one good turn. By good turn, I mean the Army cards were abundant so that each sector possessed two or more cards. Army cards are the big Combat Value (CV) cards and since the Tactical cards mostly feed off the number of Army cards, CV increase followed CV increase.

A battle in a sector can become a drain, depending on how the players feel about feeding in cards. Most battles have a few cards added to score in the single digits or low teens and that's that. But in our game, the big battle was the Somme.

We both wanted to really win that battle. Both of us played card after card. Remember that the card you play in an early battle is not available in a later battle. We were both into the 20s in CV, with first one and then the other holding a point or two lead. In the end, I did win the battle by a point or two, although I had to strip the adjacent zone of cards to do it. The reason was the progression of VPs per battle won -- in this turn, with the Somme, it was my third victory in the turn and that generated six VPs.

In the middle of the battle of the Somme, Renaud calculates his CV before deciding about playing Tactical cards. Note that I have 16 CV in Army cards, the Operation card adds 1 CV per Army card for a total of 20. My Mutinies card subtracts CV from the German Army cards. More cards would be played to boost or reduce CVs.



Also in this game, Russia surrendered in 1917, so in the 1918 and 1919 turns, the Germans would not lose cards from the Eastern Front. This was balanced by the US entering the war in 1917, which means four extra cards in 1918 and eight extra in 1919.

That was truly the breaking point for the German Army. I was at 12 VPs at the start of 1919, won a quick victory, and then poured everything I had into the next attack. Why? Because two victories in a turn netted 3 VPs and the first player to 15 wins. That second victory got me to 15 VPs.

As with all card games, the luck of the draw relates to success for the turn. Since Army cards provide the big CV values, if you drew few and the few are the lower amount cards, you will not do as well as if you drew lots of Army cards and fewer of the Tactical cards.

The wild draws are the Russia Surrenders and USA Enters War cards. An early draw, especially with the USA card, will alter the game significantly. In the first game, the USA card never arrived and the result was a tie game. In the second game, it arrived in time for two turns of extra cards and that really cemented an Entente win. I suppose you can play "historical" and have both automatically arrive in the 1917 turn, or, perhaps mark down each win for each sector and when each side gets a certain number, their beneficial card automatically turns up. Requires bookkeeping though, and slows down a nice fast-paced game.

Havoc: 100 Years War Card Game

by Russ Lockwood

After *The Big Push*, we tried another card game, *Havoc*, loosely based on the 100 Years War and beautifully decorated by colorful illustrated manuscript drawings. We played two-player, but it can be multi-player.

This is essentially playing a six-card *Poker* hand. The 17 ranks of hands from highest to lowest are obviously a bit different than standard five-card *Poker*.

Draw cards or declare an attack. Other players can oppose the attack or not. The winning hand gains the VPs on the battlefield card. The second highest hand gains fewer VPs. Other hands usually don't gain any VPs. Some battlefield cards only give the highest hand the VPs. There are nine battlefield cards to fight over. Each battlefield card has some post-battle effects of drawing cards (or not) for those who participated in the battle.

You start with seven cards and one special "Dog of War" card that functions either as a numerical wild card (for straights), a color wild card (for flushes), or to "recruit" a new card from the deck.

One player, the winner of a battle, becomes the Peacemaker. He usually gets an extra card.

It seemed fairly straightforward, but as usual when trying a game in the first place, we made a few errors.

Errors

If no one declares war after three rounds of drawing cards, all players except the Peacemaker lose a card. I guess that's to encourage attacks. We missed those losses.

If you use two Dogs cards, after a battle you can grab one card from the discard pile. We missed that, although I vaguely remembered it when I had two Dogs cards. I needed cards in my hand, so I drew two cards instead.

My hand shows a straight: 3-4-5-6-7-8. The three sideways cards are available for recruitment or pick from the deck.

We also missed that a Dog wild card played in battle has some limitations. The rules give the example of a 5-card straight without a Dog being better than a 6-card flush with a Dog. That seems a bit overly complicated.

After the eighth battle, Formigny, there are no more player turns. The face-up Recruit cards are discarded and each player draws two cards for the ninth and last battle, Castillon. Up to two Dog cards can be exchanged for card draws. Then this last battle is fought. We had played the ninth round just like any other.

Havoc has a great table presence with superb graphics, but this *Poker* variation doesn't thrill me. Nice to try, but I'd rather play *The Big Push* again...or *Dominion*...or *SpaceBase*.



Napoleon Saga: Waterloo Cards

by Russ Lockwood

Napoleon Saga is another short, abstract card game loosely based on a battle -- in this case Waterloo, although the rule book also has a Ligny scenario complete with setup cards and positions.

Each player has three lines: Front (five spots), Second line (four spots), and Reserve (five spots). In addition, two spaces by the Reserve are called Retreat spaces and one space on each flank is called the Flank space.

Shuffle up your Army Unit cards and place one card face down in the Front, Second, and Reserve spots. Some restrictions apply. You also get five Tactical cards and one leader card (Napoleon or Wellington).

During the game, my three lines. The Front facing the French show that two of my units received 1 hit each (the blood drop marker) and one of my units was activated (the "N" marker) to continue firing on the French unit, which has three hits on it. I fired the artillery (3 space range), but the dunderheads kept loading the ball first and then the gunpowder. Renaud retreated the unit safely, although it spent some time trying to make morale checks.

Each card is rated (top to bottom on left side) for firing, melee, damage, and morale. Some include special features. For example, Foot artillery fire three spots, some British infantry get +1 when firing from a building (farm, redoubt, etc.).

Close up of some of the cards. Notice the British Guards infantry has a 4 fire factor while the British artillery has a 3 fire factor. During the game, the artillery never hit despite needing only a 3+ on a d6. I should've used the camp followers for all the good the artillery crew did.

For the appropriate action, roll 1D6 and add the number on the card, plus any modifiers from terrain or Tactical cards. If the total is 6 or more: success! Place a hit on the enemy, pass a morale check, etc. If you roll a modified 9 or more for firing, you inflict two hits. If hits equals a card's damage, the card is removed.

Failed morale checks retreat a card into the Retreat spot. A successful morale check on a card in the retreated spot moves the card into a Reserve spot (assuming you were astute enough to leave a spot open). A successful morale check on a card in a Reserve spot removes one hit.



So, you need to leave spots open in the Reserve in order to cycle your retreated units into the Reserve, where they can be revived and hits removed.

Each player bids for Initiative using a Tactical card -- high wins and activates first. Both players get three alternating activations. Pick a card, activate it, and basically either move or fire. There's a bit more to it than that, but anyone who's played card games will pick it up on the quick.

First player to create three open spots in the enemy's Front line, or gain 10 VPs (each dead enemy card counts as 2 VPs) wins.

The Game

By random pick, I was the British and Renaud the French. Back and forth went the firing as we had units retreat and head into the Reserve as well as just die in their spot. I have to hand it to the British artillery, they couldn't fire and hit the ground, much less a French unit. I gave up on that card.

Other units did just fine and indeed some managed to reach the vaunted 9+ result. We both tried outflanking the other, but my big foray ended up with French cuirassiers crunching my light cavalry. Oh, I did some damage, but not as much as they did to me.

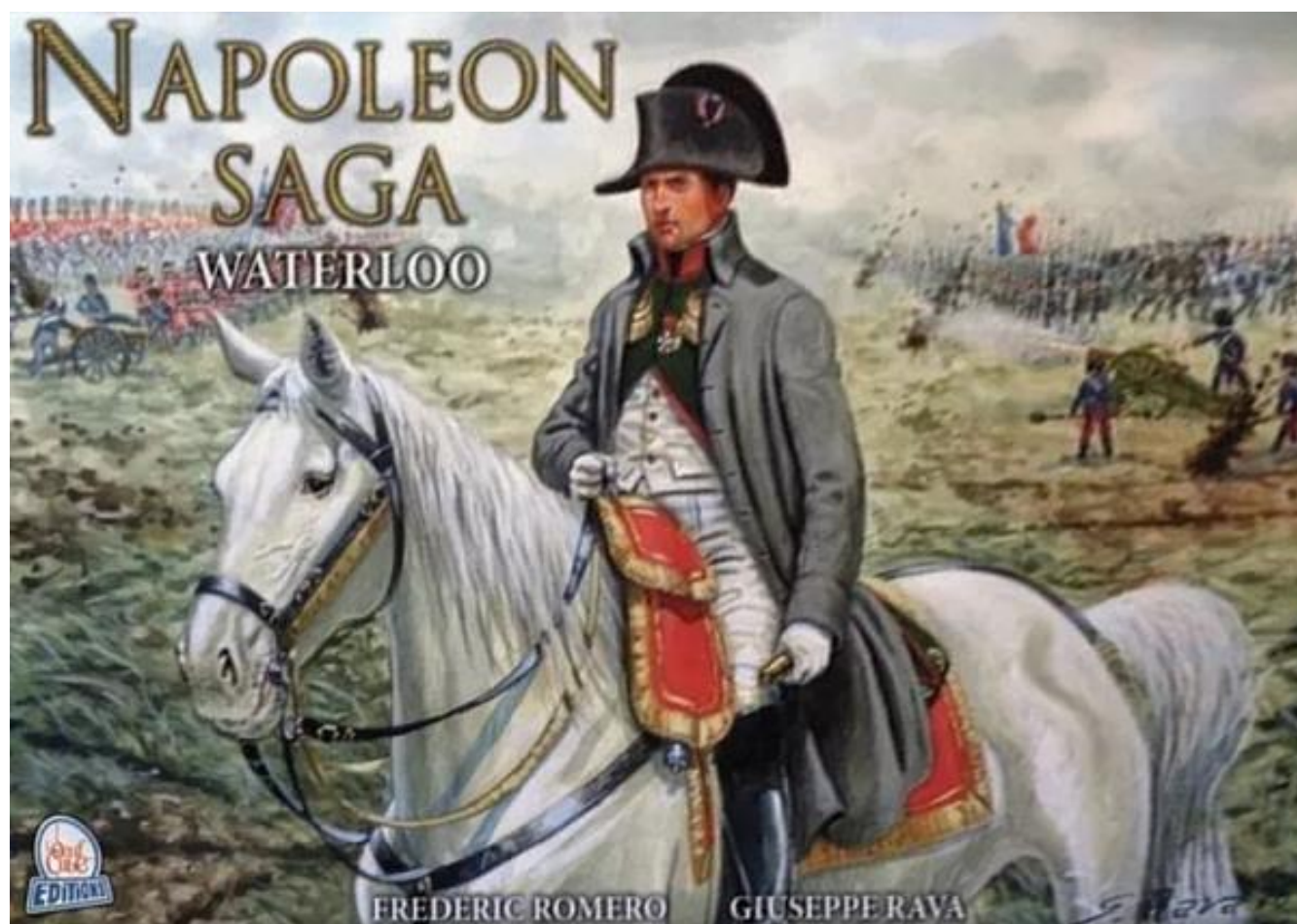
Still, as my ranks thinned, the French ranks thinned faster. I really screwed up with the farm. I occupied it, was shot out of it, and could have reoccupied it but failed to see the move. Renaud swept in and took it from under my nose. That was worth one VP to him. Oddly enough, I later took it back.

I was able to insert just enough troops to keep a Front line and shoot well enough with non-artillery troops to send French unit after French unit packing.

In the end, I reached 10 VPs just as I cleared the third spot of French troops for the win. Renaud had at one time cleared two spots, but I quickly moved troops back into them. He had 5 VPs at game's end.

The standard game is pretty fast. Based on a universe of one game played, I think keeping the Front line filled with troops is the first priority, knowing when to charge the cavalry is important, and managing your Retreat and Reserve spaces to accommodate casualties is very important because your dead cards are worth 2 VPs to your enemy.

Thanks, Renaud, for the games.





The collective brain trust...oh, are we ever in trouble. Clockwise from bottom left corner: Phil, James, Garth, and Bruce. We gather to solve the puzzles left by that madman Reager Skinner, who has kidnapped all of Scotland Yard. I say...

Blackbrim 1876: Escape Puzzle Mystery Game

by Russ Lockwood

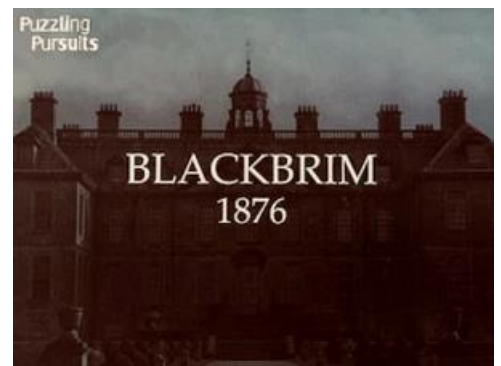
Set during the Victorian era in the English town of Blackbrim, you are a private detective who has received a package containing mysterious clues from a police commissioner shortly before he was kidnapped. He and the entire police force are being held hostage. To save them, you must solve the cryptic puzzles the perpetrator left behind.

Long ago, a friend of mine created an "escape room" in his basement for us gamers. It was entertaining, although my "team" somewhat short-circuited the game by finding one of the end images after the initial clue. When we explained our logic of zeroing in on one three things in the initial clue and matching it to his game 777, he shrugged. Hadn't thought about it. Fortunately, another team had picked up two threads of clues and graciously gave us one.

So, when Bruce put out the word about hosting *Blackbrim 1876*, a board game version of a puzzle "escape room"-style event, I made the trek. James was going to be GM of a sort -- the game actually doesn't need one because solutions are online, not in the box.

With the following letter, we faded back into 1876 and our search for the missing Scotland Yard Detective Inspector and a number of his constables. The Professor Moriarty-style villain was named Reager Skinner. By nature, a nurturing soul he was not.

The award for most innovative use of the flashlight function to solve a clue goes to...Garth and his acumen at solving the spelling bee.



The Game's Afoot

Everything starts with a letter.

Off we went to Part I and its easier sort of puzzles. Most of them fell into a word jumble type. Decode the puzzles to find letters, unscramble them, and get a solution to apply to a map. The map had about 25 named locations and constables were locked away in some of them.

I don't want to be a spoiler and go through each puzzle, so I'll just recap a couple to give you an idea. Normally, the five of us passed them around for a quick glance, with one of us retaining a puzzle because we thought we could solve it.

One Puzzle Explained

I grabbed the newspaper clipping and read four articles, all in flowery prose about whimsical events. They didn't make much sense in picking out a map location, but I pondered and pondered. No luck.

Then I turned the newspaper over and read an advertisement about a society that uses multiple words where one would suffice.

Aha!

Back to the four articles: The one about the proud gardener who won first prize for her big legume: That was obviously a pea. The other one about a female sheep was ewes. The one about a man losing a court judgement and must pay his neighbor for a horse and plow was owes. The last was a story about the opening of a shop that sold a drink of leaves and hot water: tea.

So, you have a P (pea) - U (ewe) - O (owes) - T (tea).

Unscramble the letters and you get POUT.

Here I faltered. What does pout have to do with the map?

Bruce came to the rescue. He looked over the locations and came up with Sulking Springs. To sulk is similar to pout.

One constable found!

More Solving

So we went, each looking and finding bits and pieces to the solution of each puzzle.

Note that it is highly unlikely you will be an expert on every puzzle or even every puzzle piece. The rules say "a couple of the puzzles may require internet research to solve."

This is true. One of the puzzles in Part I includes four postcards. Alas, military history buffs we may all be, but architectural historians we are not. We all recognized Trafalgar Square, but for the others, we had a bit of a debate. As they were old postcards, the architecture of today may not match the image on the postcard. Yes, we used the internet to search. Once we figured out the building, we could proceed with the jumble and we located the spot on the map quickly.

The Spelling Bee flyer stymied us for a while. Bruce gets kudos for an inspiring (if incorrect) observation, but that triggered Garth to pull out his phone, use the flashlight to illuminate underneath the spelling bee flyer with a

Blackbrim, England
Jan. 31, 1876

Detective,

I pray that you excuse the succinctness of this letter—I fear there is no time to waste. As you may have surmised from the papers, the five police officer disappearances are linked. This morning, I received a letter from someone named Reager Skinner, who has confessed to the kidnappings and appears to be playing a sinister game.

