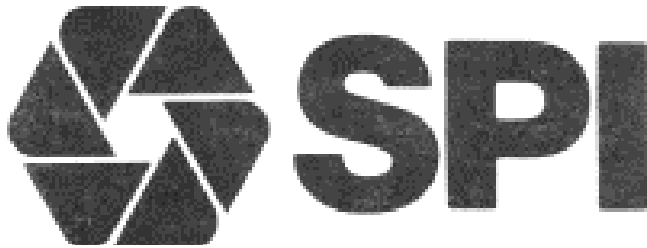

Top SPI Games?

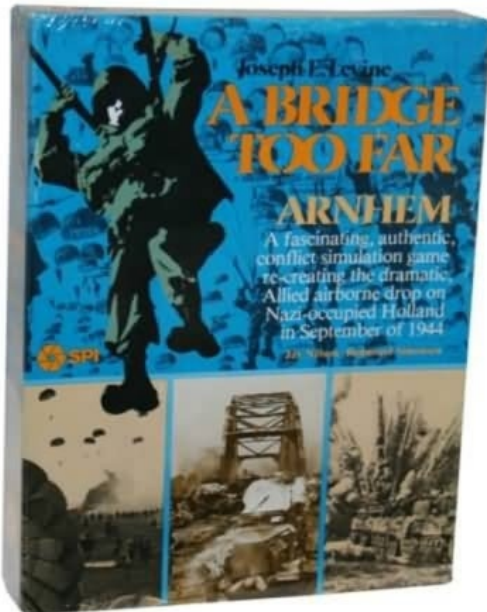
By Eric Goldberg



Editor's Note: Eric Goldberg is no stranger to SPI gamers. His work with the company culminated in great things – including the work of rescuing **Highway to the Reich** by sole development of the second edition – for which we all owe him a great debt. Eric also co-designed **Swords & Sorcery** (with Greg Costikyan) and **John Carter, Warlord of Mars** (with Mark Herman). Here is his take on “SPI's Greatest Hits”. – RHG

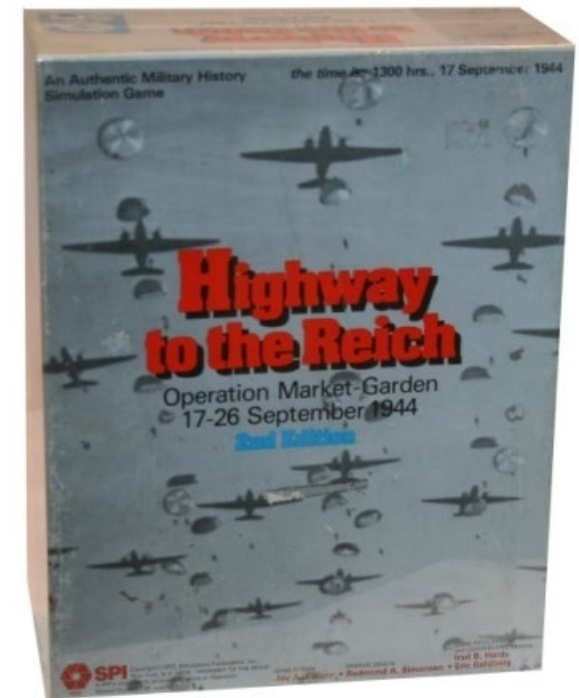
A long-time colleague, in re-visiting the SPI and S&T games he found so compelling during his teenage years, asked for a curated guide from this mid- to late 1970s insider. Your mileage may vary; hope this write-up adds somewhat to your enjoyment of our mutual hobby.

Top SPI games is an interesting question. I'm going to go with a mix of classic gameplay, eclectic gameplay, and skew toward your apparent preference for mid-70s games. (The median rules book-length went from 8 pages to 20 pages from the early 70s to the late 70s, as the feedback system ferociously boosted the grognards' signal. As a consequence, the games became steadily more complex -- still delivered at a good talent level -- which slowly eroded the attraction for new recruits.)



