

TSG review



by Dave Williams

Staff comments from TSG in **BOLD** type.

The Test Series Games concept has made an auspicious impact on wargaming at the end of its first year, having met two of the company's three objectives. The first objective was to remain in business, which means not losing money, at least not too much money. TSG has succeeded here. This seems to mean hobby fanatics' voracious appetites for new titles overrides their concern for physical quality and price. A corollary of the first objective is the second: putting good and highly playable games into the hands of hobbyists. TSG has done this, according to its overworked order department and this reviewer's opinion of the 10 games already released. We'll deal with the third objective, which TSG hasn't met, yet, at the end.

The games already published by TSG seem to fall into three categories. In some respects the three TSG World War I games are the best. 1914 and Tannenberg, both revised, are as close to being sisters as any games possibly could be. 1918 is, design wise, a cousin. The sister games don't really resemble anything in the Avalon Hill Line, not even the original 1914. 1918 is a bit reminiscent of Stalingrad. Those few who have a copy of the original Tannenberg, with step reduction, will remember it was much more playable and interesting than 1914. It is even more so now, and 1914, formerly a mechanical ball-buster, is smooth, relaxing, and a relatively fast game. The improvement is due to simpler combat mechanics, and the elimination of step reduction. To 1914 two major new rules have been introduced. The French player is required to launch a suicidal attack into Alsace-Lorraine at the beginning of the game, crippling him just as the French were crippled by the original plan 17. There is also a realistic Fast March rule, which allows the German to make very good time in the Ardennes, and to break completely through the Brussels defense line (assuming a Belgian strategy) before the Allies can do much about it. There are some problems with the new rules, but solving them is well worth a player's initiative. First, the 1914 fort rules are unintelligible. Make up your own. Next, the increased speed of the games, and the possibility of one side or the other making a real breakthrough in 1914, puts too much of a strain on the railroad and supply rules. Again, improvise. Because these games can easily lead to mutual slaughter players may also want to use, but modify, the retreat before combat rule. A major fault of both games is the replacement system. Particularly in T-burg, where the German replacements amount to many times the strength of the original German force some very unrealistic things can happen. The designer should revamp this, even it means taking a bit of the action out of the games. The rules don't spell out how replacements affect victory points.

TANNENBERG was originally completed during the Summer of '68. It had existed in prototype form before 1914 was published but required a few more months work before it became an "in-

a note from TSG

Hardly a week goes by in which we are not bombarded by letters asking for more information about Test Series Games. Unfortunately, the response to the TSG has been so great that we haven't had time for anything except getting the games out and into the hands of those who play them. Originally, back in the Summer of 1969, we had

planned the TSG as nothing more than a "non-profit" way of getting many otherwise unpublished games into the hands of people who wanted more than one new game a year. Nothing more than that. Along the way we picked up S&T (mainly because no one else would, and if we couldn't sell the games through S&T there was no place else, certainly not Avalon Hill's GENERAL). Our first ad was in S&T 18. That one went to 740 subscribers. On the basis of that issue alone we received over 700 game orders. That was about 500 more than we had expected and about

dependant" game in its own right. The '68 version was almost a carbon copy of 1914 mechanically. While it was better than 1914 (mainly because of the "situation") the designer was still trying to solve the mechanical problems of the design. This led to a redesign of 1914 (meanwhile TANNENBERG also went through one redesign, mainly a partial elimination of the step system by putting each unit's single step down step on the back of the counter, plus other modifications). The 1914 redesign led to a further modification of the most recent TANNENBERG redesign, which resulted in the "1914 Revised" game. This system was then translated to the TANNENBERG game. Then TSG published both. TANNENBERG had gone through four distinct versions, each so different that the designer became completely confused whenever asked a question about TANNENBERG rules. He simply couldn't keep the four different sets of rules straightened out in his head.

