Bull Run: First Major Battle of the American Civil War
Published by Avalon Hill 1983
Designed by Richard Hamblin

Review by Paul Le Long

Overview
This is a traditional Avalon Hill hex and counter board war game depicting First Bull Run. To be honest, it doesnøt really give you the flavour of Bull Run itself, aside from being played over a map of the area.The mechanics are pretty generic and will be familiar to anyone who has played a game of this type before. Combat consists of counters in adjacent hexes comparing attack value with defence value, working out the odds and rolling for the result on a combat resolution table.

There are some nice touches though, especially the command rules which make it difficult to keep all your units moving and really the game is one of manoeuvre rather than combat. Either side can win instantly if they capture the enemy base area (Centreville & Manassas are the bases of the US & CSA respectively) and this leads to a lot of jockeying for position. The Confederates also win if they simply deny victory to the US so the US player has to get his army over the river and carry the fight to the Confederates, which can be tough.

Can it be played solo?
The game is designed for two players. Most of the CSA counters start the game õfrozenö so while you do have to deploy them, the counters are flipped and you soon forget what units are where. CSA units (most of them anyway) remain frozen and therefore hidden for the first three turns. Nevertheless this isnøt really a solo mechanism. Having said that, you can easily play the game solo ó the CSA player has very few choices ó he can win just by denying victory to the US and heøs defending a river line so his options are obvious. I simply roll a D6 at the start of the game and decide CSA strategy from that ó a 1 is very defensive (just sit tight and defend) a 6 is very aggressive (cross the river and strike for the US base at Centreville) with a sliding scale in between.

What are the components?
The map is lovely ó see the photos. Iøve seen it criticised online but I donøt understand why. I think itøs great. The map is mounted on thick card and divided into four sections.

The counters: you get a couple of hundred counters, representing generals, battalions, batteries (limbered and unlimbered) and cavalry. The counters are not particularly attractive and are small and fiddly. They do the job but no more. Take a look at the photo of the back of the box and youøll see some examples.

You also get a couple of player aids, a D6 and the rules pamphlet.

What is the level of complexity?
Fairly easy. The box says 4/10 with 4 hours playing time. The rules only run to 12 pages, including tables and designer's notes, and the game is easy to learn. It takes me longer than 4 hours to play but I tend to be quite slow. Actually, set-up takes ages which is a chore. But overall, a complexity of 4/10 is probably accurate.

What do you spend your time doing during play?
Each turn represents 30 minutes, covering 11 hours total ó so that's 22 turns maximum. Each turns takes about 15 minutes to play through. First the US player works out which of his units are in command and therefore may act. Then he moves and then you fight any combats. Then the CSA player repeats the process. Some turns will be quicker ó for example, if you don't have any combats. As I said at the top, combat is a relatively simple affair, though there are nuances when you have actions involving multiple units (which is often).

What are the tactical decisions?
Command is the key in this game. There is a well-defined chain of command and it doesn't extend very far, so for the US player especially, your CinC will not be able to control all his units every turn unless they are really bunched up tightly ó which of course is not the point in this battle where the best strategy is to spread out in order to stretch the CSA defensive line. In the last game I played, I had a whole division stranded without orders for almost the whole game ó shades of General McClellan!

A push for Sudley Springs Ford is probably the best strategy, as it was on the day. But you can't get too many troops over that ford very quickly and you only have three turns before the bulk of the CSA army wakes up. Initial set-up is clever in this respect ó the US cannot set up within 4 hexes of any CSA unit and the CSA can restrict US set up by placing cavalry units in awkward forward areas. There is a lot of tactical nuance here and that's what lifts this game above the traditional and rather boring hex and counter combat system. The victory condition of an immediate win if you capture the enemy base does however lead to some odd situations; in my last game (playing as the US) I made two desperate dashes to take Manassas each with a division but with most of the CSA army in my rear. I believe in American football this is called an end run. Whatever it's called, it doesn't feel right historically but it is a viable tactic here (not that it worked!).

