

The Battle of Balaclava (from the SPI Quad “Four Battles of The Crimean War”)

By Leo Zappa

Lord Raglan Changes History!

Prologue:

Usually I play wargames on subjects about which I have some degree of knowledge. World War Two, The American Civil War, hell, even ancient Roman warfare and alternative history NATO versus Warsaw Pact conflicts are all things I’ve read up on over the years. When I sit down to play a game on subjects like these, I have a general idea what’s going on...

But not this time...

Playing Balaclava was one of those times when I went into the game knowing almost nothing about the battle, or for that matter, the war that precipitated the battle in question.

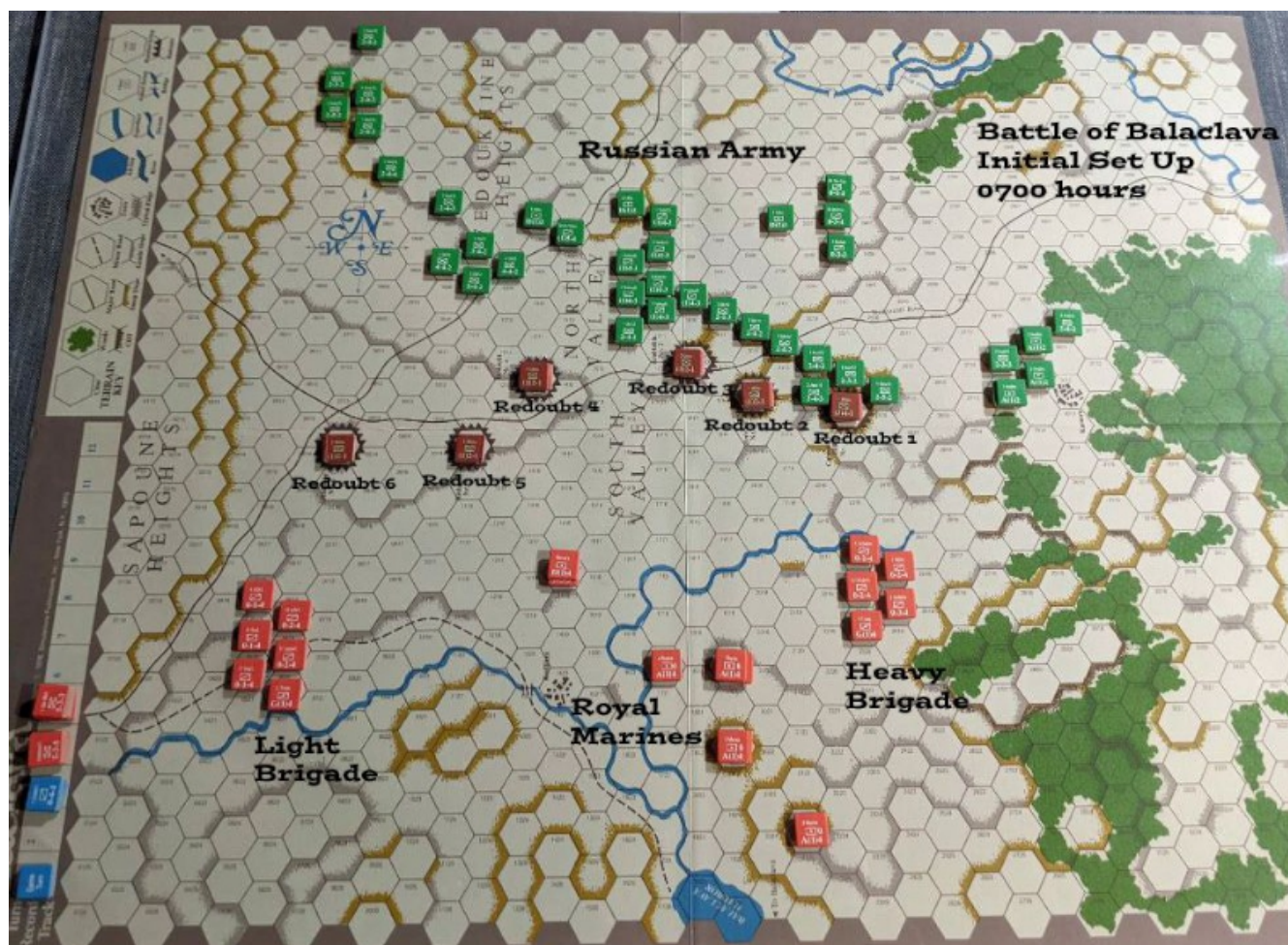
Ok, so it’s not as bad as all that. I mean, I knew:

