A WAR DIARY INTERVIEW:

DIRK BLENNEMANN

BY HANS KORTING

Dirk, could you please tell us a little about yourself. Married, children, where you live?

I'm 60 years old, married, and have lived in the Aachen area since 1986. I'm an engineer by profession, and work as senior director and head of department for a German company for high-performance home networking and smart grid solutions. I served as an officer in the German *Bundeswehr*, finally as a company commander of a *Jägerkompanie* (light infantry company).

How and when did you come into contact with board wargaming? And how was this hobby viewed at that time in Germany?

My brother and I enjoyed playing board games frequently since early childhood. These were, of course, children's and family games, which now are now usually called German games or Euro games.

In 1979 we became aware of the board wargaming hobby by accident through an article in the supplement of a German daily newspaper. One of the few stores listed was only 30 miles from where we live. We took the next opportunity to visit the store and bought the SPI classic *Napoleon at Borodino*. I certainly do not need to mention that we became highly thrilled by the gaming hobby.

Due to the German history, wargaming was, and still is, a niche hobby in Germany. This applies to the number of players as well as events/conventions and stores. The founding of the *Gesellschaft für historische Simulation* (short definition: *GHS*, something like "Society for his-

torical simulation") in 1987 and the annual running of *HexaCon* with more than 100 players created a central point of contact and convention. *HexaCon* is regularly attended by many players from other countries, including several well-known designers like Richard Berg, Dean Essig, Ty Bomba, and Mark Simonitch, to name a few.
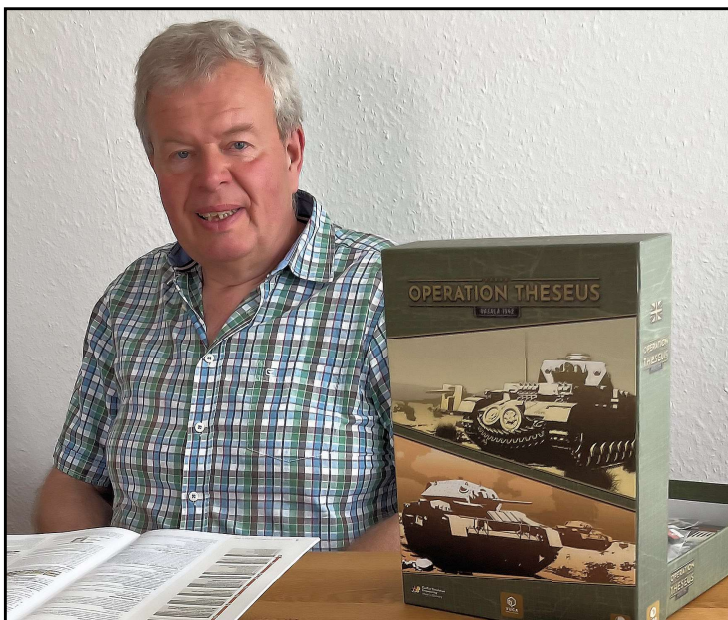
Do you have other hobbies besides wargaming?

Besides wargaming, my hobbies include (military) history and vintage Porsche cars.

I think that your main interest will be WWII, cbut are there other eras that you are interested in. Would that 'other' era make it into a wargame one day?

I have a strong interest in all areas of (military) history. In my opinion, this is important for the (overall) understanding because by focusing too narrowly on one area, the "Why?" does not always become visible. A good example of this are doctrines and equipment of the *Wehrmacht* in World War II. Without knowledge of World War I, reasons and intentions of, say, the concept of *Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen* (combined arms warfare), combat units like *Panzergrenadiere* (armored infantry) or weapons like the *Sturmges-*

chütz (assault gun) are difficult to understand. If the designer has this background knowledge, he can take it into account when developing the game system and incorporate it into the game mechanics. This allows the strengths and weaknesses of certain nations, units and weapon types to be worked out and portrayed.

It is correct that my focus is on the World War II European Theater of Operations; all of the eight games I have had the privilege to be published as a designer so far matched that theater of war. The prime reasons are my native language, my geographical location, and my contacts to the European military. However, I have also worked as a developer, researcher and playtester for games set in the eras of Frederick the Great, Napoleon, Franco-Prussian War, World War I, and NATO vs Warsaw Pact.

One of the projects I would like to complete as a designer is a game about *Cambrai 1917*. The combination of the first major tank battle in history and the German counter-offensive decided by *Sturmtruppen* (stormtroops) is exciting and led to the doctrines of World War II.

Can you tell us a little about how the T3 system (Formation Series) was developed?

Initial work on the game system that later became the *Formation Series* dates back to 1984 with the intention of modelling Word War II (armored) warfare on the operational scale. The basic idea of the game system is the realization that all battlefield processes can be identified and broken down into "Actions" and "Reactions." In addition, the concepts of "Initiative" and "Formations" play a key role in the game system. That is somewhat difficult to follow today, but at that period of time, often called "The Golden Age of Wargaming," our hobby was marked by "Igo-Hugo" and "move-and-fight" concepts.

