

# "Fire Brigade":

## A 16-bit Eastern Front Game

by Allyn Vannoy

Allyn has previously contributed articles to "Civil War Times Illustrated" and "Strategy & Tactics" magazines. Allyn reviewed this game on the basis of a near final beta version. The reason for his involvement with the simulation was to examine its potential for use by the United States Department of Defense. In

this article, Allyn shares his expertise with CGW.

*At the beginning of November, the enemy again attacked the northern wing of the Army Group, Fourth Panzer Army's Dnieper front, with strong forces. It was not clear whether this was an offensive with far-reaching aims or whether the enemy first intended to win the necessary assembly space west of the river. It soon became evident that the formations of Fourth Panzer Army would be unable to hold the Dnieper against the far stronger Russians, and by 5th November it could be seen that Kiev would be lost . . .*

*In the next few days, the situation of Fourth Panzer Army took a rapid turn for the worse. Its eleven infantry divisions, almost all of which were now down to regimental strength, were no longer a match for an opponent who had committed between*

*seventeen and twenty fully manned rifle divisions, three or four tank corps and one cavalry corps in the very first wave of his offensive. Even the two armored divisions at the army's disposal as a mobile reserve were too weak to stop the enemy's breakthroughs.*

The above passage is from German Field Marshal von Manstein's book, *Lost Victories*, but could just as easily be one player's assessment of the results after playing a few turns of *Fire Brigade*. *Fire Brigade* is the first computer simulation produced by **Panther Games** and from the looks of it, it will be a milestone for computer wargames in terms of sophistication. The player steps into the shoes of the com-

mander of the German Fourth Panzer Army as he directs infantry and Panzer corps in the battle for the city of Kiev or takes on the role of the Soviet front commander to free the capital of the Ukraine and break through the German lines. The player reviews battle reports, gathers intelligence on enemy forces, assesses information on friendly units, orders subordinate head-quarter formations into action, directs the allocation of supplies, reinforcements, and combat support assets.

Then, the player "confers" with the computer and issues orders. Using artificial intelligence routines, the computer executes the orders by carrying out all movement and combat with allowances made for unit commander and staff capabilities, troop quality, armor and anti-tank strengths, supply, morale, supporting arms, casualties, fatigue, leadership and combat power. The battle is followed on strategic and tactical level maps.

The game program executes rapidly with each turn representing one day of real time. Victory progress is tracked continuously and compared with the historical result at any given point. The computer also provides for limited military intelligence without any operating requirements being placed on the player. Since *Fire Brigade* can be played solitaire or as a two player game, a network capability has been provided so that two computers may be linked for a two player competition.

### The Historical Background: Setting the Stage

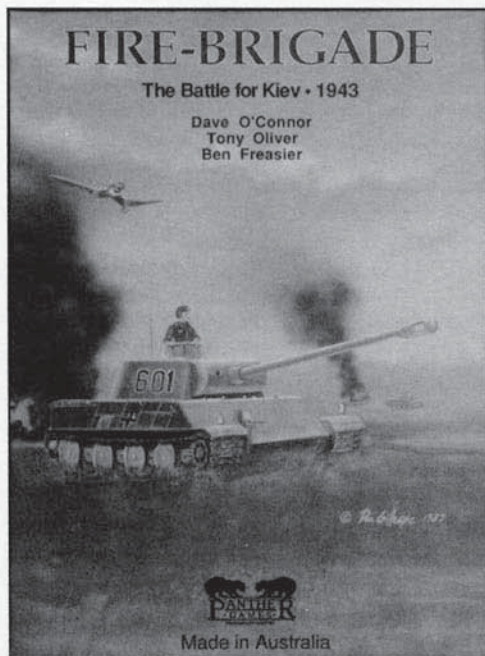
With the defeat of the Germans at Kursk during July, 1943, the ensuing Soviet summer offensive in southern Russia had driven Army Group South back to the Dnieper River. Here, Field Marshal von Manstein had intended to dig in and refit his tired troops.

The Soviet high command ordered both the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts to push across the Dnieper before the Germans could establish their lines. General Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front secured bridgeheads north and south of the Ukrainian capital.

During October, Vatutin's forces failed to break out of the Bukrin bend south of the city, so he transferred forces to the Lyutesh bridgehead north of Kiev and made preparations to launch an assault from there. At dawn on 3 November, General Vatutin loosened the largest artillery barrage seen to date on the Eastern Front. The forces charging out of the bridgehead (60th Army, 38th Army, and 3rd Guards Tank Army) were directed to capture Kiev and then roll west and take Korosten, Zhitomir, Berdichev, and Fastov. Thus, they would cut the rail link to Army Group Center and set the groundwork for the envelopment of Army Group South.

The northern wing of Fourth Panzer Army (59th, 13th, and 7th Korps) collapsed under the weight of the assault. As the Soviet tanks headed west, Manstein pleaded with Hitler to commit the 48th Panzer Korps, the *Fire Brigade*, which had previously dealt the Soviets many a defeat along the southern portion of the front.

Despite initial losses, the German Panzer and infantry divisions were brought back up to reasonable strength and elite armored formations were marshalled in the area Belaya-Zerkov for a counter-stroke aimed at cutting off the Russian forces.