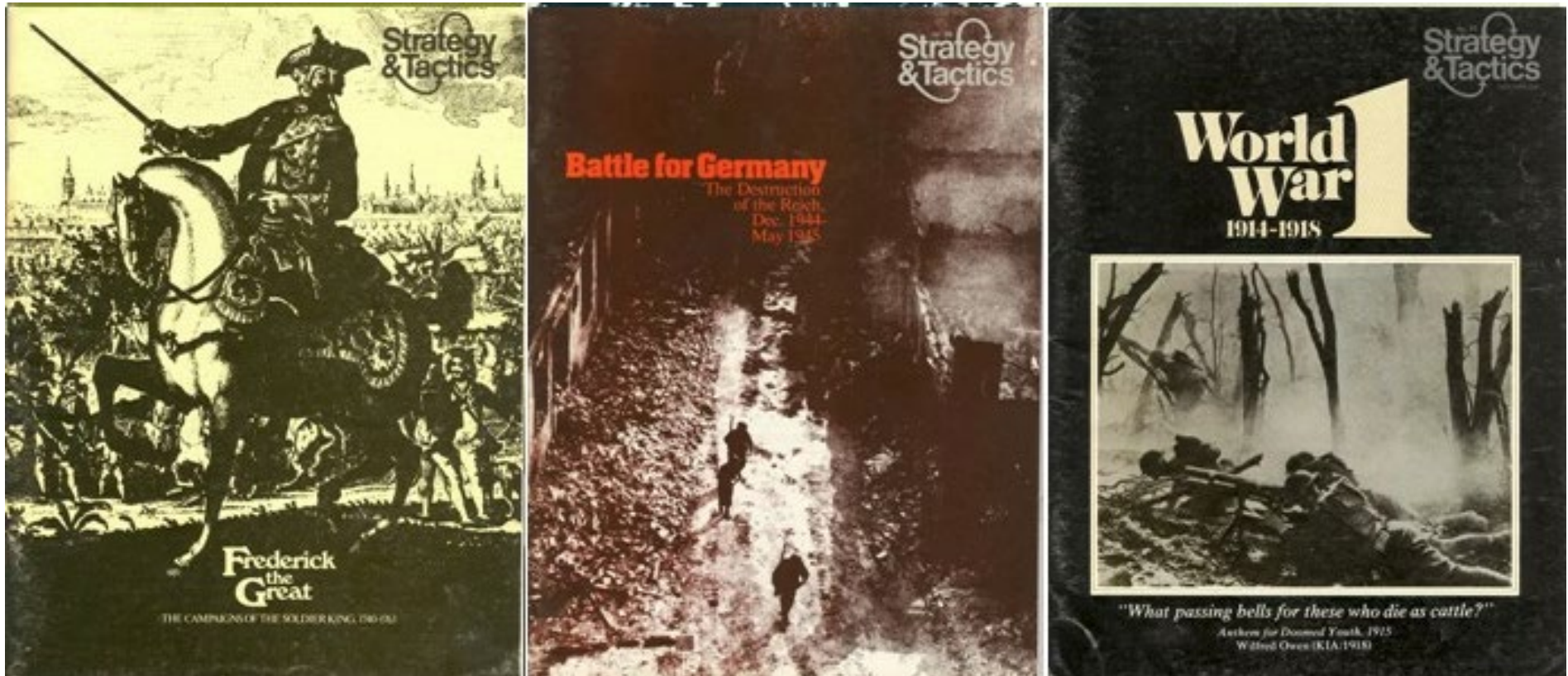
Arnhem: A super modern quad on the doomed British 1st, conveying history well with good gameplay. *Arnhem* recreates the northernmost sector of Operation Market Garden.

Highway to the Reich [HTTR], the mini-monster game that covers the entire Operation Market-Garden campaign is great and is one of the finest armor-artillery systems – if a bit complex – in rules systems. I was a playtester and provided modest development assistance on the 1st edition *HTTR*; if of interest, you want the 2nd edition, for which I did sole development. Not only are the rules a helluva lot more cohesive, I took a gem of a design and allowed it to reach its potential. [That gem originated by Jay Nelson with significant contributions from the late, great Terry Hardy.]