- 1) The Crimean War had Britain, France, and Turkey (I think) fighting the Russians. Why they were fighting? No idea.*
- 2) There was the Charge of the Light Brigade (I watched the movie once – didn’t go well for the Light Brigade, as memory serves).*
- 3) Lord Raglan commanded the British Army (whom, I’ll admit, I momentarily confused with Sir Ragnar, a character that has to be rescued in a scenario for Heroquest, but I digress...)*

It was also brought to my attention that the Charge of the Light Brigade (or more precisely, the poem about said charge, written by Tennyson) was featured in a scene from the movie “The Blind Side” – you learn something new everyday!

I also own two books on the subject, “Crimea” by Trevor Royle, and “The Crimean War”, by Alan Palmer. To date, I’ve not cracked open either book, though I certainly intend to, at some point.

So, why did I choose this game to solo, given my introduction? Well, because I find that playing a wargame on a particular battle, campaign, or war can spark my general interest in the matter and get me to, say, crack open a book or two. The game also looked like something I could knock out in a day or so, which was what I was looking for at the moment.



Initial Set-Up

Introduction:

The game is played on a compact 22" x 17" mapsheet, and uses only 100 counters. Each game turn represents 45 minutes of real time, and the game has 12 turns. On one side is the Allied force, which begins with a fairly small force on the map, and is commanded by the aforementioned Lord Raglan. The British have the (in)famous Light Brigade, plus the Heavy Brigade and the Royal Marines to start, as well as a handful of artillery units. The middle of the map is dominated by the six "redoubts", which represent fortified positions constituting the perimeter of the Allied position. These are manned by fairly low quality Turkish militia, and four of them also have light artillery batteries for additional protection. The Allied force is charged with protecting the approach to Balaclava Harbor, the supply point for the British army.

The Russian army, led by Prince Aleksandr Sergeyevich Menshikov, is arrayed across the northern half of the map. It is a large army of questionable morale, and is poised to assault the redoubts and from there, drive the British into the sea! The Russian army was anchored on the left by the Ural, Ukraine, Azov, and Odessa infantry regiments. The center was a mass of cavalry under General Ryzhov, and the right had the Susdal (Sous) and Vladimir (Vlad) infantry regiments. Altogether, the Russian force numbered around 25,000 men. The Allied forces, once their reinforcement arrived, would amount to roughly 20,000 men, though they start with far fewer on the map. The Allied reinforcements come in three separate groups:

- a. The French 1st Cavalry Brigade
- b. The British 1st Infantry Division
- c. The British 4th Infantry Division

The British reinforcements represent the forces which had been participating in the siege of Sevastopol. The game has an interesting mechanism to represent the fatigue that these units were subjected to by having to leave the trenches and march into battle. In the game, each of the British reinforcement units begins with a fatigue level equal to its morale rating. Every time one of these units either moves its entire movement allowance or engages in melee combat, its fatigue level is reduced by "1", and when a unit reaches "0" fatigue, it is disrupted for the remainder of the game.

In terms of game mechanics, Balaclava is a pretty straightforward affair. Each game turn consists of the first/phasing player movement, followed by defensive fire by the non-phasing player, then fire combat by the phasing player, then melee combat, and finally, a rally phase by the phasing player. The second player then repeats these steps and that completes a game turn. The idea of fire combat followed by melee combat is a fairly typical representation of early-mid 19th Century land warfare, and it works well here. Fire combat is voluntary, but melee combat between adjacent (non-disrupted) units is mandatory. Artillery comes in a number of varieties with different ranges and strengths. There is only limited stacking (essentially artillery can stack with other units, but all other units may not stack). Combat results include retreats of varying lengths, disruptions, and occasionally, eliminations. Disruptions are important, because disrupted units do not exert a Zone of Control, and disrupted units that suffer additional disruptions are often eliminated. Disruptions can be removed via the Rally phase. This is a die roll for each disrupted unit, with the result being compared to the morale rating of the unit. Units with better (higher) morale ratings have a better chance of recovering from disruption. Higher morale ratings also reflect in better melee combat performance.

