

# The Meat Grinder Syndrome

## The Focus of Napoleonic Warfare was on Maneuver, not Mass Casualties

Kevin Zucker

It is said in some quarters that OSG games are not capable of reflecting “the attritional nature and position/attrition tradeoffs of Napoleonic combat.” This is offered as a given, as though it is obvious and doesn’t require any further elaboration. I suspect that this misperception of Napoleonic combat is a result of the distortions of miniatures rules that concern nothing more than firepower. Take out your rulers and roll the dice. This point of view is the “Meat Grinder Syndrome,” the Clausewitzian fixation on casualties.

Casualties on the battlefield are NOT the determinant of victory. This is easy to see, because—in the Napoleonic era at least—casualties remain evenly balanced until one side or the



**“...retreats cost always more men and materiel than the most bloody engagements, with this difference: that in a battle the enemy's loss is nearly equal to your own, whereas in a retreat the loss is on your side only.”**  
[VI]

other retreats. (This is explicitly stated in Napoleon's *Maxim* VI.)

It is usually during the pursuit that losses become unbalanced. If you pay attention to battle narratives, you will see this. Digby Smith doesn't break out pursuit losses. Loss numbers are mostly guesswork. The Austrians never released their loss figures for the Battle of Dresden, as one example, and generals always lie about them. The retreating side loses all its wounded and missing, but these losses are lumped together in the battle statistics.

Throughout history, there has been a dialectic between creating mass casualties and the alternative, maneuver. The whole point of Napoleonic warfare was the focus on maneuver, not casualties. And that is where we put the focus in

this game series: Command, not combat, is the focus. However, some people do not get this. “How could a *wargame* not be *all about* Combat?” The combat results table we use works well to create a historical battle narrative, with its typical ebb and flow.

Believe it or not I produced a *Battle of Britain*

design a long time ago. I used a similar approach to build a table of aircraft losses in battle. During the height of 1940, I discovered that losses did not go up in arithmetic lock-step with numbers of aircraft engaged. At Leipzig, the allies had so many troops they could not fit them all on the battlefield. In most cases a small proportion of the troops do the lion's share of the fighting.

Let's say that in each brigade, one regiment suffers most and fights longest. In each division, one brigade suffers more than the others; and so on, up the echelons. At Eylau, VII Corps suffered most of the losses ...

Usually there is a key piece of terrain that both generals have appreciated the worth of. For example, at Austerlitz, both recognized the value of the Pratzen heights. When Napoleon "ceded" that dominating piece of terrain, the allies thought they had already won. However, for their planned "wheel" maneuver, a key piece of terrain was between Telnitz and Sokolnitz. The troops who fought there, Davout's III, suffered the most casualties on the battlefield. Their casualty rate should not be extrapolated throughout the whole French force: an average number means nothing. Casualties are terrain dependent, and those two key "chateaux" brought ruination to their Ruskie assailants.

Usually the key terrain will channel the movement of one side—the one that has the burden of attack. If you want to understand that battle you have to bring the focus down to that key location.

Similarly, throughout history... At the battle of Grunwald, in 1410, the key piece of terrain happened to be where your commander was...

"Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen then personally led 16 banners, almost a third of the original Teutonic strength, to the right Polish flank, and Władysław II Jagiełło deployed his last reserves, the third line of his army. The melee reached the Polish command and one knight, identified as Lupold or Diepold of Kökeritz, charged directly against King Władysław. The King's secretary, Zbigniew Oleśnicki, saved his master's life, gaining royal favor and becoming one of the most influential people in Poland."

The battle came to a halt as everyone watched to see whether Jagiełło would live. So that combat and its (1/0) outcome was the key piece of the whole battle.

When I was a rookie game developer at SPI, I was living at John Young's apartment (I never knew where he was staying...) John had, obviously, a rich military history library, and I recall finding a book, published during WWI, for military planners, which told them how many men would be chewed up in an hour or a day of the meat grinder. On the one hand this was the kind of statistic I wanted. But I found the inhumanity sickening, especially as it was being used to calculate 1000's of deaths before launching the operation...



This was, to me, a failure of imagination to look beyond the statistics, as the Germans managed to do in the inter-war period. Guderian and others developed a new view (outside the box) that a

total Clausewitzian approach to war would never lead to victory.

Blitzkrieg is the primacy of maneuver over battle. Napoleon demonstrated this with every victory. By leaving the key terrain undefended, and then bringing his best general with his best division, onto the battlefield *after the enemy maneuver has commenced*, he used maneuver and terrain to trump raw numbers on the battlefield.

There is a tendency for my designs to take the focus off of combat altogether, and place it where it belongs, on maneuver. I learned a long time ago, that if you have a vision, some people will hate you... What I won't do is compromise my vision and join the herd of average statisticians. *Napoleon at Bay* is my design, I take full responsibility for the thing, even though dozens of people have helped me with it over the years. (In *NAB* there were about 52, counting development, art, and editorial.)

My design intent with *NAB* was to show how *your* skill at maneuver—how savvy *your* play, how well you use vedettes, coordinate your offensive, disguise the timing and target—that maneuver is the prime determinant of victory, not battlefield statistics. Not the meat-grinder.

