

## WARGAME FIRST REVIEW

<b>Christmas in Hell</b>	★★★★★
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<b>Period</b>	WW2	<b>Publisher</b>	High Flying Dice Games
<b>Conflict</b>	Italy/Ortona	<b>Designer</b>	Roberto Chiavini
<b>Force Size</b>	~bde vs ~ 2 bn	<b>Date</b>	2019
<b>Mvr Units</b>	PI	<b>Grid Size</b>	Areas, ~100m
<b>Turn Dur.</b>	~ 8hrs, Game = 18 turns/6 day	<b>Map Size</b>	c. 700m x 1000m, ~6 x 8 areas
<b>Players</b>	1 (AI for Germans)		

### Introduction

<b>Subject of the game</b>	The Canadian battle to take the town of Ortona on Italy's East coast, 22-27 Dec 1943.
<b>Scope</b>	Whole city from after break-in battle, inf and tanks, asymmetric
<b>Presentation</b>	Paper/thin card printed or pre-mounted (I used latter). Good quality graphics but poor map – see below. Reasonably clear rules
<b>Components</b>	A2 map, 3 counter sheets, 420 counters, 5pp rules. No designer notes.
<b>Designer's focus/objectives</b>	Not documented, just a straight play of the battle. Despite references misses some key elements of the battle.
<b>Overall system description</b>	Solitaire, not too dissimilar to Ramadi/Hue in that each zone has a randomly drawn 2-4 German counters, but not categorised as in Ramadi/Hue, which despite meaning the odd weird mix, actually made it more interesting. Canadians move into and fight an area, and then move onto the next. German AI though has then withdrawing initially which again makes more interesting.
<b>Real Battle Notes</b>	The Canadians had a hard slog through the city from 22 <sup>nd</sup> to 27 <sup>th</sup> December, although easing for Christmas Day. Germans made maximum use of buildings, with MG and AT teams and man-handled IG/AT guns. Canadians had ~4 tanks, but limited to a few roads, and man-handled 6pdrs. Later 17pdrs and additional Shermans used to fire in from down the coast. Lots of use on both sides of explosives, German booby traps, sniper and rubble. Canadians discovered mid-battle how to mouse-hole at height to ease building entry and minimise street casualties. Several atrocities on both sides when whole buildings full of soldiers were blown up.

## The Game System

<p><b>Principal areas of reality represented in the game</b></p>	<p>The slog through the dense urban area, essentially max 1 new area per turn per unit/attack.</p> <p>The use of Rubble is well done, almost every area having rubble, which can increase with use of heavy weapons or the intensity of the fight, and be reduced by engineers. Rubble is the only restriction to movement, and soon stops lateral movement. Snipers and mines simply but effectively represented. German counter-attack mechanism means that rear areas need to be defended.</p> <p>Encouragement to make attacks from one Battalion (but no penalty if not) and to use combined arms, and to have Engrs present.</p>
<p><b>Important abstractions</b></p>	<p>Attack Factor and Defence Factor differentiates units. Germans don't have the same granularity of step loss that the Canadians have. No representation of Mortars, Arty or the limited air attacks.</p> <p>The map is dreadful, having some semblance to Ortona in general but not in detail, and areas have no difference in terms of how urban they are when it comes to movement/firing/combat. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The map includes large areas of open ground which in reality were a steep hillside which was effectively impassable</li> <li>• Tanks can go anywhere whereas in practice street size and rubble canalised them down specific routes which the Germans had covered by AT fire (although they didn't knock out a single tank in the dense urban battle)</li> </ul>