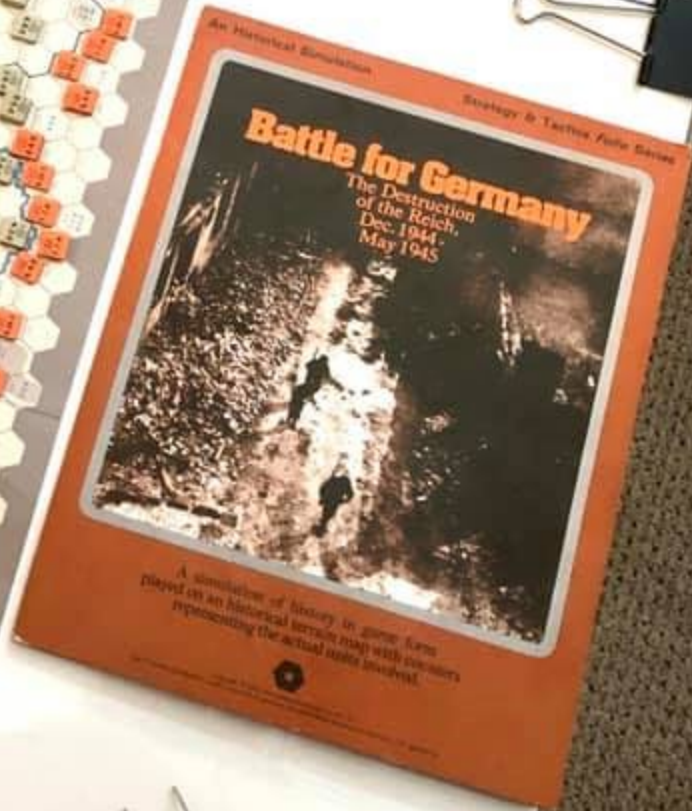
The great run from issues 49 through 51 is S&T's apotheosis: *Frederick the Great*, *Battle for Germany*, and *World War I*.

Battle for Germany, which encompasses the final assaults on Germany in 1945, is built around an elegant frame: one player directs the Allied forces and the eastern German units defending against the Russians; and the opponent directs the Russian forces and the Western German units defending against the Allies.



WWI similarly reflects a massive campaign with a clever and simple device: for most of the game, none of the units are removed when they take losses. Instead, there's a manpower track for both sides (Allies and Entente); when the track reaches zero, then units are removed from the map when an adverse result occurs in battle / on the Combat Results Table.

[More on *Frederick the Great* later.]



Empires of the Middle Ages: Jim Dunnigan and Redmond Simonsen's last collaboration is my candidate for their greatest. It was quite original at the time and was a riot of systems. Simonsen, of course, was a brilliant systems designer, whose influence on everything from IBM manuals to how we organize simulations for gameplay (the works of just about every computer game designer -- Meier, Shelley, etc. -- show definite Simonsen lineage) is both an underappreciated and foundational part of the SPI legacy.

