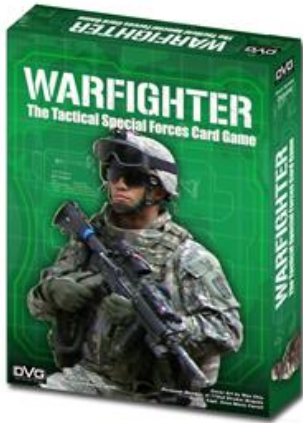


Review of Warfighter

By David H. Allen

(Disclaimer: I am not financially compensated nor do I otherwise benefit from Dan Verssen Games nor any other individual or organization for writing this review. The claims, opinions, errors, and other thoughts expressed herein are mine alone.)



I have been playing solitaire wargames for nearly a half century, and I find it (usually) a relaxing and rewarding experience. In the past decade, some of my favorite solo gaming experiences were playing games by Dan Verssen Games (DVG). DVG games have consistently managed to maintain the critical balance between detail and abstraction in their solo game offerings, and they seem adept at encapsulating the cause-and-effect decision-making of the real world into a playable, fun, and *re-playable* game format.

In this short review I will be describing the game “Warfighter: The Tactical Special Forces Card Game” (WF). As the title suggests, the game involves a small group of highly-trained, well-equipped soldiers on covert missions. The game and its numerous expansions allow gamers to play missions in Jungle, Middle East, and Eastern Europe settings, employing modern US, UK, and Russian special forces against hostile drug cartels, Middle East insurgents, Middle East military, and Eastern Europe military opponents. There are also specific cards and rules for Night Missions which differ in some fundamental ways from the daytime mission rules. WF can be played either solitaire or cooperatively with other gamers. I’ve played dozens of solo games, and a couple of times with multiple gamers. As expected, these experiences are different but all were enjoyable.

Unless otherwise stated, this review of WF includes rules and game components found in both the base game and in all of the expansions combined. (I own all of them and parsing out the individual expansions would be boring and beyond the scope of this article. My recommendation: start with the base game and if you enjoy it as much as I do, buy ALL of the expansions ASAP.) What is very nice about the expansions is that all but one of them do not require learning any new rules. The cards from the expansions can simply be added to the existing decks of Action Cards, Mission, Objectives, Locations, etc. and the gamer can begin playing right away. The Footlocker Expansion includes new rules (and cards) for Night Missions. Expansions also include clever bullet-shaped dice (d10 and d6). Since in playing the game you’ll need to roll at most five or six dice, if you purchase all of the expansions you will have plenty of extra dice. (These are good for handing out to the trick-or-treaters on Halloween or for dropping in the collection plate at church. ;)

As the game’s subtitle states, WF is card-driven like many DVG games. The base game comes with 240 cards beautifully illustrated in full color. They are printed on heavy stock and semi-glossy. I was tempted to put them all in protective sleeves, but I did not and they have held up well over many games.

One of the most satisfying aspects of many DVG games is that you have control (within constraints) of the mission planning – that is, the resources you chose to apply against a particular mission. In WF this includes selecting the special forces team that will attempt to successfully complete the mission selected by the gamer. Each soldier in WF is represented by a card which, adding to the game realism, includes a photograph of a real-world soldier, usually including the name of the soldier and the photo credit.

There are three distant types of soldiers available in WF. Player Soldiers are the most versatile and detailed, and can be assumed to be the gamer's alter ego (e.g. character) in a game. Player Soldiers are named (one is named Allen!) and have specific character traits but no weapons or gear specified. The gamer must select the Player Soldier(s) gear from a wide selection of weapons and equipment. Each Player Soldier is limited in what they can carry based on an inherent Loadout factor, which can be modified by the particular Mission rules. Player Soldiers can also benefit from Skill cards to enhance their effectiveness during the Mission. WF is a team game, even when played solitaire. Soldiers may share and spend Actions and Experience Points to enable play or maintenance of beneficial Action cards, and they can even share compatible ammunition if they are in the same location. That just feels right.

Non-Player Soldiers (NPS) come with specific gear and weapons. Gamers draw the specified Weapons, Gear, and Skill cards as they do for Player Soldiers, but in the case of NPS no additions, subtractions or substitutions can be made to the NPS gear. Squad soldiers are the most abstract, representing soldiers of various capabilities and toughness without the detail of specific weapons or gear. This hierarchy of soldier types allows a solitaire gamer to easily manage a game with, say, a single Player Soldier, one or two NPS, and one or two Squad soldiers. Two gamers might have one Player Soldier each and perhaps one NPS and one Squad soldier each. Four gamers might have just their single Player Soldier to play in a game.