<p><b>Intricacy of the system, and the mechanical ease of play</b></p>	<p>Unlimited movement until blocked by rubble (very good) or mines/enemy.</p> <p>Random generation of 2-4 enemy elements (troops, MG, HQ, mine, sniper, AT gun, boobytrap (very good)</p> <p>Fire combat based on D6 per Attack Factor, plus DMs. Result is step loss for Canadians or Retreat (non VP area) or destruction (VP area) for Germans. Latter seems broken as often rolling 16+ dice with 5+ to hit/kill!</p> <p>Close combat based on each side rolling for kills, but now 1D6 plus DMs (Attack &gt; Defence = +1 DM, also DM for combined arms and out-numbering). (works a lot better than firing)</p> <p>Fatigued/Committed mechanism for non-step damage which seems a bit confused and didn't really exploit Fatigue tests for multiple activations.</p> <p>German AI allow them opportunity fire when Canadians move into an area, and after Canadian fire, and different actions depending whether in VP or non VP area. (good)</p> <p>Die roll for infiltration/counter-attack based on amount of exposure.</p> <p>Automated recovery of attrited units.</p> <p>The rules are not too badly laid out, but some info is separated and some refers to the Beta version and doesn't reflect the published version. Had about 20 questions for HFD on how system works, all answered but my first game was a complete disaster due to not understanding/reading rules properly. Second was far better. With a good QRS and pre-play briefing actually very quick and easy to pick up – but still have the suspicion that the fire mechanism is broken.</p>
<p><b>Evaluation of the system's success at achieving the designer's goals and representing the real situation</b></p>	<p>No designer goals so can't comment.</p> <p>I cleared the city by 25th pm, in reality took to 27<sup>th</sup> pm. A better fire system would certainly have slowed me. Felt far more enjoyable that Ramadi/Hue and the representation of rubble and how it limited lateral movement and reduced effects of fire in the latter stages was excellent.</p>
<p><b>Contributions to the wargaming state of the art</b></p>	<p>Better AI than other, particularly the different behaviour modes for VP/nonVP areas.</p> <p>Really good modelling of rubble, and effective abstracted modelling of snipers/mines/booby traps.</p> <p>VP score based on achieving VP areas in line with historic situation.</p>

<b>Improvements?</b>	<p>The map, in particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better sense of the real area</li> <li>• Limit tanks to main roads</li> <li>• Sense of different impact of different areas on combat</li> </ul> <p>I've already drafted a new map for v1.1 at COW.</p> <p>The board gets VERY dense with counters. Each area typically has a Canadian Company group with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HQ Counter (or 2)</li> <li>• MG counter (or 2)</li> <li>• Tank counter</li> <li>• Engineers counter</li> <li>• 4 Platoon counters</li> </ul> <p>Planning to rebase to a Coy level game, so lose HQ (except Bn HQ) and MG and have just one Inf Coy counter. Will add in 6pdr though as missed in game but vital in real life (anti-buildings and rubble rather than AT).</p> <p>This will also hopefully get away from the bucket-of-dice model and address the broken fire combat rules.</p> <p>Also need to reflect the 17pdr/Sherman firebase established down the coast.</p> <p>Draft 1.1 rules being tested at COW. Done right they could be a very good set of generic rules for WW2 urban battles at Bn/Bde level, and possibly with further extensions into modern. But if so need to migrate from the core combat mechanisms (which are the only distinctive thing) away from the HFD model to one of my own (possibly FRAG).</p>
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### The Game in Play

<b>Play time</b>	~2-4 hours if really understand it. Pre-placed all Germans so no time lost there (and anyway drawing from only 1 cup). I played 4 days, 8 day turns, 3 night turns, about 3 engagements each turn -> 24 engagements.
<b>Player roles</b>	Cmdr 2 <sup>nd</sup> Canadian Bde only (Brig Hoffmeister)
<b>Types of decisions required</b>	How to allocate units to areas, but becomes harder to change as rubble gets in the way. Where to put scarce tanks. How to protect the rear area.
<b>Effects of the game system's mechanical requirements on the player's decision making</b>	Free movt (up to Rubble limit) really helps focus. Whether to do fire attacks (to push back) or close combat (to kill). Need to keep up with historic waypoints as otherwise game over (!) Easy recovery of attrition each night means can afford to throw troops into the fight during the day rather than retreat.

<b>Evaluation of the player's experience</b>	<p>Far more fun than Ramadi or Hue. Only real downer was the number of counters in relatively small areas and the bucket-of-dice combat model which made fire combat too easy.</p> <p>Cumbersome swap out of counters when taking damage (4 steps for every PI!), changed to just adding a 1/2/3 step damage counter (from NATO DC!)</p> <p>So overall could be streamlined, ditto hunting rules and no QRS – wrote my own and still missed things!</p>
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### Overall Evaluation

