

A "STRUGGLE OF ANTS":

A First World War scenario. Words by Chris Peers. Pictures by Richard Tyndall.

This is the second article in an occasional series presenting some scenarios and ideas for gaming the First World War. Like its predecessor, which looked at the battle at Vieux-Berquin in April 1918, it is derived from Rudyard Kipling's classic *The Irish Guards in the Great War*, but on this occasion the action which inspired it was a much smaller one, involving a patrol of less than platoon size rather than battalions and brigades. It was for the purpose of representing minor skirmishes like this one that I developed my WWI skirmish rules, *To The Last Man*, and it was these which we used in our refight, though as usual the scenario is readily translatable to whatever system you want to use.

The Fight at Hamelincourt, 22 August 1918.

By late August of 1918 it was becoming obvious that the Germans on the Western Front had been badly knocked about by the failure of their attacks earlier in the year and the subsequent British and French counter offensives. At Amiens on 8 August, the "black day of the German Army", Haig's forces had broken through apparently formidable defences, and for the first time whole German units had surrendered or run away. More such "hammer blows" followed, and soon the whole enemy front was falling back towards its last stronghold, the Hindenburg Line. But of course the German soldier has never been very good at knowing when he is beaten, and resistance would still suddenly stiffen without warning, bringing the advancing allies up short. As Kipling points out, very few people had any inkling that this time the war really would be "over by Christmas". There was plenty of hard fighting still to come.

On 22 August the 1st Battalion of the Irish Guards was in the line opposite the village of Hamelincourt, not far from St. Leger. (I hope Irish readers will forgive me for occasionally using "British" as a generic term for the forces including the Irish Guards, who were after all part of the British Army at the time.) Even at that stage of the war operations did not always run like clockwork, and the battalion had spent the previous day preparing for an attack which was cancelled, and then sitting in its trenches being shelled ineffectively with mustard gas. But because they still expected to have to advance on Hamelincourt at



some stage, it was necessary to reconnoitre the ground and keep the enemy at a distance by regular patrolling. One patrol went out on the 22nd under 2nd Lieutenant Faraday, intending to explore an old trench north of the village. Unfortunately Kipling does not tell us the patrol's exact strength, though we do know that it had one Lewis gun with it. We can assume that the fight took place in daylight, because those watching in the British front line trench seem to have had a good view of the whole business. Details of the terrain are also lacking, but the trenches in no man's land turned out to be little use as cover once the shooting started; they were probably old ones left over from a previous battle, and had partly fallen in. At any rate they were very shallow, and often clogged with coils and strands of wire, either similarly left over or placed there more recently by the Germans to prevent them being used by attackers.

Seen against the gigantic background of the opening campaign, it was a microscopical affair, a struggle of ants round a single grain, but it moved men strongly while they watched.

- Rudyard Kipling

A word on the tactical context might be useful here. Although the war was gradually becoming more mobile, it was still being fought between armies which had developed their skills during the trench fighting of the previous three and a half years. An important feature of this fight, as of countless others in this period, was the tactic known as "bombing" - in other words the use of hand grenades (invariably referred to in the British Army of the time as "bombs") in close range trench fighting. Traditionalists often complained that by the middle of the war on the Western Front soldiers were neglecting the use of the rifle in favour of ever increasing reliance on bombs, especially after the perfected Mills bomb replaced the old improvised jam tins etc. during the course of 1916. This allegedly reduced the troops' effectiveness in defence because of the short range of the grenades, and it was feared that it

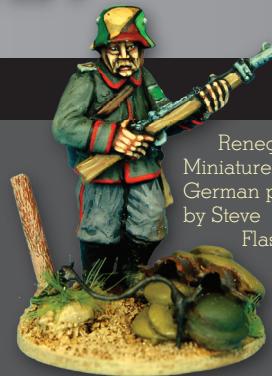
A WESTERN FRONT SCENARIO FOR TO THE LAST MAN