Final assessment
I like this game. It's certainly dated and it isn't a solitaire game, also it is fiddly and time-consuming to set up. But the nature of the battle lends itself easily to solo play since the Confederates have little to do that isn't obvious and the command rules and the rules for initial set up make for a tactically interesting contest. Also the emphasis is not on combat ó it isn't a slugfest ó but on manoeuvre. I wouldn't necessarily seek this game out but if you come across an inexpensive copy I'd get it because it offers some simple rules and an interesting tactical problem.

BULL RUN

AVALON HILL'S TRADEMARK NAME FOR ITS CIVIL WAR BATTLE GAME

First Major Battle
of the
American Civil War

8:30 AM, July 21, 1861

Somewhere off beyond the Virginia Woods, the Union Army was moving . . .

. . . and all along Bull Run, Confederates wondered where it was going and hoped that the Yankees would be stopped at the river. At headquarters, J.E. Johnston and P.G.T. Beauregard were planning their own attack, while at the fords James Longstreet, Dick Ewell and Jubal Early were braced in case the attack struck them. Thomas Jackson's brigade was marching on a dusty farm road to reinforce a bridge being shelled by a solitary Union gun. At that bridge, at the left end of the Confederate line, Major 'Shanks' Evans puzzled over the Yankees before him. For hours they had done nothing but shell his detachment. Why were they waiting? What were they up to? Spotting a glint, an officer turned his telescope to the "impassable" hills beyond the Confederate left and gasped. Rows of bayonets glittered in the woods, reflecting the morning sun! The Union Army was crossing Bull Run at the unguarded Sudley fords!

The first great battle of the Civil War was about to begin.

BULL RUN is a gamer's re-creation of the First Battle of Bull Run. It captures the tactics and 'feel' of a Civil War battle with a system that is playable and easy to use, and also contains a wealth of information about the battle itself.

Both the map and the opposing forces embody many corrections not available in other games and books. The map shows the area where both armies deployed, west to Sudley Mountain and east to Union Mills. Though stylized for ease of play, it shows much detail on a scale of 1000 feet per hex. The pieces include all of the regiments, battalions and batteries in the opposing armies, organized into brigades and divisions as they were on the day of the battle. Extensive research led to new insights and cleared up many misconceptions about the terrain and armies.

In BULL RUN, the armies must march into position and deploy to fight effectively. Enemy columns maneuver along the roads until one side reaches a position where it can deploy and bring on a battle; the players must plan where to deploy and how to get there safely, in the face of the enemy. Reserves are important to counter enemy maneuvers or to add strength to your own attack. The net result is to emphasize the importance of foresight, while capturing the strategy and pace of a Civil War battlefield.

Tactical skill is very important because terrain affects combat and movement. Infantry can defend behind 'military crests' while artillery must find good positions where they can unlimber and fire at long range. It takes skill to get the infantry and artillery to work together, however, since artillery is slow and clumsy when moving cross-country.

The famous generals at First Bull Run are represented, with special rules that reflect how their leadership affected the battle. A simple, easy system shows how they differ in initiative, tactical skill, elan and rallying skill.

Finally, the situation is one of the oddest of the whole Civil War. The armies were separated by a river, but neither was strong enough to block all the crossings. The Union outflanked the Confederates in a night march, but since the armies were equal in strength, this automatically meant that the Confederates had an attacking advantage on the other flank. Each army was in position to attack, but out of position to defend.

Both armies had the strange and fascinating task of defending on one flank while attacking on the other. The army that could strike the best balance would win the battle.

So now it is the morning of July 21, 1861, and the future lies in the balance. As the Union commander, you must attack an enemy as strong as you are, but you have outmaneuvered him by a masterful night march — can you triumph before he recovers? As the Confederate player, should you defend or should you gamble that you can attack and win before it is too late? It is the moment of crisis! What should you do?

Play the game and find out!

Complexity rating: 4
[on a scale of 1 easy to 10 difficult.]
Playing time: 4 hours

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