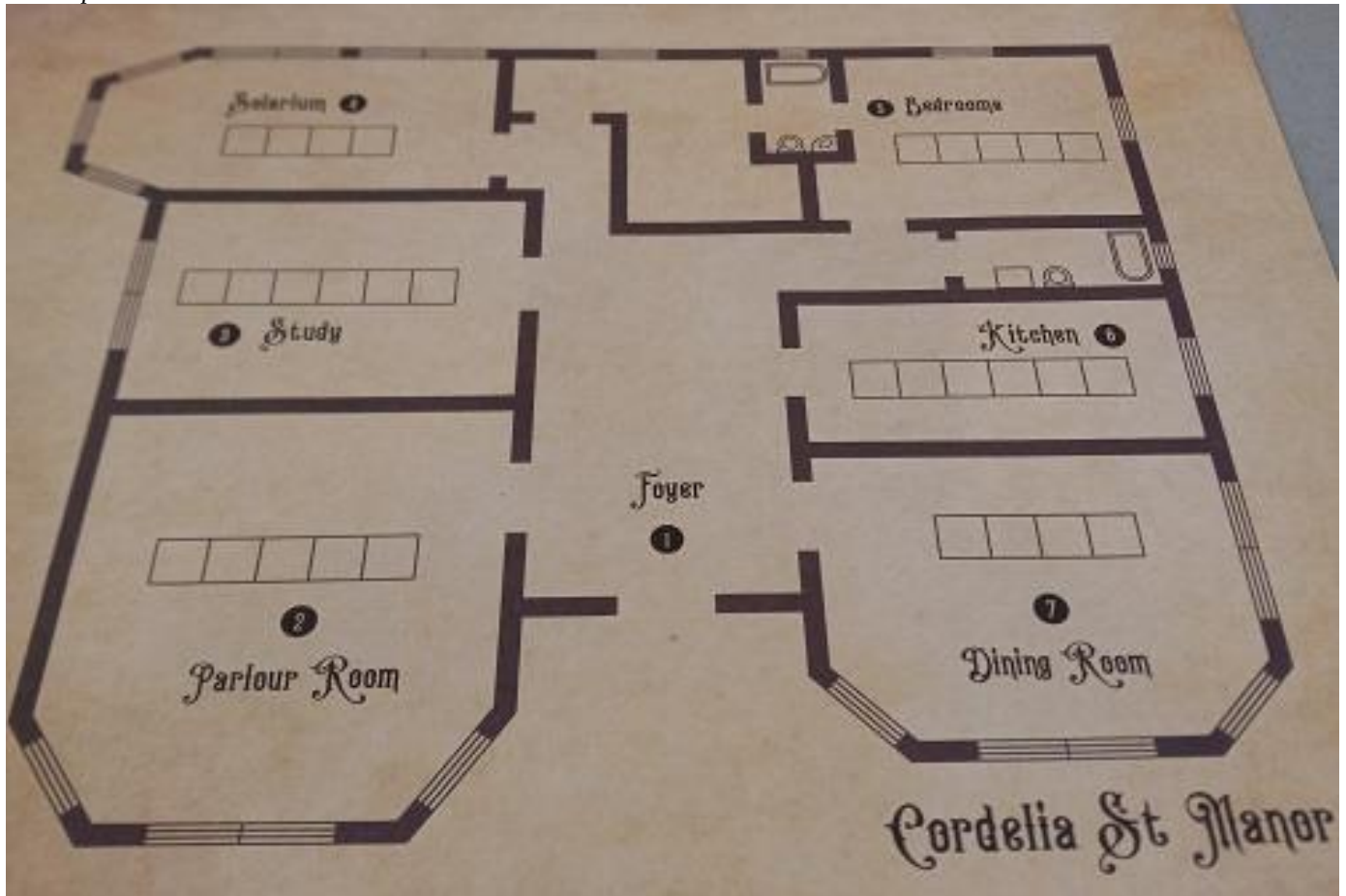
For each officer disappearance, Skinner left behind a clue. I have discovered all five—a newspaper clipping, four photos, some strange ciphers, a bill of fare, and a flyer—but have made little progress in understanding them. Enclosed is the letter and map from Skinner along with the clues I have uncovered. Sadly, that is all I can offer.

As this is to be delivered to you upon my disappearance, know that I am unfortunately also in Skinner's grasp. It is now up to you. Please aid us.

Godspeed,
Commissioner Tarodson

paper on top to solve the puzzle. We used this clumsy but effective method because we didn't want to mark up the flyer with guesses.

The map to Part II.



Part II

After warming up with a series of successful solves, we advanced to the second part and its more difficult puzzles. As we entered the house, the foyer door locked behind us. We examined a map of the house and each room is slugged to an envelope containing a puzzle.

We opened the first envelope:
The Parlour.

The five paintings in the parlour.

Remember my quip about us not being architectural historians? Well, we're not art historians, either. The envelop contained five paintings. We all recognized *The Girl With The Pearl Earring* and I thought Da Vinci had painted the *Girl With The Ferret* (it's actually an ermine). The other three? The head of a medusa, a gargoyle perched atop a lady sleeping, and some lady asleep in the woods. Beats me.

We really should watch PBS a lot more...



We looked and looked and looked. We turned the images over, but the reverse sides were blank. About the only thing we could see is the nameplate had no words, but underlines for letters and one or two of the letters were circled (er, squared).

Back at the Pearl Earring, the answer had five letters: Pearl, right? The Medusa painting had six letters: Medusa, right? We couldn't figure out any others. Then we thought it might be the artist. Nope. Had to be something.

After about 15 minutes and not a whisper of an idea between the five of us, we turned to the internet and a hint. It's not what the painting was about or its artists, it's what's missing. The girl was indeed missing her pearl. Ms. Ferret was missing her necklace. Medusa wasn't missing much, but we did perceive a couple snakes weren't there. We were stumped with the lady in the woods. Back to the clue site. Ah....Right it was.

I will say that the altered reproductions were rather dark compared to the images on museum sites. Many a photo went between arm length and nose length.

With all five complete, we unscrambled the letters and freed the constable. On to the next room...

About Two Hours

We almost got through the game in about two to two and a half hours -- we had a few rooms left. I was unable to make the next session, but the other stalwart detectives did, figured out the puzzles, and freed the DI and the rest of the constables.

Some of the puzzles were rather obscure in the logic department. Even after we learned the solution, we all sort of looked around and said, "Uh-huh." For example, we solved the Solarium interim puzzles but not the final solution. This was one that we said, "Uh-huh."

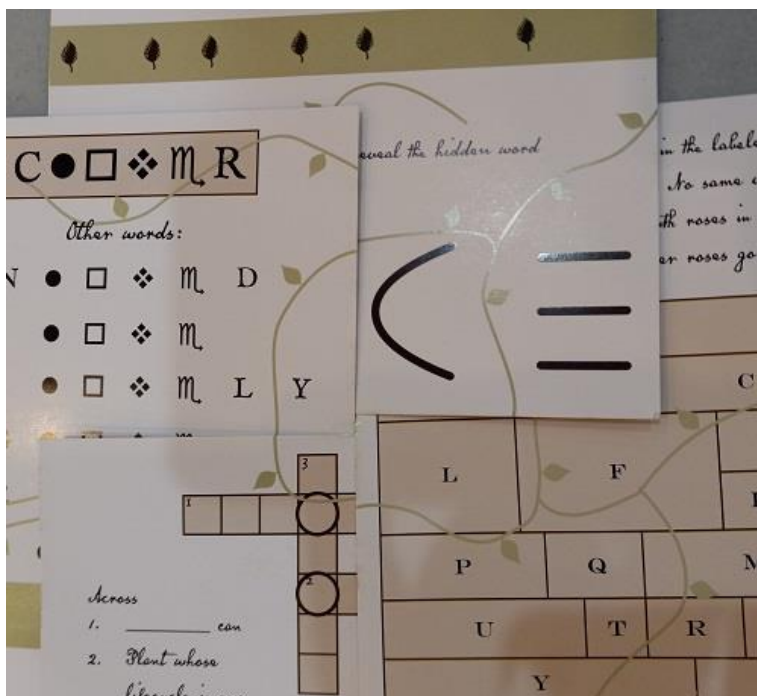
A most diabolical solution that had us so baffled, we went to the website for not one but two hints. This took us 10 minutes even after we got the hint.



Oddly enough, we solved the four puzzles shown (er, partially shown here), but had no idea what to do with the words. We sat and we thought and we scribbled and we thought some more and had absolutely no joy, but this was our last puzzle of the evening and we had been banging brain cells into activity for almost 2.5 hours. Even after getting the second hint, we failed. So we went to the answer web screen and said a collective "uh-huh."

The social interaction is the most entertaining part. Many was the time one of us got part of a solution and another filled in the rest. A couple of times we made no progress for 15 or 20 minutes and went to the internet for a hint.

So, your entertainment value depends on your enjoyment of solving brain teasers. For us five, we enjoyed this quite a bit because five brains proved better than one.



NEWS

Snappy Nappy 2024: 1809 Links Up by Russ Lockwood

Peter reports that he has consolidated all the *Snappy Nappy* links to the main Campaigns In a Day page on his Blunders on the Danube blog. You can find them here:

<https://blundersonthedanube.blogspot.com/p/campaigns-in-day.html>

Better yet, if you scroll towards the bottom, you'll also find links to events run in Australia in the past two years, including the inspiration for GM Mike's 1809 Transit Tables.

And you can find the Quick Reference Sheets for *SN* as well. Plug: The full rule set in paper or in PDF is available from www.onmilitarymatters.com or the paper version from www.caliverbooks.com located in the UK.

The tentative plan is still to run the next event circa October 2025 in Connecticut.

Full Disclosure: I wrote the *Snappy Nappy* rules and OMM is the publisher.



New Wargame **Company: New Game** by Russ Lockwood

Ryan Heilman and Wes Crawford founded Wharf Rat Games, a board game company developing its first game: *A Forlorn Hope* -- a Hermann Luttmann-designed World War I trench warfare game. The design expands on his previous 'push-your-luck' games by adding cards to trigger activations. Players advance their battalions through No Man's Land while avoiding casualties and maintaining cohesion. Random drawn event cards and tactics counters provide variety to each game while multiple scenarios allow players to explore the different battles of World War I. Features: 1 to 3 Players and a 45 to 90 minute playing time.

Planned for release sometime in 2025 via crowdfunding.

Wharf Rat Games will be at PrezCon in Charlottesville, VA, from Feb 19 to 23, 2025 to demo a number of games, including *A Forlorn Hope*.

Info: wharfratgames.com



Potomac Wargamers & NOVAG Game Day: Feb. 1, 2025 by Russ Lockwood

The venue is different this year. Game Day 2025 will be at the Sully District Government Center (aka... the Police Station) 4900 Stonecroft Blvd., Chantilly, VA 20151. Gaming will commence at 10:00 am and finish up no later than 3:00 pm.

Info: Contact Tim: hmslydia@man.com

Wargame Expansion: *Pipe Creek 1863*

by Russ Lockwood

Designed by Claude Whalen, *Pipe Creek* is an expansion of *A Most Fearful Sacrifice: The Three Days of Gettysburg* and uses the Black Swan game mechanics. You must own *A Most Fearful Sacrifice* to play *Pipe Creek*.

Pipe Creek adds most of the cavalry that fought at the East Cavalry Field and includes some What-If troops for the Army of Northern Virginia. The game allows players to see what could have happened if Meade had left Gettysburg.

Two scenarios are based on the Confederate's July 2nd attack being successful and Meade deciding to pull back to his pre-planned line. A third scenario has Meade refusing to fight at Gettysburg and making his stand at Pipe Creek with his fresh army.

The fourth scenario uses the maps of *A Most Fearful Sacrifice* and replays a reinforced Pickett's charge with 23,300 troops instead of the historical 15,000.

Contents: One rule and scenario book, one 31x40-inch mounted map, one sheet of 13/16-inch counters, additional activation cards, and two large updated players aids. Cost \$60.00.

Info from Flying Pig Games:

flyingpiggames.com/shop/ols/products/a-most-fearful-sacrifice-pipe-creek-expansion

Chris Parker Games: Army Builder Discount

by Russ Lockwood

Chris Parker Games decided to extend its 25% off Army Builder program going, although the minimum is increased to \$60, which should not be a problem as every order placed using it was well over that amount. Remember to add the code "Armybuilder" at check out to receive the discount.

CPG also continued its Free Shipping for orders of \$30 or more, but only for continental US (CONUS) addresses. There is a 60-cent packing charge.

For Overseas (non-CONUS) orders, there is no free shipping, but shipping is a flat \$20.

Info: www.chrisparkergames.com

Napoleonic Polish Vistula Legion

Infantry: 3D Printed

by Russ Lockwood

Chris Parker Games released a series of Napoleonic Polish Vistula Legion Infantry units. Package includes six plastic figures -- available in marching, attacking, and firing positions (default is marching). Also, a command set is available. All miniatures are single pieces and all are unpainted plastic.

Infantry available in 28mm (\$16), 40mm (\$22), and 54mm (\$36) plus 60 cents packing charge.

Other Vistula Legion available: Voltigeurs, Uhlans, and Artillery Crew.

Info: <https://www.chrisparkergames.com/>



Napoleonic 1812 French Horse Artillery Crew: 3D Printed

by Russ Lockwood

Chris Parker Games released 1812 French Horse Artillery Crew. Package includes six plastic figures. Also, a command set is available. Arms and heads may need attaching and all are unpainted plastic. Cannon not included.

Infantry available in 28mm (\$16), 40mm (\$22), and 54mm (\$36) plus 60 cents packing charge.

Other Vistula Legion figures available: Voltigeurs, Uhlans, and Artillery Crew.

Info: <https://www.chrisparkergames.com/>



New Wargame: Milne Bay 1942

by Russ Lockwood

High Flying Dice Games released *Digger's Resolve: The Battle of Milne Bay, August-September 1942*. The Imperial Japanese Navy, without any approval or support from their counterparts in the Imperial Army, decided to conduct Operation RE to take control of Milne Bay at the eastern end of New Guinea. The Japanese believed the area to be only weakly held by militia and a token force of Australian reservists.

However, thanks to the US code breaking activities, the Australians were alerted to the new Japanese threat at Milne Bay and had rushed two brigades of the Australian 7th Infantry Division, veterans of the battles in North Africa, and part of a third to the region. What ensued was a battle that resulted in the first Allied victory over Japanese land forces in the war.

Contains: Two 11x17-inch map sheets, 109 un-mounted, double-sided counters, and 12 pages of rules. Units represent companies (infantry) and detachments of two tanks. A hex on the map is about a quarter mile across. Each turn represents 1 day of time.

Players will also need a standard deck of playing cards and a six-sided die to play the game. Mounted counters can be had for an additional \$8.00. The *Digger's Resolve* custom card set, replacing the ordinary deck of cards, is \$11.00.

Digger's Resolve, designed by Paul Rohrbaugh and features graphics by Ilya Kudriashov, costs \$18.95 plus shipping/handling.

Info: www.hfdgames.com/digger.html



New Wargame: Polar Vortex - Alaska's North Slope

by Russ Lockwood

High Flying Dice Games released *Polar Vortex: The Battle for Alaska's North Slope*, a modern what-if game positing the Russians invade Alaska.

Putin himself has frequently claimed that Russia reserves the right to protect the rights and interests of Russians and Russian property anywhere in the world, and this includes those in Alaska. North Slope where the terminus of the Alaskan Oil and LNG Pipelines, and the tanker facilities for loading those materials, are located. Capturing the North Slope and its terminus for Alaskan Oil and LNG pipelines vital for the US to defend.

Contains: Three 11x17-inch hex maps, 131 un-mounted double-sided counters, and 12 pages of rules. Units represent infantry companies or vehicle squadrons. Each turn represents 12 hours of time. A map hex is about 5 miles across.

Players will also need a standard deck of playing cards and a six-sided die to play the game. Mounted counters can be had for an additional \$8.00. The *Polar Vortex* custom card set, replacing the ordinary deck of cards, is \$11.00.

Polar Vortex, designed by Paul Rohrbaugh and features graphics by Tim Allen, costs \$25.95 plus shipping/handling.

Info: www.hfdgames.com/polar.html



Night at the Museum: Liberty Hall

by Russ Lockwood

An interesting historic house tour fundraising event is a behind-the-scenes tour of Liberty Hall to areas that are not open to the public. Visit the servant's areas and hidden rooms used by the home's staff. Explore the 1882 Carriage House's stables and groom's quarters.

After the tour, sip on a signature drink or snack and socialize while learning more about historic Liberty Hall. A fun trivia game and time to mingle will conclude the Night at the Museum.

Must be 21 years or older. Reservations Required. Cost is \$35.00 plus "\$2.38 fee" per person.

Please note that access to the second floor of the Carriage House will require a signed waiver due to the steeper and narrower staircase. Tour runs 7:00pm to 9:00pm and is scheduled for the last Wednesdays of February, March, and April.

Liberty Hall Museum. 1003 Morris Ave. Union, NJ 07083. Phone: 908-527-0400. E-mail: libertyhall@kean.edu

Info: libertyhall.kean.edu/events-and-performances/wednesday-night-at-the-museum-vip-behind-the-scenes-tour/



Quebec 1759: Updated Block Game

by Russ Lockwood

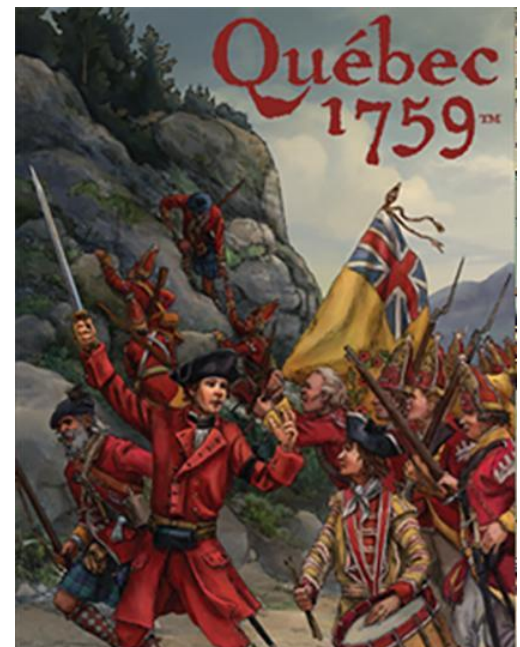
Columbia Games is running a kickstarter for a limited edition of the block game *Quebec 1759* -- depicting the British-French conflict in Canada during the French and Indian War / Seven Years' War. It contains new artwork by Richard Luschek, including a revised cover, an elegantly mounted map and battle board, and extra-large, one-inch jumbo wooden game pieces with updated graphics. Standard version cost is \$79 plus \$15 shipping.