TITLE:	Fire Brigade
SYSTEMS:	Macintosh (Apple IIGS, Amiga, and IBM to follow) Mac version reviewed
# PLAYERS:	1-2
PRICE:	\$40.00
DESIGNERS:	Dave O'Connor Tony Oliver and Ben Frasier
PUBLISHER:	Panther Games Hughes, ACT, AUSTRALIA

The commander of the 48th Panzer Korps, General Balck, launched three panzer divisions in a drive on Brussilov, followed by a swing west towards Zhitomir. A huge tank battle ensued during the latter part of November as veteran armored forces on both sides attacked and counter-attacked.

A wet-warm break in the weather resulted in mud bringing a near halt to operations. Both sides suffered huge losses in tanks, guns, and men. The Germans had re-captured Zhitomir and Korosten, but failed to take Kiev or destroy the Soviets west of the Dnieper.

By 5 December, a winter freeze allowed the now re-fitted Panzer divisions of Balck's Fire Brigade to initiate maneuvers north of Zhitomir. Taking the Soviets off guard, the 60th Army was nearly cut off and forced to pull back from Korosten. A reinforced 13th Korps advanced east towards Radomyschl. The 42nd Korps succeeded in taking Brussilov, while the 7th threatened Fastov. With the situation growing desperate, the Soviet high command threw in its reserves, the 1st Tank Army and the 18th Army. With the commitment of 18th Army, the Soviets went on the offensive and re-took Brussilov.

By late December, both sides were exhausted. The Soviets had failed in their attempts to envelop Army Group South, but had liberated Kiev; cracked the Dnieper line; and inflicted terrible losses on the German forces. For its part, the Fourth Panzer Army had failed to hold Kiev, but had smashed a sizable portion of the Soviet formations while maintaining its important rail links to Army Group Center.

All of this is what Fire Brigade encompasses.

## Design Considerations: Taking the Stage

The game is well conceived in that it considers every aspect of command, support, and troops in combat. The designers have made every effort to produce the highest quality combat simulation. It is one thing to produce a computer game based on science fiction or fantasy where the designer has complete latitude, but the portrayal of a historical even, especially on this scale, is a challenge few game companies would ever attempt.

The game graphics, even in black and white, are easily the best to be used in a computer game to date. The color version on the Amiga is most impressive. The real power of the game, however, is in its concept—the integration of the elements of combat and the functions of the chain of command. Game operations are so easily understood by using the palette and drop-down menus that a player can commence playing it almost immediately.

The Play Manual not only provides operating instructions, but gives insight into the logic behind the game's functions. The manual provides the usual tutorial and reference sections, as well as sections for: a glossary, designer notes, historical background and bibliography, scenario hints, and strategy of play.

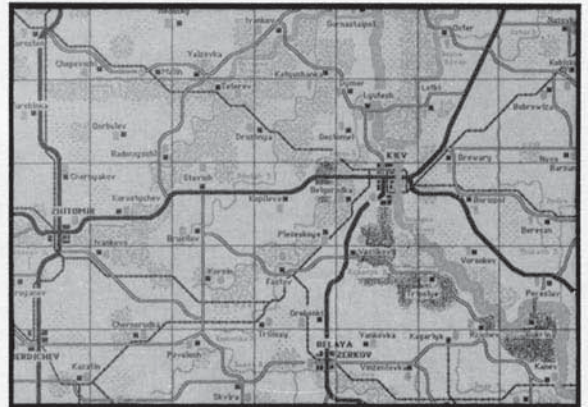
This is not a game for the kind of player that wants to control every aspect of a game down to the most minute detail. If, however, one is truly interested in a

good historic portrayal and wants a game that is realistic, a game that lets an individual get involved to the degree they wish, one that will tax their abilities as a field general, then this is definitely their game.

## Strategy Notes: Upstaging the Opposition

Although the game operations are quickly learned, the player should expect to warm up to it slowly, approach it not as if to conquer it, but to learn from it. It may take weeks (or even months) of playing to learn the finer points

such as: which commanders you can trust to carry out orders and do a respectable job in so doing; how far you can push a tried and battle-weary group of panzer grenadiers before they crack; what proper mix of tank corps and rifle corps make for a hard hitting Soviet army; and what to do when bad weather hits. There seems to be an infinite number of points to ponder.



Players should be aware that historically, even with the tremendous number of forces deployed on the Eastern Front, there was usually no continuous front line, but rather a series of forward outposts or strong points backed, when possible, by mobile reserves. So, try to maintain corps boundaries, but do not be surprised if the enemy breaks through and roams your rear areas. Just bring up the reserves, if you have them!

The only real drawback to the game is that there may be too much information for a player to handle, at least, initially. It would have been helpful if information for all the units in a corps or army could have been presented in a spreadsheet type format in order to aid the player in assessing the data and making the best decisions possible. Also, the HQ symbols should have been something which appeared less like the division/corps symbols on the tactical map. As they are now, there is a chance of getting the units confused.

## Summary: The Curtain Call

To recap, Fire Brigade is an operational level war game that may be approached by both the novice player and the expert. The game assumes no historical knowledge or experience requirement on the part of the player. Playing time ranges from three to eight hours depending on the scenario selected. The game features four scenarios, three skill levels, save game and panic routines, plays with either mouse or keyboard, includes map and scenario order of battle cards, and player's manual. Fire Brigade is meant for the thinking man, the sophisticated player who wants to learn and make the absolute most of his computer playing time.