Figures by Foundry unless stated otherwise

would place them at a disadvantage as soon as mobile warfare began again. Kipling notes that opinion in the Irish Guards differed as regards the usefulness of bombing training, and quotes a senior officer as saying - even as late as 1917 - "I swear a bomb is of all weapons the most futile in which to specialise". Many front line troops, of course, would have disagreed with him - not least my own grandfather, the bombing champion of his battalion, whose ability saved his life on more than one occasion, but that is another story. In practice, regardless of the views of the officer quoted above, more and more men did specialise in bombing, not only in the British Army but among the French and Germans as well. The advantages of the weapon were obvious: it could be thrown into places like dug outs, pillboxes and round the traverses of trenches, where a "straight line" projectile like a rifle bullet could never reach; it could also be thrown out of trenches without the thrower exposing himself unnecessarily; and in a tight corner the explosion and accompanying shrapnel could do much more damage to a massed enemy than a single bullet.

The actual story of this tiny battle (a "microscopical affair - a struggle of ants round a single grain" as Kipling calls it) is soon told. The patrol made its way up the trench and encountered only four Germans, who were obviously not expecting them, and were captured. But then they were spotted from the village, and the defenders opened up on them with a machine gun. At this point a platoon was apparently organised to support Faraday's men, but because the attack on Hamelincourt had been postponed it was not sent forward. (Whether this was a result of simple confusion or a callous abandonment of the exposed patrol, Kipling and his sources do not say.) So Lt. Faraday decided to retreat with his prisoners. The German machine gun continued to fire, while a group of infantry of unknown strength came out from the village to cut the patrol off. The Lewis gun, covering

the retirement, was soon knocked out, and five men (presumably including its crew) were wounded. Despite the desperate situation Faraday did not abandon the casualties, but he, Sergeant Dolan and a private held the enemy off while they were helped back. Faraday was then hit in the foot, and his two companions carried him back while the rest of the patrol threw bombs to cover them in turn. By some miracle they all got back into the Irish Guards' position with no one killed or left behind to be taken prisoner. We are not told whether they got the German prisoners back as well, but presumably they did, as the action was obviously considered a success. Faraday received a well deserved Military Cross for his day's work, and Dolan the DCM.



Renegade
Miniatures
German painted
by Steve
Flashman

Irish Guards:

One Veteran infantry section consisting of one officer (Lt. Faraday) with revolver, one deputy section leader with rifle and bayonet (Sgt. Dolan), one Lewis gun with two crew with revolvers, and twelve men with rifles and bayonets. Two of the latter may be specialist bombers. With no historical justification, except that he was an experienced NCO who obviously knew what he was doing, I allowed Sgt. Dolan to count as a marksman.

Right:
Foundry
WWI figures
and scratch
build
scenery by
Paul Cook



The Refight

As often happens we have to estimate the exact strengths of the forces involved here, but the following are reasonable guesses which happen to be just the right size for a quick game. All classifications are those used in *To The Last Man*.

"Veteran" classification is used for those troops who have acquired considerable experience of combat, but often at the expense of their initial enthusiasm and "dash". So Veterans are highly competent, but rather cautious. Alternatively there might be

a case for classifying the Guards as "Gallant", which is the next grade up, but I have resisted the temptation on the grounds that nobody was that keen to take unnecessary risks at this point in the war. The British bombs are Mills bombs, which count in *To The Last Man* as defensive grenades. These produce a lot of flying shrapnel and are dangerous things to chuck around, especially in the open. In fact a man who is not a specialist bomber stands a good chance of being injured by his own bomb unless he can throw from some sort of cover, which is where all those old trenches will hopefully come in handy. It seems an obvious step to specify how many bombs each man should carry, but when testing *To The Last Man* I came to the conclusion that it was not worth the trouble and paperwork to keep track of them. It is very rare for a figure to get the chance to throw more than a couple before either the enemy is driven off or he is hit. And the ones who do use more are generally the specialist bombers who in real life would carry more bombs anyway. So here everyone has (in game terms) an unlimited supply.

Also attached to the Irish patrol is a group of four German prisoners, who must be brought back alive if possible.

Germans:

One tripod mounted MG08 machine gun with three Veteran crew with revolvers, deployed in the village.

One understrength Regular infantry platoon consisting of one officer with revolver, and three sections each of one NCO and nine men, all with rifle, bayonet and bombs.

