



GM Bill Gray at the head of the table. Belgians Kelly (cap) and Mark get ready. Germans on left. Belgians on right.

## Gaming Again: WWI 1914

By Russ Lockwood

I signed up for Bill Gray's *Age of Valor* (AoV) game recreating the Battle of the Yser 1914. AoV is a WWI variation of his *Age of Eagles* (AoE) Napoleonic rules, which are an 'officially licensed' version of Rich's *Fire & Fury* (F&F) ACW rules.

*My German command in foreground. The Belgians up top.*



Having recently played Waterloo with AoE (see my recap in the 8/23/2023 AAR), and with a growing interest in WWI over the past decade while working on a *Snappy WWI* ruleset, I was interested in seeing what variations Bill made to the rules to represent WWI warfare as opposed to ACW or Napoleonic warfare.

I wish I can remember the string of puns Bill unleashed tableside. Most were groaners, of course, but some rang with wit. Alas, the only thing I can remember is after one particular groaner, he joked, "It's only going to get worse." It sure did, but I appreciated it.

*My Germans move up on Turn 2. Well, except for the Jager laggards at far left. Slowpokes.*

As with *F&F*, units were brigades made up of a number of stands with the usual Fresh - Spent - Worn differentiations as losses accumulated. At first glance, the *AoV* charts followed the same general idea of the "new" *F&F Brigade* (as opposed to the original 1980s version), but the game will tell if a first impression is correct.

*With Bill temporarily at the foot of the table, I take a photo of most of the gamers. This is the end of Turn 2. I'm pushing towards the village in a salient, but am uneasy about the several lines of Belgians forming to my front.*

*Clockwise from left: Kelly (cap), Mark, GM Bill, Peter (in red), Tanner, and Michael.*

## The Sides

I had sat down in front of German troops. Ergo, I was a German player. Across from me were Belgians Kelly and to an extent Mark and somewhere between them was a French division. Hedgerows and ditches, plus a village or two barred my way to polder (somewhat marshy) terrain and the promised land of victory. The Germans had to hop to it before the Belgians blew up the dykes and polder land became flooded land.

As for my specific division, I had a half dozen infantry, two of which were elite Jager light troops, a cavalry unit, and a trio of artillery batteries. As we had a massive corp-level artillery park, a couple more batteries were sent my way. The command post was allowed to move, but once it parked itself, it stayed there -- unless you asked the GM for permission to move it elsewhere.

*The end of Turn 3. My Jagers cross the open field (bottom) while Michael clears out the center with Tanner's help.*



Against me were Belgian infantry sheltering in ditches (relatively modest -1 die modifier) and in the village (-2 die modifier) plus a few artillery batteries and a couple cavalry units. It seemed I was outnumbered, but that's probably deceiving. I didn't know the enemy's units' statuses (er, statusi?), but being on defense is an advantage as it should be with first firing and terrain benefits.

*Turn 4: My cavalry charge the disordered (blue ring) Belgian brigade, but a supporting Belgian brigade also fires at me as I go in.*

### German Advance

Although the broad strategy was to hold back on my side, tie down as many Belgian troops as I could, and let our far stronger right side of the German force plow ahead, I deemed that if I wanted to do more than tie down troops, I needed to advance.

*My German cavalry obliterate the disordered Belgians and run the supporting brigade off, but the countercharging Belgian cavalry chases me off. The breakthrough charge just falls short of my brigade and Michael's two batteries defending the ditch/hedge.*

Well, the die was unkind at times when it came to movement. Each unit needs to roll to move -- a violation of Russ' Rule Number 1 -- and despite some stellar pluses, I managed to choke a couple of times on some units moving. One of the elite Jager units must have been doing Jagermeister shots because they rolled a pair of 1s for the first two turns and lagged behind. One of my units shot ahead with rolls of 10s to get in the face of the Belgians.

The artillery traded low-odds shots. I finally managed to figure out that I needed to concentrate all batteries on a single target, or maybe five of the six to bring the die modifier to "0" instead of a negative. That helped.

What helped more was adding in the infantry brigade gunfire factors, especially with the integral machine guns. Yes, it took me a while to figure that out, but once I did, it sure helped, even with the -1 and -2 for defensive terrain. The MGs really jacked up the fire factor as they got closer.

Of course, being on the offensive meant the defense fired first, so you really only wanted to get close when the enemy was disordered (1/2 fire factors). Even then, toss in some artillery and the fire can do a lot of damage.



## On My Right

To my immediate right, Michael, my German compatriot with the next infantry division over, moved up in the face of a stubborn defense, but numbers, especially with some help from Tanner the corp commander and his wunderbar artillery park, began to tell and the Belgians retreated back towards the polder.