There are plenty of meat-grinder type games. *NAB* will obviously never fall in that category. An attrition-based wargame could not produce any kind of approximation to the actual 1814 campaign. Napoleon is outnumbered 2.5:1 in manpower. He can not afford to wage a war of attrition. (Just as the Union realized that they could ultimately bleed the South dry in the Civil War.)

This was the *first thing* I noticed when I started reading about the campaign. How the hell can Napoleon win, or even make a contest, when he's facing those kinds of numbers. How the hell did he manage to win a single battle? That was my starting place and the first question to research.

The answer came when Chandler, on page 955, mentioned "attrition." Non-combat losses almost always exceeded losses on the battlefield. Most designers to this day avoid the topic of attrition, for the same reason that the 1814 campaign is rarely if ever touched on in a game design.

Combat losses on the battlefield are not the main determinant of victory. The focus on combat losses is a red herring.

Napoleon advises, casualties on the battlefield are always about equal (between 50/50 and about 60/40). It is only when one side retreats that additional pursuit losses accrue to that side. For that reason Napoleon advises generals to hold onto the battlefield, if at all possible, even if you have the higher loss.

For example, at Arcole (a French victory), the French suffered 61.4% of all battlefield losses, but only 24% of the captured and missing. At Marengo, French battlefield losses were 44% versus 56% Austrian, but after the battle another 8,000 Austrians went into the bag.

So if you are just looking at overall losses (to include pursuit), they seem to be predictive of the

end result when actually the imbalance only comes during pursuit. You have to separate out the pursuit losses from the battlefield losses.

If casualties in battle are not the determinant of victory, then what is? Terrain and maneuver. In the *Sun of Austerlitz*, the battle has to be resolved as several separate combats each lasting multiple rounds of attack and counterattack. The CRT would be consulted 8 or 9 times per player in resolving the whole battle. So you'd have to take your Austerlitz casualty statistics, break out the pursuit losses, and then assign the battlefield losses to one of the separate battles.

What is important is whether the Coalition achieves the breakthrough between Telnitz and Sokolnitz, allowing Weyrother's wheel maneuver to reach Napoleon's LOC. Not likely, but that would be one way to win that battle and force a French retreat.

None of the 19th century writers on military history and theory really understood Napoleon's methods: not Jomini, not Clausewitz; Yorck von Wartenburg possibly more than most of his contemporaries. Even Berthier did not understand the principles of his boss. Certainly the other marshals did not, except maybe Davout. (You can read Davout's Operations Journal, published in English a few years ago.)

On the contrary you have to read the 20th century writers. Chandler presents it clearly and cogently. Read Elting, *Swords Around a Throne*. You could do worse than to read my book on the 1814 campaign, OSG's Special Study Nr. 7 (with my co-author Louis Bélanger—140 pages including maps and appendices).<sup>1</sup>

It was only in the 1920's that the term "operational art" was used for the first time (by the Russians). In the inter-war period, the Russians and Germans began to realize, after seeing what a hell the meat-grinder theory of operations had produced, that they had completely missed the maneuver part of the Napoleonic method.

At the time, very few generals on either side actually understood which principles of war were no longer valid. Mack, for instance, thought he had discerned one key to Napoleon's ideas (and in 1805 they only had the Italian campaigns to look at). So in October of that year he sent his troops into the field undersupplied, reasoning that if Napoleon could get away with it, he could too! In a simplistic way, it was true; Napoleon was able to get away

with it, but only for short periods, after which the supply line had to be hooked up again real fast.

The point is that Napoleon would plan ahead what days he would be operating without supply, and he would have the wagons on their way even at the start of the campaign, moving slowly toward the expected rendezvous. The time spent out of supply would usually be the exact time when his troops would be crossing the enemy's LOC. So the enemy depots could be seized and operated by his own administration.

When you read that Napoleon's armies marched faster because they were willing to go without supply, that statement is incomplete. It was only for a critical 10-day period (the backpacks had 4



days bread and there was more in the caissons of the artillery) which means a Napoleonic Operation had to be completed in 10 days or so.

The real reason the French marched faster (until the allies caught on) was because of a massive public works project: the network of post-roads—raised, straightened, and graded—that allowed much quicker movement than the doctrine of the Frederickan era. Napoleon was the first general to notice how to make use of these new roads. The most important of all the "antiquated" principles of war, that had held true for eons, was the length of a standard day's march. No other general had recognized the potential of the new road net to increase the pace of operations.

It is sometimes suggested that the coalition was also out of date by their reliance on a functioning LOC. However, Napoleon's own Maxims give the lie to that. The LOC was always of the first importance to every army. As Napoleon states, it was changing the LOC that was the province of only a few great generals.

Finally, the division of the science of war into tactical and strategic levels was superseded by Napoleon's evolution of the operational level, which

<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://napoleongames.com/collections/special-studies/products/special-study-nr-10>



undermined the linear idea of the battlefield. Napoleon timed his arrival on the battlefield with separate forces converging from different directions. When once deployed, the thin red line had no ability to redeploy and respond to such a maneuver. That is how maneuver and morale became more important than firepower.

