

# THE IRISH GUARDS

A First World War scenario. Words by Chris Peers. Pictures by Dave Andrews.



This is the first in what is intended to be a short series on battles of the First World War, designed mainly as scenarios suitable for gaming with *Contemptible Little Armies* rules. It might be a good idea to establish right away what I mean by ‘battles’. *Contemptible Little Armies* is intentionally vague about exactly what level of forces it represents, the idea being that a game will work just as well whether you envisage each of your units as being a platoon or a battalion, or even if - as happens in practice most of the time - you don’t worry about the scale issue at all but just enjoy the game. Nevertheless, I have to confess that in my own head at least I tend to think of my infantry units as battalions. This is probably because of the focus of most of the sources I have read: a battalion is the smallest unit whose movements are likely to be described in any account of a large scale battle, and at the same time the largest formation to which the writers of personal memoirs convey a sense of belonging. So while in conventional historical narratives a ‘battle’ on the Western Front will probably denote something on the scale of First Ypres or the Somme, I will be focusing either on smaller engagements, or on small chunks (geographically and chronologically) of these vast sprawling operations. In a way it does not matter which: to the men on the ground it was seldom important whether they were involved in a local skirmish or a major offensive, and it was not unusual for the participants in the most pivotal actions of the war to have no idea of the significance of events until long afterwards. To quote Rudyard Kipling, in *The Irish Guards in the Great War*:

*“In modern trench warfare any attack extending beyond the range of a combatant’s vision, which runs from fifty yards to a quarter of a mile, according to the ground and his own personal distractions, may, for aught he can tell, be either an engagement of the first class or some local brawl for the details of which he can search next week’s home papers in vain.”*

It is a good idea to introduce Kipling at this stage, because his regimental history of the Irish Guards was the inspiration for the first two battles I intend to discuss. (It comes in two volumes, dealing with the 1st and 2nd Battalions respectively.) and has recently been reprinted by *Leonaur*, available in the *Eyewitness to War Series* from Wargames Illustrated. Most units of the British Army produced some sort of narrative of their activities during the war, usually compiled by surviving officers, but few of them are remembered today except by specialists. The Irish Guards were fortunate in getting one of the country’s leading literary figures to write theirs, with the result that not only is it still in print, but it remains essential reading not only for those interested in the regiment, but for anyone who wants to know what the infantryman’s war on the

# AT VIEUX-BERQUIN

## Figures by Great War Miniatures.

Western Front was really like. Kipling, of course, was too old to fight in the Great War, and his link with the Irish Guards was due to his son, Lieutenant J. Kipling of the 2nd Battalion, who was killed at the Battle of Loos in September 1915. But the old man certainly knew his job, as you would expect from one of the British Empire's most enthusiastic chroniclers. According to the title page, the history was "edited and compiled from their diaries and papers", but there must have been more to it than that. He obviously spoke to numerous veterans and took note of their personal views and recollections, and also studied the science of warfare as it evolved between 1914 and 1918 well enough to put not only the campaigns, but also the weapons and tactics into their wider context.

All sorts of details are evoked in these volumes which have the ring of authenticity about them - at least from the point of view of a reader who wasn't there either: the exhilarating feeling of space on the Somme to those who had been stuck for months in the Ypres Salient; the demoralising effect of not being able to shave (these were the Guards after all!); or the tangle of broken telephone wires making a communication trench even more dangerous than it need have been. Here, for example, is Kipling's overview of the fighting at Loos on 26 September 1915:

*"The field of battle presented an extraordinary effect of dispersion and detachment. Gas, smoke, and the continuous splash and sparkle of bombs marked where the lines were in actual touch, but behind and outside this inferno stretched a desolation of emptiness, peopled with single figures "walking about all over the place", as one observer wrote, with dead and wounded on the ground, and casualties being slowly conveyed to dressing-stations - every one apparently unconcerned beneath shell-fire, which in old-time battles would have been reckoned heavy, but which here, by comparison, was peace."*

The old caricature of the war as four years of unimaginative and unchanging tactical stupidity should have been thoroughly buried by now, but it is sometimes still necessary to record how dramatically the British Army progressed in the arts of 20th century warfare between 1914 and 1918. In many of his asides Kipling - writing admittedly with the benefit of hindsight - emphasises the effect of the constantly changing conditions on the operations which he describes. During the First Battle of Ypres in October 1914, for example:

*"A burning farmhouse blazed steadily all night in a hollow by Zandvoorde and our patrols on the road could see the Germans "in their spiked helmets" silhouetted against the glare as they stormed out of the woods and massed behind*



*the fold of the ground ready for the morning's attack. Two years later, our guns would have waited on their telephones till the enemy formation was completed and would then have removed those battalions from the face of the earth. But we had not those guns."*



~ The Battle of Vieux-Berquin, 11 - 14 April 1918 ~

The open warfare of the first months of the war is a particularly fruitful source of scenarios, and we will return to it later. But our first game is set towards the end of the conflict, during the final decisive phase which began with the “Kaiser’s Battle”, the German Spring Offensive of 1918, when the trench lines had been broken and a war of manoeuvre was once again possible. The first phase of this battle had begun on 21 March. Strengthened by divisions transferred from the Eastern Front, and preceded by devastating artillery bombardments planned by the famous Colonel Bruchmuller, the Kaiser’s troops tore great holes in the British lines and sent their stormtroopers through them, aiming for the important strategic centre of Amiens. In sixteen days of the most ferocious fighting of the war, they got to within nine miles of their objective before stalling outside Villers-Bretonneux, just short of the heights which would have enabled them to overlook Amiens with their artillery. The Germans did not know it yet, but their best chance of a successful ending to the war was gone. Nevertheless they persisted for several more months with a strategy of successive attacks against different parts of the front, each of which gained only a few miles before bogging down again. Ludendorff, the architect of the great offensive, always claimed that this was all part of his original plan, but to an outside observer it has a flavour of increasing desperation about it. By July the French were able to stop the German thrusts in their tracks and then counter-attack; by August the British were launching their own far more successful offensives, the Americans were arriving in numbers, and the final defeat of the German Army was only a matter of time.

But if the German offensives were becoming more and more hopeless from the perspective of grand strategy, this cannot have been any consolation to the men who found themselves in their path. Throughout the spring, the Entente forces were constantly kept off balance. Sectors of the British and French front were hit by overwhelming artillery strikes, followed up by ferocious infantry attacks, which – even though they were all eventually held – usually annihilated those battalions unlucky enough to be directly in front of them.

A typical German attack at this period of the war was a complex business, far removed from the close order masses of 1914, led by sword-waving officers on horseback. (Though some of their less tactically adept units – perhaps those fresh from the Eastern Front – did still advance shoulder to shoulder, and paid the inevitable price.) It was often noted that British sentries could hardly recognise the opening of an infantry assault for what it was, because it took the form of small, scattered groups apparently wandering aimlessly about in no-man’s land. As Kipling recounts from the perspective of the Irish Guards in this battle:

*“One found out where the enemy were by seeing them come over the brows of unexpected slopes in small groups that thinned out and settled down to machine-gunning under cover of equally unexpected field-guns... The German advance on that quarter resembled, as one imaginative soul put it, an encompassment of were-wolves. They slouched forward, while men rubbed tired eyes, in twos and threes, at no point offering any definite target either for small-arm or artillery, and yet, in some wizard fashion, always thickening and spreading, while our guns from the rear raged and tore uselessly at their almost invisible lines.”*

Or as another Irish witness quoted by Kipling put it more prosaically:

*“They was running about like ants, some one way, some the other – the way Jerry does when he’s manoeuvrin’ in the open. Ye can’t mistake it; an’ it means trouble.”*

On 9 April 1918 the Germans attacked the British front between Armentieres in the north and La Bassee in the south, inaugurating what was to become known as the Battle of the Lys, after the river which flows through Armentieres. In the centre of the front four elite German “Grosskampfdivisionen” or assault divisions, supported by one of Bruckmuller’s famous “hurricane bombardments”, struck a single poorly equipped Portuguese division, which, not surprisingly, collapsed. Ludendorff’s stormtroopers raced through the resulting gap, aiming for the vital

