

Basic Melee Skills

(Fighter 202)

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Teaching Melee skills with a limited number of fighters

(Small numbers translate up)

The purpose of this paper is concerned with the training of
melee skills to a limited number of fighters. I address

basic to advanced melee skills, and provide examples and training techniques you can use in your local group, with as little as three combatants.

I'd like to stress the symbiotic relationship between melee and fighting. Melee is about achieving an objective. Fighting is about killing. You have to fight to achieve your objective in melee, and to achieve your objective in fighting (winning) you have to kill your opponent.

I believe it is every Calontir soldier's duty to be 'melee-aware,' (i.e., know how SCA melee works before you get out in the field). New fighters are trained well above the level of training we 'old timers' had when we began fighting. This trend will continue to improve as long as we learn from new experiences. With the level of training constantly increasing, I propose that there are certain melee aspects that need to be ingrained in newer fighters. We try to do this on a semi-annual basis, spending a couple of hours at war maneuvers to teach basic shield wall tactics, how to use a pole in melee, etc., but many more basic concepts of melee can be at least introduced, at the local fighter practice.

For the commander, consider tactical war games. Each piece does not represent one soldier, but a whole company. That is how you can think about SCA combat when you are planning command decisions, OR how you can train the small number of fighters in our local group to fight melee. This mentality of training not only aids you in the development and implementation of new strategies, but gives your fighters important melee attacking and defending skills which, when combined with the rest of the army, enhances the performance of the Calontir war host.

Lars tells us that we fight for four reasons - Safety, honor, fun, and to win. Safety first, as we never want to hurt (just kill) our friends; honor, as that is a watchword of our Society and part of why we fight; fun, because why would you fight if you weren't having fun, and finally to win. Fighting is competitive, and winning is the conscious objective of the fight.

The paper is divided into four sections: Weapons Use, contains basic information on how to fight in a melee environment; Engagement, covers when you are engaged versus when you think you are engaged; Movement, details

repositioning yourself for better target opportunities; and Tactics, enforce some ways to quickly dispatch your opponents.

Much of the information contained within is the culmination of the war leaders of Calontir through the ages. I must however, specifically attribute Sir Lars Viljhamsson with teaching me (and many of us) these basics.

This paper assumes that you are an authorized fighter of Calontir, with some experience in SCA fighting, be it melee of any size or just at practice.

Weapon's Usage

Weapon's use in melee differs from that of individual combat in the fact that you are presented with multiple targets on multiple opponents at any given time, and you are forced to recognize these targets and the threats. These targets are constantly changing, and decisions as to their effects need to be assessed on an ongoing basis. The wrong decision made, and you are dead, or at best, a target is lost. The melee environment is a fluid one, constantly changing until the last blow is swung. In this part of the text, we discuss basic melee fighting concepts, taking advantage of combined arms.

High/Low

In a line, you are engaged with all fighters in the other line, 2 or 200. Combined arms means that you and up to three of your buddies can strike one opponent. A good way to accomplish this is by targeting different parts of a single enemy fighter, as a shield can only block so much. In working with another fighter, single out a foeman, and tell your buddy to go high, or low (then you will strike the opposite). This way, two of you are throwing two different shots, one at say the opponent's head, and one at the opponent's off side body, and it is likely they will not be able to block both. This technique is often used

with artillery, but can be used with any combination of arms.

Cross Shooting (a/k/a, Cross Firing)

In melee, you are generally not fighting the foeman directly in front of you. You are fighting the line in front of you (i.e., that you are engaged with). In this regard, the majority of your kills (and threats) will come from the foemen in the line that are within weapons range (spear range) from all around. This is because when you are part of a line, there are many targets (for both sides) that you can not protect all at once. Throwing shots at these targets (cross shooting) is optimal exploitation for killing.

When you are in a line, you need to be aware of the "make-up" of the enemy line (what is the placement of weapons, how is the unit organized, what is the unit doing, etc.), and look for openings. Openings generally occur on the sides of fighters (that's what makes cross firing so destructive). Targets to look for are AROUND shields: at the base of shields, gaps where legs are vulnerable; shoulder/neck regions where the head is vulnerable; and side pockets between the weapon and shield where you might land an abdomen.

When cross firing, you need to be aware of the fight going on in the line in front of you. Pay attention to who is throwing blows, and in what succession. If a spearman is firing, then pausing, then firing, then pausing, you can see the pattern where they have just fired, then are about to recover. That is the time to make your move: at the point where their shot is about to hit your line. They will be hyper extended, and not yet thinking about coming back to a guard position. Be aware that this (when YOU throw your shot) is the time YOU will be most vulnerable as well. Pay attention to people who are focused on another part of the fight. The person looking over there is an easy target. People who are not paying attention are asking to be gaked.

