

## Battlefront

Name: Battlefront  
System: Apple, C-64  
# Players: 1-2  
Price: \$40.00  
Designers: Roger Keating  
Ian Trout  
Publisher: Strategic Studies Group  
1747 Orleans Ct.  
Walnut Creek, CA 94598

Well, the boys at SSG sure fooled me. After their very successful releases, *Carriers At War* and *Europe Ablaze*, the word was that their next release would be an American Civil War game titled *The Road To Appomatox*. When I saw the cover of *Battlefront*, I knew right away that this was not your ordinary Civil War game; not with an American Sherman tank rolling through the ruins of some European town straight towards a band of waiting Germans! No, that's right; Ian Trout and Roger Keating managed to finish their World War II Corps-Level game before the Civil War title and *Battlefront* made its debut at Origins '86 in Los Angeles.

*Battlefront*, as I mentioned is a Corps level game covering ground combat during World War II. Not exactly a small topic! The way it is able to cover such a vast array of combat situations is that it is a true game kit as well as a game. In the now expected style of SSG, the "design your own" scenario aspects are at least as important as the pre-built scenarios. *Battlefront* gives you the framework within which to build almost any combat situation that occurred in World War II at the level of one Corps per side.

The game package includes one disk (with the game on one side and scenario data on the other); a 48-page book which includes the rules, examples of play, and scenario design data; and two sets of six-by-eight laminated cards with scenario information and details of the various menus in the game. The components are very well done; my only complaint is with the cover art on the package. All I can say about that is "Yuck!"

Well, let's put the album-style package away (please!) and take a look at the game. Roger and Ian have taken a great stride towards demolishing two of the long cherished gripes about computer wargames; that they lacked a realistic "point of view" and that computer wargames could not hope to compete with boardgames since the player could not make changes to the basic system in a computer game where he thought it appropriate.

More on the scenario design later, the "point of view" question is really at the heart of this game. You play a Corps commander about to face a com-

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## Corps Level Command in World

by Jay Selover



bat situation. Your Corps consists of up to three divisions, each of which contains up to four regiments. You also have several independent battalions which you can attach to any of your divisions and you have the word of your air force buddies that they will be there when you need them. The units which move and fight on the screen are actually the component battalions of the regiments in your Corps, but you can not actually touch them directly. You will be telling each division commander what you want each of his regiments to accomplish during a turn, but then you must sit back and watch how your subordinate units decide to carry out your orders. This game really has the proper perspective of the role that you play in your army, as frustrating as that can be when you watch one key battalion move somewhere you didn't really want them at all.

### The System

*Battlefront* uses a scale of about one kilometer per hex (this can vary with the scenarios), and each turn is six hours (there are three daylight turns and one night turn per day). And, of course the unit of maneuver is the battalion. The battlefield can vary with the scenario up to 39-by-28 hexes, scenarios can be up to sixteen days long (seven is average for the provided scenarios), and up to fourteen different unit types. All of this may seem a bit fuzzy, but that is because the system can be adjusted to alter so many of the basic parameters.

The four scenarios provided with the game give an excellent indication of the diversity of the program. The first one covers the German airborne invasion of Crete. The second covers part of the action at Stalingrad. Actually, it covers the attempt by two German Panzer divisions to drive through the Russians and relieve the besieged Von Paulus in



the city. The third scenario takes you half way around the world, to the small island of Saipan where the Americans must land and take the island stronghold from some pretty determined Japanese. Finally, the last scenario is Bastogne; you guessed it, General "Nuts" McCauliffe keeps the Germans (hopefully) from capturing this critical road juncture during the Battle Of The Bulge. These scenarios appear to be selected as much as anything to demonstrate the flexibility of the system to cover everything from the frozen steppes of central Russia to the steamy tropical jungles of the Pacific.

The game itself is completely menu driven, and the menu layouts do bear some striking similarities to SSG's previous offerings. When you get down to the play, though, one big difference becomes apparent. This is not a pseudo-real time game where the action just goes along until you request an interrupt. This a game with real turns. Before each turn, the players are given an opportunity to check the situation, look at the current status of their forces, and issue new orders for the upcoming turn. After each player is finished, the computer takes over and completes the turn, moving and executing combat for all of the units.

The point of view of the player as Corps commander is rigidly adhered to in the limitations placed on the types of orders that the player can issue. Basically, you have the ability to assign objectives but not to get in and meddle with the tactical execution of the battle. During the "Orders Phase", you can call up each of your divisions separately and assign a few items at the divisional level. You can order a move by the divisional headquarters, assign a portion of your limited air support to that division, and you can assign any of your independent battalions to that division for the upcoming turn. Then, you can go in and look at the status of each regiment in the division. The display

will show the condition and location of each battalion in the regiment, but you can not talk directly to the battalions. Instead, you give a general order to the regiment, and each of the battalions will carry it out to the best of their abilities. Even the allowable orders are very much in character. You have four options but what the four options are will depend on the contact status of the regiment. A regiment which is not near any enemy units get a very different set of choices from those that are heavily engaged. The movement orders give a good example of the perspective of the game. A regiment which is given a movement order is then given an objective. Objective hexes are pre-designated in the scenario design and represent important landmarks or goals of the historical combatants. Thus, you order a regiment to move to Bastogne, and then it is up to the individual battalions to each select the most efficient way to get there. Another example is the "support" order; when you give this order to a regiment, any battalions which are within two hexes of an enemy will dig in and any uncontacted battalions will move up to support their buddies. But again, you have no direct control over how any one of the battalions will move.

### The Play

So, how does it feel to sit there, one step removed from the actual fighting and watch your computerized minions try to execute your plans? Pretty good, actually! The game can be extremely frustrating, but it is the accurate portrayal of your role as Corps commander that causes the frustration, not the game mechanics.

