Bloody Big Battles: Rules for Wargaming the Late Nineteenth Century
By Chris Pringle

Review by Paul Le Long

For those of you who have read my first impressions review and blog post there may be a little repetition here but bear with me; this review comes after quite a lot of play-through sessions, so I feel I know the game a lot better now.

Now, I'm not used to receiving stuff for free just so that I can review it and I found myself feeling as though I owed it to Chris Pringle to give not just a thorough but a *good* review. That's nonsense, of course. If a game is terrible, a reviewer should say so. Happily, BBB is an excellent game so I wasn't placed in this self-imposed dilemma – but I just wanted to be candid with readers about that. I'm giving this game a good review because I genuinely think it deserves it.

Overview

Bloody Big Battles is a 56-page, soft-bound booklet. It is not a big hardback glossy book of the type that has become quite common (and costly) lately. That said, it is well-laid out, has plenty of very clear black & white illustrations and is attractive. The rules cover the first 25 pages and the rest of the book is scenarios – nine in all, covering the Franco-Prussian War. You can play them in sequence as a sort of campaign. Each scenario follows a standard 3-page format with orders of battle, scenario considerations and a full-page map. I found everything to be attractive, easy to use, well-written and also clear and logical.

A word about the supplement: This is Bloody Big European Battles (BBEB) which is 54 pages of scenarios (16 of them) all following the standard format set out in BBB. The wars covered are: Crimea, Italian War of 1859, Second Schleswig War, Austro-Prussian War of 1866, Russo-Turkish War, Serbo-Bulgarian War, Greco-Turkish War; so the second half of the nineteenth century then. There's no ACW, though I do know that BBB can handle that conflict and you can find content on ACW BBB online.

There is plenty of online support for BBB in general in the form of a blog and Yahoo group:
http://bloodybigbattles.blogspot.co.uk/
https://uk.groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/BBB_wargames/info

Both sites have lots of content and are an entertaining read. They also illustrate that BBB can be used outside of the late 19th century European sphere – there's stuff here for ACW, WWI, WWII and more.

The Yahoo Group also has scenarios including two "training scenarios" (Montebello & Langensalza). I've played both and they were great fun. It's explicitly stated that these battles are too small to be a typical BBB game (only ~20 units per side) but they are designed to get you used to the rules ó which they accomplish very well. I'd encourage anyone picking up BBB to play these training scenarios first, just to get you into the swing of the game.

The Rules

<u>In General</u>
Armies are divided into units representing brigades or divisions ó each unit comprises (usually) 4 or 5 bases. Each base is 1" square and can hold any number of figures according to taste. You are probably looking at 6/10/15mm figures for the most part in order for the game to look right ó but the figures themselves have no game effect so it's just up to you to suit yourself.

Units are rated for quality (veteran, trained or raw), weapon type (7 types of shoulder arm & 5 types of artillery) and attributes (things like "aggressive", "fragile" "passive" and so on). A lot of units have skirmishers as well and these do have in-game effects and so need to be easily differentiated ó in my forces I'm using 10mm figures with 3 or 4 to a base but with only 2 figures on a skirmisher base in order to tell them apart from the rank and file.

There are only three formations ó line (bases arranged side by side in a single line), in-depth (bases arranged 2 abreast in 2 lines), column (bases arranged single file one behind the other). This makes for very easy identification without the need for records or markers ó lines are good for firing, depth is good for assault and columns are good for moving. You will nevertheless need quite a lot of markers on the table to mark things like disruption and low ammunition ó I use different colour meeples for this so that you can see what's happening at a glance. The only dice you need are 2D6.

These are big battles and though they are fought on a normal-sized table they do pack in a lot of landscape so you will need a lot of terrain. By the way, BBB recommends a 6x4 table but mine is more like 4x4 and works just fine ó you don't need to use the floor of your local ballroom. Anyway, terrain is set out in the scenario maps ó I would think that assembling the number of hills, woods, roads, rivers and so on in the correct layout will be beyond most gamers. If you look at photos online though you will see a lot of BBB players using felt for terrain. I did this ó cutting up bits of felt to make the battlefield and it worked very well ó quick, cheap, represented the battlefield pretty well. This approach will not win awards at wargames shows but I suspect that soloists will not worry about that; for us it's the substance, not the style that matters.

The rules have 5 pages on terrain ó mostly its effect on movement and combat; all of which is simple and intuitive. Then we have a sequence of play followed by three sections: Movement, The Firefight, The Assault. Each is 3-6 pages including lots of

illustrated examples ó the latter are excellent and make the rules very clear indeed. There's a 2-page quick reference sheet at the back which I suggest you photocopy.

