A Beginner's Guide

Up Front is the card game (and some say superior) version of Squad Leader/Advanced Squad Leader. Basically, you control a squad of infantry in WWII. Maybe a tank or infantry gun, too.

Here's how the game works. Each player lays out a set of cards representing his men. One card, One Man. You may set up in 2-4 groups of 2-10 men. The cards are double sided, one side being an 'active' man, the other side represents the man when he's pinned (ducking, afraid, what have you). The main component, though, is the action deck of 162 cards. These cards represent the basic "game engine" and are used to perform actions such as: Move, Rally, Fire, Terrain (Buildings, Hills, Streams, etc), Hide (Concealment), and many more (Snipers, Smoke, Wire...). Yes, the map is built by the play of terrain cards as the game progresses…

As well, instead of dice, these cards are used to generate random numbers to determine the effects of fire/rally/etc. Each card includes a bell curve distributed random number from –6 to +6 (the RNC), and an evenly distributed random position numbers from 1-n, where n is 1-10 (the RPC). Each number is again, red or black. The numbers in the 1 column are mainly red, getting a higher percentage of black numbers as you move to the right.

A turn is pretty simple. You have a hand of cards, and can take one action per group. So a group could move, or fire, or rally (get pinned people back to active) as the three basic actions. But there are plenty of other actions. Transfer people from one group to another, fix a broken weapon, entrench, infiltrate a nearby enemy group, and what have you. Then you may get to discard cards (each nation has it's own rules for hand size and discarding), then you replenish. The objective of the game depends on the scenario – but it is generally simple – close with and engage the enemy!!

So, what's good about this game? It is quick playing, and it accurately represents "The Fog of War"

Mr. Allen discusses this in his designer notes (which you should read). He read many, many interviews of actual WWII front-line soldiers of many nationalities, and was struck by some common themes that weren't represented in any of the wargames he was aware of. For example, lack of information about the nature of the terrain over a hill or around a corner or even beyond a hedge was very nerve-wracking for soldiers. Even excellent maps just don't have the level of detail a soldier would love to have: is there a ditch past that hedge, which might be hiding an enemy machine gun? Just how many houses are down that next side street? What's beyond that clump of woods? And so on. In a traditional wargame, both players see the whole map of the terrain laid out in advance, and plan their moves accordingly. In real life, you couldn't do that.

And you can't in Up Front.

So when you move out of a safe Terrain, you may or may not know what lies ahead. You may have a Building card in your hand, so you think your group is moving to that building they can see. But your opponent might discard a Stream card onto your group - they couldn't see there was a stream in the way!

Another thing Mr. Allen discovered about WWII: morale and firing. In the movies - and most wargames - you have no trouble firing away at the enemy. You point to your unit, say, "They're shooting at that unit," and roll the dice.

However, Mr. Allen found that only about 20% of soldiers actually fired their weapons in a squad-level encounter! The Action deck has about 25% Fire cards to represent this. Sometimes you just don't have a Fire card - this is one of those times you can't get your squad to stick their heads up over the wall and actually shoot at the enemy ...

Likewise, getting your troops to move forward into hostile fire wasn't always easy. So those times you don't have a Movement card in your hand reflect a lot of reality ... Of course, in most wargames, you can move all your units each turn, blithely forward into slaughter, if you want. Not in reality; not in Up Front.

Yet the game simulates the standard squad practice of "Bound and Overwatch" much more realistically than any other game I know of. Assuming you can get the cards (i.e., assuming you can get your troops to behave the way they've been trained...) one group lays down suppressive fire while another advances. Then the roles are reversed. Elegantly done!

A "pinned" result is the most common adverse Fire effect in Up Front. This also models reality. When enemy bullets started flying near the average soldier's head, he tended to hit the dirt, probably with a few choice words. It'd have to be pretty quiet for a while before he'd risk sticking his head up again, no matter what his squad leader is yelling at him. Hence, those times when you just can't get a Rally card to get your troop moving or firing again ...

In addition to the actual equipment on the Personality cards, the Action card hand size and discard capabilities are the main distinctions between the different nationalities. As with any nationality distinctions, they are oversimplified, but they all make sense.

Up Front is truly a well-designed and thoroughly thought-out game.

Give this unique classic a try!!!

A game usually takes only an hour or less to play.