Soldiers are entitled to a specific number of Actions each turn, depending on their inherent abilities and any wounds received during the Mission. Actions allow soldiers to make Attacks (fire a weapon, throw a grenade, etc.), move from one location to another, remove a Suppression marker, etc. An attack resulting in an Enemy Killed-In-Action (EKIA) usually rewards the attacking soldier with Experience Points (EP). These EP can come in handy to help pay for the cost of playing or maintaining an Action card that is particularly beneficial to the team. Cards are also used to represent hostile combatants, usually of varying skills, equipment, weaponry, tactics, and toughness. They can vary from a single hostile thug, to a skilled flanking force of 4-5 soldiers, to an Mi-25 attack helicopter. These cards pop up whenever a new Location is played, and additional hostiles can appear as reinforcements in most Locations currently occupied by a friendly soldier. Whenever a new hostile card is placed in a location, a marker designated that hostile's target it randomly assigned. During the Hostile turn, that hostile card will attempt to attack the targeted friendly (that is, US, UK, or RF soldier). Successful attacks result in Wounds that can reduce the effectiveness of the soldiers or require them to be medevacked out of the game entirely.

Each Mission requires the gamer to maneuver his soldiers through a linear array of Location cards, in order to arrive in (or near) the Objective card and satisfying the requirements for

Victory. Locations consist of terrain (natural and manmade) that may help or hinder movement and concealment. Each Location specifies the level of hostile forces encountered when that Location is first revealed, as well as the chance for reinforcements in later turns. Location cards are represented in the Action Card deck (see below) by generic marker cards which, when drawn, are exchanged for specific Location cards. These Locations can be placed to represent the next portion of the route that the team must follow to get to the Objective and (hopefully) successfully complete the mission. Since a gamer may draw multiple Location cards, part of the decision making required is which Location card to place next (that is, what route to follow) to enhance the team's chance of success. All soldiers come with an inherent movement rate which can be enhanced by some gear choices. Soldiers can be represented on the game board by numbered tokens provided, or by miniatures either purchased through DVG or other suppliers. In the multiple-gamer games I've played I usually provide my own painted 28mm figures to represent the individual soldiers just because they look cool and attract interest. However, the tokens work just fine too.

Action Cards specify abilities, support, or other transient capabilities beneficial to the special forces team. The number of Action Cards a gamer holds is analogous to the "good ideas" (as a result of training, skill, nerve, experience, etc.) available to the Player Soldier. When the gamer has a full hand (perhaps 5 to 7 Action Cards) his Player Soldier has plenty of "good ideas" to help his team succeed. When the gamer has few or no Action Cards (due to having expended them already this turn) his Player Soldier is low or out of "good ideas" and his team will suffer. Fortunately, Action Cards can be discarded and re-drawn by expending an Action or through play of certain Equipment or other cards.

Fans of military hardware will enjoy the Weapons cards. A complete listing here is beyond the scope of this article, but weapons available to the US Player Soldier in just the base game include KA-BAR Knife, M4 Carbine, M4 Shotgun, M9 Pistol, M14 Sniper Rifle, M16A2 Rifle, M16A3 Rifle, grenades, Claymore mines, and more. Expansions provide the M249 SAW Machine Gun, MP5 SMG, smoke and flash bang grenades, and more. Expansions that include UK and Russian Federation special forces come with your favorite British and Russian weapons.

Some of the Action Cards provide "off map" Support in the form of mortars, snipers, etc. Playing these cards requires the expenditure of some number of other Action cards, and to maintain them from turn to turn, gamers must expend their soldier's Experience Points. Support is effective but expensive.

Other Action Cards enable (or enhance) Stealth attacks, which can be made if the soldiers possess the appropriate stealthy weapons (knife, suppressed SMG, etc.) and skills. They can even make hand-to-hand attacks, although I've never tried that.

Equipment cards represent non-weapon tools used by individual Player Soldier or NPS (if specified). These can be as innocuous as a water-filled canteen or as sophisticated as an MQ-9 Reaper drone. Other cards represent gear providing navigation, medical, mobility, and weapons effectiveness advantages. Yes, there are plenty of hi-tech gizmos like wrist GPS, ACOG sights, MICH helmets, and night vision goggles available.

Skill cards, as the name implies, impart a specific ability to a Player Soldier or NPS (if specified). This can include things like superior route-finding, marksmanship, personality traits relevant to combat, etc.

Combat is played using a simple but realistic mechanic. Each attack requires a roll on a 1d6 to exceed the protection rating of the target (presumably representing both available cover, armor, and concealment *and* the target's skill in using such to their advantage) and a roll on one or more d10s to achieve a Kill (or Wound, if the target is a friendly soldier). Failure to achieve only one of those rolls still results in a Suppression against the target, but failure to achieve both is a miss. Soldier Players and NPS with specific weapons can empty a magazine (of which there are a limited number) and possibly jam their weapons on low dice rolls. So, while there is a benefit to fire full auto (for example roll 3d10), the chance of both hits AND emptying a magazine are increased compared to firing in burst mode (2d10) or semi-auto mode (1d10). Decisions, decisions, decisions...