1918 introduced one of the most effective specialized unit rules, the use of infiltration tactics by Stossdivision. Many units, a quick and bloody combat system, lots of replacements, create the goriest wargame yet. The game is printed on absorbent brown paper, much like meat is wrapped in. This is not a campaign game like the other two. Rather, it creates the German First Somme offensive on a limited area of the Western Front. 1918 is dominated by a nightmarish supply rule. Because the first move can be so complicated, it is recommended beginning players use the original starting German set-up printed on the board. While TSG games have no zones of control, or have limited zones of control, there is a problem with these three games. Battles must be worked out precisely, many battles are fought each turn, and there are many units on board at all times. By the time a player has finished his turn, it is difficult to remember which units are attacking, and at what odds. Because of this, enjoyment of the games improves with experience.

1918 was another offshoot of the attempt to redesign 1914. At one point Tom Shaw (the head of Avalon Hill) had asked whether it would be possible to confine the 1914 game to one part of the front, like the German advance through Belgium. He also once suggested doing a World War I game on the entire war (OH YAS!). Anyway, a game was designed, MONS, which recreated the German advance through Belgium. A stalemate STILL developed, the game often being decided very one sidedly by the choice of reinforcement options (in other words, what happened on the rest of the Western Front decided the MONS game). Anyway, the idea of a divisional WW I game turned on one of our designers and in the Fall of '69 1918 was finished. What made 1918 a good game and MONS a bad one was the use of the Stossdivisionen in 1918. Without these specialized units for breakthroughs 1918 would have been little different than MONS. MONS is still being worked on, it seems that additional game mechanics were developed in 1918 that COULD be

used in MONS, so MONS may yet prove a playable game. In the meantime TACTICAL GAME 19 (Europe, 1914) is nearing completion. More fuel for the fire.

The second group of games owes much to rules that will be familiar to miniature players. These are Deployment, Tactical Game 3, and Leipzig. Deployment pits a wide variety of late 18th or early 19th century units against each other, in a variety of hypothetical situations. It is a study of infantry formations moving from column to line, with accessory artillery and cavalry. What happens when several battalions of Prussian type infantry, which fight best in ponderous linear formations, take on an equal (or unequal) force of ill-trained but high spirited revolutionary infantry which are best used in mass assaults. The game successfully bridges the gap between board games and miniatures. The only criticism is that the designer seems to lack a real understanding of the Napoleonic and pre-napoleonic controversies over the uses of line, column, and "mixte" formations. Tac 3 is much same thing, removed to 1944 on the Eastern Front. It is a most experimental game, and all of its problems aren't resolved in the edition published. Like Deployment, it provides food for thought for later development. The designers allege it is the basis for other games reproducing tactical situations in many wars. But the game is sound. There is an endless variety of possible situations. For instance, "can a reinforced SS reconaissance battalion find true happiness fighting its way out of an encirclement by two Russian Tank Corps?" The answer is really very interesting. Leipzig, the 1813 campaign of Napoleon against everybody, is Deployment on a huge scale. It offers ideas for other strategic games in times when armies didn't have continuous fronts. The game, however, lacks something. It is probably too stylized. The mapboard is rather empty, the units are too abstracted.

TAC 10 (DEPLOYMENT's Tactical Game number) was originally developed out of an attempt to do a game on Marlborough's Blenheim campaign (the famous "March Down the Rhine"). Some of our people had a considerable background in Napoleonic and pre-napoleonic warfare and, while the BLENHEIM game was finished we immediately moved into DEPLOYMENT. At the time we were still working on STATE FARM 69 (title courtesy of Bob Dylan and the designer's perversions) which eventually became Tac 3 (Tactical Game 3). These two games being designed together brought about the Tactical Game series. Actually, Tac 3 started it all. It was NOT meant to be a "miniatures" game but rather a vehicle for historical research into "just what did go on in the east during 1944". The game went through many evolutions, being worked on for over a year before appearing as Tac 3. It has proved to be one of our more popular titles. Because of this we are currently working on Tac 8 (Europe, 1960's), Tac 14 (Europe 1250-1550) which will be published in S&T No 22, Tac 19 (Europe 1914) and whatever else we get time to

100 more than we could handle. It wasn't until sometime in February 1970 (six months, and 800 additional game orders later) that we finally 'caught up'. TSG even began to make money, although not enough to pay anyone a salary yet. Because we must produce the games in small runs, the first two thousand produced cost us over five thousand dollars to produce (including a 0% royalty to the designer and another 10% to the "production" people. That's all they get, it isn't much). The surplus went into S&T, since Boulton (French for "lunatic") Press owns both