There are times when you can't make the killing blow, but you can help your buddy by creating an opening. Use these techniques for getting around shields.

Generally we don't aim for shields. Newer fighters have a tendency to do this, and we try to correct it. There are times, however, when hitting a shield is called for. Smashing down on a shield can be demoralizing and sometimes intimidating for a fighter. It tires them out (careful, it tires you out as well). Hitting a shield often opens up a slot for another target (cross firing).

When you have a shield someplace you don't want it to be, you can use the cross-firing technique to open a slot. Hook (or press) your opponents shield in one of the corners (or edges). This will generally cause him to table his shield, and if you informed your buddy next to you, he's wide open.

Leg them

If you can take the legs of a fighter in a melee, you have reduced their effectiveness enormously. Sometimes you don't have time to fight every fighter you encounter. If you can take their legs, you have destroyed their ability to move around the field, and rendered them fairly useless. You can come back for them after accomplishing your objectives.

The following two segments, "Wingman," are exercises that can be done to train basic melee fighting. For our example, each unit of two will have one each sword/shield (s/sh) and one pole-arm. The one will be s/sh.

Engagement

When are you Engaged?

Engagement is one of the trickiest concepts for most fighters to grasp and maintain in the heat of battle. With constant movement and repositioning, flanks and attacks, engagement in a melee can change in a split second with little warning. So how can you tell if you're engaged?

The "Basics" of Engagement:

1. You are engaged with someone when you move within weapon's range. That is, the longest weapon's range of the two of you.

2. To engage with someone you must have eye contact. Eye contact should be established, before you throw a blow, and this generally means your opponent recognizing that you are an enemy. Your opponent is supposed to "know" (realize, recognize, have "ample" time to defend himself) that the two of you are engaged before you swing at him.

Depending on the urgency of the attack, you may be so kind as to tap your opponent on the back of the shoulder to get their attention. If they ignore you, move around to a better position where they can't. NEVER STRIKE ANYONE FROM BEHIND, EVER (see #5 below).

You may not feel like being polite. Pushing, fouling weapons, and the like are perfectly legitimate ways to get your opponent's attention. At the least, you may tie him up where someone else can get a kill (cross-firing).

You may not have the time for such strategies. I encourage yelling at your opponent. A good blood curdling scream from the bad guy who wasn't there a second ago, always brings out the feeling of a period moment. You might even want to introduce yourself, "Hi, I'm a bad guy," or some such verbiage, before you engage. When he turns to acknowledge whatever you are talking about, give him a second to realize the nature of your business, then, lay-on (Some times you pick the wrong bad guy to sneak up on. There's always the chance he could turn around swinging. Always be on guard when engaging an opponent. Even the ones you don't feel threatened by. They're the sneakiest)!

3. Two facing lines are engaged when they come into weapon's range. When you are in a line, you are engaged with EVERYONE in that line (cross-firing).

4. Flanks are the worst. More than likely this is where you will have engagement problems. You're at the end of a line, on a line that can fold in on itself. You can be engaged from multiple angles, and armies. The same can be said if you engage a flank. The best way to avoid engagement issues is to be aware of EVERYTHING AROUND YOU.

If you are on a flank, and you get pressed from the side, don't disengage from the fight you are in to engage the new threat. If you do, you are now engaged on two fronts, and only quickening your demise.

5. Don't turn around! Once you are engaged, you continue to be engaged until you leave the longest weapon's range. You can be hit in the back if you turn to run, disengage, or just get confused or overwhelmed. Once you are engaged, if your opponent turns, give him a firm slap on the head. Just enough to let him know he wasn't clear yet. This is the only instance where you should think about hitting someone in the back. They knew you were there, and they knew you might do it. Just be friendly about it.

In that same regard. If you charge through an enemy line, you are engaged with the front rank as much as you are they rank you are facing. While it is unlikely you will get killed from behind, you will be swung at as you go through the ranks of your foemen.

If you are being charged, don't panic. Try to block the charge by killing the lead charger. If you can't, keep your wits and your guard, and try to kill others as they pass by you. Do not worry if some of the enemy get through the shield-wall. There are generally a bunch of great-sword guys hanging out in reserve that welcome that kind of visitor.