Movement
You can move any or every unit each turn but have to roll to see if a unit moves this turn ó this can depend on a unit's attributes and the presence of generals. Depending on the result a unit might move, move half distance, not move at all, recover some casualties and so on. Disrupted units do the same but on a different table with harsher results (you usually get disrupted by taking fire). There are rules for formation changes and all the other usual stuff including increased movement on roads and decreased movement in rough terrain but basically you are just measuring the distance from A to B and adding/deducting inches for terrain. It's simple and you'll have learned it all within minutes.

The Firefight
This couldn't be simpler ó each weapon has a numerical value at a given range ó so for example a base with needleguns counts 2 at 3" range - you take each firing base and add up all the scores. So if you had 4 bases of needleguns firing at 3" range that would be 8. You just add up all firing bases, including supporting artillery, and look up the result on a combat chart. Modifications are made by shifting columns left or right on the chart. You roll 2D6 and cross-reference the result which could be anything from killing up to 3 enemy bases to no effect with various things in between like halting a charging enemy or disrupting him. It is incredibly simple and again, after a couple of minutes you will be doing it very quickly.

The Assault
Here you simply roll 1D6 for each side, add modifiers, including numerical odds, and consult a table. The loser is usually going to lose a base and retreat and everyone is probably going to be disrupted.

After my first game (a training scenario ó Montebello) I hardly ever needed the rulebook and was quite comfortable with just the quick reference chart.

Other Stuff

Game Length: As an example one scenario I played was Loigny 1870 (Franco-Prussian War). There were 3 turns on day 1 then a ˜night interval' which is basically a reset phase, then 7 turns on day 2. The scenario notes say this should play out in 3.5 hours which was about right. So let's be clear: this is a battle with 74 French bases and 49 Prussian bases ó each base representing 1,000 men or 24 guns ó and it took me an afternoon and was played on a ~4x4 table. That's incredible I think; we are talking about recreating very large battles like Sedan, Gettysburg, Solferino and Koniggratz *in their entirety* on a normal table in a sensible amount of time. And my brain didn't ache afterwards because the rules are so simple and intuitive.

Solo play: Well, usually the "soloness" comes out in the command and control rules but these are very light in BBB so it doesn't really. The book states that the game suits 2-4 players and there's nothing particularly that's solo friendly. But I didn't find anything that militated against solo play either (like hidden movement). It's a case of doing your best for both sides or bolting on some solo mechanisms – the latter would be easy because the core rules are so clean.

Generals: Command and control is handled in a strange but elegant way. Generals only really function in getting units to move and to recover from disruption. But not all generals are represented on the table – better-led armies get more generals while stolid, passive armies (I'm looking at you Austria) get very few. So armies that displayed initiative and élan tend to do so on the tabletop as well because they have generals going around motivating their units while other armies have less of this.

Ranges: At first glance weapon ranges look really strange. I don't actually ever care about ground scale so it wouldn't bother me anyway but the author specifically addresses the point in the rules so it's worth looking at here. Units can engage at ranges of ~3,000 yards, while as the book says, rifle range was only ~1,200 yards (firefights in the ACW though rarely took place at anything more than 200). But what is being represented here is the zone of control exercised by a unit – the bases on the table represent that unit's centre of gravity only – its power is extended way beyond by groups of skirmishers or detached bodies of troops. So range isn't really 3,000 yards at all, it is just an abstraction to indicate a zone of control exercised by a brigade or division.

One problem I did encounter was getting mixed up with which units were which, which were armed with this or that and which had this or that attribute. You probably need some system of identification if your army is a mixed bag; less of a problem with forces that are more uniform in terms of equipment and ability.

Conclusion

The feel of the game is very good – the rules are good but simple and they don't get in the way of the battle or the tactics. There is a sense of manoeuvre over large areas – even on my smaller than recommended table there was a great deal of open space in which to manoeuvre and the battle never felt constricted – there were always flanks to exploit and this leads the player to think in terms of grand tactics rather than micro-managing at low level. You get the feel that you are commanding a whole army, not just a brigade. You also won't generally just line up 70 units a side and blast away. Because the game is scenario driven and based on historical battles, you will be striving for realistic objectives, the strength of contending armies might be asymmetric and reserves and reinforcements will be arriving all the time to be fed in to the battle. It feels realistic and dynamic but without unnecessary complexity. I think the author should be applauded for pulling this off.

Something that appealed to me was in the introduction which stated that the rulebook should be used as a 'toolkit' rather than a bible – 'house rules rule!' This will appeal to soloists who are inveterate tinkerers by nature.

I will certainly be playing BBB in future and I can give no better recommendation than saying that it has become my go-to game for this period (and I'm looking at adaptations for other periods too).

Highly recommended.