After Action Report:

Turn 1: 0700 to 0745 hours, October 25, 1854

The Russian attack against the Allied positions began in earnest at 0700! Prince Menshikov, the Russian commander, ordered the left wing of his army to commence the assaults on the eastern redoubts (redoubts 1 through 3). The Turkish militia troops defending those redoubts were simply overwhelmed and redoubts 1 and 3 were overrun by the Ural, Azov, and Ukraine infantry regiments before their guns could even be spiked. The same happened on the Russian right, as the Odessa regiment crushed the Turkish defenders of redoubt 4. British commander Lord Raglan ordered the Light Brigade to move into the South Valley in an attempt to support the defenders of redoubts 5 and 6, while further to the east, the Heavy Brigade moved north to the small stream south of redoubts 1 and 2.



Turn 2: 0745 to 0830 hours, October 25, 1854

The Russian wave continued to roll through the line of redoubts protecting the British position north of Balaclava. On the Russian right, the Odessa and Vladimir regiments took redoubt 5, though not before the British gunners were able to spike their cannons and the Turkish militia made good their getaway. Redoubt 3 also fell to the Ukraine and Azov regiments. General Ryzhov's cavalry remained at the ready in the center of the Russian line. The British maneuvers were limited, with the Light Brigade on the Allied left being called back away from the redoubts, and the Heavy Brigade on the right holding position.



Turn 3: 0830 to 0915 hours, October 25, 1854

The first Allied reinforcements finally arrived on the field of battle, as the French 1st Cavalry Brigade came down the road from Sevastopol. These units came in from the west and were met by the Susdal (Sous) regiment of the Russian army, which was assigned to hold the extreme right of the Russian position. Meanwhile the rest of the Russian army continued to advance southward towards the British positions. Ryzhov's cavalry probed towards the boundary between the Light Brigade and the Royal Marines.