S&T and TSG. This has allowed us to increase the quality of S&T considerably. In addition we will come out with as many new titles as possible. As soon as S&T gets "on its feet" (probably not until it goes monthly and hits a circulation of about 5,000) we will probably drop the price of the TSG to four dollars. By that time we will also have die cut counters for the more established TSG. Keep in mind, however, that the TSG are NOT meant to be "commercial" games. They are just what they are called, TEST SERIES games. We make them cheap so that we can put out even

the most dubious titles. Tactical Game 3 was just such a gamble. Avalon Hill would have certainly never published it. We have in the works a plan for publishing the more popular TSG as "commercial" games. We'll keep you posted on this. Meanwhile, we have below a series of reviews written by Dave Williams, the designer of AH's ANZIO. Dave is currently working on some titles for TSG and at our urging he has written the following reviews. As you will see, he obviously doesn't agree with everything the TSG have done. And that's why the TSG were produced.

do. These we hope to publish this year, and possibly others as time and resources permit. We do feel that these games catch the essence of the period's tactical problems. The games have been kept simple, otherwise their appeal would be limited. Also, complex games would have players spending more time on mechanics than tactics. After all, they are TACTICAL games. Anyway, the "Tac" idea seems to be the first original one to come along in quite a while. So we'll stick with it.

LEIPZIG really doesn't belong with this group of games. The TSG people feel that it is the worst game of the first ten published. Mainly because it could have been so much better. Unfortunately it was the game that suffered the most from the "Great S&T Crush" which overtook TSG during the late Summer of '69. We had the choice of either debugging and playtesting the "half developed" LEIPZIG or of holding up the game for a few months. The then current vibes were of the "haul ass" variety and, of course, we went ahead with the "half assed" LEIPZIG. There are currently plans afoot to either re-do LEIPZIG or start fresh with a similar campaign. Nothing will probably come of this until 1971. If nothing else, the unique situation in LEIPZIG (Napoleon in the "central position") compensates for the underdeveloped design concepts of the game.

The last four games get TSG into World War II. Some good things, and some bad things, have to be said about Barbarossa, Flying Fortress, Italy, and Normandy. Shall we start with the bad? Normandy stinks. Sales of this game are supposed to be good, but one wonders if sales will last. The game gives the impression of being slapped together overnight. The rules don't hang together well. When a designer sits down to make a game, he has to draw some conclusions about the original campaign. For instance, who really won. Or, did errors cancel each other out? etc. Normandy's Dr. Frankenstein seems to believe the Germans hadn't a chance to do as well in the D-Day invasion campaign as, in fact, they did. There's a supply rule, here, which makes the whole thing seem contrived.

NORMANDY is a well liked game with the TSG people. But a game with the following features is bound to turn some people off. The game is actually three separate "games" in one. First there is the "Defending the Area" game in which the Germans must deploy their defensive forces. They must also (if they really want to have a chance of winning with the original OB) decide on a defensive policy, try to "outguess" the Allies. The second "game" is the most difficult of all from a mechanical point of view. The Allies must plan (on the planning chart) their actual "Airborne/ Amphibious" invasion. Quite a job with a game that gets down to the battalion level. The third game is, of course, the game itself. The tactical maneuvering involved in maintaining the beach head. It is more complex than most TSG games, about on a level with the pre-JUTLAND Avalon Hill games. Sort of a cross between BULGE and

BLITZKRIEG. NORMANDY moves fast and has plenty of variety. But we told Dave Williams to "tell it like it is". And he gave his two cents worth (for which he received eight dollars, our current rates). OK Dave, next time we won't make you pay for your "review" copies.

Italy, I think, I like. It makes an interesting contrast with my own Anzio, showing how two completely different rules systems can arrive at much the same situations. In general Italy is "underdesigned" as much as Anzio is overdesigned. This is compensated for by introducing Tactical and Strategic boards. Italy and Anzio were intentionally designed side by side, without either designer knowing what the other was doing. After publication of Anzio by Avalon Hill, but before distribution of Italy by TSG, a test was organized to see which was the best game. The results, according to Avalon Hill, showed Anzio the better game. However, statistically the results were altogether invalid. I still think Anzio is a better game, but I hope TSG publication of Italy will make for a better comparison.