A version with a 34x68-inch double size map in neoprene is \$169 plus \$20 shipping.

And an offer for every Columbia block wargame is \$1,499 plus \$49 shipping.

The Kickstarter campaign has garnered \$33,925 from 226 backers, which is more than the \$10,000 goal. The KS ends Feb 9, 2025.

Info: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/columbiagames/quebec-1759?ref=9rfuqn>



by Russ Lockwood

Info: www.rally-the-troops.com/

by Russ Lockwood

Above: 69 icons from Greek and Roman section and I alter a Greek helmet icon by Zorc.

Website: <https://game-icons.net/>

by Russ Lockwood

Info: <https://www.chrisparkergames.com/>

[illegible]

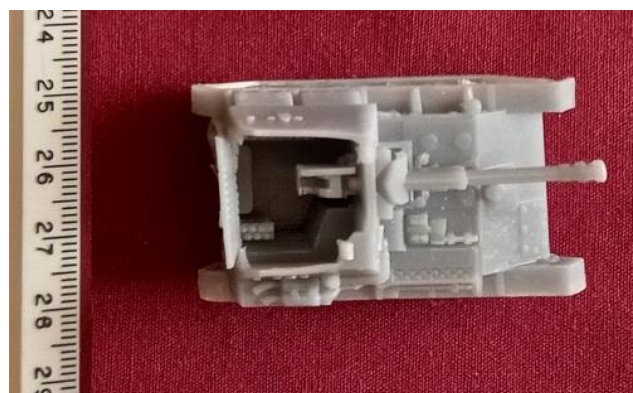
28mm Orcs and shields.



28mm French and Indian War (left half top row), Beowulf (left half bottom row), and Dark Ages casualties (right half, both rows).



15mm SU-76.





The Kobold group in foreground, clockwise from bottom left corner: Jared, GM Fred, Chris, Connor, Jordan, and Dan. In the background, the Hilltop group: Steve, GM Sean (back), a small part of Sophie, John, and Ed.

Kobold Caverns: The D&D Adventure Continues

by Russ Lockwood

After slaying most of the evil folk in and under Fort of the Wannabe Lich (see the Dec 19, 2024 AAR) -- we're still wondering where the trained Mammoth went -- we took stock and looted everything.

In the comings and goings of the way of adventurers, our group consisted of Tazan Rell the archer (me), Gorven the ranger (Jared), Gavriel the wizard (Connor), Nevar the alchemist (Dan), Skurg the Bugbear cleric (Chris), Cristof the wizard (Steve), Keul the cleric (Ed), and a new cleric of Pelor from Sheffield named Franq (Jordan). We made our introductions and settled in for a well-deserved sleep.

Come morning, a most impressive teleportation orb of light flashed into existence next to our camp. Out stepped a woman of beauty and grace clasping two scrolls.

"Hail and well met. I bring the greetings of Adamar from the West Keep." She gave a slight nod. "Who is in charge here?"

After a moment of suspicion and noticing that she did not immediately launch an attack, Tazan stepped forward. "I am Tazan Rell at your service, m'lady...." He let the last syllable rise into a question.

"Izabel. I bring news and a request from Adamar."

"I see." Tazan held out his hand, palm up, ready to take her hand and escort her the campfire. "Come, Izabel, and share our breakfast, meager as you must be used to, but as fine a dining as we can provide, while we hear of news and request."

"Your offer is kind, but time is fleeting and I must return." With that, she handed over the two scrolls. "One is news, and the other a spell for your wizard."

Tazan nodded back. "Alas, a loss to us, but I understand tasks at hand cannot wait."

"Fare thee well, Tazan Rell."

"And you, Izabel. May we meet again, when time is a leisure and the setting less perilous."

As she stepped back into the orb of teleportation, Tazan gave her a cheeky wink and a smile. An immediate flash of light signalled her departure.

"Oh, sooo, sooo subtle, duuude," Keul commented with sarcasm dripping from his voice. "Like you even know, like, where West Keep is to ply your woo."

"You might be surprised, ah, dude. What happens in your plane may stay in your plane, but in our plane, all things are possible." Tazan turned to the rest of the group and unrolled a scroll. "Hear ye, hear ye, lend me your ears. Gather 'round to learn the news. To revel in the words of Adamar. To understand--"

"Oh just get on with it," shouted Cristof.

"We don't need pre-battle inspiration to listen to a news-scroll," chimed in Nevar.

"Is he always this long winded?" queried Franq.

"Always," Gorven remarked. "He goes on for like 10 minutes. We're inspired to enter into combat just so we don't have to listen to him anymore."

"Hey!" Tazan blurted. "Don't listen to them, Franq. All words wield a power and mine help keep them all from oblivion."

"Read the scroll!" Scurg bellowed.

"OK, OK!" Tazan relented and began to read. "Some demon lord Fuzz, ummmm.... Nope, that's Iuz, has returned to the north and is recruiting. No immediate threat yet. Minions of Zuggnuts, ummmm, I mean Ziggmoy, are in our area. Can't this fellow write cursive any neater? Ah, he says to slay all the cultists of the elemental Zuggnuts. And, um, giants of the Crystalmist Mountains, which seems to be where we are, will 'fight with' King Snurre of the fire giants -- I don't know if that means joining the king in alliance or fighting against the fire giants. Can't this fellow be any clearer?"

Tazan paused. "Hmmm. Our favorite lich Sterling serves Vespa, I mean Vecra, which I guess is bad. The Yeomancy, Keoland, and Sea Princes kingdoms are loosely aligned, but pursuing their own goals. Oh, joy. None of them will commit troops out of fear the other two will invade. It's a three-sided stare down."

Tazan looked over the rest of the message. "Says here Izabel will carry a message back to Adamar," he noted with a chuckle. "As if she waited for one."

Tazan rolled up the scroll. "And that's the news." Then he unrolled the other scroll.

"Whaddayaknow. Teleportation spell. Seems some Abbey named Pholkus in a place called Hilltop south of Sheffield is under siege by the undead and Sheffield needs a scouting party to sort out what's what. Cristof, this is probably for you."

Tazan handed over the teleportation spell to the wizard. By way of discussion, the adventurers would split into two groups. The first group consisted of Tazan Rell the archer, Gorven the ranger, Gavriel the wizard, Nevar the alchemist, Skurg the Bugbear cleric, and Franq the new cleric from Sheffield. They would continue following the trail of the defeated evil army.

The second group was Cristof the wizard and Keul the cleric. These two would teleport back to Sheffield for more information and to confirm the orders to head to Hilltop. We six bid them goodbye as we packed up the generic food, water, and other goods looted from the fort.

We thought about how to collapse the cave mouth that led under the stone tower. In the end, we couldn't think of anything big enough that would work.

The Long And Winding Road

We followed the road alongside the river through the slot canyon. Tazan made sure to toss in a goblin body or two to appease the river monster. We never actually saw the monster, but that was good enough for me. I did pick off an inquisitive kobold who stuck his head over the edge of the cliff to spy upon us.

Our party enters the cavern. Do not confuse the D&D cloth map with the carpet.



The river bent away from a cliff face of basalt instead of the usual red rock we'd been following for miles. A bridge over the river led to a landing and a door. We scouted and found nothing around although the top of this geologic anomaly had a pitted surface. No monsters lurked, so we examined the double doors.

Etched into the rock over the door was the name "Pyrofaxus" in the common language. Ominously, "Domain of Fiery Death" was etched in kobold language below it. Ol' Pyro was a red dragon known to hunt in the area and burn up villages.

Once again, we debated whether to push on and leave an unknown red dragon and friends behind us, or explore this underground maze. We elected to explore.

We examined the doors for traps and Gorvan pushed them open enough to let in some outside light. About 20 feet away was a kobold with a horned head and clad in red robes sitting behind a desk reading a book.

I immediately shot two arrows in rapid succession, punching out the back of his skull to splatter his little red brains all over the floor.

"What ARE you DOING!?" screamed Gorven, the rest of the party, and even Fred the GM.

"I never met a kobold who didn't try to kill me," I growled.

"But he was reading a book!" they protested.

"Hello! Red robes? Spell book?" I chided. "Didn't we have enough kobold fireballs and lightning bolts flung at us in the Sheffield catacombs? He's a sorcerer. And now he's a dead sorcerer."

"Maybe he wanted to talk!"

"Do I really have to spell it out. He wanted to fry us."

In the midst of the recriminations, I dug out my two arrows from the body. Good. Still usable. Nevar went over to examine the body and found a potion. He then looked at the book.

"It's a guest book," Nevar noted. "Here's a bit of charcoal to sign in."

I shrugged off the glares. "Yeah. I bet it says
"Number 2" on it."

"No, just charcoal." Nevar bent over and signed the book. "Looks like the last entry was six months ago."

We clear the first block of rooms. Gorven leads the way deeper into the maze, followed by Franq, Nevar, our mule, and Tazan. Above Scurg confronts two ambushing kobolds. Franq's fireball felled a flying kobold and exploded its molotov cocktail.

Into the Labyrinth

We entered the caverns and quickly found out a couple of things. We were under observation all the time, and the kobolds had drilled small tunnels in between corridors and rooms. So, it was hard to actually catch one until they formed a pack -- a phalanx pack we called it -- and made a stand in the narrow passageways.

Now this Pyrofaxus seemed to enjoy collecting art, for the rooms and corridors had many a statue in nooks and paintings and tapestries hanging on walls of room. After clearing one section, mostly by the kobolds running away, we found a tapestry of a Paladin of Pelor, so Nevar took that down and rolled it for later retrieval. Our guess was the patriarch would be pleased for its return.

Now, about those phalanxes. As we pushed forward, we found the kobolds had formed one: two spearmen in front, two pikemen with flaming pikeheads behind, a flying kobold with crude molotov cocktails, and a sorcerer ready to toss fiery death upon us.

We hit it piecemeal, which was a mistake. Gorven took a few for the team. I twanged a couple, Gavriel came out of hiding in an ambush, and Nevar accompanied Scurg towards the entrance to deal with kobolds that had come in behind us -- and booby trap all the tiny tunnels he could find. We slew them all.

Nonetheless, we healed our wounds and pushed on into a circular room, where another phalanx met us. This time, better prepared, we hit them almost all at once, Scurg in the lead. The sorcerer flung one spell and dove into a tunnel and away. The rest we slaughtered.

We became a little smarter after that. Gavriel sent his recon book through one of the little tunnels and found another phalanx forming. A fireball spell issued through his book fried them all.



A fire snake in a campfire ambushed us to no avail. It was quickly sliced and diced, with Nevar nicking a piece for his research.

Gorven encounters the first kobold phalanx and takes damage. Gavriel the White is hiding in ambush (upper right corner).

Hot and Humid

As we advanced, the cavern was increasingly hot and humid. Most of us were unaffected, but a couple had to rest a moment to catch their breath. Fatigue could be a problem here.

Scurg confronts a kobold phalanx in circular room 4. A kobold (left) closes the door and tries to hold it shut.

We found our first trap, or should I say, Gavriel found the first trap, on a stairway down to a lava stream. That hurt a bit, but not as much as when a Fire Elemental arose from the lava stream at just the precise moment another phalanx paid us a visit.

It was nip and tuck in there for a while, with Gavriel using a Ray of Frost spell and our magic weaponry finally sending the elemental back into the fiery ooze. He was replaced by a Fire Snake, which became an ex-Fire Snake.

As for the phalanx, we once again smashed it and once again the sorcerer fled. That was annoying. And Gorven was hit with a rust monster which dissolved the studs on his leather armor.

We went back to the circular room for a short rest to heal and gain back some spells. We hadn't gotten that far, but we needed the breather.

We're a bit strung out, but Gavriel leads and finds a trap. Meanwhile, via his recon book, he fireballs the kobold phalanx in the hall beyond. Nevar booby-traps a connecting kobold tunnel.

Yah, Mule

Somewhere in there a small bridge over a small lava tendril collapsed, dunking a foot of Gavriel. That burned off a shoe and bottom of a pants leg, but he was quickly healed. The odds of that was rolling a 1 on a d20. Tsk. Tsk.



Ambush! A fire elemental (right) rises from the lava stream while a kobold phalanx blocks our path. The blue chip is a fallen bridge over a small lava tendril. The demon statue is next to the orange chip and the mimic is on the door next to it,

Worse luck was to follow. Our ranger, who had animal handling skills, managed to roll a 1 for our trusty mule, who plunged with all four legs into the lava. He quickly pulled on the lead reins and got the mule out...sort of.

All he had was the head at the end of the reins. The rest of the mule burned in a flash, along with all our common items such as food and sporks.

"Maybe we can put the head in the kobold leader's bed," I suggested. Thankfully, the veteran adventurers understood the reference. Anyway, looks like we were going to have to forage later on. Kobold food is edible, if not that tasty.

Eye of the Storm

Somewhere in there, giant rats with oil kegs on their backs attacked us and took their chunk of flesh, although all were chopped or spitted. A long-range recon showed more rats in various places, which we decided to ignore.

During a fight with a phalanx, the cursed sorcerer hit me with a paralyze spell, which I failed to save against. Even my special re-roll failed. I could only watch until the next round, where a 20 on a d20 released me. Whew!

We reached a small alcove with a grinning demon statue and a giant ruby in its forehead. We thought it might be booby-trapped, but it was not. Gorven pried the gem out of the statue.

The door was booby-trapped on the other side. The recon book found that out when it got too close and a mimic lunged for a snack. As the book is incorporeal, the book sailed on. We opened the door, stood back and burned, spelled, and chopped it into oblivion. Nevar took a piece for his research.

Scurg reached inside and pulled out a partially digested corpse -- we got a few items from the deceased. I think we gave it a small ceremony and tossed it into the lava.

That led us to a medium-sized room and yet another phalanx plus hellhounds. I skewered one of the beasts with arrows, Franq paralyzed the sorcerer, Nevar and Scurg healed our burns, and we slew the sorcerer. Down he went in a pool of blood. The rest proved fairly easy to sweep clear. We did get lucky that a molotov cocktail failed to break. We figured we had cleared out about half the kobolds so far plus a few extra monsters.

After clearing out the medium-sized room (left), we advanced to the door of the big room.

After looting the bodies, especially of the sorcerer of his magic eyeball and potions, we stopped in front of a door leading to a big room. Welllllll, after we killed the mimic that was pasted onto the door. We salvaged a half-digested hobbit or a gnome, it was hard to tell, and recovered nice mithril armor -- albeit hobbit-sized.



Here we ended the Kobold Caverns session. Of note, our stalwart other half of our party declined to teleport out our aid, saying they did want to battle like the tunnel rats of Vietnam.

Thanks a lot. We're fighting real giant rats in here and they're sipping tea with the Abbot of Hilltop Abbey. Or are they?

Hilltop Abbey: Worse Than Undead

by Sean the GM

After receiving the messages, Cristof cast the Teleportation Circle Scroll bringing him and Keul back to Sheffield. There they were heartily greeted by Captain Altharion of the Guard for the city of Sheffield.

The Captain noted with some alarm that refugees from the various farmsteads, homesteads, hamlets were pouring into Sheffield with tales of the dead rampaging in the south around Hilltop Abbey.

Altharion brought them into an office that was still in need of some refurbishment and introduced Feyre and the foppish Lord Darathan. Three goblins appeared from behind and Cristof was about to cast a lightning bolt at them when Altharion calmed him. "Those three are Lord Darathan's servants."

Cristof kept a wary eye considering goblins had tried to kill him not too long ago.

"They serve me well," Darathan replied. "Besides, you don't expect me to tidy up Hilltop myself, do you?"

Altharion explained that he needed a small group to investigate these claims of undead overrunning the walled fort and the Temple of Pholkus -- the deity of the Blinding Light. According to the refugees, all those Pholks are dead, or likely undead.

Journey to the South

The four set out on city horses to the south to cover the 50 miles to Hilltop. Along the way, they came upon the desecrated roadside shrine to Farlanghn: the minor deity of roads, distance, and travel. They stopped and Keul spent some time fixing up the shrine. For this act, Farlanghn bestowed a blessing upon Keul.

At the end of the second day's ride, the fort's keep came into view. As the four approached, a flock of black birds flew away from the keep. All was open.

Upon entering the keep, the party found no sign of anyone, but upon quick investigation found that the various merchants had barricaded themselves into their homes/shops because the last few nights, the dead had walked out of the temple and through the streets and out of the keep. After further investigation of the keep, it had appeared all the guards had abandoned their posts and the lord of the keep had been killed in his chambers with a dagger through his left eye and his left hand cut off.

In the courtyard, there stood six-foot-tall, four-sided stone pyramid with intricate carvings and arcane symbols. As the day's light began to fade, the group entered and barricaded the Temple foyer for the night.

Morning Has Broken

The night passed without trouble. With the morning break the group first went to the obelisk. When Cristof touched the obelisk with both hands, his mind was sent to what he believed was the past. He was then standing next to the obelisk, but it was night, the keep was gone, and instead of an abbey across the courtyard, there was just a set of stone stairs going down into the hill. On the stairs was a horned devil talking to a black-robed man with red eyes. The human turned and stared at Cristof. Instantaneously, Cristof found himself back in the present at the obelisk.

