

Holding the Line: Le Cateau, 1914

A Scenario for *The Hun at the Gate*



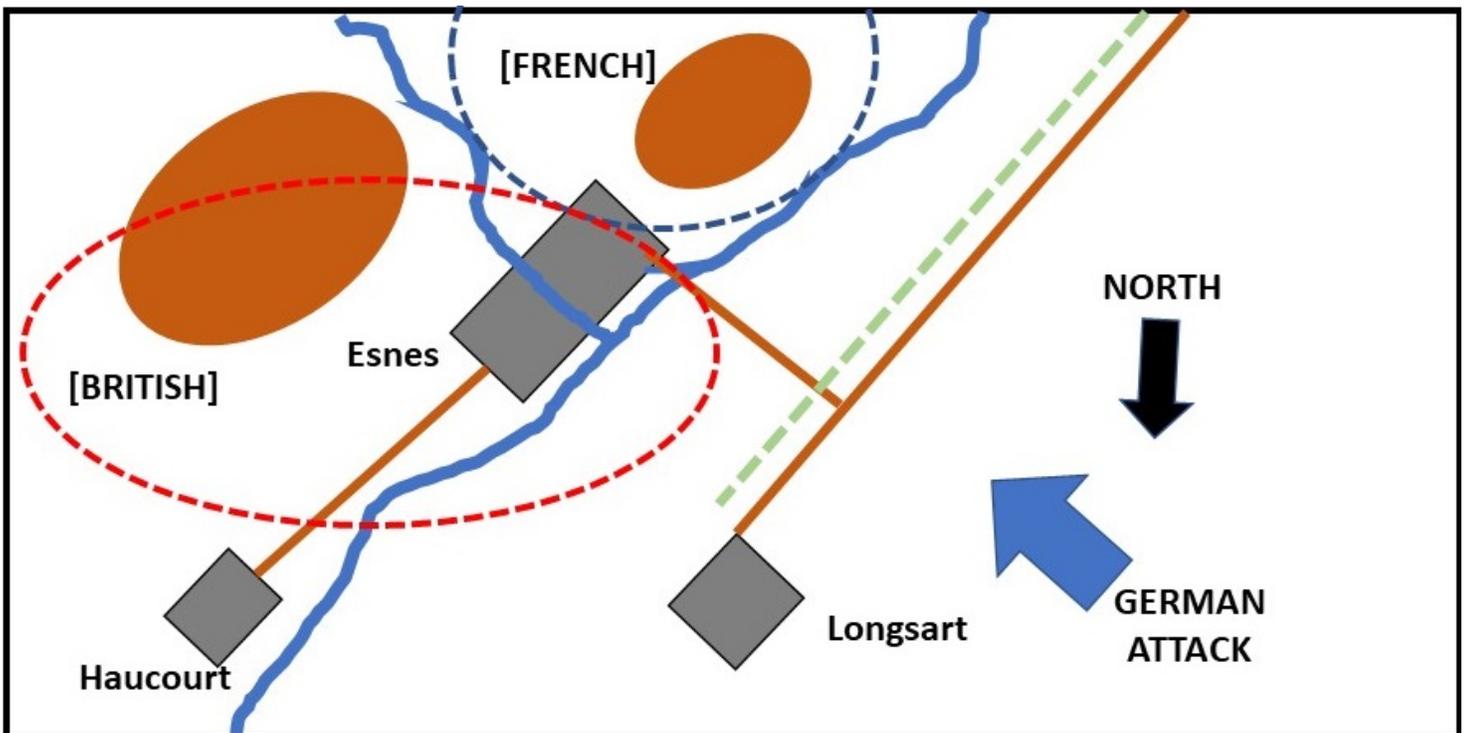
Background

On 26 August, 1914, II Corps of the British Expeditionary Force fought a delaying action against superior German forces. Having already encountered them at Mons, the British army split into two columns, in order to fall back to more defensible positions around St. Quentin to the south. The columns took different routes of march around the forest of Mormal, with II Corps marching to the west. Pursued by the Germans, and under orders to withdraw, they instead fought a delaying action throughout the morning, covering the retreat of the BEF southward. To the western end of the line, near Esnes, the British fought against superior numbers, assisted by the men of Sordet's French cavalry corps.

This scenario puts players in the shoes of the Allied commanders as they attempt to keep the Germans at bay. The goal is not to beat the Germans - that was never a question - but to delay them as long as possible, and to make their "victory" an expensive one. Indeed, historically this was the case, and it paints an unforgettable picture of the bravery of the Allied fighting men. The action depicted here is in the 4th Division sector on the left flank of the Allied position.

The Tabletop

The table is an ordinary wargames table, of approximately 8 foot by 4 foot. The map below shows an approximation of the terrain over which the action was fought.



Note that the battlefield actually slopes from the hills around Esnes downward to the northwest, giving the British a clear line of sight over most low terrain to the advancing Germans. What is depicted here by a thin blue line - a stream - is described as a ravine, which would likely not have held substantial amounts of water in late August. It counts as a linear obstacle, but does not provide cover, and may be crossed by all troops. The hills around Esnes are smooth slopes, and do not provide cover. All of the built-up areas on the map are villages or farms which will provide hard cover to troops anywhere inside them - troops deployed on their edges will be protected, but also visible as targets of fire. The green dotted line is a line of hedges and thinly-spaced trees, which will provide soft cover to troops immediately behind it.

Each of the Allied commands must choose whether to deploy forward or not. The local French peasants have half-dug a "trench" - it is completely ineffectual - some distance forward of Esnes for the British troops, and they may choose to occupy it or not (it is at the very front edge of their deployment zone). Otherwise, they will defend on a line centered on Esnes and the hard cover it provides. The British artillery can be deployed forward, in Esnes, or further back, on the hillside behind it.

For the French, the question is whether the cavalry will shelter behind the hill and Esnes, or whether they will deploy forward in a position to move aggressively.

Allied commanders should discuss the deployments of their forces before play begins, and set up accordingly.

Order of Battle

The British and French forces detailed below deploy in the areas indicated in the map above. There are no Germans on the table at the start of play, but their direction of attack is indicated.

French Forces

French commander: 1 Officer, mounted, with sword and pistol

French dragoons: 10 mounted Veterans armed with sword and carbine.

French cuirassiers: 10 mounted Veterans armed with sword and carbine.

French forward observer team: 2 Veteran observers on foot armed with pistols, calling in fire from off-board heavy artillery.

British Forces

British commander: 1 Officer on foot, with sword and pistol

1st infantry section: 12 rifle-armed Veteran infantrymen

2nd infantry section: 12 rifle-armed Veteran infantrymen

Machinegun detachment: 1 MG with 3 Veteran crew, armed with a rifle and two pistols

Artillery detachment: 1 field gun with 4 Veteran crew armed with pistols

Victory Conditions

The game lasts for 12 turns. If at the end of play the Allies have managed to kill a total number of enemy units and officers which is at least three times as great as those they have lost, it is deemed an Allied victory. (Historically, the casualty rates were at about a 2:1 level overall, but British losses were heavier on the far end of their line - performance should be judged against the historical record.)