

Grand Campaign – Der Weltkrieg – Centenary Game

GT135: 6 – 9 March 1916 (March 2).

General Situation

Intelligence of the German Green line (later known as the Hindenburg Line) was filtering back to the Allied commanders. The Germans had little hope of keeping it secret. The Allies may have lost the air superiority they enjoyed in 1915 but still many reconnaissance aircraft were able to overfly the zone of construction. In any event, the farmers of northern France and western Belgium were infuriated that their land was being requisitioned or at least highly disturbed by the earth moving operations and their discontent was heard on the Allied side of the lines.

Joffre and Haig consulted over the meaning of the German engineering efforts but were not very troubled by it. If the Germans were so unconfident in their present lines that suggested the Allied campaigns were wearing them out steadily. If the Germans could not envisage taking the offensive then surely it was just a matter of time before they would offer terms.

Western Front

Before the First World War one of the first German air pioneers had been Karan, Countess von Thraxis und Sternbock. During a period when flying was done on a wing and a prayer, she was reputed to have gift for getting the most unlikely contraptions in the air and had mentored many young German pilots.

The Countess' subsequent history had been quite obscure. It is recorded that she had offered to train wartime fighter pilots by approaching a family friend, Admiral von Richthofen und Darma, who commanded one of Germany's largest naval airships ("Galactika"). This early model Zeppelin was obsolete when war broke out. In August 1914, Galactika was about to be converted to a fairground attraction in Kiel but, instead, it had been pressed into service to guard German civilian convoys in the Baltic Sea.

Thanks to the Admiral's patronage, Sternbock was given an unofficial posting to the German air fighter school where she was a valued instructor. Not much else was known until a private letter from Lothar von Richthofen to his father appeared which was first published in 2005. This suggested Sternbock may have seen some front line service. Most dismissed it as a fake, but it was nevertheless hotly debated in circles of "Red Baron" enthusiasts whose condemnation of it may have been self-interested.

Laon, 8 March 1916

"Dear Father,

I must apologise for what I told you when we last met. I thought Kara had already confessed the truth about Manfred.

Kara is worshipped here as an avenging angel. There isn't a pilot who is not in love with her. She is a sister to me and, you may as well admit, she is the daughter you never had.



Figure 1: The Green Line (Hindenburg Line), under construction, 6 - 9 March 1916.

Manfred is dead. We all know that. Now we know that he should have failed flying school and should never have been allowed in that machine. Most pilots would have sensed that the fuel gauge was faulty. Manfred had no feel for that kind of thing. He only understood horses and he should never have left the cavalry. You will just have to live with the fact that he only reached for the skies to try

and gain your approval. Kara is also deeply remorseful about what she did. No one loved Manfred more.

I have worked through my own anger. I know you will not expose Kara. Germany has too few pilots and everyone who has passed through training school knows that Kara is the absolute best we have. If she has to impersonate a man to be allowed to fly in combat then let it be. So say all the men in this squadron. She may as well be Manfred as anyone.

A few days ago, enemy raiders were crossing our lines every half an hour. Sometimes you think they are machines not men. Kara had the engineers turn her Viper¹ round in no more than 33 minutes. That day she took on eight French raiders helped only by a novice who saw her crashing to the ground beyond the front lines with a broken enemy machine spiralling from the sky with her. I know you would have asked for extensive searches for the wreckage to confirm her fate. We did no less. It was still beyond obvious she was dead. The flying conditions were terrible and we had to give up when the squadron's fuel allocation was exhausted.

This morning a lone French raider was spotted heading for our field. I was sent to intercept. I had a shot at it but the Frenchman smartly evaded me. Moments later, I looked up and he was flying above me close enough that I could read "Sternbock" painted on the wings. It was Kara! Imagine the joy and surprise of the whole squadron.

She had spent two days on the ground wounded after the crash. It was an isolated spot and no one came. Struggling to find help, she came across the downed French raider which contained the bloody remains of the dead enemy pilot, Capitaine Selon, according to the papers found on him. I saw it and I can say that French raider was a real mess on the inside. Kara literally climbed into the dead man's boots and somehow got that machine airborne. How she did it no one will ever know.

Father, you will come to see the wisdom in this. When the truth is more widely known, it will be seen that Germany has its own aerial Joan of Arc. The chaplain told me this has happened before and it will happen again.

Lothar

France, Post District 5-3.1412.

Italian Front

Both sides were consolidating in new positions in the high Dolomites after the Italians re-captured Cortina (6-4.2715). Winter still had a firm grip on the Alpine fronts though spring was now showing through elsewhere.

