Battle Report:

Fulda Gap

by Raymond Lowe

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Military conflict in contemporary Europe is a subject which has been given extensive treatment in wargaming circles. SPI's **Fulda Gap** is a recent and unique addition to the collection of 'gaming treatises' on this subject.

Fulda Gap is narrower in scope than many 'future history' NATO/Warsaw Pact (WP) games. It covers only the southern portion of the central West European front (i.e., the area of primary responsibility for American troops in Europe). The central feature of this mountainous region is the Fulda Gap, the only easy passageway from the East German border to the city of Mainz on the Rhine River. SPI's game simulates a WP invasion of Southern Germany, whose main thrust is directed through Fulda Gap with the ultimate goal of breaching the Rhine. Although only one part of any future European War, such an operation would be crucial to the final, overall result. Most military analysts agree that a WP invasion of Southern Germany is necessary to protect the southern flank of any invasion of northern Germany, where the prospects of success are the greatest. The Soviets must either destroy, pin, or otherwise neutralize the powerful U.S. formations based in southern Germany to prevent them from reinforcing the northern central front or threatening the flank of a Soviet breakthrough there. And the Fulda Gap affords the most lucrative invasion route for any such purposes. Thus, the Fulda Gap takes on great importance in the scheme of any future European war.

Accordingly, the four-color, 22 x 34 inch game map gives central prominence to the gap itself. The map covers an area from Wurzburg in the south to Kassel in the north, and features the gap as it runs east from Fulda, then slightly southwest to Frankfurt. The gap is flanked on either side by rough terrain, which comprises over 50% of the terrain on the map. The western portion of the map shows the Rhine River from Köln in the north to Mannheim in the south. Also printed on the map are various record tracks used to display replacement levels, nuclear warhead stocks, air superiority levels and victory points accrued. Initial deployment for NATO units is printed unobtrusively on the map.

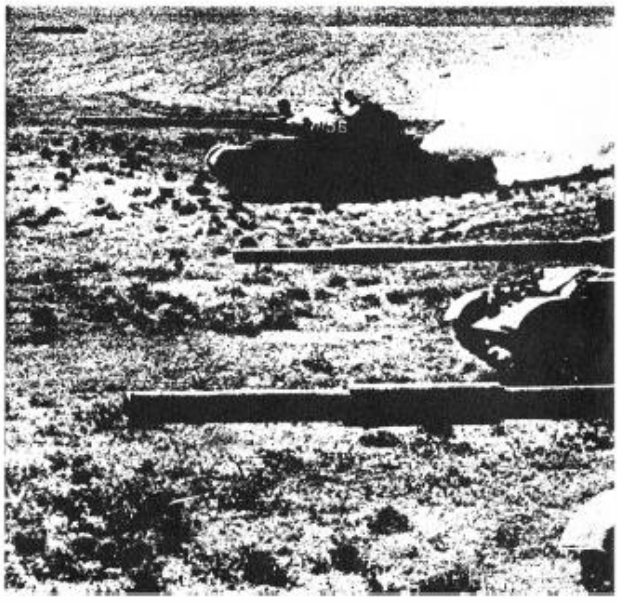
The map is clear, unambigious, colorful and generally good-looking if not dazzingly beautiful. Also included in the game are 400 backprinted counters, a 16-page rules booklet with index, two sets of game charts and tables, one Turn record/Reinforcement track, and two dice. The game comes packaged in SPI's standard high-utility plastic game box.

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW...

The game system for **Fulda Gap** is a pleasant mix of old and new concepts. This makes the game at once both comfortably familiar and a refreshing challenge. The combat system in **Fulda Gap** exemplifies this mix.