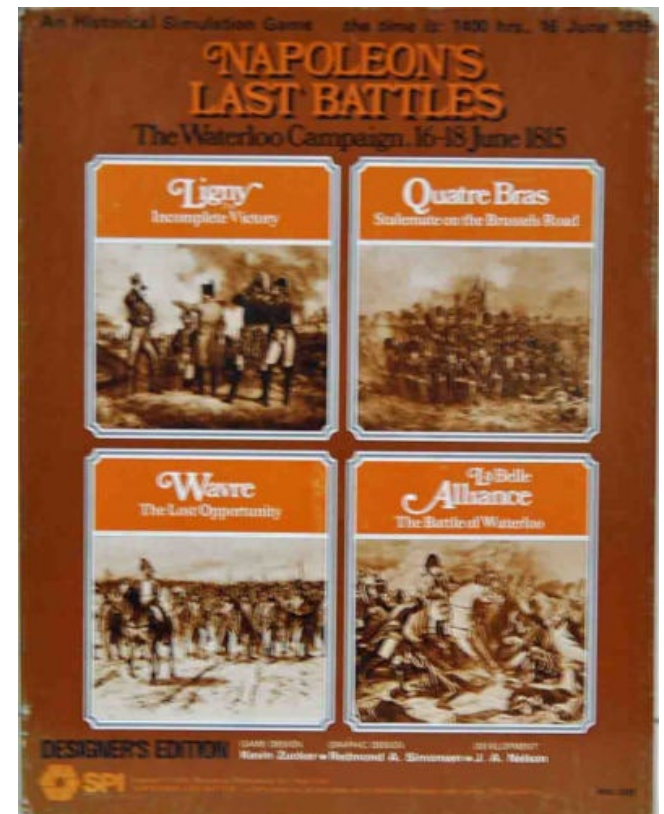
Empires of the Middle Ages is a sprawling multi-player -- best with 4-6 players -- game of contending empires (think Holy Roman Empire from 8th Century to 15th Century Europe). Was underdeveloped; when I played with Jim and several other SPI designers in the years after he left SPI, we had house rules to patch the development holes, which sadly, I don't retain nearly four decades later.