¹ A less successful model of German fighter plane compared to the Albatross D.III which quickly superseded it. Only about 20 Vipers are known to have flown in combat in early 1916. Although without any modern communication equipment, the Viper did have an impressively tight turning circle and was perhaps insufficiently appreciated for its ability to reach extremely high altitudes compared with other contemporary aircraft.

Eastern Front

The struggle on the Szumsk – Teofipol line (5-5.4405 – 5-5.4607) was suspended by the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army. Meanwhile, the Austro-Hungarian 1st Army was moving down the River Styra from Luck. Ahead of them the Russian 9th Army shortened and reinforced its front having also retreated in the past two weeks over 80 kilometres from positions beyond the River Stochod. The shorter front also allowed the Russians to put the Russian 4th Army in reserve and this was located behind the 9th Army front in early March.

Further north, the Russian 6th Army reoccupied Baranovichi (4-5E.0217) on 9 March. This rail junction had changed hands innumerable times during the previous winter mostly without a fight. This time the Russians arrived to find the Germans had ripped up the rails and engineers would have to be summoned to make repairs.

The Balkan Front

The Central Powers had concentrated on a narrower front about 150 kilometres long on either side of the Vardar Valley. There were signs of preparation for a Bulgarian attack at the eastern end of this line near Kočani (7-6.1708) causing the Serbian 1st Corps to reinforce the sector between 8 – 9 March. However, by this time the Bulgarian side of the front had gone quiet again.



Figure 2: The South Balkan Front, 6 - 9 March 1916.

The Near East

Further fighting between the British and Turks did not seem very imminent. Despite the start which Murray had made on a logistical pipeline across the Sinai Peninsula it was a project which would last some months.

At the same time, Townsend had continued to withdraw toward Kut a position that he considered could be held during the flood season which was now imminent. The Turkish 6th Army at Baghdad showed no sign of following the British-Indian force.

In the Pontic region the Russian retreat in the Coruh Valley also continued. The commander of the Russian III Caucasian Corps stumbled back on to Russian territory on 8 March riding a half-starved nag. Reinforcement was on its way but somebody had wired through from Batum that the Turks had broken through and all Tiflis was put into a wild panic – entirely unnecessarily. Two strengthened Russian Cavalry Divisions had recently arrived at Kars (21st) and Batum (2nd) and a Siberian Infantry Division (4th) was also marching from Kars.



Figure 3: The Turkish IX Corps advancing down the Coruh Valley, 6 - 9 March 1916.

Meanwhile on the Turkish side of the front, the IX Corps had three Infantry Divisions (1st, 15th and 20th), a Kurdish Cavalry Division, assorted border troops, and a heavy artillery battery slowly working its way down the banks of the powerful river now surging with the spring melt. Perhaps the most uncomfortable thing for the Turkish Corps commander was the fact that the commander of the Turkish 3rd Army, Mahmut Kamil Pasha, had insisted on accompanying the IX Corps in this campaign. He drove the IX Corps on while his subordinate wondered about the lack of Russian resistance (according to his letters home). To the north the impenetrable Dogukaradeniz Mountains loomed. The terrain was not much better to the south and periodically the road the IX Corps had to take narrowed. If this was a trap, then the only way out was back the way they had come.

DM Summary – March 1916

Nation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Food Deficit	Month	Total	Morale
Germany	-	-						12	12	1115	Good
Austria-Hungary	4	-						1	5	472	Good
Ottoman	-	-						-	-	68	Good
Bulgaria	-							-	-	16	Good
Central Powers	4	-						13	17	1671	
France	-	-						-	-	673	Good
Great Britain	-	-						-	-	251	Good
Russia	4	-						-	4	729	Shaken
Italy	-	-						-	-	58	Good
Belgium	-	-						-	-	(100)	NA
Serbia	-	-						-	-	(33)	NA
Entente	4	-						-	4	1711	

Player Notes

- *CP: East: The AH 4th Army attack resulted in an even exchange which is acceptable given the mandatory nature of the attack. I still have to make more of the same this turn and will continue to feel pressure from above to make these supply burning offensives. Robert, of course, knows this and will be able to configure his defence accordingly. Once AH reached shaken morale, however, I can throw German support into their attacks and start to cause some real damage in return. It is in a potential support role to AH that I see the German 11th and 12th armies being employed. I could deploy them to the WF, but I feel reasonably securely entrenched there (although the front is begging for more artillery) and know that in the not too distant future AH will need shoring up in either of Italy, the Balkans or on the EF. These two strong armies in reserve will prove useful.*
- *Balkans: I considered throwing my Bulgarians into an attack this turn but reconsidered. There is nothing to be gained in deliberately attriting away strength on the Serbs.*
- *West: Nothing occurs other than the assimilation of RPLs to rebuild cadre-ised divisions in the rear areas.*