It is basically an odds-ratio system, with doubling or halving of combat factors for unit integrity, chemical warfare, supply effects, etc. Artillery units have a Final Protective Fire capability, as first seen in SPI's **Modern Battles** quad system. From this basic model the departures begin. Terrain effects and combat results are more closely integrated than in most land wargames. Different types of terrain are rated with different Retreat Point (RP) values. Combat results are expressed as a certain number of RP's. In order to force a defending unit out of a hex with a certain RP value, a combat result must be achieved against it that is equal or greater than the defending terrain's RP value. For example, rough terrain has an RP value of 3. If a combat result of 5 RP is achieved against a unit in that hex, the unit must retreat out of that hex. The retreat expends 3 of the 5 required RP's, leaving 2 RP's. If the hex the unit then finds itself in is a forest hex (2 RP), then it must retreat out of that hex also, expending the last two RP's. If the hex the unit found itself in had been another rough terrain hex instead of a forest hex, it would **not** have had to retreat further, since to do so would have expended 3 RP's, and only 2 RP's remained after the retreat out of the first rough terrain hex.

Combat is also affected by untried units, especially in the early stages of the game. Almost all units are represented by two counters (only one of which is on the map at any one time). One shows the unit as untried ('U') on the front, and at full strength (attack and defense) on the back. The other counter shows the unit at approximately ⅔ and ⅓ strength. All units begin the game in 'U' status. As each unit becomes engaged for the first time, its 'true' strength is revealed. This is achieved by rolling two dice on a particular column on the Untried Unit Status Table. Which column used (A through N) depends on the nationality of the unit. The scenario specifies which nation uses which column. A is best and N is worst. The result on the Untried Unit Status Table may reveal a particular unit as actually being ⅓ strength, ⅔ strength, full strength or double full strength. An E result (all too common on the lowest rated columns) may even result in that units' elimination before combat begins! The three-tiered step reduction system has an additional effect on combat results. Units may voluntarily (or when surrounded, involuntarily) convert RP's into step losses.



This means, the defender has the option to hold ground more firmly at the expense of higher casualties.

The **Fulda Gap** combat system is not a system for the type of player who can't cope with uncertainty, the type who needs to calculate his attacks carefully so he can enjoy the security of the limited range of possible outcomes. The combination of terrain effects on combat, untried units, and the step-loss system, allow any given combat situation to result in an infinite number of possible outcomes — and therein lies much of **Fulda Gap's** excitement value.

Fulda Gap is also in the minority of games in which, like **Highway To The Reich** and **Wacht Am Rhein**, the unit designations on the counters actually have a realistic function in the game. In **Fulda Gap**, this function is called Divisional Integrity. Most of the units in the game are brigades or regiments, and most of them are component units of a division (normally three brigades/regiments to a division). When operated as a division, the units are more effective. On offense, this means that if all three units of a division are in two adjacent hexes and participating in the same attack, they are all doubled in strength. On defense, this doubling applies if all three units in the division are within two hexes of each other. Thus, players are encouraged to use their units in a manner more commensurate with the way they would be used in real life. And, of course, this adds another variable factor to combat resolution.

Another 'real life' factor included in **Fulda Gap** is the matter of disengagement, which has been omitted from every other land wargame I am familiar with. In **Fulda Gap**, units may only leave a locking Zone of Control in two circumstances: Retreat and disengagement. Disengagement involves an odds calculation procedure, as well as a roll on the Disengagement Table. Heavily engaged units run more risks and have a harder time disengaging than do more lightly engaged units. A successful disengagement leaves a small Covering Force unit behind in the vacated hex. This Covering Force unit cannot move or exert a Zone of Control, but it can offer nominal resistance and slow down any enemy units attempting to enter the hex. The parent unit may or may not lose a step when disengaging. A disengagement attempt may even result in disaster, with the disengaging unit being forced to counterattack all the units it was attempting to disengage from.

Supply becomes important during the latter stages of the game as both side's units exhaust the supplies they initially carried into the battle. Automatic supply ends on Turn Three for NATO and on Turn Five for the WP. Both depot and convoy units are used to represent supply, with NATO units drawing supply from their own national West German, American, French, Belgian or British sources. All East German, Polish and Soviet units draw from a common WP source. The supply rules are structured so that autobahns and roads are very important for tracing supply lines over long distances. Each side is faced with different supply difficulties. For NATO, the problem is to keep its depots from being overrun; for the WP, the problem is to supply its units with a meager logistics train once its automatic supply runs out.