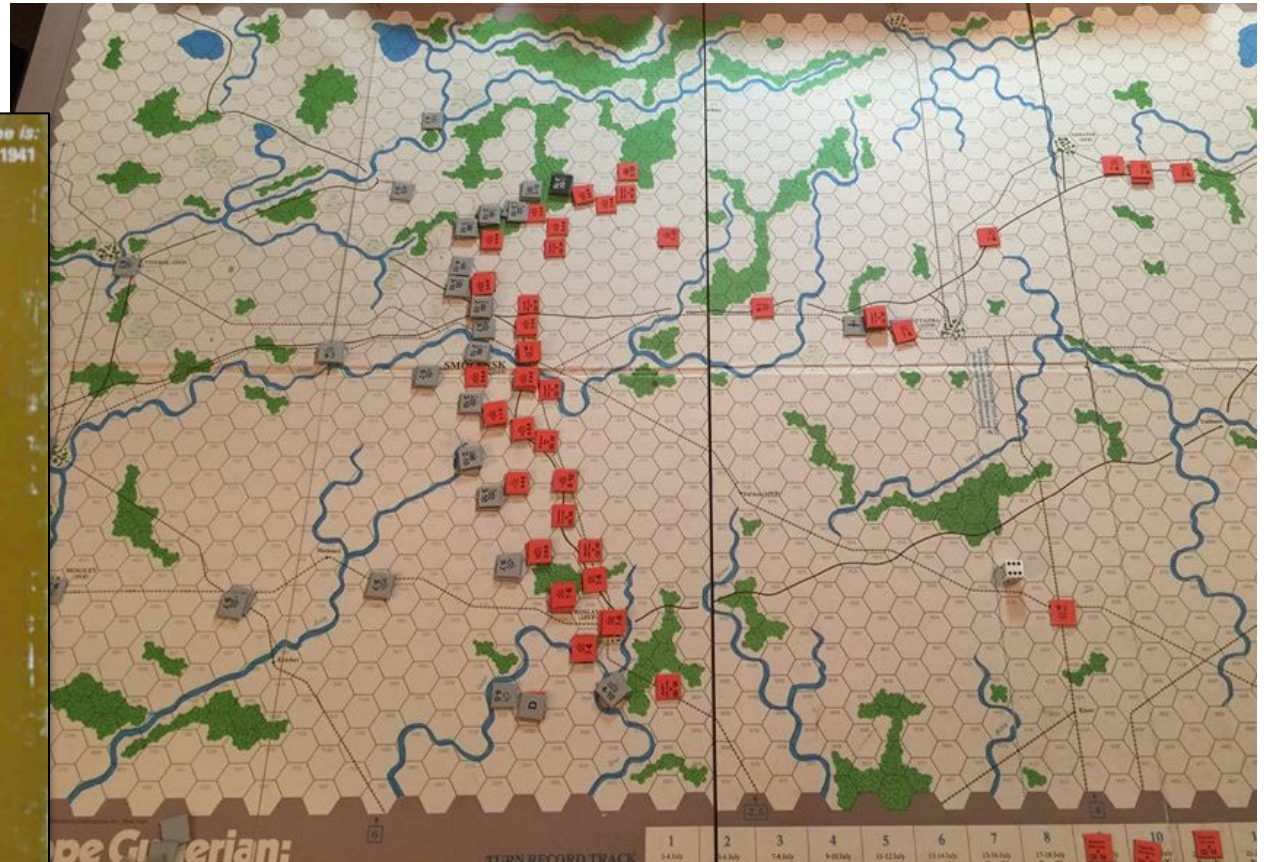
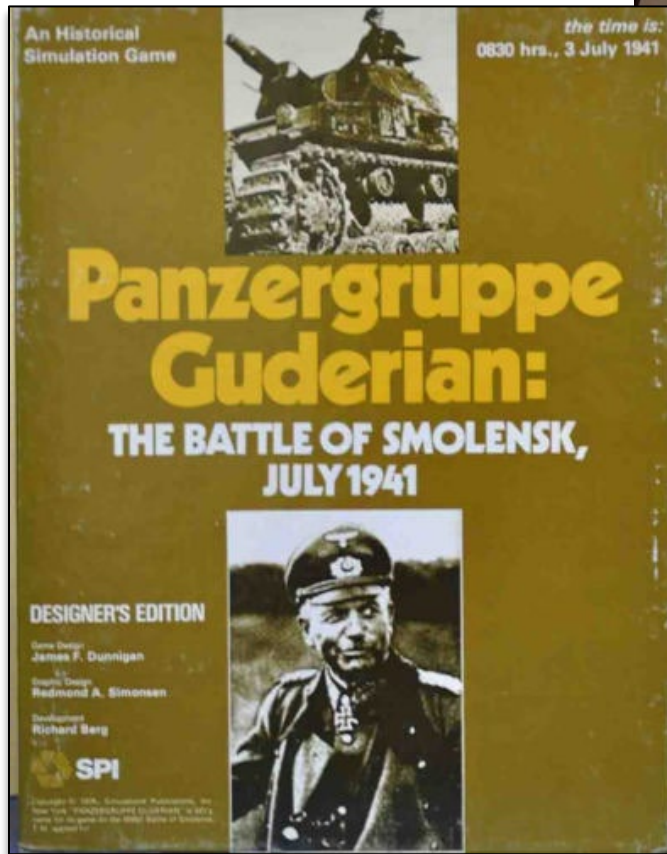
Frederick the Great (FtG): Frank Davis is the Preston Sturges of wargaming: he delivered masterpieces while at SPI, and, while delivering decent games with other publishers, none achieved the greatness of *FtG* and *Wellington's Victory*.

FtG, which is played in annual scenarios, is almost chess-like, with a dance of leader initiative, countermarches, supply trains, and sieges. Through and through a wargame, with a set of individual systems that evoke the campaigns and are both recognizably a SPI wargame and unique. [An important footnote: Eric adds he has not played any of Frank Davis's games published in the 21st Century.]



Napoleon's Last Battles (Quad): We used to joke that you could reliably produce 2,000 copies of a Napoleonic game: 1,000 for customers who were aficionados and another 1,000 as comps for designers who favored the period. Kevin Zucker established himself as the *primus inter pares* of Napoleonic wargame designers with *NLB*; I don't recall the merits of each of the individual games; the campaign game, interlocking the four maps, had a very good 'feel,' was fun and reasonably fast-playing for a larger -- but not monster -- game.