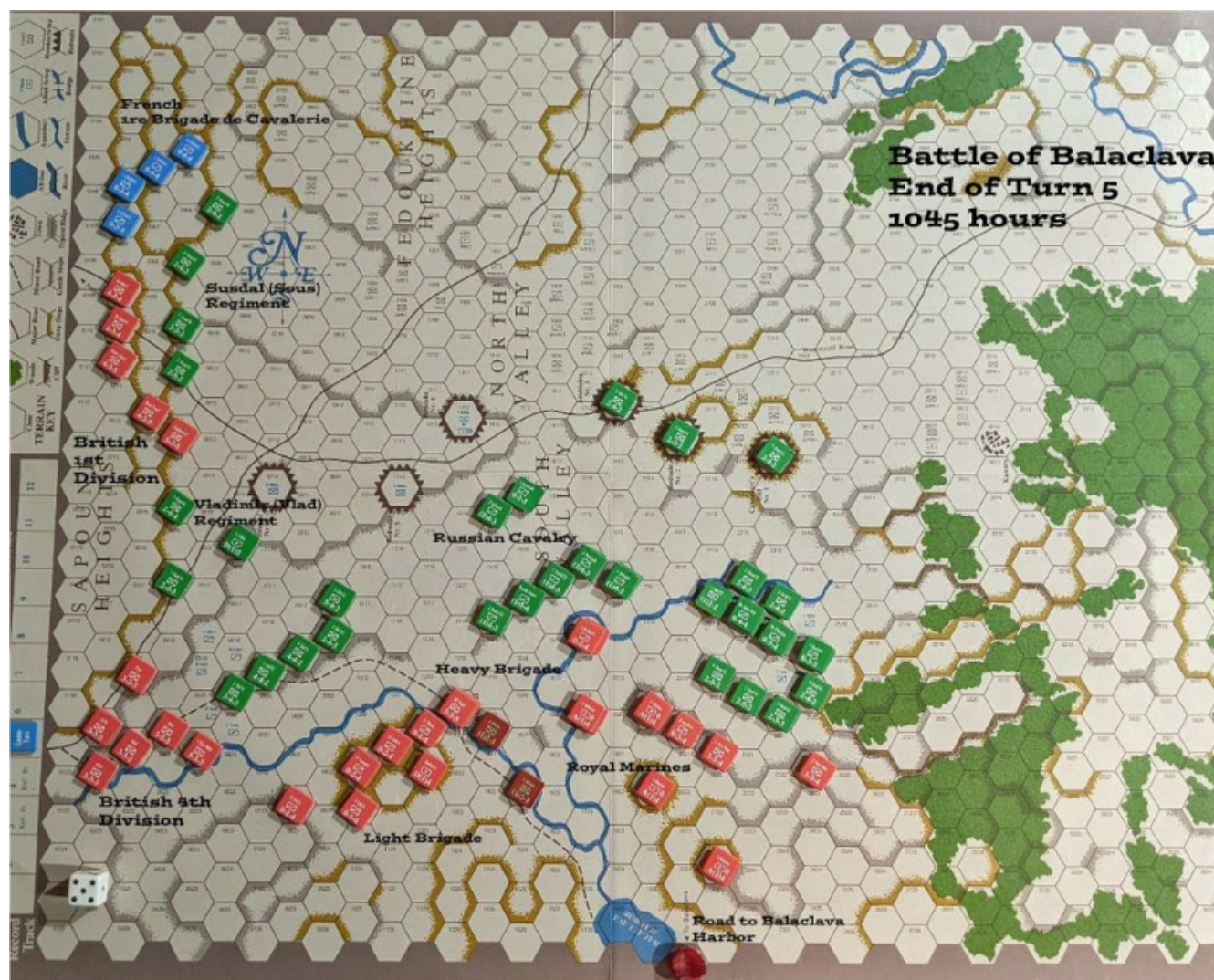


Turn 4: 0915 to 1000 hours, October 25, 1854

More reinforcements poured in for the Allies, as the British 1st Infantry Division, led by the Coldstream Guards, arrived behind the French cavalry. In an attempt to contain the growing threat on his right, Russian commander Menshikov ordered the Vladimir regiment to join the Susdal regiment in holding the right flank of the army. Ryzhov's cavalry continued to hold the center, while the Russian left wing, including the Azov, Ural, and Ukraine regiments and the army's heavy guns, continued to close on the British right, held by the Heavy Brigade and the Royal Marines.



The last Allied reinforcements arrived in the form of the British 4th Infantry Division. All in all, 15 new battalions were now present in support of the Allied defense. The Russian army's left was now concerned about being flanked. The Susdal (Sous) regiment in particular was in danger of being cut off by the French cavalry and the British 1st Division.



Turn 6: 1045 hours to 1130 hours, October 25, 1854

Seeing the danger to his right flank, Russian commander Menshikov ordered the Susdal (Sous), Vladimir, and Odessa infantry regiments to retreat back to the vicinity of the western redoubts. Meanwhile, in the center, Rzyhov's cavalry executed a successful assault against a Royal Marine artillery position, destroying it and the Heavy Brigade battalion that was screening it.