The game itself does take quite a while to get used to. The documentation does not help much. It's better than a lot of what we have seen in computer games, but it does not contain any of the specifics that I like to see. The first seven pages of the rulebook contain a "walk through" of the first turn of the Saipan scenario, and the rest of the rules pretty much explain the functions and capabilities of the various menus. After that, you are pretty much on your own. Expect to lose a few battles before you begin to figure out how to really use your forces effectively. One big lesson to learn real quick is that your units represent men, not machines. Leaving a regiment on the line once it gets really tired is the quickest way I've found to get it ground into dust! Another good lesson is that you don't just go and order assaults by every unit that happens to be close to the enemy! There are some real good orders like "probe", "prepare", and "support", that can make all the difference between a well orchestrated attack and a banzai charge. Oh, and how about one more good lesson; learn the ca-

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pabilities of your units and exploit their strengths. This one can be a bit tough, since the scenario descriptions tell you things like the identity of your units (mechanized infantry, assault guns, tank destroyers, etc.) but do not give you any specifics on the movement and combat capabilities of the individual battalions. Still, it is not a good idea to send your regiment of foot infantry in against a solid



line of armor battalions in the open! If all of these lessons sound pretty familiar, well they should. *Battlefront* does a pretty good job of rewarding proper strategies and blasting away poor ones. The problem to be overcome is the common feeling among gamers that "If I've got a unit, then by gosh, it's gonna do some fighting!" The sooner you learn to look beyond the simple symbols on the screen to take in the full picture of the battle with consideration to fatigue, supply, available air support, and your overall objectives; the sooner you will be a successful Corps commander.

The above mentioned were obviously recognized by the designers, and were obviously incorporated into the computerized opponent. The computer can

play either side (or both) in any scenario, and provides a very credible opponent. Don't be ashamed to play your first few scenarios with a considerable handicap for your side.

## Designing Your Own

Here we come to one of the key features of *Battlefront*, and also to one of the hallmarks of SSG's games. The game contains a "scenario creation" utility that allows you to create a scenario to cover virtually any ground combat that took place in World War II. Pretty big order? Well, yes, but when you can modify almost every parameter that defines a scenario, there is really very little limitation to what you can do. Undoubtedly, the biggest problem with designing particular scenarios will be that you will need accurate data for your scenarios.

This part of *Battlefront* is really more a "game design kit" than simply a way to modify scenarios. Let's start with terrain. You can specify the size of the map; from 13-by-7 to 39-by-28 hexes. The terrain in each hex can be defined individually. The number of possible terrain types is unlimited, because you define the effects of all terrain. There are fourteen different terrain icons, so this is the maximum number of different types of terrain you can put in a scenario, but each of those fourteen types can be anything you want. Take that light green icon. Label it "light woods" and give it minimal cover for direct fire and make the "movement points to enter" fairly low for both foot and motorized units. Or, call it "Amazonian jungle" and have it cost ten movement points for foot infantry and impassable to vehicles! Each terrain icon can be given a name and different movement parameters for foot vs. motorized units and different combat modifying parameters individually for small arms, heavier caliber direct fire weapons, and artillery.

The treatment of terrain should give you an idea about the open ended capabilities in designing your own scenarios. In addition to creating a custom map, you can generate the combat units in all shapes and sizes. Each battalion in the game can be given different movement and combat capabilities, range, weapons effectiveness, fatigue, and experience. Also, the headquarters units of the divisions can each be rated for leadership, administrative effectiveness, and supply capabilities. Finally, the scenario itself can be designed with a host of special features. You can designate the terrain objectives for each side, the length of the scenario, the victory points to be earned for each enemy strength point destroyed, and many other factors which can make each scenario unique.

One of the biggest headaches that people complained about with *Carriers At War* and *Europe Ablaze* was the amount of time that it took to ac-

tually input all the parameters needed to do your own scenarios. Although it may look like things will be just as time consuming with *Battlefront*, that is really not the case at all. The main reason is that even the very biggest scenario that you can design will have no more than sixty battalions on each side. This really made a big difference when I went to input my own scenarios; what had taken several evenings can now be done in a few hours. Actually, the toughest part of designing your own scenarios will be obtaining the required accurate background information on the battle that you plan to simulate. But then, that has been a major problem for all game designers since the hobby started. And, I am sure that we can look for help in this area to *Run 5*, the SSG magazine which has been published to support their games.

### Final Thoughts

So far, I have not mentioned the execution of the combat routines in *Battlefront*. Unfortunately, it is a little tough to judge the appropriateness of the combat execution, since the documentation with the game tells us very little about how combat is actually resolved. For instance, the fatigue of the units in combat obviously affects their performance, but we can not tell whether the program

might overstate or understate the importance of fatigue in the overall combat equation since we never see that equation. And judging the importance of any one component in combat by watching the outcome of combats in the game is pretty tough since each combat situation has so many independent variables which impact the outcome. In defense of the designers, I must say that the combat results do look pretty believable, and there is no doubting that Roger and Ian have tried to factor in as many parameters as possible. As one last example of the amount of detail in this program, it keeps track of the ownership of each hex on the board; whose units were the last to pass through it. Then, in the movement routines, the computer adjusts a unit's movement rate depending on whether it is traversing friendly or enemy hexes.

*Battlefront* is a very good game which does an excellent job of putting the player into an authentic combat role: that of a Corps commander. The four scenarios provided are a good showcase of the game's capabilities, but the real value of the game is in its ability to be tailored by the player. If you are willing to do a little research, *Battlefront* can be used to recreate just about any Corps level action from World War II. That's a lot of game to get for the money!

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