Panzergruppe Guderian: For a brief shining period when he was paying attention, Richard Berg was a damn good developer. (He was a great wargame designer for a longer span, of course.) Jim Dunnigan came up with a draft design which had the elements, and Berg turned it into a quintessential WWII operational armor romp featuring a great commander. (*Cobra*, featuring Patton's, um, blitzkrieg through southern France, is also good, but not quite *PGG*).



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Swords & Sorcery: What happens when you let two unsupervised teenagers loose: I was 17 and Greg Costikyan 18 when we started on *S&S*, for which Greg designed and I developed the *Army* game and I designed with backing vocals from Greg the *Quest* game. (We ran out of time to test most of the ~15 scenarios and, um, the *Quest* game.) Lots of goofball humor (*New Orc City*, *Hills of Avalon*, *Stream of Consciousness*), and a remarkably playable strategic game and quest game design kit. *S&S* was feedback, spec'd, and on the production schedule as only the *Army* game, but "unsupervised". And don't forget the *Killer Penguins*, which started as "SS *Killer Penguins*" before an adult suggested we show some restraint.

(Actually, Redmond Simonsen was mildly horrified when he first took a close look at the finished game when it came in for art production; and sorta kinda resigned himself to SPI becoming a SF&F publisher when *S&S* became a word-of-mouth bestseller.)

Wellington's Victory: Davis's other masterpiece, an elegant -- yeah, that adjective applies in spades when Frank was in top form -- monster game of the Battle of Waterloo. As with *FtG*, the game features near-unique systems that were tailored to simulate the warfare and tactics of the era. Time-consuming and rewarding.

(Am obscurely proud of one of my "contributions": I had several legendary rolling sequences with the cheap and often unbalanced SPI dice that made some Friday night playtest sessions useless. Frank told me he'd varied the various combat tables to alternate between favoring "1"s and "6"s to mitigate against one of my hot streaks. It worked, in that he got consistent playtest feedback from me and the other playtesters.)

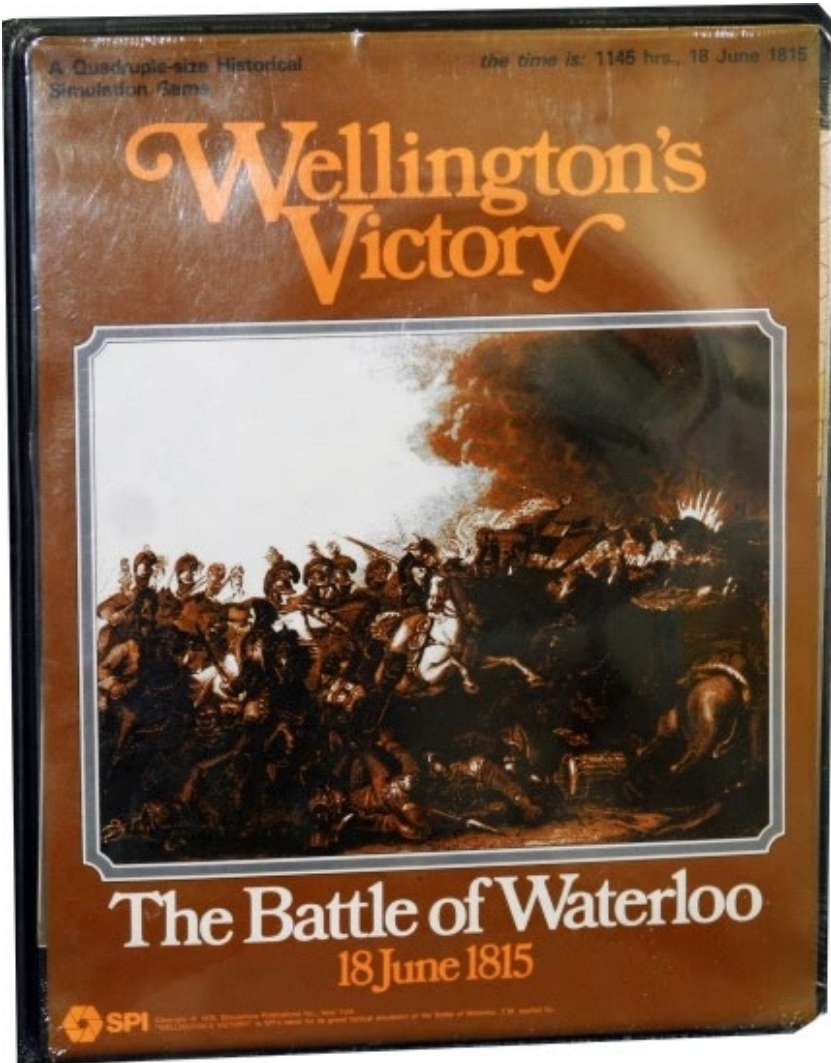
RELATIVE FIREPOWER TABLE [Fire Combat Results Table]