By late 1918 most ordinary German infantry had lost much of their enthusiasm for the war, and would normally be classed as Raw. However I have assumed that this is something of a picked detachment - if they had not been, they would probably not have come out of their trenches at all! The machine gunners, however, remained highly disciplined and determined to the very end. The Germans used a variety of different types of grenade, most of which relied on blast rather than shrapnel and so at least in theory had a smaller lethal range than the Mills bomb. They are best classified here as offensive grenades. The men in this scenario are from ordinary "trench divisions", not stormtroopers, so there are no specialist bombers or marksmen among them.

To a large extent the terrain will have to be left to your imagination and the items you have available, but the following are the essential features, based on Kipling's description. Somewhere on the German base edge will be a small village containing a machine gun post. As the patrol never attempted to put the gun out of action we can assume that it was situated well out of bomb throwing range from the nearest point of the trench they were exploring, which runs from the left hand corner of the British table edge, roughly diagonally to the centre of the table. This should be just one of a number of old trench sections running across the middle part of the table in random directions. These will be obstacles to movement and can provide men in them with soft cover, but do not count as proper fire trenches, because they are too shallow and poorly maintained. This means that men cannot move along the bottom of them in complete safety, out of view of the enemy outside. In places there may also be tangles of rusty old wire blocking the trenches. The land in this sector was undulating rather than dead flat, and had also been churned up by shellfire over the years, so it seems reasonable to scatter a few low hills and ridges about to interfere with lines of sight. Although the Irish



Guards could see the fight from their front line, we are not told that they provided any supporting fire, so the distance was probably too great for them to do so without endangering their own men, and for the purpose of the game we can ignore them.

The patrol deploys at the point where it was discovered, which is the point where their trench approaches nearest to the village. The Lewis gun can be set up in the trench ready to fire in the direction of the village. The German machine gun is obviously inside the village, sited at the player's discretion where it will have the best field of fire. In reality of course it might have been much further away from the scene of the action than we have placed it here; the proper location for a machine gun was in a commanding position anything up to a mile back from the front line, from where it could dominate the area without exposing itself to hostile small arms fire. But the game will not be much fun for the Irish player if he has no chance at all of getting at his opponent's strongest element, so we will leave it where it is, on the assumption that the unexpected war of movement has left it temporarily in a vulnerable spot. The German infantry should start off in the village as well, but can advance as soon as the game starts.

Victory Conditions.

To The Last Man focuses on sections and platoons rather than the detailed careers of individuals, and so it does not normally concern itself with the fate of wounded men. If you are hit you are considered to be out of the game - either dead, lying low, or making your own way back home with a much sought-after "Blighty one". But in this scenario, unless we require the Irish player to bring back his casualties, there will be nothing to prevent him simply running away as soon as he is discovered. Therefore the following special rule applies.

All Irish soldiers who become casualties are diced for on a D6 to see what state they are in. A 1 or 2 means that they are walking wounded. They can no longer fight, but must return to their base edge as quickly as possible, using "Stealthy" movement. A score of 3 or 4 means that the figure can still walk, but is more seriously hurt. He can move back at the same speed, but only if he has a comrade to lean on; two walking wounded can support each other in this way, or alternatively a fit man can support up to two casualties. A figure scoring 5 or 6 is either dead or a stretcher case. Even if he is dead he still counts for victory points if he is brought back, but in the absence of any of the battalion's

stretcher bearers (who are not mentioned in Kipling's account) he must be carried off the table by two able-bodied men, again travelling at "Stealthy" speed. To assist or carry a casualty a figure needs to be in base contact with him at the start of the turn in which the wounded man is to move. The position of any wounded man who is unable to move must be marked with a suitable casualty figure or other marker. Casualties and the men assisting them cannot shoot or be shot at, but they are automatically taken prisoner if an enemy figure comes within six inches of them at any time. Fit men accompanying the wounded can however drop them if necessary at the start of any movement phase, and then fight as normal.