The pecularities of the West European military situation are reflected in the Chemical Warfare and Soviet Doctrine rules. Chemical warfare is simple in its execution (in game terms), but awesome in its effects. All Soviet units are doubled in strength, above and beyond any other doubling due to other factors. Movement for both sides is slowed, but the effect is more pronounced on NATO troops. Finally, all NATO units have their untried unit statuses shifted two columns to the right. That is, at the onset of chemical warfare, NATO units are more prone to evaporating into thin air when the chips are down. These effects last for two Turns after the Soviets initiate chemical warfare. Unique Soviet characteristics are reflected in both Accelerated Assaults (allowing higher combat odds at the risk of greater attacker casualties) and Soviet Doctrine (which restricts Soviet freedom of movement in the second movement phase. Chemical warfare, accelerated assault, and Soviet doctrine rules make clear the essential differences in the NATO and WP armies. For the gamer, the two armies 'feel' different as you play them in the game. NATO is more flexible while the WP can hit harder.

The advanced game introduces airpower, tactical nuclear weapons, and special units such as helicopters, airmobile battalions, paratroops, etc. Nuclear weapons are treated in some detail, with warheads being taken from a stockpile and delivered by air, artillery, or missile systems. Nuclear contamination of target hexes is possible to varying degrees and lengths of time. Both sides have different capacities for air, artillery, and missile delivery of nuclear weapons.

Airpower is treated in even more detail, but does not dirty up the game. This cleanliness is achieved through the sequence of play, which separates air unit and ground unit functions and keeps the air units off the board while the ground units are operating in the sequence. Both sides have various air units distinguished by aircraft types and 'penetration' ability, but these units cannot be used until one side or the other achieves a

certain degree of air superiority. This is done through the allocation of air Superiority Points (together with a few fortuitous die rolls). The greater level of air superiority achieved by one side, the greater number of air units that side may introduce onto the board. The air system works very well and cleanly, and is even a lot less abstract than most comparable airpower game systems.

Victory is determined on a point basis, with both sides accruing points for destroying enemy units, capturing airbases, etc. The largest 'chunks' of points usually come from destroyed units, Soviet units across the Rhine, and control of the north-south autobahn which runs on the east side of the Rhine connecting the north and south edges of the map.

Three basic scenarios are provided in the game, with variants for each of these such as NATO disintegration, Soviet main effort, etc. The first scenario, the 'Tripwire' scenario, assumes that the WP has successfully disguised its mobilization as peacetime maneuvers and catches NATO with its treads down. This scenario lasts seven Turns (seven days). The second scenario, 'Advance Warning', assumes that NATO smells a rat and begins to move into position before the balloon goes up. The 'D+7' scenario picks up the war at the end of the first week of hostilities and carries it on for another seven days. Various special rules apply to each scenario to account for their individual circumstances. One particularly interesting rule simulates the movement restrictions imposed on both sides by panicky German civilians clogging the autobahns with their Volkswagens. No VW Beetle counters are provided, however.

AFTER ACTION REPORT:

The following 'Tripwire' scenario was played between Rodger MacGowan and myself using the standard game rules (that excludes airpower, nuclear weapons and the miscellaneous special units). Rodger commanded the WP forces and I commanded NATO.

Frankfurt U.P.I. — 08 July 1978 — Early this morning Warsaw Pact forces poured across the East German border signalling the start of the next long awaited European war. Two East German divisions surrounded and annihilated a West German Infantry Brigade east of Kassel, then poured through the undefended city. The British 6th Armoured Brigade halted their drive west of the city on the autobahn to Köln. Soviet tank divisions rushed down the autobahn to Giessen, slowed only by the wreckage of thousands of abandoned automobiles. The U.S. 11th Cavalry Regiment was hit hard at the town of Fulda. Only the remnants of one squadron remain intact tonight. The U.S. 3rd Mechanized Division and the West German 12th Panzer-grenadier Division are engaged in heavy fighting north and west of Wurzburg. Belgian and American reinforcements are reportedly moving up, but are being slowed by heavy civilian traffic. The U.S. 3rd Armored Division rumbled out of Frankfurt this afternoon and has taken up blocking positions in the woods west of Fulda.