<b>Does the game work? (Veracity)</b>	Only just, better than Ramadi/Hue in overall feel but let down by a dreadful map and broken fire combat system.
<b>Does it have real world validity?/Insights?</b>	In terms of nature yes, and to some extent tactics – which would be amplified by a better map, fixed fire combat and urban sensitive combat.
<b>Is it a good game?</b>	Yes, 4/5. Really more like 3.5 due to broken bits/map, but some really nice elements and broken elements hopefully easily fixed, which could make it a 4.5 or even 5.
<b>Who would be most interested in the game?</b>	People interested in WW2 combat of any sort, or of urban combat in any mechanised period. Easy to motivate to play as relatively short and not too much of a grind.
<b>Is the game good value?</b>	<p><a href="http://www.hfdgames.com/ortona.html">http://www.hfdgames.com/ortona.html</a> CA\$14.95 unmounted, \$19.95 mounted. Shipping from Canada more or less doubles that.</p> <p>Probably yes, if only for the general purpose Rubble/Mine/Sniper/Boobytrap counters. Map should be thrown away after first play, but some useful insights in the rules as a basis for further games.</p>

### MECHANICS

Aspect	Mechanic
<b>Activation/C&amp;C</b>	Automatic unless 2 <sup>nd</sup> /3 <sup>rd</sup> or Fatigued. Seems reasonable.
<b>Movement</b>	Limited only by presence of en units and rubble. V good.
<b>Direct Fire</b>	Broken system of D6 per attack factor + DMs looking for 5+, which with whole Coy Gp = 20+ dice.
<b>Damage</b>	Steps for Canadians, or optional withdrawal. Withdrawal or elimination for Germans (broken?). Fatigue and Committed from SFX, eg mines/boobytraps.
<b>Assault</b>	Better system of D6+DMs
<b>Indirect Fire</b>	Nil
<b>Air Support</b>	Nil
<b>Engineers</b>	Good simple mechanic to reduce impact of mines and to clear them. Extend to boobytraps?

<b>CEMA</b>	Nil
<b>Morale</b>	Nil – although German AI rules encourage regrouping
<b>Civilians</b>	Nil
<b>Subterranean</b>	Nil – even though extensively used by Germans – but could be seen to be reflected in AI behaviour, but Canadians can't do anything about it
<b>Urban Specifics</b>	Nothing apart from rubble and SFX, which are well done. Nothing on mouseholing which was a major turning point in the battle.
<b>Other Notable</b>	Auto-recovery of losses (well 1 step) each night.

*[Per scenario/run through]*

<b>Date</b>	6-9 Jun 22	<b>Scenario</b>	Default
<b>Players</b>	DB	<b>Constraints</b>	None

### **SET-UP**

As per standard

### **HOW IT PLAYED**

All over in about two moves. Massive overkill rapidly eliminated any Germans and raced across the map with ease.

### **RESULTS**

Decisive Canadian victory.

### **THOUGHTS (c.f. RL AND URBAN)**

Missed two key rules:  
- generate Germans into empty areas as you go, not just the initial and VP ones (held off due to lack of counters to do them all but then forgot!  
- Germans in non VP areas can/must retreat rather than be lost

<b>Date</b>	13-14 Jun 22	<b>Scenario</b>	Default
<b>Players</b>	DB	<b>Constraints</b>	None

### SET-UP

As per standard

### HOW IT PLAYED

A far better game. Germans pushed back into the VP areas, Canadians ended up with an over-concentration of troops on the L flank bit couldn't rebalance due to the rubble. Exploited the broken fire mechanic to eliminate most Germans by fire, doing it by close combat typically took 2 not 1 go. Left one area in the rear open which led to a German counter-attack, so took better care of the rear after that. Finished the battle clearing whole map bar one area by pm 25<sup>th</sup> – home in time for Christmas Supper!

### RESULTS

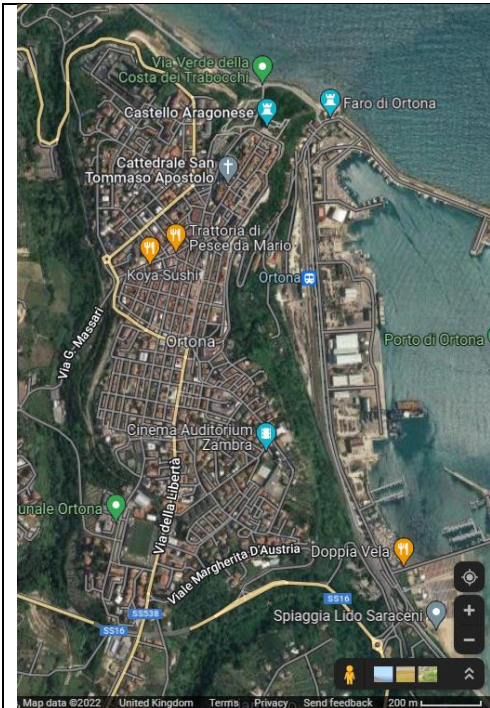
Decisive victory.