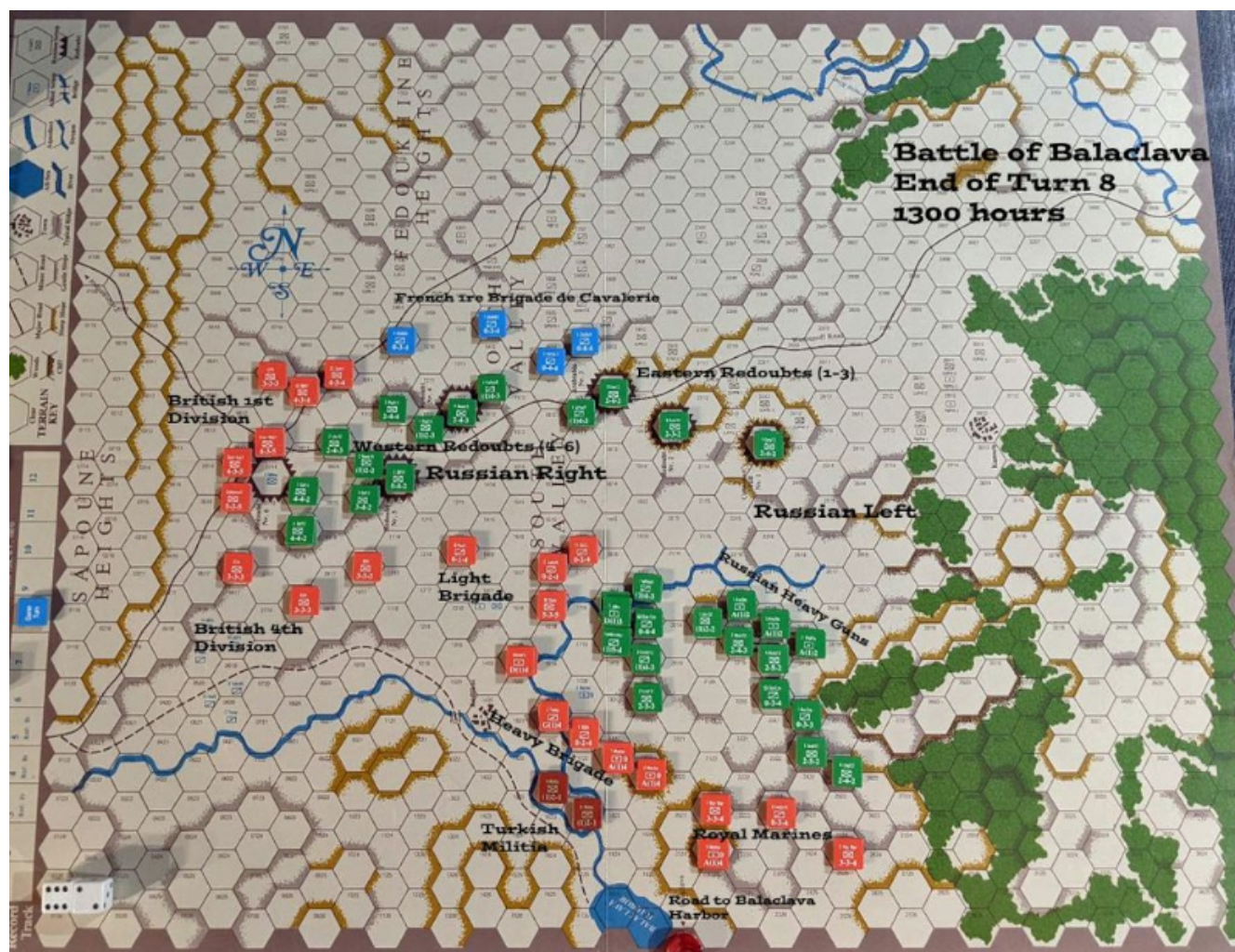
Turn 7: 1130 hours to 1215 hours, October 25, 1854

The British 1st and 4th Divisions got into position to assault redoubt 6, while the French cavalry wheeled to the northeast of the Russian positions. Rzyhov's cavalry continued their attack southward into the center of the British defenses, destroying one of the British heavy gun batteries, while the Russian infantry of the left wing unsuccessfully assaulted the Royal Marine positions.