Bonn, London Times — 09 July 1978 — The situation remains critical in the new war on the continent. Soviet forces initiated widespread chemical warfare this morning, with disastrous consequences for many of the unprepared NATO units. The U.S. 3rd Armored Division has been virtually wiped out in the course of one days fighting, as Soviet tanks and artillery pounded American positions choked by clouds of gas and smoke. Our own British 6th Armoured Brigade is holding in the hills north of Marburg, and the WG 5th Panzer Division has taken up strong positions east of Giessen.

From the Official Motherland History of the Great War of European Liberation — The attack on Wurzburg was a total success. The green troops of the American 3rd Mechanized Division, dazed and shocked by nerve gas attacks, were easily swept aside by the tanks of the 9th Tank Division. By nightfall, the remnants of the sole remaining American Brigade had fled across the Main. The WG 12th Panzergrenadier Division was nearly surrounded north of the city, and the Germans took heavy casualties as they tried to disengage. Only a handful of the original complement escaped. By nightfall of the third day of the war, our troops were halfway to Frankfurt.

Frankfurt U.P.I. — 11 July 1978 — The WG 5th Panzer Division, after having distinguished itself in two days of heroic fighting, has been hopelessly surrounded south of Giessen, along with elements of several other WG units. Soviet tanks, after overrunning positions of the American 8th Mechanized Division, sealed off the Germans' last escape route. Now only a handful of WG territorial troops stand between the Soviets and Frankfurt — and the Rhine beyond.

From the Official History of the French Army in the German War of 1978 — By the fourth day of hostilities, the French 1st Division had taken up positions in the hills west of Giessen. These troops, together with the remnants of various WG and US units screening Mainz, hoped to keep the Russians from reaching the Rhine. East German troops supported by Soviet paratroops badly mauled the French line, but did not break through. The French 4th Division arrived in Mainz just in time to turn back the first of several unsuccessful assaults on the city. In the next few days, the men of the 4th Division would prove themselves to be among the best at the front.

Bonn, London Times — 13 July 1978 — The British 6th Armoured Brigade, though battered, continues to delay the East German advance through the rugged hills east of Siegen, and the French 4th Division has successfully parried the Soviet thrust at Mainz. Further south, however, Polish and Russian troops have put pressure on the river line south of Mainz held by battered West German and American brigades.

From the Official Motherland History of the Great Patriotic War of European Liberation — On the seventh day of hostilities, Polish troops spearheaded by Russian engineers made a successful assault crossing of the Rhine at Worms. The Poles wheeled north, pinned a weak American brigade against the river and destroyed it. All through the afternoon of July 14th, troops, tanks and guns poured across the Rhine at Worms. By nightfall, nearly nine divisions had breached the Rhine — an incredible feat! In the early morning hours, an American/French counterattack toward the Rhine-Main airbase (from just south of Mainz) attempted to cut the supply line to the WP bridgehead. After some initial successes, the Allies were beaten back by an East German Tank Brigade. On the eighth day, the West German government collapsed and the new Revolutionary Provisional Government (RPG) sued for peace.

FINAL COMMENTS

Fulda Gap 'feels' like a modern battle. The action is clean, fluid, and full of surprises. To my knowledge, it is the only operational level land wargame that captures the dynamism of modern combat, at least as portrayed by contemporary analysts.

Most future-history games of potential military conflict are very set in their assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the armies involved. A common complaint is 'These units are too strong' or 'Our units aren't that weak.' **Fulda Gap** avoids such arguments. The sum of the printed strengths on the unit counters are **not** the final word in the assessment of that army's strength. The real strength of an army in **Fulda Gap** lies in what column that nation uses on the Untried Unit Status Table, since it is **that** which determines what the **actual** strengths of the units are likely to be. So, if you think that the Americans are too strong, simply adjust their Untried Unit Status. This flexibility makes **Fulda Gap** a fascinating working model for **anyone's** assessment of the military capabilities of each nation. And the scenarios are short enough to allow one to play both a 'Kremlin' version and a 'Pentagon' version of the same game in one night.

In this age of unwieldy, multi-map monster games, I found **Fulda Gap** to be an appealing change. **Fulda Gap** stands as a monument to the medium-size, somewhat familiar-but-still-innovative-enough-to-be-challenging wargame. Kinda like the old days.●●