The group decided to enter the temple and went up to the 2nd floor. Mainly comprised of personal quarters for priests and a small study, they found within the personal quarters of the Head Priest Redmund a Gem of Brightness. Searching anew, they discovered a demonic contract between the devil Maraxor and a redacted name for the construction of a demiplane with Maraxor as overseer of this demiplane.

The group went downstairs, peeked into the main worship room of the temple, and found lots of dead Pholk. After a short discussion, the group ignored the dead for now and descended to the basement and its small catacombs used to bury the faithful. Here, they battled and defeated a FireGaunt.

Advancing, they found the floor of the basement had been torn up, revealing a set of stone stairs going down into the hill. Further examination found the floor breached from below, where the stairs led to a larger catacombs.

The undead massed and came at them -- mummies, skeletons, flameskulls. and even a Boneclaw. Cristof used a well-timed counterspell to prevent a Fireball from being thrown at them and Feyre wielded the Gem of Brightness to great effect, blinding the undead with its light. Though the battle be close, they fought their way through to a dead end corridor with writing upon the wall:

Those who make it do not need it;
They who buy it do not want it;
They who use it cannot perceive it.

Keul shouted "Time!" For Keul, it was the closest thing to a simple declarative sentence.

The wall opened revealing a dark crypt with guardian Alips that immediately attacked and were subsequently defeated with some ease. Cristof could not resist looking inside large sarcophagus, but found it empty except for carved runes in the bottom.

I am something you hold,
Yet never can see,
I'm whispered in shadows,
And locked without key,
Provide Me and Enter.

Feyre yelled out "Secret!" but nothing happened.

Thinking a bit more about the words, Darathan whispered a secret to the sarcophagus. With the scrape of stone, the bottom slid aside to reveal a stairway. At this point, the party decided to go back up and rest.

The Demiplane Deal

When they returned, the sarcophagus was whole again without a trace of the stairs. Feyre then whispered a secret and once again, the bottom slid and the stairs returned. They descended into a demiplane.

Ever curious Cristof went back up the stairs to determine if they could leave. They could, but he found the entrance once again closed. Cristof whispered his own secret and re-entered.

At the base of the stairs they came to a room with a blood waterfall pouring from the ceiling to land in a basin that overflowed and drained away on the floor. All around the room, names of famous necromancers were carved into the stone with blood filling the cracks. Ahead of them were a set of large Adamantine doors with a devil's face in the middle and the teeth as handles. The party took a second debating on whether to enter or not, but finally reached and pushed open the door and entered.

From a balcony above, a horned devil sat upon a throne and called out, "Welcome to the Library. I am your host, Maraxor."

Considering the contract they had read, most of the group chose to negotiate instead of fight. Keul, thinking it so, like, unKeul to negotiate with a devil, left with the intent of taking care of the dead Pholks.

So the group negotiated. Lord Darathan made a deal to provide four souls via a black dagger to Maraxor in exchange for information on who the redacted individual in the contract was and who the last person to enter the library was. Maraxor handed over the dagger and noted that Vecna was the redacted individual and that the lich Charis BoneBreaka Sterling had just come a few days prior to visit the library.

Feyre the monk decided not to make any deals. Cristof made a deal for one soul in exchange for the ability to read and understand any language. Maraxor, also gifted Cristof three scrolls of greater demon summoning, "in case you wish to negotiate further deals in the future."

Library Research

The three entered the library to be greeted by the Librarian Lucious, an imp with a sense of entitlement. Cristof immediately ran to find a book on Dragons. Feyre and Darathan went to look at "Newly Acquired Titles." where they found a book on each of them, with their personal history written to the point in time they entered the demiplane.

Meanwhile, Cristof passed a book that had been thrown on the ground. Upon further investigation, all the pages had been ripped out and destroyed. He looked at the title which read "Charis Bonebreaka Sterling."

The group spent a little more time in the library, finding a diorama of Castle Hawkgrey, complete with subterranean levels. Feyre noticed that one of the levels appeared to be a prison of some sort that had been completely destroyed. Whatever was in it is no longer.

The group then left the demiplane and began cleaning up Hilltop for possibly use as a base of operations.

BOOKS I'VE READ

By Russ Lockwood

Solomons Air War: Volume 3. by Michael Claringbould and Peter Ingman. Softcover (6.9x9.9 inches). 184 pages. 2024.

Subtitle: *Guadalcanal: From the Brink - November - December 1942*

The Pacific air war experts Claringbould and Ingman are back with the third volume surrounding Guadalcanal air operations of WWII: *Volume 1* (see the 08/23/2023 AAR) and *Volume 2* (see the 02/29/2024 AAR or up on hmgs.org).

The US Army and Navy gradually wrested initiative and superiority from the Japanese over the Slot and elsewhere. The Cactus Air Force proved resilient in the face of IJN naval bombardments, IJA artillery shots, and the omnipresent small air raids on the captured and expanded air fields. Japanese logistical shortcomings, decreasing quality of pilots due to losses, and increasing obsolete aircraft contributed to US ascendancy.

The book chronicles operation by operation, mission by mission, and plane by plane action with a keen analytical examination of US and Japanese records to fact check claims versus actual losses.

It also places these air battles in context of naval and ground operations as the US increasingly intercepted the Tokyo Express supply runs and performed ground support. As for the latter, twice the text mentions air support dropping depth charges on land forces (p35 and p38). The text mentions that bombs and torpedoes were often in short supply, but dropping depth charges on land? New one to me...

US and Japanese search efforts receive more than usual attention, as do wasted missions and losses from weather events.

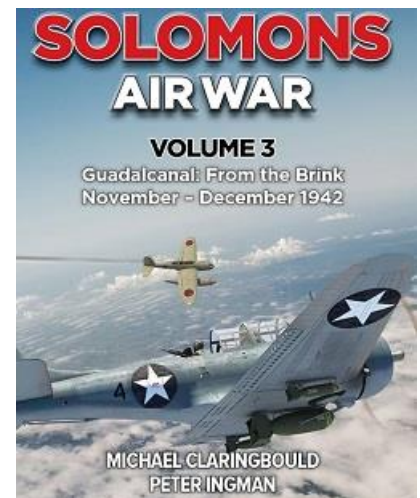
One editing typo (p167): "it king-hit" should have the "king-" deleted.

And what the heck happened to the footnotes. I know I complain about font size, but man-o-man, can you make them any smaller? What is that font size? 4pts? Just when I thought layout artists couldn't be dumber with font size -- especially when the end of the chapter has a half page of blank space.

The book contains 48 black and white photos, one color photo, three color maps, 20 color aircraft camouflage profiles, and 11 color illustrations. The profiles are the same excellent works of art from his Pacific Profiles series.

Volume 3 is an excellent addition to an excellent series. I look forward to a *Volume 4*.

Enjoyed it.



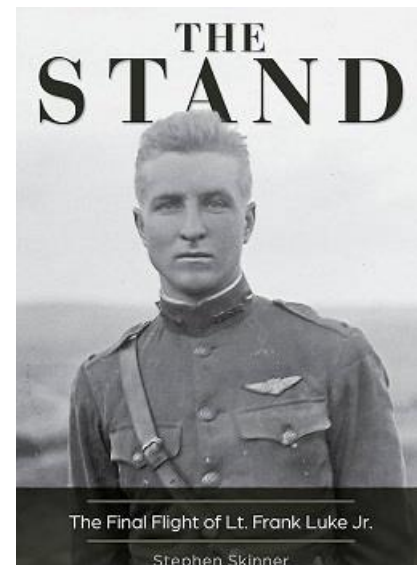
The Stand: The Final Flight of Lt. Frank Luke jr. by Stephen Skinner. Hardback (7.2x10.2 inches). 478 pages. 2024 reprint of 2007 book.

This is the second edition of the book and I did not read the first edition. I imagine some additional information was incorporated, although other than a new foreword, I only picked up a few passing references to post 2007 work.

Skinner shows an obsession with tracking down details of the demise of the "Arizona Balloon Buster" Frank Luke jr on his final flight of Sep 29, 1918.

A good bio that takes up the first third of the book precedes this cold case examination of reports, photographs, and eyewitness evidence. Apparently, Luke turned out to be a natural pilot and absolutely fearless in taking on the AA and defending fighters around German observation balloons. He was also a braggart before he even flew his first mission with a reputation for abandoning missions due to "engine trouble" and other alleged aircraft maladies. So his fellow pilots thought him a coward. He became even more intolerable when he shot down his first aircraft that went unconfirmed and uncredited.

Then he figured out how to work with another pilot to shoot down balloons and the legend was born. The tactical details are well explained. One wrinkle I didn't know was the use of a special machine gun with phosphorous ammunition to light up the hydrogen balloons. He was only in the air about two months when he was shot down by ground fire, much the same way as the Red Baron was downed in his final flight. Luke landed just outside Murvaux (France) fine, but the chest wound filled both his lungs with blood. He made it 221 yards to a stream and brush, popped off a few handgun shots in the vague direction of German infantry, and died.



The remaining two-thirds of the book tackles finding long-buried evidence, pursuing leads to interview French civilian and German military survivors, and field trips to the location. It's all explained, including sorting out conflicting stories, in excruciating detail. Skinner does bemoan that he was unable to track down three main missing pieces: newsreel footage by Pathe of the unit in either late August or early September 1918; photographic slides made in 1962 by researcher Royal "Sonny" Frey; and 1918 photographs of the SPAD XIII sitting on the ground outside Murvaux.

I'm not sure these would change the history much. I suppose the SPAD photo might offers details about the shooting, but as the plane had been through combat, it's hard to see how to interpret all the damage versus the idea of one bullet hitting Luke.

One minor typo (p17): The cartoon caption in the text reads "F. Luke breaks the line." The reproduced cartoon clearly shows the caption as "F. Luke breaking the line." Like I said, minor.

The book contains 248 black and white photos, 101 color photos, two black and white maps, six color maps, 12 black and white illustrations, six color illustrations, and eight color camouflage aircraft profiles of Luke's SPAD XIII.

In separating fact from fiction about Luke's death, Skinner does an exemplary job tracking down evidence and drawing conclusions -- all in excruciating detail. Sometimes, that means repeating events over and over again, albeit with pulling nuances out of the descriptions. If all you want is a Luke biography, you'll enjoy only one-third of the book. But if you like detective work that examines the last flight and fight of a balloon busting ace, this offers superb commentary and deductions.

Enjoyed it.

Savage Skies, Emerald Hell. by Jay A. Stout. Hardback (6.2x9.3 inches). 369 pages. 2024.

Subtitle: *The US, Australia, Japan, and the Ferocious Air Battle for New Guinea in World War II*

As you know, I'm a fan of Claringbould's work on the WWII air war in the Pacific. Here's another take of air operations over New Guinea, which is quite thorough in recapping various air battles -- many covered in Claringbould's books. Only one Claringbould book, the *P-39/P400 AirCobra* published by Osprey, is in the bibliography. Why all the other books were not used despite the overlaps is beyond me.

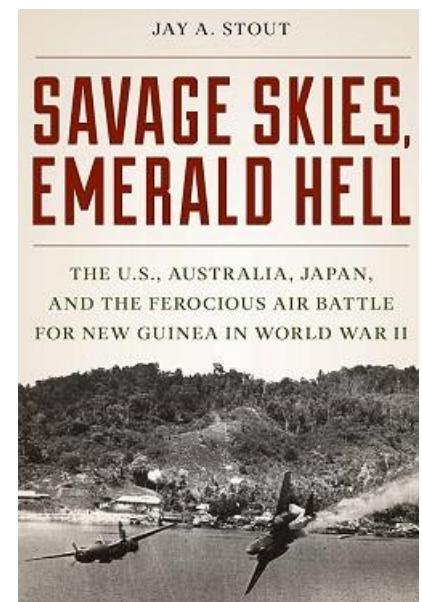
That said, *Savage Skies* is nicely written with an emphasis on US records and only the occasional use of Japanese excerpts. The battle scenes are engaging, with the weaknesses of Allied airpower evident at the start of operations and slowly ascending to total air superiority. In general, the Japanese held the initiative in 1942, 1943 found the Allies deploying considerable numbers of better aircraft and more experienced pilots, and in 1944 the Japanese had little left to contest Allied control of the skies.

One typo: Australian "solider" (p103) should be "soldier."

The book contains 92 black and white photos and three black and white maps.

With all these dogfights and narrow escapes, you can find plenty of scenario ideas for the tabletop. The early years saw few planes over New Guinea, although as the US ramped up and the Japanese tried to counter, the numbers increased.

Enjoyed it.



Pigs, Missiles and the CIA: Latin America at War 37. by Linda Rios Bromley. Softcover (8.3x11.8 inches). 92 pages. 2024.

Subtitle: *Volume 2: Kennedy, Krushchev, Castro and the Cuban Missiles Crisis 1962*

Conventional wisdom saw the US and USSR on the brink of nuclear war over the stationing of USSR missiles in Cuba. In a concise format, you'll find out why -- including allowing Gen Pliyev to launch nuclear missiles at the US without seeking permission from Moscow (p23) and the US military advising President Kennedy to launch air strikes without guaranteeing destruction of all missiles. Oh yeah, the world came close as the US declared a blockade of Cuba.

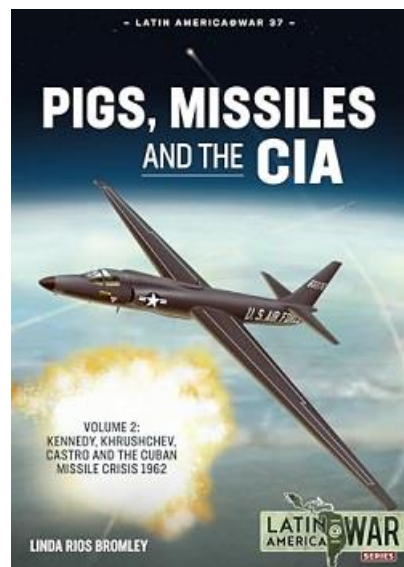
The USSR lied directly to the US, and in general to all other countries, about missiles in Cuba. Recon flights by U-2s and other aircraft soon exposed the lies.

Meanwhile, the USSR sent submarines and cargo ships to break the blockade. The Soviet subs proved notorious for defects and breakdowns, but arrived nonetheless. The stand-off at sea mirrored the diplomatic stand off.

A few typos: "As great government such as yours" (p34) is probably "A great government" and "1,500yards" (p67) is missing a space between the 0 and yards. Also, the same paragraph is repeated (p52 and p54), but that may be more for emphasis than a cut and paste error.

The book contains 81 black and white photos, seven black and white maps, one color map, 18 color aircraft camouflage profiles, one color missile profile, and one color submarine profile.

It's well written and showcases how good the At War series can be. Enjoyed it.



Midway: The Pacific War's Most Famous Battle. by Mark Stille. Hardback (6.3x9.4 inches). 416 pages. 2024.

Stille, author of numerous WWII naval books and booklets, now tackles the Battle of Midway. Having read more than a few of the books on the subject, what could he possibly say that hasn't already been said? Lots -- because he approaches the battle from the perspective of a naval intelligence officer.

The short version: Admiral Yamamoto bet the Imperial Japanese Navy would gain surprise in any encounter with US Navy carrier forces and it just wasn't going to happen. Worse, the IJN stuck to the plan long after it needed modification because that was the intrinsic culture of the IJN.

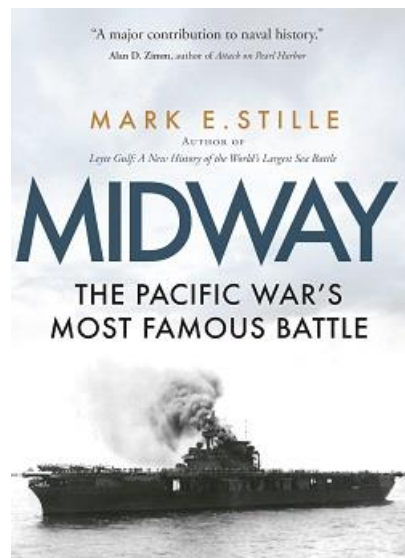
The long version offers an intricately interlocked series of analyses that peels back IJN preconceptions and overconfidence versus USN leadership adaptations that turned the battle into a US victory. Stille delves into both sides' decision-making processes against the background of unfolding operations. He pinpoints the key actions, some well-known and some little-known, by IJN and USN officers and men that made the difference.

Part of this starts with the Battle of Coral Sea and how aircraft carriers and air groups operated, which left the IJN with only four carriers, not six. More revolves around how Yamamoto essentially blackmailed the Navy into accepting, albeit with compromises, his multi-pronged plan. He describes the operational miscues, including poor IJN air defense, poor damage control, and a tardy early warning line of submarines that didn't get into place until after the USN sailed by their sectors.

And best of all, he describes the search elements, procedures, and efforts of the USN and IJN. When the first one to strike wins, search proved a key component.

The battle is described in detail, tracking claims versus actual results. For example, the B-17s claimed all sorts of hits, but only generated a couple near misses. Likewise, experience -- and a little bit of luck -- showed on both sides.

A couple possible typos: USS Enterprise squadron leaders Gray, Best, and Gallaher are listed as Lieutenants, while the majority of USN squadron leaders are listed as Lt Commanders (p139). I don't know if they should also be Lt Cmdrs. And "American carriers had to close the Japanese to launch" (P179) likely should be "close with."