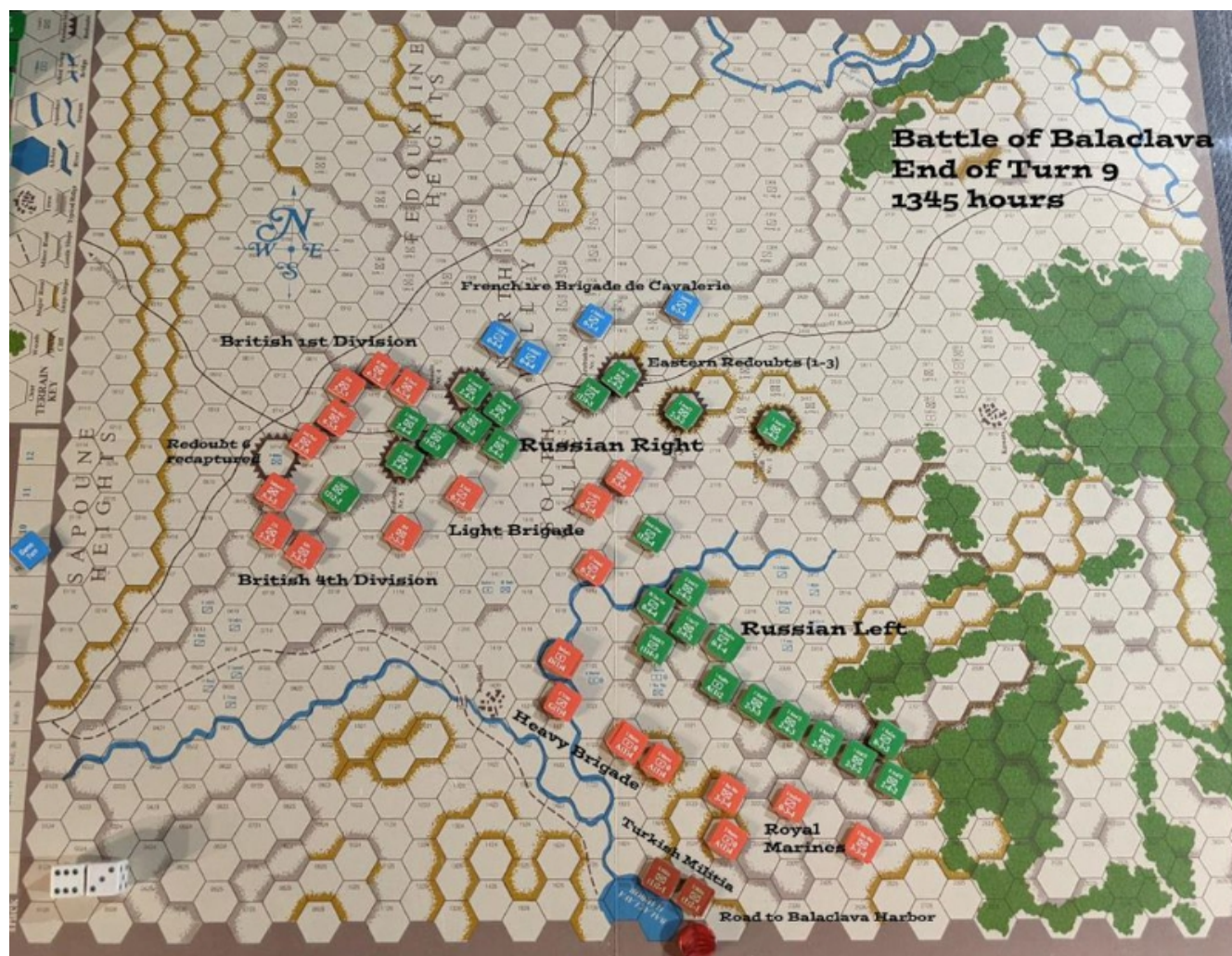
Turn 8: 1215 hours to 1300 hours, October 25, 1854

The Russian infantry on the left, having suffered a significant setback in their assault against the Royal Marines, fell back to the north to regroup. The British moved battalions of both cavalry brigades into position to potentially cut-off and surround the Russian cavalry, which had penetrated deep into the British lines. On the Russian right, heavy British fire drove the Russian defenders from redoubt 6, and the British infantry looked to prepare to assault redoubt 5 next!



Turn 9: 1300 hours to 1345 hours, October 25, 1854

The British infantry cleared some defending units away from the western side of redoubt 5 in preparation for their main assault. The French 1st Cavalry Brigade scouted out the Russian position at redoubt 3, looking for an opportunity to attack. In the center, Russian cavalry fell back slightly to the east in order to prevent the British cavalry from cutting them off, and the Azov and Ural regiments once again formed up for another advance against the Royal Marine positions.



Turn 10: 1345 hours to 1430 hours, October 25, 1854

The British 1st and 4th Divisions continued their preparations to assault redoubts 4 and 5, eliminating several more Russian infantry battalions in the process. Menshikov meanwhile hesitated to launch the left wing of his army into the attack against the Royal Marines, as his heavy guns exchanged fire with those of the British.



Turn 11: 1430 hours to 1515 hours, October 25, 1854

Heavy rifle fire from the British infantry successfully drove the Russians from their positions in redoubts 4 and 5, although the British were unable to advance forward to capture the positions. General Cathcart of the British 4th Division ordered the 57th Foot to join the French cavalry in preparation to assault redoubt 3. Russian commander Menshikov, perhaps unnerved by the events occurring to his north among the redoubts, continued to delay ordering another attack on the Royal Marines.