Formation and Class of the Firing Unit Modified for Range

	1...9	•	•	•	•
Sq or Dis Form/Max Range Inf:	1...9	•	•	•	•
Col or Skirm Form/Max Range Art:	1...5	6...9	•	•	•
Three Rank Line/Med Range Art:	1...3	4,5	6	7,8	9
Two Rank Line/Min Range Art:	1,2	3	4	5	6...9
Class of Firing Unit:	123	123	123	123	123

Strength

Die	1	2	3	4	5	6
Target Class 1 Column, Square, Enfiladed or Massed Target	1 0 0 0	1 1 0	1 1 1	1 1 1	2 1 1	2 1 1
Target Class 2 Line and Cavalry Formations	1 0 0 0	1 1 0	1 1 1	1 1 1	2 1 1	2 1 1
Target Class 3 Skirmish, Routed and Artillery Formations	1 0 0 0	0 0 0	0 0 0	0 0 0	0 0 0	0 0 0



Wellington's Victory

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SHOCK COMBAT RESULTS TABLE

Die	Differential (Attacker's Effectiveness)				
	-2	-1	0	+1	+2
1	Dr1/D1	Dr1/D1	Dr1/D1	D1/Dr1	D1/Dr1
2	Dr/•	Dr/•	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr
3	•/•	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr
4	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr
5	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr
6	D1/Dr1	D1/R	D1/R	D1/R	D1/R
Die					
1	Dr1/D1	Dr1/D1	Dr1/D1	Dr1/D1	D1/Dr1
2	Dr/•	Dr/•	Dr/•	•/Dr	•/Dr
3	Dr/•	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr
4	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr
5	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr
6	D1/Dr1	D1/Dr1	D1/R	D1/R	D1/R
Die					
1	Dr1/D1	Dr1/D1	Dr1/D1	Dr1/D1	D1/Dr1
2	Dr/•	Dr/•	Dr/•	Dr/•	•/Dr
3	Dr/•	Dr/•	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr
4	Dr/•	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr
5	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr	•/Dr
6	D1/Dr1	D1/Dr1	D1/R	D1/R	D1/R



[Above: Wellington's Victory as the battle for Hougomont is about to begin.]

Terrible Swift Sword, on the Battle of Gettysburg, is probably the 'people's choice' of the multi-map monsters. A fine game, the *PanzerGruppe Guderian* of the monster battle games, with a terrific 'feel' for perhaps the most famous battle fought on American soil.



Left: The CSA assault on the Peach Orchard. We are looking over Little Round Top and Devil's Den on the original *Terrible Swift Sword* 1st edition map.



The beginning of the three days of Gettysburg, better known to SPI gamers as "Terrible Swift Sword." It starts small. It will grow to three full maps and a few thousand counters.

Many thanks to Eric Goldberg for his insights and thoughts on these games! – RHG

Photo Credits: Empire of the Middle Ages – Jim Simpson. Fredrick the Great – Michael Galandiuk. Battle for Germany – Martin W. Spetz. Swords & Sorcery – Mike Montesa. Panzergruppe Guderian – Alan Snider. Wellington's Victory, Terrible Swift Sword – Russell H. Gifford.