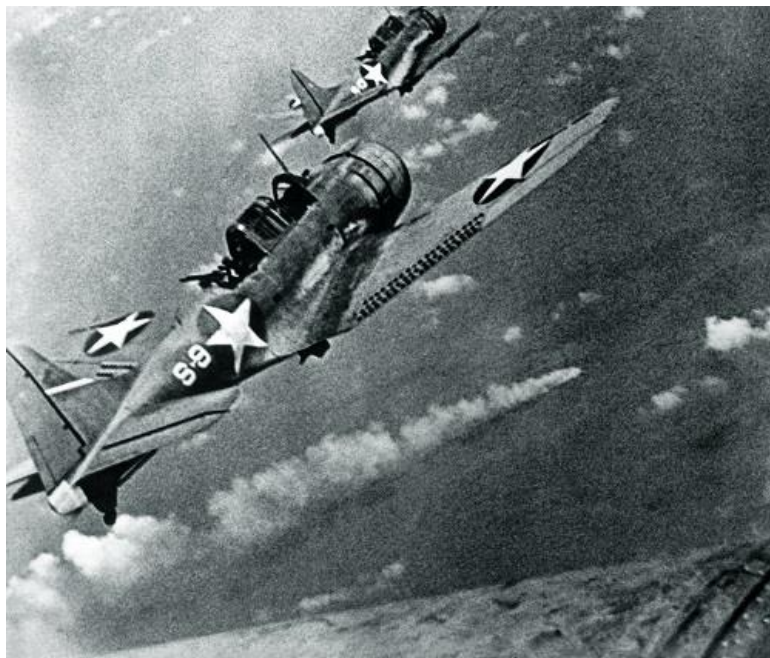


The Appendices contain OOBs for the USN and IJN naval and ground forces plus an "alternate history" look at how the IJN might have lost less and sunk more enough to close and land troops. The prospective land battle would make for a good what-if scenario.

The book contains 40 black and white photos and 10 black and white maps.

The legacy of Midway was less a war-winning victory than a definitive halt to rapid Japanese expansion and evening the odds. What Midway started, the Guadalcanal campaign in the Solomons reinforced as the Japanese faced ever growing US industrial and technological might.

Dauntlesses over IJN Mikuma.



It's a fascinating analysis with a deep dive into naval policies and practices. I'm not sure it was as inevitable a loss as proposed, for the alternative history showcases an alternative result based on some more timely decisions, but it sure seemed the IJN faced longer odds than you might have read about in previous histories.

Enjoyed it.

The First British Army: 1624-1628 (Century Soldier 114). by Laurence Spring. Softcover (7.1x9.8 inches). 293 pages. 2024 revision of 2016 book.

Subtitle: *The Army of the Duke of Buckingham (Revised Edition)*

This is the second edition of the book. As I hadn't read the first edition, I can't say what was changed, edited, added, or otherwise amended.

That said, if you are looking for a comprehensive look at the British Army of these years, this is as comprehensive as you will get. Just listing all the topics, such as officers, rank and file, uniforms, recruitment, arms, armor, flags, logistics, discipline, and tactics does not do it justice. That's not even including the army on campaign in Germany, a 1625 invasion of Cadiz in Spain, and a 1627 invasion of the Ile du Rhe off La Rochelle. The last two would make for two good tabletop games with only a few thousands troops per side.

As for recruitment of troops in England, Scotland, and Ireland, besides volunteers as young as 15 years old, the British were none too picky -- quotas were often met by emptying the parish jails and poorhouses. If that didn't work, they press-ganged working tradesmen. Desertion was often a problem.

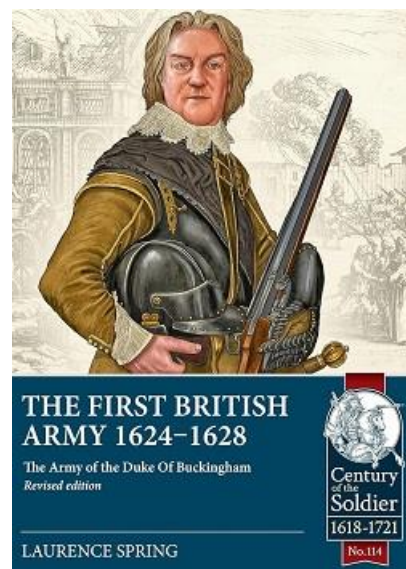
A few women followed the men on campaign and were divided into three types: wives, whores, and prostitutes (p50). Terms were a bit different than today. Wives were women married to soldiers, whores were unmarried women partnered to a soldier, and prostitutes were, well, prostitutes. Concerning the latter, among the many diseases that felled many a man, syphilis was a problem on campaign.

Regarding gunpowder, flasks were used by musketeers, but paper cartridges started being used for faster loading (p74). Buying gunpowder was in terms of "lasts" -- each last was 2,687.5 pounds with a price of 8.5 pence per pound. For what it's worth, English gunpowder was considered superior to Dutch gunpowder, although I'm not sure why. Maybe it was the ratio of saltpetre to charcoal to sulphur.

Outfitting one soldier, sans arms and armor, cost 43s 2d (p61), so when you read about the cost of expeditions and why pay and payments were often in arrears, consider that cost in the 17th century. English troops often looted because pay and food proved hard to come by...in England!

Formations are well covered, although the typographical "graphics" for the location of every officer, pikeman, and musketeer leaves a little bit to be desired. That's my only nit to pick in an otherwise information book. Well, maybe one more (p59): uniforms were of "medley colour...deer colour, sage colour, watchett and olive colour..." What's a watchett?

One typo (p204): "done little damaged to" should be "damage".



The book contains 25 black and white illustrations and three period black and white maps (Cadiz, Rhe, and Rochelle).

The army on campaign, and especially the bungling of the Duke of Buckingham, presents a concise account of the failures of this first British Army. As I noted, just the thing for the tabletop, especially with the OOBs in the appendices. You'll need to sort through the text for the Spanish and French units and numbers, but nothing a good GM can't figure out. Excellent all-around work and a credit to the *Century of the Soldier* series.

Enjoyed it.



The Allied Neutralization of Rabaul: Images of War. by Jon Diamond. Softcover (6.8x9.7 inches). 212 pages. 2024.

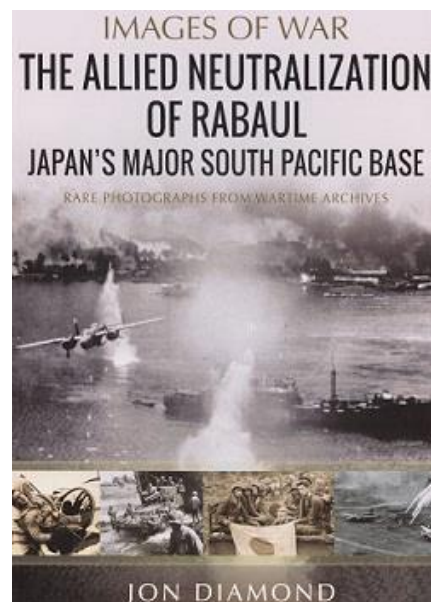
As noted in the November 2024 AAR, the *Images of War* series suffered dimension shrinkflation (the book narrowing from 7.4 inches wide to 6.8 inches wide), but almost doubling the page count for an extra dollar from 128 to 206 pages and from \$26.95 to \$27.95 list). I found that a good trade-off. This book's page count went from 206 to 212 pages and the list price went from \$27.95 to \$29.95. So it seems the size doubling is here to stay, but the pricing seems variable.

In any case, the book offers 114 black and white photos and nine black and white maps of operations in and around New Guinea and Rabaul. The maps are often accompanied by an aerial photo of the area of the map, for example, Rabaul map (p186) and aerial photo (p187), which is a clever touch.

The usual array of shipping and airfield attacks and island misery provide a period view of increasing Allied success. I've always been amazed that the Japanese, masters of camouflage, were often caught with aircraft lined up in the open wingtip to wingtip. The photos show it, although sometimes the aircraft were separated and rarely were in revetments.

Nice selection nicely done.

Enjoyed it.



Model Dioramas Handbook: Blueprint. by Mat Irvine. Hardback (8.8x11.3 inches). 192 pages. 2024.

I am always amazed at the expertise of model makers, mostly because I am as inept at it as they are expert. My model making days passed long ago and while I understand that 10,000 hours of practice begets expertise, I would probably have to add another zero to the end of that number.

However, books -- and I suppose YouTube videos -- can help shave time off whatever number you want to slug to competence. This book is not about step-by-step instructions to build a model, create weathering effects, or perform kit bashes. "The primary aim of this book is to provide an overall view of model dioramas, examining how traditional model companies...started to include 'diorama accessories' with their kits." (p8)

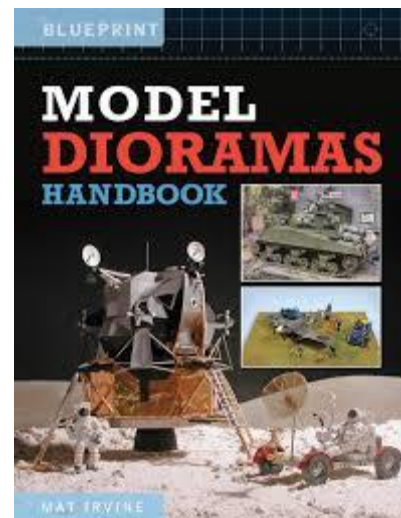
It includes chapters on tools, base materials, and what to put on the base. Much involves showcasing model kits and aftermarket kits that have been used to create dioramas and vignettes. Also includes building miniature sets for TV programs because models are cheaper than location shots.

Some wargame tables sparkle with model-making goodness. Others, like mine, plod along in the Dark Ages with felt woods and rivers and pink styrofoam hills painted green. I once built a 25mm castle out of insulation foam and used a knife to carve the outlines of stone blocks -- lo and behold, page 122 shows the exact same method, albeit the photo shows a far more sophisticated end result.

The book contains 390 color photos, three black and white photos, and three black and white illustrations.

The strength of the book is providing inspiration of photos and highlighting considerations before you start a diorama or vignette. And as anyone who has ever done a project knows, preparation is half the battle.

Enjoyed it.



Back Into Focus: The Real Story of Robert Capa's D-Day. by Charles R. Herrick. Hardback (6.3x9.4 inches). 334 pages. 2024.

This is one of those books that possesses superb research, sound analysis, and offers a hyper-detailed look at a tiny slice of history. It has nothing to do with tabletops or wargaming, but everything to do with a series of photos taken on D-Day by war photographer Robert Capa.

You really, really need to be a D-Day photo buff because this account hammers again and again on Capa's purported Omaha Beach first-wave D-Day photos. The short version: they're not. The long version consists of tracking down Capa's every movement between ships and units, analysis of his photos' subjects and their whereabouts, comparisons of his photos versus Omaha Beach tidal and land geography, and recreating a timeline using logs, reports, and other photographers' photographs.

Along the way, you learn that Robert Capa, made famous with a Spanish Civil War 1937 photo *Falling Soldier*, is really named Endre Friedman, staged the *Falling Soldier* shot, and spent most of WWII avoiding getting anywhere near combat -- and lying about it.

Interviews and his autobiography showcase his bravery to get that combat shot. Not exactly. He said he dropped with the paratroopers in Sicily. Nope, although he did ride in an aircraft. When he was sent to Anzio, he spent most of his time trying to get back to the UK. In the UK, he avoided taking paratrooper training so he wouldn't have to drop into Normandy.

Now, he was indeed on Omaha Beach, but in the 13th or 15th wave an hour and 50 minutes (p12) after the first wave -- still dangerous, but not first wave dangerous. He did take a series of 11 photos on Easy Red Beach, but apparently in a "calm" seam between German strongpoints (WN 62 and WN64). Again, dangerous, but not excessively so. And he may or may not have disembarked from the landing craft onto the beach.

If so, he spent about 30 minutes before leaving (p129).

At various times, he claimed he shot 72, 76, 79, and 106 photos of Omaha Beach first wave, but all but 11 were lost due to a darkroom accident. Apparently not.

Factoid: SHAEF accredited 540 correspondents, of which 467 were assigned to D-Day units (p10). Only four landed in immediate combat danger -- all four with the airborne divisions.

Factoid: Accredited civilian correspondents, if captured by the Germans, were considered officers (captains) and the US expected them to be treated as per the Geneva Convention (p17). Of note, David Sarnoff of RCA (NBC parent company) and William Paley of CBS were colonels on Eisenhower's staff (p16).

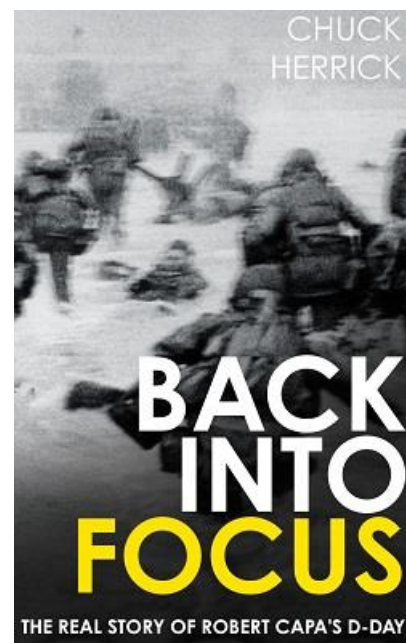
To his credit, Capa did eventually complete a short paratrooper training course and dropped over the Rhine in 1945.

Two typos: "De Gaulle was flown in from hid headquarters" (p19) should be "his" and "had for some season failed" (p54) should be "reason."

The book contains 66 black and white photos and 23 black and white illustrations and maps.

I admit that halfway through the book, I started skimming. The prose was fine, but the subject matter overdrive outweighed my interest in the photos. Ties go to the author.

Enjoyed it.



Panzer Aces of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS. by Federico Bussone. Hardback (6.4x9.4 inches). 304 pages. 2024.

Subtitle: *The Ultimate Tank Killers of WW2*

Bussone amassed 313 mini-biographies of German soldiers who proved quite adept at destroying enemy tanks: 201 bonafide 'aces' mini-bios ranging from a half to three pages in length each, 92 'pending' of only one paragraph, and 20 'misinterpreted, dubious, or inexplicable number of kills' of a paragraph to half page.

The accounts offer a quick survey of service, number of tanks, armored vehicles, and AT guns destroyed, awards, and fates. A Michael Wittman has the longest bio at 10 pages and nine photos.

The book contains 309 black and white photos. Most of the aces have an official photo, with some supplemented with field, equipment, or homefront photos.

Interesting Rating System (pxi): Each destroyed Soviet enemy tank granted 1 point to the commander, 0.5 for the gunner, and presumably 0.5 to be shared among the rest of the crew. Double the totals for Western kills, although German sources often discounted claims of kills and damaged enemy vehicles because they could be dragged away and repaired if the Germans did not hold the battlefield.

As for the tabletop, you might include one of these aces in a skirmish scenario, with some sort of modifiers above and beyond whatever the game system provides. Just a thought.

Enjoyed it.



The City Who Fought. by Anne McCaffrey and S. M. Stirling. Hardback (6.4x9.5 inches). 436 pages. 1993.

This is the fourth book in the series, of which I have not read the other three.

The city is an unarmed trading space station run by an AI named Simeon and a "brawn" named Channa. All's well until a rapidly failing ship full of refugees strikes a glancing blow on the station. The space pirates are not too far behind and the Central Worlds Navy doesn't station even a single warship out on the frontier. So it is up to the AI, Channa, and a blood-thirsty teenager to defend the station until a Navy relief force arrives.

The novel starts slow and stays that way through a variety of meetings and conferences until about 2/3 of the way through. Then, finally, we clear for battle as all those plans discussed, re-discussed, and re-re-discussed are finally put into action.

I'm going to be kind and say ties go to the authors just because I have fond memories of other novels written individually by these two authors.



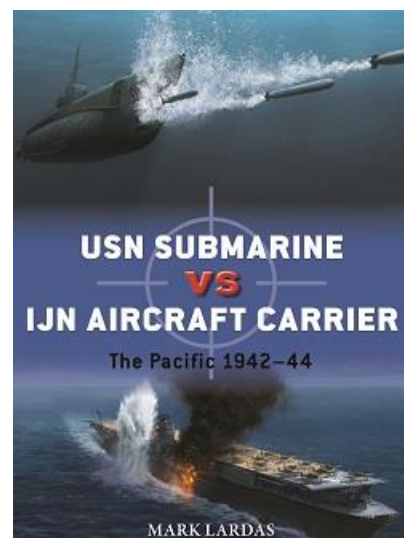
USN Submarine vs IJN CV: Duel 139. by Mark Lardas. Softcover (7.25x9.75 inches). 80 pages. 2025.

Subtitle: *The Pacific 1942-44*

In WWII, US Navy submarines maneuvered against Imperial Japanese Navy aircraft carrier 67 times, resulting in 22 unable to launch torpedoes, one opting to report position instead of attacking, 10 sinking a carrier, 12 damaging a carrier, and 22 failing in their attacks. In 1d6 wargame terms, that a 1/6 chance of sinking a carrier, 1/6 chance of damaging one, and 4/6 chance of missing or not attacking (p72).

The longer story is contained in the booklet with chapters comparing and contrasting design and development, technical specifications, personnel training and procedures, and five combat examples. It's all well-told, highlighting features and actions that contributed to the overall war in the Pacific.