communications centre of Hazebrouck, about 20 miles to the west. The British units on either side had no choice but to give way as well, and their generals were soon reduced to throwing in their few reserves piecemeal to fill the gaps. So when the 2nd Battalion of the Irish Guards, then part of 4th Guards Brigade, reached the front near Vieux Berquin on the Hazebrouck road on the night of 11 April, its situation was far from ideal. For a start, half the Battalion consisted of new drafts who had never seen action before, and even the veterans had no idea what was going on. No one knew where the supporting units on the flanks were - if there were any - and the enemy was expected in overwhelming numbers and at any moment, from one or more of several directions. In fact the rest of the Brigade had not yet arrived and, says Kipling, the Irish "lay down to think it over till the CO returned, having met the Brigadier, who did not know whether the Guards Brigade was in the front line or not, but rather hoped there might be some troops in front of it." The Battalion was supposed to be in support behind the Brigade's other two battalions - the 3rd Coldstream Guards on the right, and the 4th Grenadiers on the left - but at that point neither of these units had reached the front, so the Irish had no choice but to find a likely looking defensive position and dig in in a hurry. The area was completely flat, dotted with farm cottages and cut up by ditches and fences, but was overlooked by several German observation balloons. There was no time to construct a continuous line of trenches, and so the Battalion occupied a string of partially fortified positions around the farmhouses on either side of the main road.

When dawn broke on the 12th it was clear that there were plenty of troops in front. Unfortunately most of them were German, and the ones who were not were coming back in small, scattered groups, their formations totally broken up by the violence of the offensive. (Many of these stragglers stopped and joined the Irish when they reached their lines, and continued to fight well in spite of what they had already been through.) Throughout the morning German artillery

shelled the exposed positions, making communication between the various outposts extremely dangerous, but luckily no infantry attack developed. Meanwhile the Coldstreams and Grenadiers were advancing into their positions, but were suffering heavily from machine guns and artillery on their flanks. A battery of German field guns was firing down the road over open sights at the Grenadiers at a range of only 300 yards, but no British artillery seems to have been in a position to retaliate. The only thing the Irish could do to help was to detach two companies to support their fellow guardsmen and provide them with flank defence with their Lewis guns.

The German tactics in this action were interesting. Their infantry took a largely subsidiary role, and the massed attacks which occurred elsewhere during the Kaiser's Spring Offensive do not seem to have materialised here. Neither did the Guards find themselves infiltrated by fast moving parties of stormtroopers pushing deep into their rear. Instead the Germans used their machine guns offensively, supported by field artillery and snipers. As Kipling says:

*"Our people did not attach much importance to the enemy infantry, but spoke with unqualified admiration of their machine-gunners. The method of attack was uniformly simple. Machine-guns working to a flank enfiladed our dug-in line, while field-guns hammered it flat frontally, sometimes even going up with the assaulting infantry. Meanwhile, individual machine-guns crept forward, using all shelters and covers, and turned up savagely in the rear of our defence."*

Of course such tactics could not have worked if the defenders had had enough men to hold a solid front, but the other important factor must have been the availability of new, lighter varieties of machine gun. It would have been a daunting task to manoeuvre like this with the original Maxim 08, which with its tripod mount had a weight of





more than 120 pounds, but by 1918 the bipod-mounted 08/15 version was widely available. Weighing only 43 pounds, this could be carried by a single strong man, and even at a pinch fired from the hip. With a less steady mounting and less elaborate sights it had an effective range of about 1200 yards, much less than that of the 08 model, but its rate of fire was similar. These guns were issued at the rate of six per company (a British company would have had eight Lewis guns, but these were drum-fed weapons with a much lower sustained fire capability) organised into sections, each consisting of a gun "Truppe" with an MG08/15 and four men, and a rifle "Truppe" of eight infantrymen, whose main tasks were to carry extra ammunition and protect the gun. We are not told so specifically, but it was undoubtedly weapons of this type, perhaps supplemented by captured Lewis guns, that spearheaded the German attack in this battle.

Somehow the two Irish companies which had been sent forward reached their objectives, moving from cover to cover in diamond formation across the bullet-swept battlefield, controlled by whistle blasts. They got into position in time to counter the inevitable German infantry advance, which developed about 2.30 on the afternoon of the 12th. The attackers seem to have avoided a frontal clash with the Grenadiers and Coldstreams, but instead tried to get past their flanks. In doing so they exposed their own flanks to the Lewis guns of the Irish Guards, and suffered accordingly. But on the right - where the unit which had been prolonging the line on the right of the Coldstreams fell back at this point - they managed to capture a small hamlet called Arrewage, and had to be thrown out again by an improvised counter-attack. At this point Kipling admits that no coherent narrative of the activities of the 2nd Irish Guards was possible. Battalion HQ was forced to move several times, and lost track not only of its fellow battalions but even of its own companies. But there was one piece of good news: the 1st Australian Division had arrived, and was digging in along the edge of the Forest of Nieppe not far behind the Guards' position.