Turn 12: 1515 hours to 1600 hours, October 25, 1854

The final Allied attacks were a mixed bag. The British 4th Division under Cathcart's command were able to recapture redoubt 5. However, the Duke of Cambridge's men of the 1st Division were unable to overcome the 3rd battalion of the Odessa regiment and the Russians remained in possession of redoubt 4. Similarly, the French 1st Cavalry Brigade, along with the British 57th Foot, could not dislodge the 1st Battalion of the Russian Vladimir regiment from their position at redoubt 3. While this transpired, the Russian left wing withdrew to the east, fearing that Allied advances in the north threatened to cut them off from their base. At this point, the battle concluded.



Conclusion:

Based on the victory conditions of the game, the Allies were the winners, with a score of 109 to 80 for the Russians. The Allied points came as follows:

Russian infantry melee strength points eliminated: $1 \times 40 = 40$

Russian cavalry melee strength points eliminated: $1 \times 24 = 24$

Russian artillery units eliminated: $15 \times 3 = 45$

TOTAL ALLIED SCORE: $40+24+45 = 109$

The Russian score was based on the following:

Allied infantry melee strength points eliminated: $1 \times 16 = 16$

British cavalry melee strength points eliminated: $2 \times 2 = 4$

British artillery units (less redoubt guns) eliminated: $8 \times 3 = 24$

British redoubt guns captured: $3 \times 2 = 6$

Occupying the three eastmost redoubts: 30

TOTAL RUSSIAN SCORE: $16 + 4 + 24 + 6 + 30 = 80$

This reverses the historical outcome, which was a Russian strategic victory, where they held all of the redoubts and thereby severely restricted British mobility between their supply hub at Balaclava and Sevastopol. The British tended to take the view that Balaclava was a sort of moral victory, given the gallant actions of the “Thin Red Line”, and the charges of both the Light and Heavy Brigades (the charge of the Heavy Brigade being not quite so well remembered as it was not as notably disastrous as that of its sister brigade).

In my solo replay, two things happened to turn a historic Russian victory into a Russian defeat. Firstly, I did not have the British cavalry embark on any suicidal charges into the Russian lines. A quick examination of the strengths of these units, especially those of the Light Brigade, make it clear they are not suited for combat against the Russian infantry, or even the heavy Russian cavalry. So, in my play, I used the British cavalry simply to screen the road to Balaclava harbor and later to protect the gap between the Royal Marine units and the 1st and 4th Infantry Divisions.

The second, perhaps more important reason why my play resulted in a Russian defeat, was that I believe I pushed the Russian left wing too hard to try to get to the road to the harbor and break the Royal Marines. This push, if successful, could have scored the Russians another 15 victory points for exiting two or more units off that road towards the harbor. However, my over-concentration on this objective meant that the Russian right was understrength versus the Allied reinforcements that poured in from Sevastopol. The French 1st Cavalry Brigade and the 1st and 4th British infantry divisions proved too much for the couple of Russian regiments I had left to defend the westernmost redoubts, and these Russian units suffered extensive casualties in their attempt to hold that ground. A smarter play for the Russians would have been to seize all of the redoubts and then essentially sit on those positions and force the Allies to push them off. As it was, my push by the Russian left to get to the harbor road was unsuccessful, as the Royal Marines and their heavy artillery repeatedly repulsed the Russian assaults.

Thoughts:

I thoroughly enjoyed my play through of this game! The rules were clear and concise, and made sense to me, matching up with what I expected from a light simulation of 19th Century land warfare. The map graphics are simple but well-done, and the counters were serviceable (though I did notice that my older eyes did have a bit of trouble making out the fine print on these classic Redmond Simonsen designed counters). I was able to complete this game in a single sitting, something that newer wargames seldom allow, and I found the gameplay both challenging and satisfying, even as a solitaire experience. There were plenty of opportunities to make meaningful tactical decisions for both sides, in terms of where and when to advance, and where and when to hold ground. Despite the small footprint of the map, there is quite a bit of room for maneuver, and I can see another play of this game turning out quite differently than mine.

I would certainly like to play this one against another human opponent, and I also want to try out the other games in the package. All in all, two thumbs up on Balaclava and the Crimean War series!



Lord Raglan, British Commander in Chief