For me, while I knew US submarines carried radar, I was unaware that it was used to launch torpedo attacks while submerged. As the text points out, peering through a periscope wasn't the only way to attack a Japanese ship. Likewise, electro-mechanical analog computational equipment computed torpedo attack angles. And I thought it was all done on slide rules.



The booklet contains 45 black and white photos, three color photos, three color maps, five color equipment illustrations, eight black and white illustrations, eight color USN submarine profiles, and 12 color IJN aircraft carrier profiles.

Only five Japanese carriers survived the war: *Hosho* and *Katsuragi* were capable of operations, *Junyo* and *Ryuho* were floating wrecks, and *Ibuki* was under construction. All five were scrapped in the late 1940s (p77). Of all the US subs that sank a carrier, only the *Cavalla* survives to this day -- a museum ship in Galveston, TX.

It's another fine addition to the *Duel* series.

Enjoyed it.

The Athenian Army: 507-322BC -- Elite 259. by Nicholas Sekunda. Softcover (7.25x9.75 inches). 64 pages. 2025.

This comprehensive recap and analysis of the training, equipping, and use of the Athenian troops checks all the boxes. Hoplites, cavalry, archers, and other types receive a thorough -- or as thorough as space and sources allow -- analysis of strengths, weaknesses, and changes through 200 or so years. Add in the political efforts of the period and deployments in the Persian, Peloponnesian, and other wars of Athens and you have a nice overview.

The text often uses the Greek words to introduce various equipment and practices, with an English translation following. The rest of the text then uses the Greek word, so you'll need to pay considerable attention to the first mention to understand the rest of the booklet. Although kudos for technical accuracy, it's a bit off-putting for general readers like myself. This needs a glossary to avoid having to page back to find the original English definition. The workmanlike prose wobbles a bit at times, so the information seems more presented than immersive.

One somewhat glaring omission (p4): "military training in the form of the ephebeia (the system of ephebic training)..." Now, the author should know better than to define the term with the term. Certainly the editor should have picked that up. I'm guessing that this is some sort of step-by-step arms training not unlike martial arts training in a dojo or firing practice in the modern military -- or, it's a drinking and belching contest. Your choice.

The booklet contains eight black and white photos, 42 color photos mostly of surviving stone and pottery images, six black and white illustrations, and eight color plates showcasing 24 troop figures. It's certainly enough to get you started painting up an Athenian force.

Enjoyed it.

South Atlantic 1982: Air Campaign 51. by Angus Konstam. Softcover (7.25x9.75 inches). 96 pages. 2025.

Subtitle: *The Carrier Campaign in the Falklands War*

Another excellent volume in the series recaps the air war between Britain and Argentina over the Falklands Islands. Per usual, an overview of men, equipment, and plans forms the first half and combat forms the second half.

One thing to take away from the combat recaps is how fortunate the British were that most of the conventional Argentinian bombs didn't explode when they hit the ships. More Exocet missiles would also have increased ship losses.

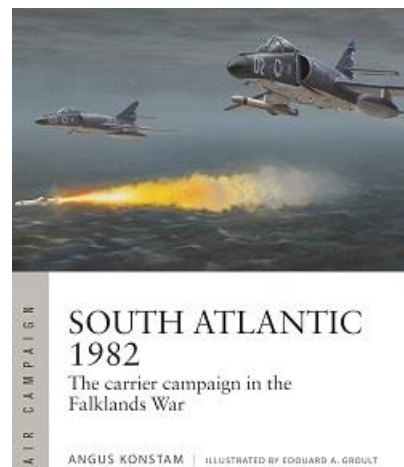
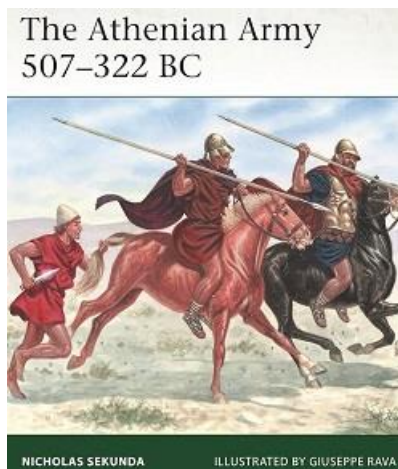
I have to say I skipped over quite a bit of the first half -- the tiny font does me in all the time. I can only wish the font size of the back cover blurb equaled the font size of the text. I closely read most of the second half, stopping from time to time to let my eyes rest. I suppose if you get the e-book version, you can crank up the font size as much as you want, but you really shouldn't have to.

The booklet contains 22 black and white photos, 42 color photos, six color maps, one color equipment illustration, two color diagrams, and three of the color two-page action illustrations.

One typo (p89): "missile did a quick initial junk" is probably "jink."

You can pull lots of tabletop air combat scenarios from the text.

Enjoyed it.



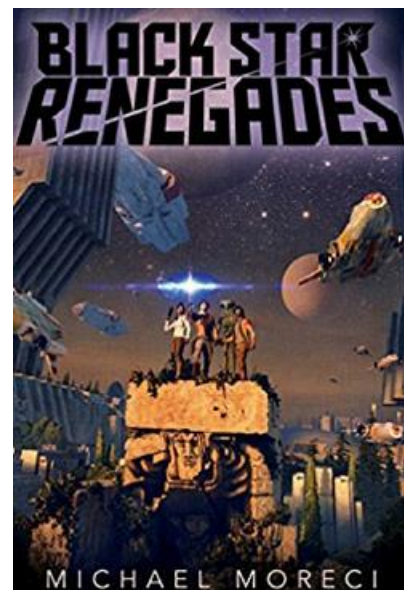
Black Star Renegades. by Michael Moreci. Softcover (5.4x8.3 inches). 2017. 375 pages.

This space opera novel centers around Cade, who was able to wield the Rokura -- a powerful weapon in the hands of the chosen one. Problem is, his brother was the chosen one and Cade picked it up to slay the empress' low-level Fatebreaker assassin. Now the entire Praxis empire was after him and his Rokura, including the Empress in her massive death-dealing spae fortress. Cade, Kira, Mig, and a deathdroid have to escape the Praxis invasion of his planet, infiltrate the space fortress, and blow up fortress and Empress.

If this sounds vaguely similiar to a certain movie, it's fairly intentional. From the peacekeeper force Jedi, er, Rai, to the Sith, er, Fatebreakers, to the DeathStar, er space fortress, this oozes a *Star Wars*-esque plot. One main departure: Instead of plans, the four need a super-metal explosive found only in one spot -- inhabited by Ewoks, er, Mithradorians -- small, furry beings with a elephant trunk.

It's written well enough, got martial arts fights with energy weapons, and a suitably heroic dash against time to try and start a chain reaction by hitting the energy core of the fortress.

Enjoyed it.



AH-1 Cobra Gunship vs NVA Armor: Duel 140. by Peter E. Davis. Softcover (7.25x9.75 inches). 80 pages. 2025.

Subtitle: *Vietnam 1967-73*

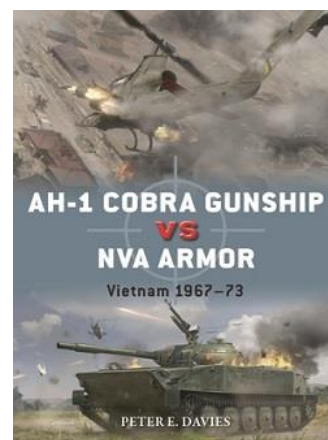
You can almost love the smell of napalm in the morning with the combat operations of the US helicopter gunships trying to destroy enemy armor prior to North Vietnam overrunning South Vietnam.

The usual examination of technical specs of the helicopter and the armored vehicles is followed by the changing nature of the Vietnam War. The recaps of various air ops showcases the firepower available versus the anti-aircraft efforts. One interesting point was the North Vietnamese use of AA weaponry deployed teams in triangles to try and gain a crossfire advantage. As AA increased, helicopter tactics changed to minimize exposure. It's all well explained.

The use of shoulder-fired man-portable SA-7 missiles changed the dynamic again, but the US left before massive numbers could be fielded.

The booklet contains 21 black and white photos, 35 color photos, one color map, five color equipment illustrations, two color diagrams, three color helicopter profiles, three color profiles of tanks, one color half-page action illustration, and one color two-page action illustration. Tiny font size here, too. Jus' sayin'.

Enjoyed it.



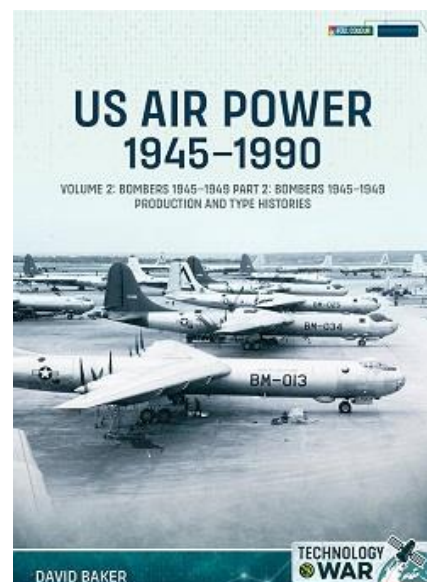
US Air Power 1945-1990: Volume 2 Tech at War 3. by David Baker. Softcover (8.3x11.8 inches). 84 pages. 2025.

Subtitle: *Bombers Part 1 -- Policy, War Plans, Strategic Air Command, and Manufacturers*

This second of 15 (!) volumes starts with the application of post-WWII airpower policy. The review of the marvelous first volume is in the 10/28/2024 AAR or up on hmgs.org.

I didn't find policy the most scintillating of topics, but it's comprehensively covered. I was more intrigued with war plans that tried to put atomic bombs within the context of policy. On note, one 1947 war plan (p49) called for dropping seven A-bombs on Moscow, three on Leningrad, two on Kharkov, two on Stalingrad, and single bombs on a lot of other Soviet cities. New strategic bombers were being developed to accomplish missions like those.

The manufacturers covered are Boeing, Consolidated Aircraft (Convair), Martin, North American, and Northrop. I didn't see Lockheed in there. These companies were seeking larger profits in the Cold War than they



turned during WWII. Interesting points abound.

Finally, the Strategic Air Command is activated and the text covers its goals, organization, and equipment.

The booklet contains 64 black and white photos, 14 color photos, four color maps, seven black and white maps, one color illustration, and 21 color camouflage aircraft profiles. I believe the font size is the same as the Osprey font size. This is not looking good for grognard eyes. I imagine my harping won't bring about larger font sizes, but I can only hope for publishers' New Year's resolutions to include such.

Enjoyed it.

The Story of the Spitfire: An Operational and Combat History. by Ken Delve. Hardback (6.4x9.5 inches). 272 pages. 2024 reprint of 2007 book.

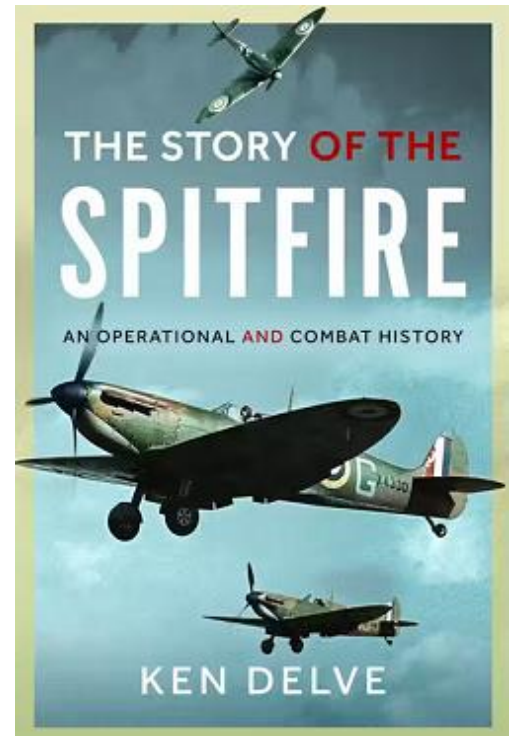
Covers the design and development from the initial Spitfire prototype through the last designs that came off the assembly line after WWII. Along the way you'll learn about the design decisions as well as trade-offs. A great deal of thought went into armament, which was settled on eight .303 MGs instead of a mix with 20mm cannons -- although later models did incorporate 20mm cannons.

The prototype flew in May 1936. At the start of WWII, about 300 Spitfires were available to the RAF (p29). Combat descriptions cover service in the Battle of Britain, fighter sweeps across Europe, D-Day, Malta and the Mediterranean front, SW Pacific, and aircraft carrier-based SeaFire variants in the Pacific. Some SeaFires served over Korea, in the Middle East, and Malaysia, but by and large, the end of WWII brought about the end of the Spitfire era.

The appendices cover tech specs, squadron lists, and Spitfire vs. other fighters capabilities.

The book contains 29 black and white photos and six black and white illustrations.

Enjoyed it.



Beachhead Assault. by David Lee. Softcover (6.1x9.2 inches). 272 pages. 2024 reprint of 2004 book.

Subtitle: *The Story of the Royal Naval Commandos in World War II*

This is an excellent topic for a book -- the UK Royal Naval Commandos who cleared the enemy, if any, from the beaches and set up beachmaster operations to guide in landing craft. A few were frogmen, a few parachuted in, but most landed and tried to create order from a chaotic site.

Training included weaponry, mines, landings, barbed wire crossing, signals, skirmishing, unarmed combat, and fieldcraft. The landings included Dieppe, Sicily, Salerno, Anzio, Normandy and a few Far East missions.

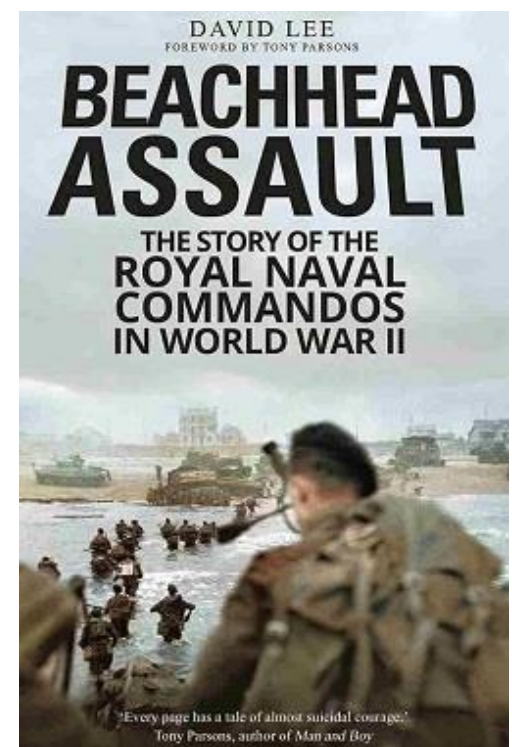
The first-person excerpts describe these operations at the individual commando level, complete with success as well as mishaps, errors, and other failures. It's quite comprehensive by the time you finish the book.

My main objection is this is less a book and more just excerpt after excerpt. Good as they are, little context within the broader landing operation comes out of these first-person accounts.

The booklet contains 32 black and white photos, six black and white maps, and one black and white illustration.

In the balance between the rarity of the information on these overlooked formations and a cohesive narrative, ties go to the author.

Enjoyed it.



Night Fighter Aces of the Luftwaffe 1940-43. by Neil Page and Jean-Louis Roba. Softcover (6.1x9.2 inches). 128 pages. 2025.

Subtitle: *Casemate Illustrated*

This book offers a well-written chronological history of the Luftwaffe NachtJagd units, pilots, and crew. From the tentative, somewhat clumsy ad-lib first efforts to full organized and radar-controlled defense, you'll discover how the units operated, their success, and their failures. Mini pilot and crew biographies pepper the text and enough first-person accounts of combats are included without overwhelming the history.

Of note, about 60% of UK Bomber Command losses were attributed to nightfighter attacks (p6) and a disproportionate number of these were racked up by experienced pilots. As the war turned against Germany, one by one, many of these experienced aces fell to Allied guns.

The booklet contains 112 black and white photos, two color photos, one black and white map, one black and white illustration, one color illustration, and seven color camouflage German aircraft profiles.

As I've noted before, publishers are evidently conspiring to keep reducing the font size. The first paragraph of every chapter is a nice, readable font. All other paragraphs after that are squinty-worthy. I don't even want to go into the lightish blue text of the first-person accounts. So, those of you with grognard eyes like mine are warned: excellent booklet but hard to read.

Enjoyed it.

Panzer Crewman. by Simon Forty and Richard Charlton-Taylor. Softcover (6.1x9.2 inches). 128 pages. 2025.

Subtitle: *Casemate Illustrated*

I suppose you can't separate the men from the machines, but this examination of the men that crewed the panzers tended to focus more on the machine than men. By my count, 45 pages covered the men, training, and duties while 83 pages covered the ammo and equipment of the tanks and other armored vehicles.

Not that the tech spec section was bad -- it was quite good, but if you've read about the vehicles before, this isn't going to add much to your knowledge. If you've never read anything about Germany's armored vehicles, then this will be helpful. The *Casemate Illustrated* series offers introductory descriptions and explanations

The crew sections provide a nice overview of crew training and general duties, although specifics such as how they approached battle, dealt with damage, and performed maintenance is in short supply. I figured those topics would be discussed more than tech specs.