Shade (The Buddy System)

Shade is the concept that, in line fighting, you are protecting your buddy as much as you are protecting yourself. In that regard, you can stay more focused on the fight(s) more directly in front of you, and not have to worry about your flank(s). Shade narrows your focus. Again, be aware of everything around you. If you loose your shade, something's wrong.

Scutum fighters are a good example of shade. As shade, they protect the pole-arm fighters abdomen and below, so the pole-arms can concentrate more on killing, and less on their lower bodies. If a scutum fighter is killed, the shade is gone, and the pole fighter exposed.

Internal Timer (Have I been here too long?)

Important to pay attention to, although you may loose all sense of time when you are in a melee, is your "internal timer." This is particularly true when you are in a smaller group, or by yourself. As the nature of battle can change in a moment's notice, it is too easy to get wrapped

up in killing, and fail to notice the unit closing on your flank, or your buddies running off. You don't have to "run and gun," but be aware about getting too focused on what you are doing, where there are a number of other factors that may change without warning.

Charging (Through/Into, What is the Difference?)

Charging is generally organized by the commanders with one of two purposes in mind: A heavy press into or the enemy line to push it back, or to penetrate through the line. A charge can be a whole line charge, or a press through one side to weaken the enemy line/unit.

If you see an opportunity to make a hard press/charge, communicate with the troops around you. The charge will be situational, and you may not have the support needed to make an effective strike. Wait for the opportunity, and when the time is right, make the charge. Tell, quietly and quickly, the people around you that you are planning a charge. If you just shout out, "Let's go!," and run into the enemy line, chances are your buddies are going to watch befuddled as your run into certain death. If you get a group together, you'll have more support to make an effective charge. Be prepared.

Generally, a charge will be INTO a line. That is to say, with engagement and the intent to cause heavy damage in a short amount of time. It may be a press to push the unit back, or away from a particular area. It may be a last ditch effort of a loosing unit to break free, or cause serious damage to a bigger unit (think kamikaze) . It may be a limited push to accomplish a task like breaking through part of the unit, or inflict other discord.

When charging, keep a high guard, and stay tight & covered until you get into the fray. When you are all bunched up with the enemy, take advantage that the enemy is just as bunched up, and has less room to swing. With a higher guard, you can move a bit more freely than your opponents (and look at all the heads!). Remember you're engaged with most everyone around you, so pay attention to the difference between weapons striking you and incidental contact with shields and armor.

At times, you may be called to charge THROUGH a line (such as a "bug-out" situation). The objective here is to get through the line/unit, to the other side, without being killed. Keep covered up. DO NOT STOP TO ENGAGE (if you do, a clotting effect will occur and the penetration is over). Move through quickly and determinedly. Pass through against the flats of shields. Keep on guard, and get through as soon as possible without stopping to engage. The gauntlet drill is a great exercise for this maneuver.

Gauntlet Drill --Line up a number of fighters in a row, offset from one another about 9' apart on the diagonal. The fighters in the gauntlet should be just within spear range of one another. Have the person running the gauntlet run up to each fighter, throw a blow, and move on to the next fighter, without stopping to engage. This teaches a focus on defensive movement, while still maintaining a threat.

Movement

Movement - flanking

Flanking a unit is the best! Flanks are the sides of a line. They can occur by accident when a line breaks, or naturally when a unit is passing by. Natural flanks tend to be more supported, but all that changes quickly when the 'big' fight is in front of the line.

Flanking is done by engaging the end of a line. You have the opportunity to run behind the enemy ranks, to break them up, or fight a smaller number of fighters than if you were engaging the front of the line. A line that passes within weapons range is engaged.

Flanking is often best done when the unit being flanked doesn't see you until you engage. Wide flanks, sometimes really wide flanks, are required to make the best opportunity. In these cases, you need to consider the amount of time it will take you to get to a certain location, and if you can spare that in the overall battle plan.

Passing Around (Small Circles)

Small circles repel big circles. If you are pressed, pivot off of one of your heels, remaining on guard, and take a step backwards with your other foot. If you are being pressed by someone going in a straight line, they will continue to go in a straight line when they don't meet the expected resistance of your shield, and suddenly, their back is open. This technique works best in the open field when facing a single or single line of fighters.