Combat outcome is not merely a function of the Combat Results Table but rather the outcome of successful maneuver. That is not trivial in a hidden movement game that requires players to maneuver in smaller packets and unite on the battlefield, in order to avoid prohibitive attrition.

The Campaigns of Napoleon series is unique in wargaming. You have to play it many times to see how everything works together. Reading the rules and charts doesn't reveal the game's secrets.

In terms of the big picture, combat outcomes depend on how forces position themselves, which in turn depends on mobility (leader initiatives, length of LOC, number of Admin Points, posture of the Center of Ops) and on intelligence (deception and scouting). It's the *ensemble* of all of those factors and how skillful the players are in blending them that determines the victor. In meat-grinder games it's all about moving your stacks into position to get the best odds, merely an accounting process. I have worked to avoid factor-counting, which means looking at many of the non-combat levers that Napoleon needed to keep in mind. Hidden movement, for example, prevents your knowing at what odds you will be fighting. If you can fool your opponent and achieve better intelligence overall, your chances of winning are significantly enhanced.

A man with a staff could do little to influence the outcome of a whole battle—once the troops were deployed. Wellington was a great example of a battlefield leader who always managed to pop up at the right place and time. Napoleon, on the other hand, usually took a nap. His work was done in the hours and days before the battle. I wanted to make a game about these non-combat levers, taking the focus off of combat so that these other systems—leadership and command, attrition, administration—could be added while keeping the game playable.

Right at the start of this game system, when the first Leader counters joined their brigades on



the NLB sketch map of 40 years ago, we made a decision that simplicity would best serve our design intent.<sup>2</sup> We had a basic combat results table that had been tried and tested and it worked. Its very

*F. Murray Abraham as Salieri in the movie Amadeus*

simplicity was and remains its virtue. At a time when other designers were finding ways to increase complexity, we decided to move in the opposite direction. Of course, this fundamental decision would not please everyone, but it pleased me, and it allowed us to explore other aspects of warfare, which happen to be the areas that Napoleon excelled at and where he won all his battles—the areas of leadership, command, and logistics. The Emperor was not a leader like Wellington, riding from one threatened square to another. Napoleon himself didn't get involved in tactics, except when it came to the employment of artillery. He had begun his career in the artillery and he held this branch to be of prime importance among the three arms. As a game designer, I made a trade-off. In order to make room in the game for the rules on leadership and command, I decided to forego all the bells and whistles in the combat arena. The result was a highly popular game that many people played until all the print was worn down on the Napoleon counter and the map was in tatters. That original combat system, which has continued to evolve over the years, still gives me the kind of back-and-forth shifts in the battlefield that I want, even though our best theoreticians will tell you that the "combat model" of this game system isn't accurate at all. How can that be? How can a combat system that isn't accurate still produce proper outcomes? For the answer, we need to remember the gap that always exists between theory and practice. Look at the field of music. Don't listen to compositions of

<sup>2</sup> The remainder of this article is from "Amateurs Talk About Tactics," in the Fall 2014 *WDM*, page 3.

the theory teachers, unless you like your music dry as dust. There is a saying in music departments: "Those who can, play. Those who can't, teach." There is something in the orderly outlook of a theoretician that actually prevents all creativity.

There is no better example of this than the marvelous film *Amadeus*. The hard-working guy who plays by the rules is nowhere in comparison to the iconoclast who loves music and breaks the rules. In Napoleonic history, there were a number of pedants like Salieri, who put their theories into action with disastrous results. Just to mention two—the "unhappy" General Mack at Ulm, and the Tsar's favorite, Phull, of the camp at Drissa. Napoleon himself disavowed theory: "I have no system of operations."

Our combat system, as it has evolved over the years, works for me. It doesn't please the pedants, but that is their loss. They, like Salieri, keep trying to design a game according to theory. I don't give the same weight to "cumulative attrition" that hobby theoreticians do. I weight it differently. If "cumulative attrition" was the sine qua non, then the U.S. would have won in Vietnam. Napoleon stated that morale is more important than numbers. "You see that two armies are two bodies which meet and endeavor to frighten each other; a moment of panic occurs, and that moment must be turned to advantage."



I agree with Frederick, that "his sacred majesty chance" rules the battlefield. Chance, the roll of the die, is the most historically accurate element of any wargame.

If we read that Maloyaroslavets changed hands 6 times in one day, isn't that historical data? I would argue that we have plenty of historical data besides the body count—including parade states, which are often cited as the army strength going in to the battle, when in fact historians forget the attrition suffered by the armies in the run-up to battles.

The OSG criterion is this: Can the game produce an historical outcome? The combat system is only one element—and not the most important one—in achieving this goal.

In my view, if we get the map right, and we get the unit strengths right, then the outcome of the battle should be right. That is because we know that the series rules and other parts of the system

work. To those who actually *play* these battles, the historical outcome is always a possibility.

Everything in the game is designed to produce accurate outcomes at the corps level, or overall in the battle as a whole.