The booklet contains 129 black and white photos, 37 color photos, seven black and white illustrations, and 22 color illustrations. My small font complaints carry through all these new *Casemate Illustrated* volumes.

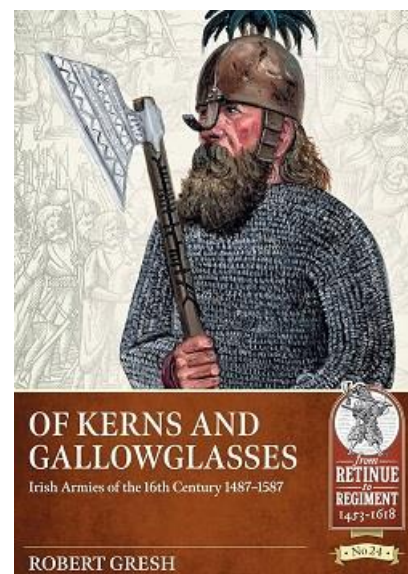
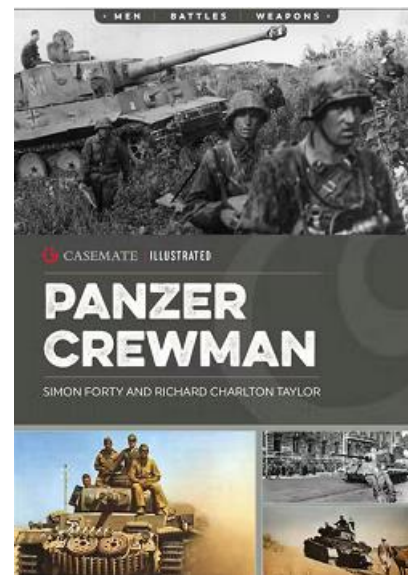
With the above caveats, the benefit of the doubt goes to the authors. Enjoyed it.

Of Kerns and Gallowglasses: Retinue to Regiment 24. by Robert Gresh. Softcover (7.2x9.8 inches). 328 pages. 2024.

Subtitle: *Irish Armies of the 16th Century 1487-1587*

The Irish armies of the period came down to four basic types: Chieftains and other leaders, cavalry, gallowglasses (mailed foot with great axe), and kern (light infantry). Of Kerns and Gallowglasses explains them all as well as bowmen, artillerymen, and other ancillary types. British garrison troops are also covered briefly.

Each troop type receives a full description of weaponry, armor, equipment, banners, customs, and tactics. A chapter even covers bagpipers. Pike and shot arrived in the mid 1500s.



Most military activity revolved around raids on neighboring nobles, although very few were slain compared to bloodletting elsewhere in the early Renaissance age. Even the largest armies were only around 5,000 or so, with the gallowglasses usually in the center and the kern on the flanks. Feigned retreats and ambushes were a part of such raids and battles.

Irish forces created for use in invasions, for example France in 1544 France, are touched on.

The text is quite thorough and often interspersed with period excerpts, which may drive you crazy with the old spellings and terms, but add period atmosphere. It's not a bad balance overall.

The book contains seven black and white photos, 68 black and white illustrations, six black and white maps, six color uniform illustrations, and seven color flag/banner illustrations.

While I had some notion of medieval Irish troops, the transition to early Renaissance was a black slate in my knowledge. This book wrote up the slate and then some. Well done.

Enjoyed it.

Hitler's Miracle Weapons: Volume 1. by Friedrich Georg. Softcover (8.2x11.8 inches). 127 pages. 2024 reprint of 2003 book.

Subtitle: *Secret Nuclear Weapons of the Third Reich and Their Carrier Systems: The Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine*

Plenty of books cover all those WWII German wonder weapons that were supposed to help win the war, but this is the first I've run across that specifically addresses the German nuclear program.

It starts with delivery vehicles, from aircraft to rockets to submarines firing rockets. Along with the technical specs and intended uses, it also offers speculation on a multitude of other enhancements and designs. Mind you, the Germans spawned many a four-engine and six-engine plane that may or may not have reached prototype stage or multiple prototype stage. For example, the JU-390 purportedly had the range to go from Norway to Japan...but a lot of this reads like one of those History Channel documentaries that draw conclusions from circumstantial evidence or an offhand remark. It's a lot of coulda/woulda.

The atomic bombs, or radiological bombs, seem even more speculative. Maybe there was a test in Czechoslovakia. Maybe one in the North Sea (p48-49). The bombs included tactical ones carried underneath a ME-109 as well as larger ones that would be carried by plane or rocket.

Allegedly, Hitler refused to use nuclear weapons because Germany had no defense against such a weapon. The Battle of the Bulge was supposed to mark the start of the atomic offensive designed to force the West to sign a separate peace.

One typo (p17): "Goring oprdered all production of bomber and torpedo aircraft." In context, the sentence should add the word "ended."

The book contains 23 black and white photos, two black and white maps, two black and white illustrations, 19 color photos of models of some of the aircraft and bombs discussed, five color illustrations of aircraft, and 15 color camouflage aircraft profiles.

I don't buy most of the speculation about German nuclear weapons and not at all that Hitler refused to use them. A guy who slaughters millions and orders the razing of the entire country as the Allies close in is unlikely to be squeamish about using radiological weaponry. That Germany had a nuclear program is historically accurate. That it was as developed as some of the claims made in the book is a stretch -- but at least a good beginning of a discussion.

One point that kept nagging me. I didn't see anything that said this was a revised edition. As a straight reprint, has any other evidence come to light in the last 20 years? If I were to guess, I'd say the success of the Oppenheimer movie generated interest in republishing a 20-year-old book.

A couple recent other reviewed books come to mind: *Hitler the Scientist* (published 2024) and *Dropping the Atomic Bomb on Hirohito and Hitler* (2022). Also, a magazine (2019) also comes to mind: *Against the Odds* # 50, with a multi-player card game within called *Die Atombombe, The Reich's Bid to Build The Bomb*, and a cover article all about the topic.

Enjoyed it.



Hitler's Miracle Weapons: Volume 2. by Friedrich Georg. Softcover (8.2x11.8 inches). 139 pages. 2024 reprint of 2003 book.

Subtitle: *The Secret History of the Rocket and Flying Craft of the Third Reich*

Continuing from the first volume, this follows the same trail of supposition, official reports, and offhand comments to outline various WWII German scientific projects and prototypes -- primarily the rockets that would be used to launch nuclear weapons described in Volume 1. In total, 138 rocket and missile projects were in various stages of design, prototype, and testing, of which he could not find information on about 80 of them (p1).

The rocket story starts in WWI, when Siemens-Schuckert built more than 100 wire-controlled glider bombs equipped with warhead ranging from 300kg to 1,000kg. These would be launched from Zeppelins, although their range was only about 7.5km (p3).

As the Versailles Treaty didn't mention rocketry among its restrictions, Germany set up rocket production and testing centers, including a 1922 lab where Dr. Hermann Oberth tested turbine engines (p5) and the 1927 Space Travel Association in Breslau (p6). Werner von Braun wasn't the only scientists testing rockets in the pre-Nazi and Nazi era.

During WWII, the V-1 and V-2 rockets were developed and launched, although considerable -- and beneficial -- obstacles delayed their use until 1944. Most of the testing for these was finished in 1943, but if you read Volume 1, you know the author believed these were meant to carry nuclear warheads. Rocket variant by variant receives considerable examination about design, development, and prototype testing.

Again, much of this sounds like one of those History Channel conspiracy documentaries full of speculation and semi-logical deductions. It gets a little tiring reading about all these logic leaps. For example, on the say so of a Spanish agent planted in the Vatican, in Jan 1945, FDR considered a negotiated withdrawal from the European war if Germany could hold the Rhine River-Westwall line and unleash escalating rocket obliteration against Britain and France (p113). Uh-huh.

Let me put on my secret squirrel conspiracy hat and link this to Himmler's well-reported efforts to negotiate with the Western Allies through Switzerland. Could this be the result of such secret negotiations? Of course it is, it's a conspiracy theory! History Channel, call me. I'm available to star in the next Nazi-Nuke-Nonsense "documentary."

Wait, wait, I can do better. The missing Nazi gold train is in the Vatican Secret archives. Whenever the Pope needs a new Pope-mobile, he assigns the local Mother Superior to melt down a few bars. That's why the price of gold fluctuates as it does. Whoa.... Nazis, Nukes, and Nuns-sense. Emmy, here I come.

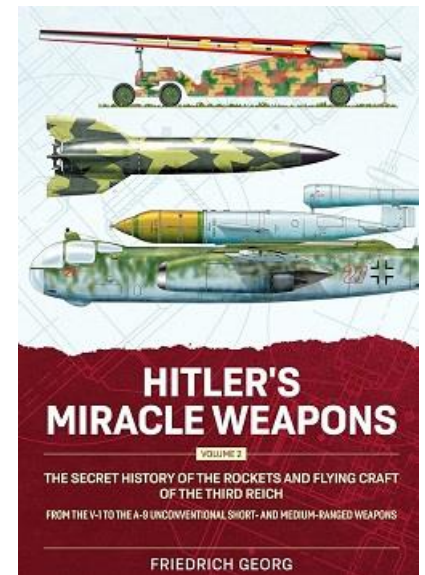
Oh, oh, oh...and the reason ET had to phone home was his assignment to help the SS develop nukes had finished. Ba-dum-bum!

Was that over the top? I can never tell.

Other interesting projects: Konrad Zuse's Z-1 and Z-3 computers predated ENIAC and were used in 1943 to calculate ballistics (p10); Nipolite was a nuclear explosive material with the tensile strengths of steel so a rocket could use explosives as the shell (p41); a carbon-dust explosive named "artificial tornados" could be stuffed into unused empty spaces within a rocket and would amplify the initial explosion with secondary explosions (p57); one German attack used jet packs to leap over the front line and attack the Allies from above and behind to create the first flying infantry weapon (p95) -- eat your heart out 007; and on it goes.

The reconstructed Z-1 at German Museum of Technology.

The text suffers from a few more non-fatal typos than usual. Typos include: "in 1943.600" (p27) needs a comma and space; "laser laser" (p70) is a double word as is "of of" (p94); and "dvelopment" (p89) which is missing an e.



The booklet contains 22 black and white photos, nine black and white illustrations, 35 color photos of models showing what some of these rockets look like, five color illustrations, and 15 color camouflage illustrations of the various rockets and projects.

I have no doubt that just about the entire book represents actual projects existing on drawing boards -- not unlike books about 1,000-ton panzers and all manner of jet fighters. That Germany tested and built nuclear weapons??? I am skeptical...and snarky. I figure lunatic leaders slaughtering millions would have no reason not to unleash such destruction as soon as it was available.

That said, these books are intriguing from a "look what scientists are designing" viewpoint. Drawing board designs are a valid aspect of historical research and development. The Conclusion notes a Volume 3 is coming. I'm looking forward to that.

Beyond that, for Pulp RPGers -- a goldmine of adventures. Whoa.... a movie: Jersey Russ and the Nazi Nukes. Spielberg, have your people contact my people. The Oscars are calling my name.

Enjoyed it.

The Waffen-SS at Kharkov: February-March 1943. by Massimiliano Afiero.

Softcover (6.1x9.2 inches). 128 pages. 2025.

Subtitle: *Casemate Illustrated*

This overview of the SS PanzerKorps counterattack to retake Kharkov in 1943 often brings the action down to company level. Although dealing primarily with the Leibstandarte with some Das Reich included, the initial maneuvers, swift attack, and house-to-house battle for the city is well told.

Although the SS PzKorps lost 4500 men, or about 44% of its starting strength, the Soviets lost an estimated 80,000 (p122). That also goes to show the odds facing the Germans as well as the disparity in quality. It may have been the last German major victory, but it hardly changed the shifting momentum.

The booklet contains 201 black and white photos, five black and white maps, two color maps, and three color camouflage tank illustrations.

Enjoyed it.



The Soviet Battle for Berlin 1945. by Ian Baxter. Softcover (6.1x9.2 inches). 128 pages. 2025.

Subtitle: *Casemate Illustrated*

The booklet takes you through an overview of five Soviet Phases, starting with the assault on the Seelow Heights, before it gets to the actual Battle of Berlin, which starts on page 90. It's all a nice, succinct package, although given the situation, it's mostly Soviet operations crushing the defenders except for a few temporary repulses. Berlin gets surrounded and then stormed.

Of note are the 29, yes, twenty-nine, pages of orders of battle, mostly down to division level for the Soviets and battalion level for the Germans. No specific numbers, although you can pull some of them from the text. Mini-bios of the primary commanders are also included.

One typo (p14): "facing an three" should have the "an" deleted.

The booklet contains 157 black and white photos, 11 color uniform illustrations, seven color camouflage vehicle profiles, and six color maps.

Small font complaint aside, this is a good introduction to the end phase of the war on the Eastern front.

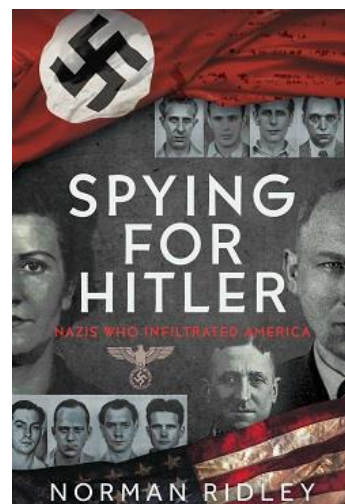
Enjoyed it.



Spying for Hitler: Nazis Who Infiltrated America. by Norman Ridley. Hardback (6.5x9.5 inches). 230 pages. 2024.

Despite the title, the book starts with WWI spying and sabotage in the US by German agents. After that comes the great 1930s spy rings and the 1940s spy and sabotage efforts.

As the spying was only as good as the spies, some rings were quite successful and others quite inept. For example, the vaunted secrecy surrounding the US Norden bombsight, including not photographing it in the nose of bombers, was apparently



unnecessary. German spies copied enough of the blueprints to allow German engineers at Zeiss to make a close duplicate once the drawings were smuggled back to Germany (p111-112).

The fate of most spy rings was eventual discovery, often due to the ineptitude of the spies, of one spy and then the FBI rolled that one into talking about another and then another and so on. Granted, the FBI once illegally held two German agents for 10 days in order to sweep up the rest of the German-Italian spy ring (p125), having learned in the 1930s from a previous cracking of a ring that saw 11 of 18 spies flee back to Germany.

Captured German spies.



The best known sweep was nabbing four German saboteurs landed by U-boat on Long Island, NY. The Operation Pastorius was supposed to destroy bridges, power plants, and factories, but a bungling spy gave the operation away (p142). The most surprising operation involved German-Japanese collaboration that sent intel to Japan first.

The workmanlike prose isn't exactly scintillating. I ceased reading at about the two-thirds mark, but the info is there. I imagine pulp RPGers will find much to mine for a 1930s spy game. In reality, no car chases or shootouts, but that's history, not role-playing. Appendices include mini-biographies of various spies to add a tinge of historical context to a RPG.

A few typos: "large steel mill of the and the Roebing & Sons Co" seems to be either missing a company name or has an "and the" too much (p20); "had met by accident when Lonkovski had visit Griebel's" (p73) should be "visited"; "harvested a bountiful crop of secret including army maps" (p73) is likely "secrets" although it may be a secret something-or-other.

The book contains 16 black and white photos.

Most spy successes resulted from appealing to recent immigrants in position to pass information. Most failures resulted from sloppiness. Ties go to the author.

Enjoyed it.

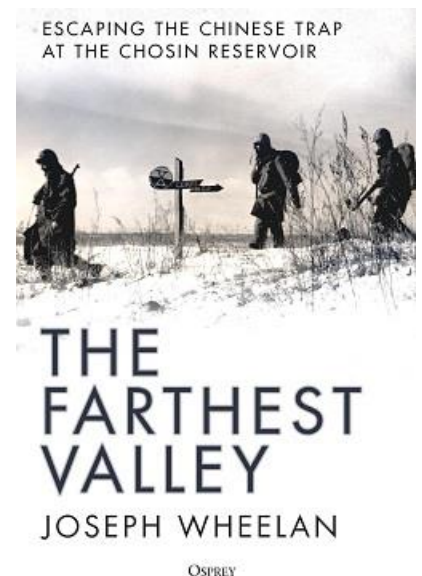
The Farthest Valley: Escaping the Chinese Trap at the Chosin Reservoir. by Joseph Wheelan. Hardback (6.3x9.5 inches). 392 pages. 2024.

Exceptionally well written history of the retreat of 1st Marine Division plus US and British Army units from the Chosin Reservoir to coast in November-December of 1950.

With the North Korean Army demolished after a repulse at Pusan and the Inchon landing, United Nations troops advanced northward, intending to liberate all of Korea. The Chinese responded to North Korean calls for help as well as fearing a border with the capitalist West. The Chinese set a trap at Chosin, allowing X Corp to advance against minimal opposition. Other UN troops reached the Yalu briefly and for a while, the war would end by Christmas.

Except the Chinese sent in armies (three to four divisions each) to surround and destroy the 1st Marines. X Corp commander Gen. Almond, oblivious and arrogant, kept sending orders to push northward, but Marine Gen Smith smelled a communist rat and dragged his feet, setting up depots, fall-back positions, and an advanced airfield just in case. They were all sorely needed at one time or another.