Nevertheless the next day - the 13th - saw some of the worst fighting of the battle. "The position of the 4th Guards Brigade outside the forest", says Kipling, "had been that of a crumbling sandbank thrust out into a sea whose every wave wore it away." After dawn a strong German attack overlapped the left flank of the 4th Grenadiers, who were virtually annihilated where they stood. A company of the Irish Guards, sent to reinforce them, vanished into the early morning fog and was never heard of again - either encircled with the surviving Grenadiers or cut down by random fire en route. (Of the eight officers of the 2nd Irish Guards posted missing in action since the end of 1914, three disappeared on this one day.) Then, in the afternoon, the

enemy regrouped and attacked the rest of the line. They broke through and temporarily got into Arrewage for a second time, but by what must have been countless unrecorded acts of heroism they were expelled again, and the line held. As before, most of the pressure came from the German machine guns and snipers, with Lewis guns doing most of the damage in reply. The Irish were frustrated by a shortage of Mills bombs, which made it difficult to get the enemy snipers out of the cottages where they were hiding, but eventually the Australians sent up some "smoke-bomb confections" (whatever they were), which helped. At this point Brigade HQ sent up a trench mortar battery and a company of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry which they had somehow got hold of in the confusion, and these helped to stiffen the rapidly dwindling Irish Guards. By the evening of the 13th April the German offensive was clearly faltering, and the next day the Guards finally linked up with the Australians on their left. There were two more attempted attacks on their line during the day - one broken up by artillery and the other by Lewis guns - but these repulses were followed up only by indiscriminate shelling. After dark on the 14th the Guards were relieved, after three days and nights of constant fighting. They had almost single-handedly thwarted Ludendorff's advance on Hazebrouck and the Channel Ports, but only at the cost of around half their number dead, wounded or missing.



## The Wargame

As usual with sources of this type, what we gain in detail and atmosphere from the point of view of one side, we lose in terms of our knowledge of the enemy. So while we can reconstruct the British order of battle fairly well, we will have to base the German forces on a mixture of odd references, general knowledge of their tactical organisation, and a bit of guesswork.

The terrain will be quite easy to reproduce, even though Kipling does not provide a map. As described above, it was completely flat, with a network of ditches and fences to impede manoeuvre and provide cover. Four small villages (really just groups of farmhouses) and the same number of copses should be scattered about more or less at random, allowing a couple of villages sited so that the Guards can incorporate them into their front line. The most fought-over settlement, Arrewage, should be represented by a village about 12 inches in from the table edge on the British right, and 24 inches in front of their base line. Unless otherwise stated below, use the standard deployment restrictions in the rules for both sides. In other words, the British may deploy anywhere within their own half of the table. The Germans must start within 12 inches of their own base edge, or be diced for to come on later.



### The forces involved are:

#### British (4th Guards Brigade):

C-in-C (Brigade HQ) on foot. Under HQ's direct control are the following, which historically were fed into the line on the 13th and attached to the Irish Guards. As we do not know when they first became available, I suggest that they are deployed on the British player's table edge at the start of the game, but will have to get forward under their own steam:

One light mortar, available to be attached to any infantry unit, same classification as the Guards.

One composite unit of stragglers, Tactical Rating 4, Morale Rating 4. 7 figures with rifles and bombs, 1 with Lewis gun.

#### In the line at the start of the game are:

Three infantry battalions (2nd Irish Guards, 3rd Coldstream Guards, 4th Grenadier Guards), Tactical Rating 4, Morale Rating 4, Stubborn. Each with 14 figures with rifles and bombs, 2 with Lewis guns. If their player wishes, the Irish Guards unit may be split into 2 units of 8 to reinforce the flanks.

One off-table artillery battery dedicated to Opportunity Fire, with one on-table observer. Tactical Rating is 5. Ammunition may be Shrapnel or High Explosive.