ITALY is one of our poorest selling games. We attribute this to ANZIO, and the fact that even today nobody is particularly interested in the Italian campaign. It does contain quite a few design elements not found in any of the other TSG, particularly the Tactical/Strategic board concept and a step down attrition system using back to back counters. You can't win 'em all.

Flying Fortress may bring air war games out of the cellar. It is certainly the first successful and realistic air game, miniature or table top. It succeeds because it operates on a strategic level and boldly proclaims itself an abstraction. Each turn in this game represents a month's bomber missions over Germany, and is construed as a whole game. The rules allow players to recreate many of the great missions of the bomber offensive. The whole thing can take 30-40 minutes when players are familiar with the mechanics. Someone went to a lot of trouble to create a campaign game linking several turns together. For several months Avalon Hill considered buying and publishing FF. They didn't. It's their loss.

Avalon Hill is apparently STILL interested. As of April they were bugging us to publish as a TSG the third of the three "Luftwaffe" games designed in '69. The first two have already been published. FLYING FORTRESS is actually the second of the games designed. It's main difference from FLYING FORTRESS 2 (the original design delivered to AH in the Spring of '69) is that FLYING FORTRESS does not use a step down system of unit elimination (accomplished by having the unit's second "step" on the back of the counter, thus no "substitute counters" are needed. The same system is used in ITALY). FLYING FORTRESS 2 has this step down system, but we felt it was not needed as FLYING FORTRESS is basically a strategic game, although the step system adds complexity and "depth" to the somewhat

"tactical" mission game it makes the more interesting campaign game last much longer. Using the step system the campaign game lasts over five hours (the mission game lasting for about an hour). Without the step system the campaign game lasts about three hours with the mission game going at little more than half an hour. The third "Luftwaffe" game was designed by another designer and is more "tactical" in concept. We hope to get it published this Summer.

Barbarossa is so different from anything else wargamers have run up against, it highlights a problem with the whole Test Series. All the games lack a section on tactical and strategic hints. Now, in Avalon Hill games these sections of the rules have been rather puerile. The "mobile battle in central France" has become a standing joke. But the suggestions are valuable to the novice. The test series games are so different from each other, and from the AH line, that a few hundred words of suggestions and analysis in each game would be valuable. In Barbarossa, each counter represents an army moving across oversized hexagons. Only the size of the board (but not the number of squares on it) resembles AH's Stalingrad. The mechanics of moving these armies are rather complicated. More important, remember the time you spent learning all the little tricks necessary to using the Avalon Hill system? There are just as many new tricks to learn in Barbarossa. Fortunately, the game is rather well tested and the rules are relatively clear. It can be, when players are familiar with the mechanics, a fast game. Barbarossa is actually four games, recreating the 1941, Stalingrad, Zitadelle, and final Battle of Berlin situations. They can be easily linked into a long campaign game. TSG reports this is their best selling game, and it's not surprising. Working out all those "little tricks" can be fun. The designer wants me to answer those who ask, "where are the railroads?" Apparently many people received games without a rail system printed on the board, and are besieging the TSG offices with irate letters. To them, we say, keep looking at the board until you find them. The railroads are well hidden, but they are there.

The main reason for publishing the TSG is to obtain just this kind of information. That's why we have the extensive questionnaires and encourage those who play the games to send us their comments. Every piece of "feedback" we receive on the games is reviewed and filed away. The BARBAROSSA and TAC 3 files are each three-four inches thick at this point. In the "commercial" versions of the games we will have just such a section. But right now we just want to get the games out.

What about that third TSG goal, the one it hasn't met? The brains behind TSG have a cynical interest in jarring Avalon Hill out of its complacency, and lack luster approach to marketing. So far, this hasn't happened. AH's attitude towards TSG, while respectful, is one of "how can they keep up the pace."

Indeed.