What follows is a fantastic narrative of Chinese human wave attacks, which worked against the Nationalist armies during the Chinese Civil War, failing versus American firepower and resolve. Marine companies, supported by artillery and air strikes, repulsed Chinese battalions and higher formations. What bullets, shells, rockets, and napalm didn't do, the cold of -20F to -30F degrees did. Chinese troops in summer wear or lightweight "winter" wear froze to death in the fields while waiting for the order to attack. No food reached



them and they couldn't scavenge as they did in China. Plenty of scenarios abound, but it seems difficult to comprehend rules that would duplicate such Chinese carnage.

Of note, the 7th Marine Regiment, 2nd Battalion commander was Lt. Col. Randolph Lockwood, who led a defense of Yudam-ni (p99). However, when Dog, Easy, and Fox companies stayed north, Lockwood was ordered south to Hagaru-ni (p167-168) as the Chinese surrounded Yudam-ni. His efforts to lead a relief force failed amid a Chinese ambush. He never got back to his three companies, became apathetic and depressed and was diagnosed as neurotic and relieved of command (p281).

On a lighter note and something that might befit a M*A*S*H episode, the Marines needed 60mm mortar ammo. A radioman didn't have his codebook handy and so transmitted in the clear: "Send Tootsie Rolls" -- using the slang for 60mm mortar ammo. A later airdrop dropped Tootsie Rolls candy (p206).

The retreat, or as Gen. Smith called it "advance in another direction," proved an arduous undertaking. The Marines used a French tactic from the Rif War of 1925 (p233) of clearing the hills surrounding the road route.

Numerous bridges needed fixing or erecting along the way and the omnipresent Chinese ambushes sometimes reached the column itself.

The book contains 19 black and white photos and six black and white maps. The maps are fine as such, but considering that details go down to platoon and even squad level, they need to be more tactical to be useful for scenarios.

Mao may have crowed about such a wonderful victory, and the Chinese armies did recover the terrain, but the cost was steep. The Chinese suffered 48,156 casualties: 19,202 from combat and 28,954 from non-combat (p326). The 1st Marine Division suffered 4,418 combat casualties and 7,313 non-battle casualties.

While I've read about "Frozen Chosin" here and there, this is the first full-length book on the subject for me. Detailed and exceptionally well written, it's brilliant.

Enjoyed it.



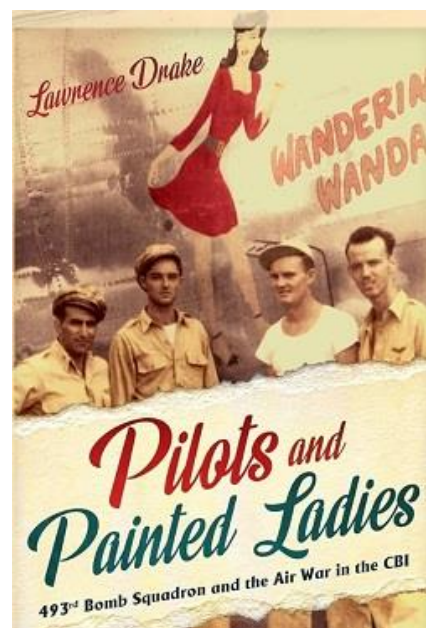
Pilots and Painted Ladies: 493rd Bomb Squadron and the Air War in the CBI. by Lawrence V. Drake. Hardback (6.2x9.2 inches). 237 pages. 2025.

At first I thought this was another unit history using some aircraft pin-up nose art on the cover to sell the book. You'd think I'd know better to judge a book by its cover. It's much, much better than that.

This is actually a biography of Lt. Vernon Drake, pilot of a B-24 bombing Japanese targets in Burma and later transferred to flying supply missions over The Hump (Himalaya Mountains) from India to China. Starting with his childhood in Montana, it covers his enlistment after Pearl Harbor, training, flight as a passenger from the US to Brazil to and across Africa and to India. Then it's bombing missions of bridges, Rangoon, and other targets.

Alas for co-pilot Vernon, his good friend and pilot Lt. Goodrich showed off during takeoff for the Army brass and journalists covering overseas deployment of B-24 Spirit of Fort Worth. A take-off blunder sent the plane skidding down the runway and those two to fly a B-24 converted into a gas hauler to China.

The smooth prose rolls right along as if you are flying next to Vernon on the B-24 or white-knuckling a ride through the updrafts and downdrafts among socked-in mountains. Drinks at the officer's club, buzzing the pyramids, and other lighter moments pepper the text.



But Vernon was an amateur artist and asked permission to paint a babe on the nose of his B-24. That was against regulations, but his CO noted that a maintenance touch-up paint job would also boost morale. That's when Angry Angel graced the nose of his B-24.

She proved so popular, other crews wanted their B-24s decorated and Vernon was happy to oblige. After his involuntary transfer to Hump missions, more of his nose art decorated planes. The list at the back of the book shows 10 designs, with photos interspersed of his sketches and final results. Some of his original nose art was saved post-war and donated to the Commemorative Air Force Museum.

The book contains 35 black and white photos, 18 black and white illustrations, three black and white maps, 14 color photos, and one color illustration.

What a delightful book to read.

Enjoyed it.

American Experimental Fighters of WWII. by Tony Buttler. Hardback (8.6x12.0 inches). 328 pages. 2024.

Subtitle: *The Pursuit of Excellence*

With a clever subtitle, this book profiles 24 single- and two-engine fighters profiled all failed to get beyond prototype stage. Some of these prototypes out and out crashed, including instances of killing the test pilot.

The text details all the tech specs air buffs love and often includes excerpts of the official flight test reports. Most of the time, the new and improved version failed to equal the existing version, or at least not by enough to retool production lines. Many of them failed due to problems with new engines. Many of them used contra-rotating propellers, i.e. two propellers rotating in opposite directions, to counteract the increasing torque of ever more powerful engines. The complexity proved difficult to overcome and jet engines soon replaced piston engines.

Some of the fighters were supposed to carry more than the six or eight 50-cal machine guns. The Curtiss XP-46, successor to the P-40, and the Fisher XP-75 Eagle were supposed to carry 10 50-cal MGs. Many were to use 20mm cannon in place of MGs.

Probably the most unusual was the Northrop N-1 flying wing fighter that first flew in July 1940 (p79). While not particularly useful as a fighter, the form factor and technology proved to be the father of the B-2 bomber and the grandfather of the new B-21 bomber.

As you might expect, the book showcases a ton of imagery -- 493 black and white photos, 50 black and white illustrations, 20 color photos, and one color illustration.

After the first dozen profiles, I tended to skip around in the next dozen. Tech specs and engineering details tend to become repetitious. As none of these were in combat, how they would do against Axis fighters remains speculation, but how they did against Allied fighter specs explains much about why these designs were shelved. The more you revel in specs and test flight reports, the more you're going to enjoy reading about planes that never quite measured up.

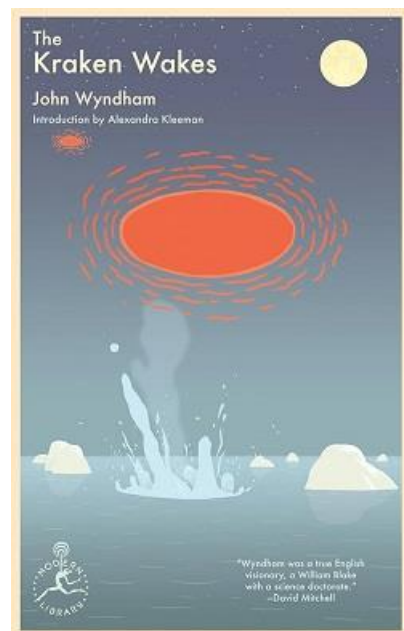
Enjoyed it.

The Kraken Wakes. by John Wyndham. Softcover (5.2x8.0 inches). 239 pages. 2022 reprint of 1953 book.

This is a reworking of the War of the Worlds, or at least it seems so to me. Meteors fall into the ocean and the next thing you know, ships are sinking without a trace over the deepest waters of the oceans. Military expeditions are eliminated. An atom bomb is detonated in one of the deep trenches, but that doesn't stop the attacks. Soon, the seas are swept clear of most ships.

From this interesting premise comes a tale of humans trying to counter the beasts of the deep. It's seen through the eyes of a husband and wife journalist team from the EBC (English Broadcasting Corp), a competitor to the BBC. As they consult military and scientific sources, the situation gets worse. Remember, this is the 1950s, so technology is Cold War technology.

Nothing seems to work and soon the "tanks" -- armored beasts -- slither on the shore and ensnare people with sticky cilia. Rifle fire proves



ineffective, but rockets and cannons work. Air and ground counter-attacks repel such mass slitherings as governments fortify the shorelines with mines, bunkers, and reserves.

Yet just as these measures prove effective, the beasties start to melt the polar ice caps. The commentary on societal collapse as the seas rise seems spot on.

One aspect that I found less than effective is the innocuous dinnertime and vacation time banter between the husband and wife. I found myself utterly bored and skipped pages until the conversation returned to the main plot. I can only say I found the story so compelling, these "interruptions" detracted from the story.

Another aspect was the payoff. I realize that the original *War of the Worlds*' bacteria killing off the Martians could be abrupt, but the end of this book -- however logical -- was so abrupt I paged back to see if I had inadvertently missed pages that had stuck together. I didn't. Abrupt it was.

It was as if the publisher said, "On my desk by 5 o'clock today or kiss your book contract goodbye." It must have been delivered at 4:59.

This may be a reflection of 1950s-era novels...or maybe my impatience to get on with the plot. Either way, it's a cracking good book, or perhaps a kraken good book, but could use a cut here and there and a longer examination of various efforts at the end.

Enjoyed it.

Star Corpsman: Bloodstar Book One. by Ian Douglas. Paperback (4.1x6.7 inches). 355 pages. 2012.

Follows Navy corpsman Elliot 'Doc' Carlyle on an interstellar Marine scouting expedition to Bloodworld, where the marauding Qesh captured a human colony of religious fanatics. Thanks to an entry in an interstellar internet called the Encyclopedia Galactica, humans knew the basics about the Qesh, but not very much more. Hence the Marine recon mission.

The envisioning of medical advances combined with combat armor is quite impressive. Couple that with ground-level action and you have a well thought out and consistent universe framework. The only hiccup in the explanation was the "entire Marine Rifle Company" of 50 to 60 Marines (p78) followed by Bravo company consisting of a HQ company and three platoons of 48 Marines each (p84).

It is of no consequence. Although it occasionally seems a bit padded with a little too much info dump at once, the action comes fast and furious, the world building is superb, and the writing is generally excellent.

Enjoyed it.

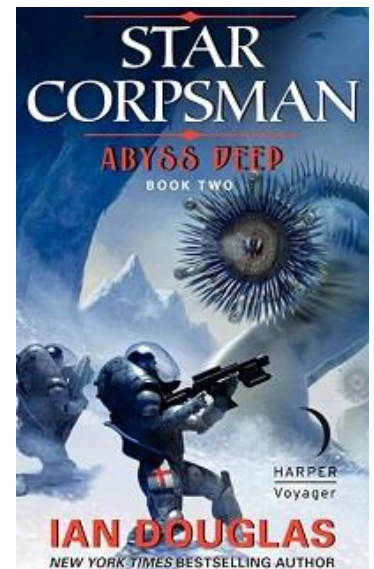
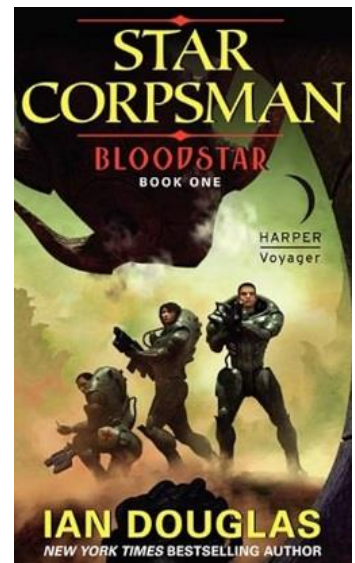
Star Corpsman: Bloodstar Book Two. by Ian Douglas. Paperback (4.1x6.7 inches). 373 pages. 2013.

Continues the exploits of Navy corpsman Elliot 'Doc' Carlyle on a recon mission to a ice and water planet called Deep Abyss. As with the first novel, you get a considerable dose of science in this science fiction. All those who revel in discussion of the many types of ice as well as theories on the evolution of ice cuttlewhales will enjoy the book -- quite imaginative.

The 10-foot-tall prawn-like Gykr apparently arrived to find a human science outpost already at Deep Abyss. As the Gykr didn't want to share, the outpost needed a rescue mission. Enter Marine recon with the stalwart Carlyle in support braving the ice, water, cuttlewhales, and Gykr to pull the scientists out from a deadly first contact.

The writing continues its excellence, the info dumps and conference room planning occasionally bog down the plot, and the action sequences are inventive and fast-paced.

Enjoyed it.



Make Germany Great Again. by Andrew Sangster. Hardback (6.5x9.5 inches). 212 pages. 2024.

Subtitle: *How The German People Reacted To Nazism*

For a brief moment, I thought this was a comparison of Nazi Germany with the possibility of the US becoming a fascist state or even the rise of modern fascism in current day Germany. Sign of the times, I guess, but this book is about 1930s-1940s German public opinion and the people and groups opposing Hitler and the Nazis. As the Nazi political system was a police state, most objectors ended up in concentration camps or executed.

The longer the Nazis were in power, the more restrictive society became. In the beginning, when the Versailles Treaty was torn up and people were put back to work, public support remained strong. However, free elections were some of the first casualties, followed by free expression in the media. Suborning the local police as well as creating a national police (Gestapo) made sure that votes legitimately gained on the campaign trail were never needed again once Hitler became Chancellor.

Eventually, the only recourse to ending Nazi oppression was killing the top Nazis in charge. Hitler's erratic behavior and scheduling changes foiled all the plots, but as security tightened in the war years, it was up to the military to carry out the assassinations and take control of the government. July 20, 1944 was the closest the disaffected officers came to success.



Profiles of individuals explain their opposition to the Nazi regime, the plots they considered, and the actions they took. Fear in the form of the Gestapo ruled the country and Nazi adherents were always ready to denounce those questioning the government or its leaders. Silence became a measure of self-preservation.

I'm not sure if 'Nazisim' is a typo or a British alternative spelling of Nazism, but the subtitle is more accurate than the title. Typos: "1,0800" (p40) is some number; Most spellings are "Goebbels" but for a couple pages "Gobbels" (p43-44) takes over; "don't do to" (p59) is really "don't go to"; and "year1942" (p73) needs a space.

The book contains 20 black and white photos and one black and white illustration.

In the US, when you hear threats of jailing opposition politicians, reporters, and late-night comics, you have to understand that -- if carried out -- this is the playbook of the Nazi, Communist, and third-world dictators. Promises to gain legitimacy and then repression to ensure no one else makes promises -- that's the tyrants' modus operandi.

As this book shows, once a police state takes hold, it is incredibly difficult to eject -- Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, China, and Russia being prime examples of totalitarian regimes that never let go. Public demonstrations of opposition only go so far until a police crackdown arrests the major opposition leaders -- and often kills them. An armed response from within and without then becomes an option to overthrow the tyrants.

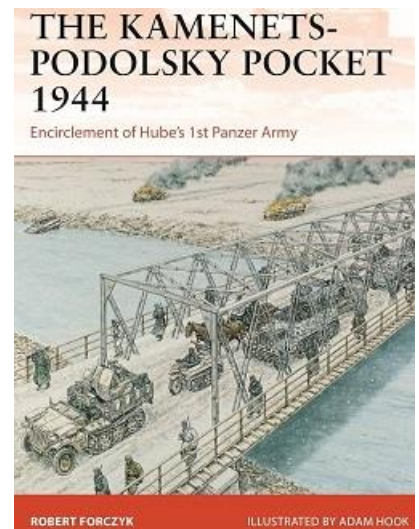
Enjoyed it.

Kamenets-Podolsky Pocket 1944: Campaign 411. by Robert Forczyk. Softcover (7.25x9.75 inches). 96 pages. 2025.

Subtitle: *Encirclement of Hube's 1st Panzer Army*

This guy can write, which is the highest praise I can bestow on such a captivating overview of what may be better known as Hube's Pocket. The town of Kamenets-Podolsky served as HQ during the German breakout back to friendly lines. How different Stalingrad may have turned out had Hube, not Paulus, been in charge of 6th Army in 1942-1943.

In true *Campaign* format, you get an overview of the forces,



commanders, and plans followed by an OOB mostly down to Division and Corp level and sometimes even lower. Then comes the operations to escape with all the German command prowess and Soviet command blunders contributing to the successful evacuation of about 80% of German personnel at the expense of most of the tanks, vehicles, and other equipment.

The Luftwaffe performed just enough supply missions to provide the bare minimum of fuel, ammo, and food to keep the breakout going. That it was done with minimal outside help is amazing. The German counterattack seemed to aim for the garrison at Tarnopol, which held Soviet and German attention far longer than it should have.

The booklet contains 59 black and white photos, three color photos, six color maps, three of those less-than-useful color 3D maps, and three color two-page action illustrations.

Overviews like these make me want to break out the troops to recreate some of the breakout battles contained within.

Enjoyed it.

Bonus Pic:

One more from the Chain of Command game. Your intrepid editor ponders characteristics from a Soviet unit card as the Germans mass along the stream ... and the woods ... and the hills... Photo by Dan.