*Turn 5: My Jagers trade shots at left as my center brigade gets pummeled into the ground. My supporting brigade rolls poorly and stays in field column.*



Tanner also had a command besides the artillery and pressed forward when necessary, aided by the strong right hook of the far right.

On my far right, the German C-in-C Peter was waging a fine battle. I don't know if the die rolls went his way or not, but I'm just going to say superior generalship winkled the Belgians out of the front lines and the right wing began to turn the flank and head inwards.

## The Cavalry Battle

Thanks to better living through firepower, I bounced a battered and bruised Belgian brigade back bisordered (ooops, one too many bits of alliteration), I mean retreated it disordered from the ditch/hedge. What a perfect time for my cavalry to charge.

*Turn 6: I break one Belgian brigade and an artillery battery at bottom, but a Jager retreats due to a bad die roll. The polder is just to the left of the villages, behind the canal where an entire division awaits us. The Belgians have a pretty solid line on my end of the battlefield, but the German right hook is making headway at the top of the photo.*



I did and the supporting Belgian infantry unit laid on some supporting fire into my charge path. It proved ineffective and my cavalry swept away the dispirited defenders, providing me with a breakthrough charge into those pesky supporting infantry. I swept them away, too, but left myself right in front of fresh Belgian cavalry.

Then it was my turn to be pummeled and kicked backwards. The breakthrough charge sent them towards nearest enemy -- a full infantry brigade of mine and two artillery batteries from my German compatriot that were lined up along a ditch. The Belgian cavalry was forced to charge, but fortunately for us, didn't have enough movement to reach the troops and force a second melee.

In the subsequent fire phase, my German compatriot Michael hammered the Belgian cavalry and retreated them back across the field. I then charged them with my own cavalry, but lost. The resulting fire by my infantry brigade along with several batteries' worth of shelling did in the Belgian cavalry. There's lessons to be learned here.

## Advancing Jagers

Meanwhile, I finally kicked the laggard Jagers into gear and both Jager units advanced across the field. The resultant firefight swept away one Belgian infantry brigade and supporting artillery, but the other hung tough. A reinforcement Belgian brigade moved up to shore up the line.

I lost an infantry brigade in the center, which had stuck its nose out for too many turns. An untouched supporting infantry brigade must have panicked at the sight, for it fumbled the movement roll and stayed in column in the middle of the battle. The next turn it shook out into line, fortunately without casualties.

One of my heretofore reliable Jager units flubbed a roll and sped away back to the German start line. The offensive on my far left fizzled as Belgian Kelly and the troops formed up a nice line anchored on the village.

I was too scattered to do much except send artillery and MG fire into the village to chip away at the enemy units. I figured it would take me a turn to reorganize my units so I could launch a coordinated attack on the enemy line instead of going in piecemeal.

## Game Over, (Her)Mann

After six turns and about five hours, Bill called the game as a Belgian victory. Our German far right was in position to sweep in, but had not actually done so. I needed to reorganize the units to put them all back into position to roll into another attack.

*End of Turn 6: Game Over.*

I don't think we Germans eliminated enough Allied troops -- it would take another six turns, if not more, to clear the villages and reach the polder. The Belgians still had a half dozen brigades and two garrisoned villages between me and Michael's forces and the polder. That would be a tall order to crack at 1:1 odds -- although we had an advantage in artillery.

Kelly and Mark played a smart defensive game. They held ground and sacrificed a unit or two to delay us. The French division slowly made its way across the polder as a large reserve. As far as I can tell, I wasn't able to pull any units my way, although Michael pulled a few in the center.

## Is It *Fire & Fury*?

From what I can tell without a deep dive (and Bill provided a fantastic memory stick of WWI manuals, his rules, maps, scenarios, music, and more), *AoV* is like *AoE* is like the new *F&F Brigade*, only with more up close and personal (i.e. integrated MG) firepower. Granted, one convention game is not an in-depth look, but I got the hang of *AoV* in a couple turns, while it took a few more to understand the close-in lethality of MG firepower mechanics.

Given the massive damage on the Belgian cavalry that missed contacting our infantry and artillery by this much, I can imagine that overcoming trenches will be difficult. Granted, real WWI offensives were often preceded by days-long artillery barrages, but close-in MG fire seems appropriately devastating. Add in supporting artillery, make that supporting large-caliber 105mm and higher artillery, and you can create a killing ground between the trenches.

Between Bill's puns and general banter, this was an entertaining game. Thanks, Bill for hosting and thanks all for a rather pleasant wargame.