The fact that these approaches are still state-of-the-art and accepted by the wargaming community after almost 40 years underlines the correctness of the selection. For me as a designer it is something really special to maintain and further develop a game series over such a long period of time. However, this would not have been possible without listening to player feedback and significant support from the community. The *Formation Series* is the result of a design evolution process over decades supported by the passion of many comrades in arms.

I am not clear about the history of the 'Moments in History' game company. Was this yours or were you a part of it. Could you explain some about it?

"Moments in History" (MiH) was founded and operated by my brother Ulrich. I worked for MiH as a designer, developer, researcher, and playtester. For me, MiH was a great opportunity to publish my designs.

I did not buy the game 'Piercing the Reich' at the time, but did so later (Yeah!), and seem to remember that there was a cassette tape available for it. What was on it and what was it about?

The heart of the cassette tape is a playthrough of a game turn. Put simply, it is the audio version of a printed *Extended Example of Play* in a rulebook. In addition, the cassette tape includes background information, close to printed *Designer's Notes* in a rulebook.

The idea for the tape came from John Kranz. At the time of publication, this concept was very forward-looking and an anticipation of today's established concepts such as audio books, podcasts and YouTube content.

How did you end up in game design and what is your main aim doing this?

To my experience, almost every gamer has thought of designing a game. The reasons for this are many and varied: They think they can do better, more accurate, more realistic, more exciting etc. than existing games, or their favorite topic hasn't been covered yet. A lot have started, but only a few have gotten beyond the concept phase and even fewer were lucky enough to see their designs published (most are not aware that wargame design consists of at least 90% real work, but that's another story).

For me as a designer it is important to provide the player not only with results but also with insights ("Why?") by means of the game mechanics. In addition, I have a strong interest in rather unknown operations such as Aachen 1944 or Velikye Luki and would like to bring them to the attention of the wargaming community. I also like to pick up well-known operations such as *Gazala 1942* or *Von Manstein's Backhand Blow* if I see the possibility (necessity?) to take a fresh look at it and portray them from a different perspective.

Obviously historical research will be the start of a game design, but while doing so, what is your main focus during the process? I would like to know what the main point is that you want the player to experi-

ence. (C3i, supply, combined arms, etc.).

I have been studying operational warfare in the World War II European Theatre for many years and try to incorporate the insights into wargames in a *playable* form; a clear focus is essential for this approach. This focus appears during the research process. If during research no interesting and feasible focus becomes visible to me, I do not start the design process.

Military operations are often portrayed as carefully planned and precisely executed events. In the real world, the opposite is true, because the dominant element of any military conflict is chaos. In my designs, players constantly have to face the current conditions (the German term is more appropriate: *"In und mit der Lage leben"* — something like "to live in and with the current situation"). Therefore, uncertainty ("Fog of War") and C3I always play crucial roles in my games.
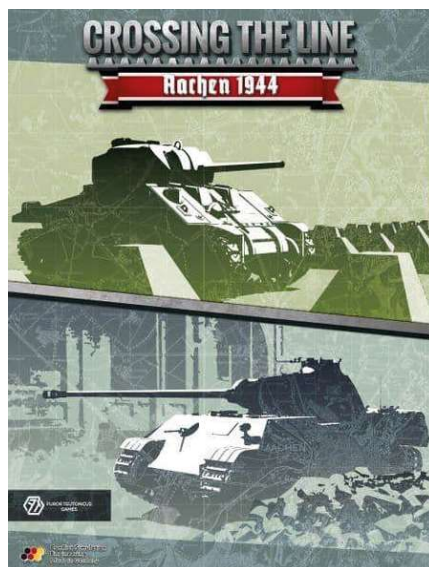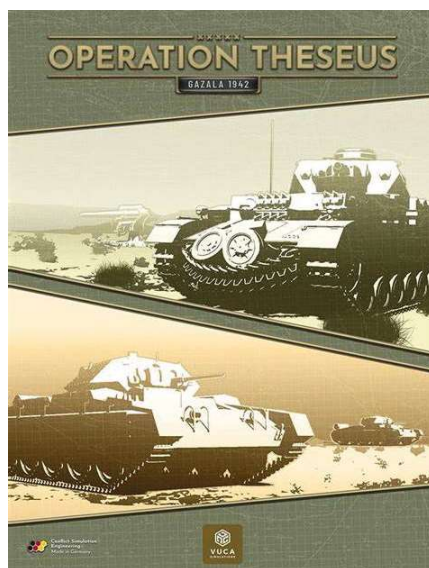
In my opinion, the purpose of a wargame is not to obtain historical results. Instead of repeating history, a range of outcomes must be possible. However, the historical result should be an option, but not every time. Otherwise the game is "resolved" after one playthrough.

How did you get in touch with VUCA Simulations?

A longtime friend made the contact. The chemistry was right from the start and the concept of VUCA Simulations convinced me. It helped a lot that our homes are only about 30 miles apart and our interests in (military) history and board-wargaming strongly overlap.

Some of your earlier game designs are over 20 years old. Has it ever been your intention, before VUCA Simulations got into this, to redo or update them? And how does it feel to do this right now?