One off-table battery dedicated to Counterbattery Fire.

This lot, with the addition of 48 inches of fire trenches to dig in most of the front line infantry, comes to about 900 points in *Contemptible Little Armies* terms. Anyone who cannot fit into the allowed length of trench will have to take cover in villages or behind other terrain features, which is fairly realistic. Because of the hasty deployment, there are no wire, no communication trenches, no registered defensive fire tasks, and no counterbattery artillery. So holding on is going to be a challenge, but remember that the opposing infantry are not the very best, so if you survive the artillery and can neutralise the machine guns they should be fairly easy to stop.

#### The Germans:

In a "Prepared Attack" scenario for *Contemptible Little Armies* we normally allow the attacker to field two and a half times the defender's points total, which usually gives a pretty close-fought game. So bearing this in mind, this is my suggested German order of battle for a total of approximately 2250 points. However this is by no means definitive, and can easily be changed to fit in with what figures you have, as long as the rough overall strength remains the same.

C-in-C (Regimental or Divisional HQ) on foot.

Seven infantry battalions, each with 15 figures with rifles and bombs, plus 1 with LMG. In view of the mediocre performance of the infantry in this sector I am assuming that they were either from an ordinary "trench division"



(Tactical Rating 4, Morale 3), or were veterans of the Eastern Front, who were confident but less used to conditions in the West (Tactical 3, Morale 4). The German player may choose which type to field, but all these units must be classified the same.

Two snipers, Tactical 5, Morale 4.

Seven Maxim 08/15 HMGs, Tactical Rating 5, Morale Rating 5. Up to 3 of these could instead be standard tripod mounted Maxim 08s, though the latter are probably less useful in this scenario.

Two 77mm or captured Russian 76.2mm field guns, Tactical Rating 4, Morale Rating 4.

One off-table artillery battery dedicated to Opportunity Fire, with one on-table observer. Tactical Rating is 4. Ammunition may be Shrapnel, High Explosive or Heavy High Explosive.

One off-table battery dedicated to Counterbattery Fire.

Three off-table batteries, each with six turns of shrapnel for static or rolling barrage.

Two off-table batteries, each with four turns of high explosive for static or rolling barrage.

This is quite a lot of artillery, but as most of it will have to be pre-planned, and the defenders will be well spread out, it will probably not cause as much damage as you might like. Shrapnel was used in large quantities during this battle, but it is of very limited use against men who are dug in, so your best bet will be to identify the likely routes that the British will use to get reinforcements up to the most threatened spots, and concentrate it on those so as to catch them moving. But to my mind the 08/15 machine guns are the most useful weapons a 1918 German army has. In *Contemptible Little Armies* they have much the same effect at close range as tripod mounted machine guns, but can be set up and brought into action with much less delay. If used aggressively they may be able to prise the defences apart from the flanks or rear, or at least inflict enough casualties to give your infantry a chance when they go in.

Normally in this type of scenario, the attacker must bring any later arrivals onto the table over his own base edge. However, in this case we need to allow for the collapse of the British units on the right of the Guards' position, so I suggest that any German infantry or machine guns which are intended to arrive in any turn after the sixth may instead do so along their own half of the table edge on their left side. This need not be ordered in advance, as it represents a local commander's act of initiative in response to the British withdrawal.





Victory conditions can be the same as for a normal Prepared Attack game, but this was no longer the slow positional warfare of the previous few years, and the Germans were not concerned with simply capturing a few terrain features. Instead Ludendorff was banking on achieving a large scale breakthrough in the direction of the Channel Ports. Therefore the German player should not set himself terrain objectives for this game, but should aim for a “complete breakthrough”, as defined in the relevant section of the rules. I suggest confining yourselves to the fighting of 12 April, and giving the attacker a maximum of 12 game turns to achieve this breakthrough, since by the following day, with the Australians in position in the next line of defence, a decisive breakthrough was impossible, even though the Germans did not know this at the time.

#### References:

R. Kipling, *The Irish Guards in the Great War*, Vol. 1, *The 1st Battalion*, and Vol. 2, *The 2nd Battalion*.

*Contemptible Little Armies*, HLBS Publishing, 2002.

*Army Lists for use with Contemptible Little Armies, Part 1: The Main European Fronts, 1914 - 1918*, HLBS Publishing, 2002.

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