- *Caucasus: The gradual withdrawal Coruh River has me puzzled but I advance into relinquished territory nonetheless. There is potential opportunity for offensive action in it and it may even enable me to turn his flank.*
- *Mesopotamia: Digging in to defend Baghdad. I had a real fright with how close he came to investing it and, but for a succession of very unlucky attack rolls by Robert, I would have been in a parlous position here. I can extend trenches now forward of the city whilst he withdraws to lick his wounds and regroup.*
- *Palestine: Quiet. I am hearing reports from roving Bedouins that tracks are being laid east of Suez.*
- *Italy: Quiet.*

AP: *The following is from a post by Sam Fellowes #11776 of 16 January 2016. I think it is worth including here.*

"I'm now on turn 117 of the centenary game (almost caught up!) and I have some comments.

I find Ivor's withdrawal from the area around Rheims to partly behind the Aise to be very interesting. From where I sit, it does seem all wrong though. That particular line is a very good defensive position (it is where I have placed my German in my own game). However, good defensive positions are very useful for the Germans in 1915 (assuming they, as Ivor did, attack the Russians) but surely 1916 will see a German offensive against France? Strengthening the German position has the consequence, in this case, of also giving France some good defensive positions. The French will also benefit from the river whilst they will have less hexes to defend, allowing them to concentrate greater. So it seems to me that the Germans could take defensive line prior to 1915, get the advantage in 1915, then suffer the disadvantage in 1916. Alternatively, you take another position, making 1915 a bit harder but then helping in 1916. In this case, none of the advantage was gained in 1915 whilst the Germans are not in ideal positions for 1916.

This does relate to Robert thinking he will have the initiative in 1916. I wonder if the Germans remaining relatively defensive in the west in 1916 is possible. As the game progresses, the British are able to take up more of the burden of attack against the Germans. Consequently, there is less requirement for the French to force up the German demoralisation. So if the French decide primarily to make attacks which limit the casualties they received, they will never get close to surrender, whilst the Germans will keep suffering damage from a strengthened Britain and eventually America. The Germans could focus more on Russia in 1916 and be careful in any attacks on the west, to make sure they use up the mandated supply without sustaining massive casualties, and then attack France in force in 1917. But then the British will be stronger and the Germans will need use supply to defend against them. I cannot see a route to a central powers victory if Ivor does not use the Verdun window (i.e. increased forces in early 1916 before the British become too strong)."

I agreed with a lot of this but the Verdun window is not yet closed. There is an advantage in delaying an attack on France because it will be costly and the CP wants to delay the time when it reaches German DM 1425 (submarine warfare). It looks also as if the CP wants to try and force the French to attack the Germans first. This could possibly happen and then be followed by a German offensive.

Nevertheless, this might be instructive

DM needed to Surrender in same calendar year.	France	Germany	Austria
As at 1 August 1914	750	1300	450
As at 1 January 1915	448	1126	371
As at 1 January 1916	529	993	254
As at 10 March 1916	527	935	228

This shows the decline of Morale (the inverse of DM – essentially what DM you have left to play with). What is notable is French Morale increased in 1915 while both German and Austrian Morale sank. Russian Morale sank too (a lot) but the Entente doesn't care much about that. It also shows that while the Entente is attacking in the West they will not do anything that truly endangers French Morale at least not until they have some higher benefit in sight.

By referring to Verdun style attacks I am indicating German offensives that put all their firepower on France. That means maximum stacks (48 Infantry) supported by maximum artillery (27 Artillery – 3 Brigades) or as near as possible. Germany can get 75 combat strength in a hex, and 150 in two, or 225 in three. That will generate sufficiently favourable results against even maximum stacked French hexes so long as the terrain is not too severe. In any event, the bigger the attack the smaller the counterattack is relatively.

On the above figures Germany, could have made progress against France with an unfavourable loss ratio below 1:2.51 in 1915. That has now declined to 1:1.79. This is counting all German losses versus all French losses not just combats between Germany and France. This favours France because France is really only engaged against Germany whereas Germany is doing the Eastern Front as well.

This is still achievable for the CP but it is harder as Britain gets more involved. In addition, Germany needs to drive France to surrender faster than Austria is driven down which is not happening so far this 1916 year. Again it should not be impossible because Germany has so much more firepower than Russia and Italy, the main threats to Austria.

There are other considerations not highlighted here. There will be other costs and consequences of following what was historically not regarded as a total success. Nevertheless, the German – French conflict is possibly the most critical in the game and its evolution determines much.