### THOUGHTS (c.f. RL AND URBAN)

Far better game although some things still unclear in the rules (despite clarifications) and still sure some mechanics broken. As detailed above the rubble model works really well and gives a nice sense of urban, which could be enhanced further with a better map., limits on tanks, and having urban density impact combat. Making a bit harder could easily give a game than ran on to the realistic 27<sup>th</sup> Dec and feel like a hard but enjoyable fight.



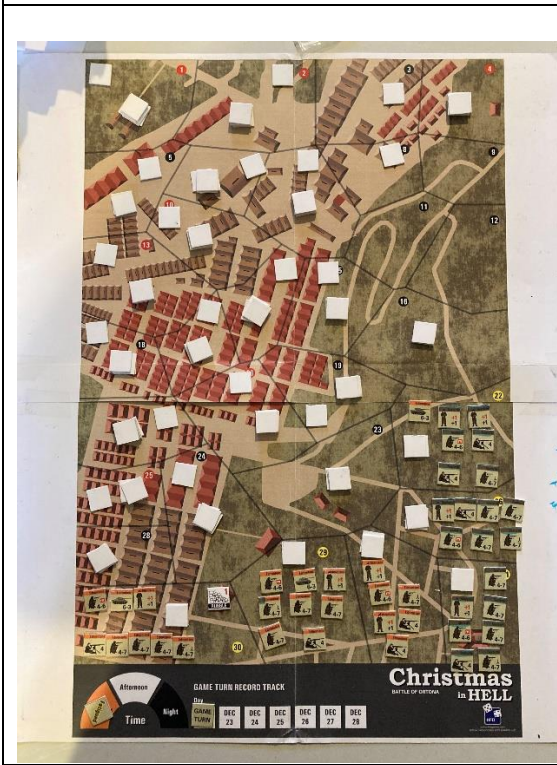
IMAGES



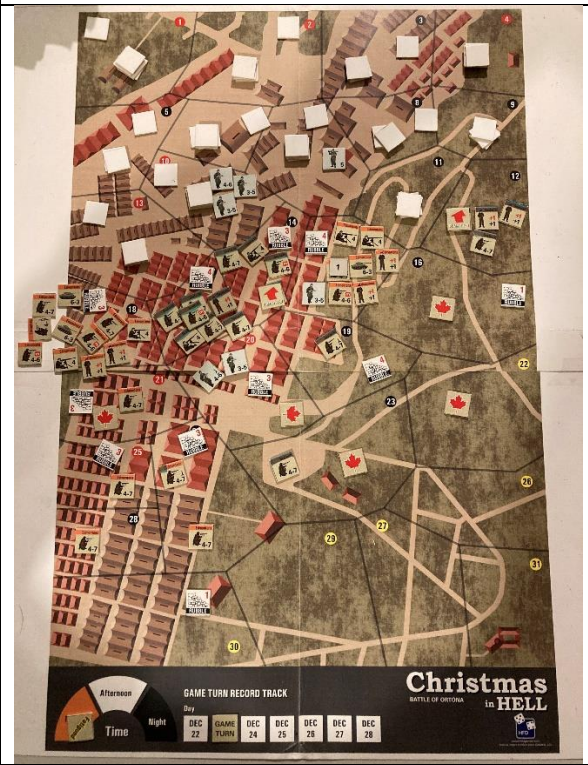
Real terrain



Game board (deliberately blurred)



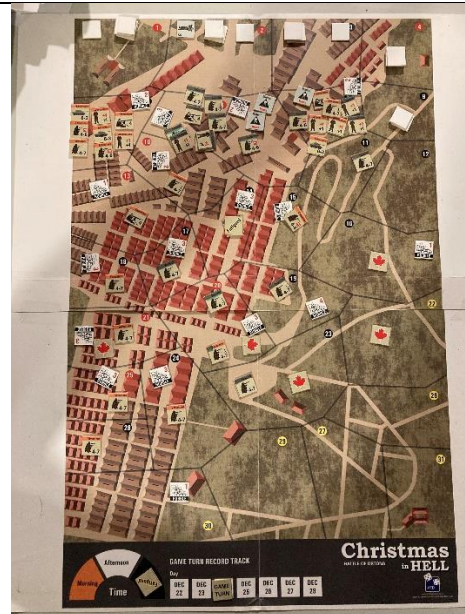
Initial Setup



Midday 23rd



Close Up of a Combat



End 24th