One earmark of a good game is that most games played are either won or lost by a small margin. I have lost several games because I was short just one EKIA when the timer ran out, and I have won several games on the very last turn. Another sign that this is a solid game is that the gamer can learn from his mistakes and improve his game. I lost the first several games I played and was somewhat frustrated. Then I analyzed what was going wrong or right, what worked or didn't, etc. and began winning more games. For example, going on a Mission that requires Explosives to destroy the Objective without any Explosives is a mistake. That seems obvious in hindsight (but doesn't everything?). Yet another aspect in which WF shines is replayability. Since you can design your own game (team size and composition, weapon and equipment loadout, mission type and objective, setting, enemy, route, etc.) every time you play, there is effectively an endless variety of missions that can be played. Add the dimension of a Campaign (rules available in the base game) and you can experience the tension, risk, and reward of playing your favorite Player Soldier through a series of linked missions. (For completeness, I should mention that the Footlocker Expansion includes rules with pre-designed scenarios with specific soldiers, missions, etc. for those who prefer not to have to brew their own.)

Like a good role playing game, WF generates a narrative, or story, as the game progresses. To demonstrate this, I'm providing a brief after-action report couched in real-world terms that the game represented as it unfolded.

For this example, I chose the Middle Eastern setting, a Short Patrol as the Mission, and the Bomb Shop as the Objective for this game. My patrol was led by Sgt. Thomas (Soldier), who was equipped with the M4 carbine with an M203 grenade launcher (with four 40mm rounds) and two M67 hand grenades. Accompanying Sgt. Thomas is a NPS, Cpl. Samaniego, who is trained as a medic, carries a First Aid Kit, and is armed with an MP5 submachine gun. Rounding out the team is Cpl. Walker (a Squad soldier).

To start the Mission, Thomas chooses an initial route across Low Ground. There he spots an hostile Leader accompanied by a Radioman. He fires a burst from his M4 at the Radioman and takes him out. He fires a second burst at the Leader but misses. Walker moves up, takes careful aim at the Leader, but only manages the force the Leader to take cover. Samaniego moves up

also, firing on automatic, reloads and fires again, but fails to kill the Leader. Walker fires twice more and the hostile Leader finally goes down. Thomas moves up to join his men. The team has not taken any casualties so far, but the presence of the hostile in the Low Ground has delayed them substantially. While preparing to move out, the team spots a group of Militants approaching in the Low Ground. The hostile fires first, barely missing Walker. Walker returns fire but has no effect on the Militants. Thomas decides to take a Shortcut to where he suspects he will find the Bomb Shop. Walker moves ahead onto the Shortcut, while Samaniego covers the rear, firing on automatic and killing one of the Militants. Samaniego's magazine is empty so he Reloads.

Thomas places Samaniego on Overwatch. An hostile Stalker moves up on the Team on the Shortcut but Samaniego shoots him down. Thomas moves up and spots the suspected Bomb Shop. It is well-defended by two groups of Militants, an hostile RPG Team, and an hostile Technical mounting a heavy machine gun. Thomas takes aim at the Technical with his 40mm grenade launcher and it explodes and burns. Walker takes aim at the RPG Team and kills one of them. He fires again and misses. Samaniego kills the remaining Militant in the Low Ground and moves up to the Shortcut. The team is together in the same Location again. Thomas orders Walker on Overwatch. The remaining RPG Team member moves up to fire but Walker shoots him dead. The Militants are too far away at this point to be effective against Thomas and his team. The Militants move up on the team, and Walker fires at them with no effect. Thomas throws a grenade which kills a Militant. Samaniego kills another with a burst from his MP5. These Militants are Martyrs! They are Fearless and can only be stopped by killing them.

Thomas fires again and kills another Militant, and stays on Overwatch. A Militant pops up and Thomas fires at him but misses. The Militant fires at Samaniego, who is rattled by the near miss. Thomas moves up, pulls the pin on a grenade, and tosses it into the suspect Bomb Shop. It explodes with large secondaries. Samaniego fires a full magazine at the remaining Militant and kills him. The Mission is over and a success. In real time, the above game took only 17 minutes to play.

As of this writing (January 2018), WF was ranked 91 for wargames on Boardgamegeek, so others find it an enjoyable game as well. DVG games also markets a similar title set in World War 2, appropriately-enough named "Warfighter: The WWII Tactical Combat Card Game." So, if you are a miniatures or board gamer and haven't yet tried a solitaire board wargame, DVG's "Warfighter" is a great place to start.