My first published design was *Triumphant Fox* in 1993. Some hard-core players regularly confronted me with questions and suggestions for improvement of the rather "old"

games. This gave me the opportunity to continuously improve things, especially the *Formation Series*. For me as a designer it is something really special to maintain and further develop a game series over such a long period of time.

There were sporadic inquiries from game companies regarding second editions or projects based on known game systems, but these were half-hearted and all came to nothing. Knowing the business challenges of wargame companies, I con-

sidered my options as rather limited. VUCA Simulations is a stroke of luck for me. Without VUCA Simulations, I most likely wouldn't have been able to release any more games as a designer.

Why was Crossing the Line your first new game?

VUCA Simulations and I made the decision together. The topic is very interesting, but not overused by numerous games. In addition, the topic is close to our hearts due to the geographical distance — both the head of VUCA Simulations and I live in the area of the operation. Of course, economic aspects such as the number of counters and card size played a role, too.

Are there great differences between doing a design today and when you did your first games?

From a designer's perspective, the differences are enormous. 30 years ago, the prototypes (maps, tracks, countersheets, player aid cards, etc.) were usually drafted by hand by the designer. Now with digital development, prototypes can be created (and modified) quickly these days. Some of these prototypes are even more attractive than the final releases thirty years ago.

Worldwide networking has made it much easier and faster to access sources and exchange information with other people like researchers, developers, playtesters, and artists. Besides speeding up development, it does increase the quality of the research and the visualization of components.

VUCA Simulations have really surprised 'the world' with their high quality game components and great customer support. How do you view this leap in progress on graphic design and support?

One principle of the industrial sector reads: "What looks good

usually works well." Even if this statement is somewhat over the top, we all know a lot of cars, aircraft and even tanks for which this is true.

What does that mean for boardgames? An attractive game invites players and increases their motivation to engage intensively with the game. However, high-quality components are not restricted to the aesthetic aspect. Instead, a useful presentation of game components increases the fun playing the game and reduces the playing time.

Support from the publishing company is crucial for the fun of a boardwargame. Besides short response times, concepts like Living Rules are well-received by the community. Social media are both a curse and a blessing for companies, because on the one hand it is easy to reach many players in a short period of time, but on the other hand the daily support requires many resources.

Operation Theseus: Gazala 1942 has just recently been released. What will be your next project? I personally enjoy the war on the NW European front during 1944-45, so was really happy with the Aachen game, but I know there is a large Eastern Front crowd out there. Will you be heading East?

Following player's demands, VUCA Simulations decided to split the rules of further games into two parts: Series Rules identical to all games of the *Formation Series* and Special Rules, limited to the specific game. My next design – a quad game about four operations in North Africa 1940/41 - is the first game to benefit from this concept.

I have already been working on *The Siegfried Line Campaign* for many years. The game covers the Western Front 1944/45, starting with *Operation Market-Garden* and ending with the Allied Rhine River crossing. I would like to finalize this project after the North Africa quad game.

It may sound somewhat arrogant, but I certainly have a dozen projects in various stages of development lying on my desk. This includes projects on the World War II Eastern Front, too. However, since I work full time and wargaming is just a hobby, I don't want to plan concretely more than two games in advance.

Designing a game does take a lot of time. Do you still have time available to play games yourself? If so, any favorites and why?

I enjoy active exchanges with other designers and players around the world. In my opinion, this is very important, because otherwise a designer loses sight and feel for trends and general preferences.

Due to time constraints, I do not play other games often, but I do play regularly. The focus is on operational Word War II ETO wargames and – I guess somewhat surprisingly for some readers - multi-player German games/Euro games. With these games, I particularly like the social aspect and the strong interaction on the gaming board.

Earlier I asked you how the hobby was judged when you got into wargaming. Has this situation changed over time?

For understandable reasons, in Germany wargaming was and is always viewed more critically and distantly than in many other countries.

In recent decades, the situation has slightly improved. This has been helped by the realization that armed forces are necessary for Germany and that military history including simulation games are an essential part of conflict research. It is also helpful that wargaming companies are more and more avoiding symbols of the Nazi era, like swastikas. Nevertheless, wargaming is a small niche in Germany: I assume there are less than 1,000 active players.

A uniquely German aspect is the very critical view of German designers and German wargaming companies. Outside Germany, these are generally viewed and evaluated in a better and more positive light. This is an unfortunate German phenomenon that is also regularly present in other areas.

Each game company should have a Market-Garden title in its catalogue. Is this something that you might consider doing?

Nijmegen is about 100 miles from where I live. It is therefore certainly unsurprising that I have studied the operation in great detail and toured the area several times. Although Market-Garden is one of the boldest, most interesting and exciting operations of World War II ETO, I decided against my own design.

Why? More than 100 games are said to have been released on the Market-Garden theme. Of course, I don't know all of them by far, but the ones I've already played are so good in terms of research, game play and thrill that I don't see how I can really do better. From my point of view, it makes more sense for me to move on to other topics.

Dirk, on behalf of War Diary magazine I want to thank you for taking the time to answer my questions and give us a behind-the-scenes view on your game design projects.   WD

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