The German POWs must all move as a group, keeping within an inch of each other, but are treated in all other respects like the Irish walking wounded. I have assumed that at this stage of the war they are not all that unhappy about being captured, and will make their own way towards the British trenches. If German troops get to within six inches of them they will be liberated, but they have been disarmed and so play no further part in the game. It is up to the players or game organisers whether they allow the German



player to machine-gun them, as one of our more bloodthirsty characters did. This sort of thing did sometimes happen historically, and I can think of no good reason to forbid it beyond a general distaste for the idea. I suggest that, as they will not be expecting to be fired on by their own side, the prisoners move at "Stealthy" speed like the wounded unless the machine gun opens up on them, but if they are shot at and missed they are allowed to change to "Rush" movement until they leave the table over the British edge! The other obvious dirty trick is for either side to use the wounded or POWs as a screen against enemy fire. I eventually decided not to allow this, but to assume that they will always go to ground or otherwise make themselves scarce if they find themselves in the line of fire. They can therefore be ignored by combatants, and shot over as if they were not there.

As soon as all the unwounded Irish have left the table over their own base edge, count up the total number of figures, including wounded and prisoners, who have got back. Anyone left out there after the last of the combatants have retired will no doubt be picked up by the Germans, and can be counted as lost. Rather arbitrarily, I decided that if twelve or more figures returned safely (60% of the original total of patrollers and their prisoners), this would represent an Irish victory. Anything less was a German victory. German infantry casualties did not count, but in the unlikely event that the machine gun in the village was knocked out this would be an obvious boon to the troops in the British line, and would earn the Irish player an additional four points. To get everyone off, as Faraday did, seemed to be asking too much. And so it proved in our refights.

Conclusion.

Our two attempts to play out this scenario brought home to us just how clever (and lucky) Faraday and his men had been. In the first game the Irish player decided that it was unwise to leave the Lewis gun to shoot it out with the German Maxim, and sneaked it away down the trench to deal with the expected outflanking attack. The problem was that this left the riflemen helpless against the enemy machine gun, and they spent a worrying couple of turns pinned

down before their officer managed to get them out of the line of fire. By then the German infantry were behind their flanks and intercepting the wounded trying to make their way back. The Lewis did kill quite a few of the enemy, but one German section got into the trench it was in and knocked it out with bombs, leaving the rest of the patrol with no choice but to break out back

to their own lines, leaving the wounded behind. It was at this point that the "beastly Hun" (ie. our German player) shot down the unfortunate POWs, just as they were about to escape from the table. Only six Irish infantrymen returned to their trenches, making the game a clear German win.

The second game was a better example of how it should have been done; the Lewis gun was sacrificed to cover the retreat, just as in the historical action, and the Irish fell back by stages, successfully keeping between the enemy and the wounded and prisoners. Their losses still mounted under machine gun fire, and eventually the German player decided to rush their weakened line with his infantry. This was where the Mills bombs came into their own. At close range their area effect makes them a more reliable defence than rifle fire, especially where the defenders are thinly spread, and the zone in front of the Irish line was simply swept clear by volleys of



Above:
Great War
Miniatures
British Lewis
Gunner

bombs. True, most of the Germans were pinned rather than killed, but that was all that was needed to bring their advance to a halt. They started throwing bombs back, but the cover provided for the Irish by their trench, and the shorter lethal radius of the German grenades, made their response less effective. With the prisoners and all but two of the wounded brought back, for a total of 18, the Irish player was the winner on this occasion, even though the German casualties were actually lower. So great was the victor's newfound enthusiasm for bombing that he even proposed to send his two specialist bombers back across no man's land to try and take out the machine gun in Hamelincourt village, but unfortunately lack of time prevented us playing this out!

It might be worth pointing out in conclusion that WWI skirmish gaming is not just about trench raiding. There are countless other scenarios which are often neglected by gamers, but can provide games which are just as enjoyable and challenging. I have tried to make sure that *To The Last Man* is equally suitable for the activities of Cossack cavalry, Balkan irregulars and "Ruga Ruga" in the African jungle (not to mention other contemporary conflicts involving exotic characters like Chinese "dare to die" swordsmen). So in the next scenario I shall leave the Western Front for something a little different!

Below:
Foundry
WWI figures
painted by
Paul Cook