Tactics

Who to Kill

In the front ranks of a line, your duty is to protect the artillery in the half rank behind you. In that half rank, your duty is to protect the first rank, and kill the enemy. Shields cover the poles, poles fend off presses and lay barrage/suppressing attack fire, and spears exploit targets of opportunity all around. Look for these targets of opportunity:

1. People who are not paying attention to the fight going on around them (for the obvious reasons).
2. People shouting orders. These people are doing what you don't want - communicating. People shouting orders are probably more experienced fighters, trying to get their unit (or section of unit around them) to do something. Often, that something is motivating them to charge, or take advantage of a situation, you may not be aware of.
3. People wearing crowns/coronets/white belts/or recognizable heraldry. People wearing recognizable heraldry (as described above) are likely commanders (they at least advertise that they have some skill at arms). In many units, the commander is the glue that holds the unit together. Killing a commander can be demoralizing, and confusing for the enemy. A lot of the time, more undisciplined units will go into battle with their only command being, "Follow me!" If you kill that commander, the rest of his unit has to make up their next plan, and depending on the skill of the unit, killing that one commander may effectively take the threat out of that unit.
4. Threats. The spearman who has off-ed three of your buddies needs to die. The first guy in a charge needs to

be shown the errors of his ways (and hopefully some of his buddies will trip all over him and slow the rest down). The fighter who is sneaking up on your right flank can't be allowed to get away with that. That sneaky combat-archer hiding behind that shieldman. If you see something that is "bad" and you can do something about it, quickly weigh the options (Will it get you killed? Will it save the unit? Can this be done some other way? Is it worth it?), and commit. At the very least, let some other fighters know what's going on. Someone may have a better opportunity to correct the situation.

How to Confront a Shield-man Backed by Artillery

When closing with multiple opponents, there are two strategies that may be employed, both of which use your opponent as a shield. For simplicity, let us assume you are a sword and shield (s/sh) fighter confronting a s/sh backed with a pole-arm.

One strategy is to circumvent the s/sh fighter and get the pole between you and the s/sh. In doing this, you have placed the s/sh out of range, as he cannot fight effectively around the pole. This turns the situation into a one on one with the s/sh. This strategy works better in an open field, as you will have to constantly be aware of the s/sh and where they are repositioning to.

To avoid this situation, it's best to work together and support each other with combined arms (see tactics-wingman).

The other version of this thought is more readily used when you are pressing a line. If you can get so close to the s/sh that they cannot effectively fight you (i.e., place the flat of your shield on and above your opponent's shield), you can concentrate your firepower on the artillery behind them. You can also cross-fire to other s/sh in the front ranks. You will need to exert some pressure on your opponents shield. At first he may think you are pressing him, but after a bit he will get annoyed. Also, don't succumb to the urge to kill the s/sh you're pressing. They are helping keep you alive.

If you are confronted in this manner, pivot on your shield foot (if you can) and let the force of him pushing carry him through to "fall" forward. If he's pressing your

shield, and suddenly it gives away (moves back) he is going to "fall" the direction he is pressing. (small circles)

Both of these techniques involve being very aware of the situation around you.

Wingman (2 on 2) (Teamwork)

The concept here is to play off one another. The two of you will line up facing the two of them. At lay-on, one of you will charge into the enemy line. Your buddy will be a half step behind you, taking advantage of your attack, cleaning up. If you are not successful in killing your target opponent, come quickly back around and engage the enemy that your buddy is struggling against. Your buddy will then, in turn, disengage, and come quickly back around and engage the enemy that you just engaged, and so on.

Wingman (2 on 1) (Dispatch Quickly)

In a two on one, your objective is to kill the one fighter quickly and efficiently. This is used in battlefield conditions when you can't spend a lot of time in one given place. The two of you close quickly and strike at different targets (high/low).

If you are the "one," review How to Confront a Shield-man Backed by Artillery above.

Melee fighting isn't about killing your opponents. Melee fighting is working together to achieve an objective. Often times that does mean a lot of killing, but at times it means keeping a cool head, and knowing the best way to accomplish the objectives set before you.

Lastly, here are some ways to improve your or your local group's melee skills:

- War Practice - At least once in a while, have a fighter practice devoted to melee. Two on one drills can be exponentially increased to accommodate any number of fighters. Learn how to work with, and play off of one another. Practice melee situations, especially engagement. Practice fighting with unequal numbers.

- Take your show on the road - Get together with the next closest group and challenge them. Have a local 'war' event between the two groups to determine who owns that river/road/pile of cookies. Test yourselves.

- Go to war - The best way to experience what SCA combat is like, is to be there doing it. Experience gives you insights no practice can. Experience is our best recruiter, anyone who has been to a major war will urge others to go and share in the camaraderie.

- Focus on the weapons of war - Train in pole, spear, and shield. These weapons are most effective in melee.

- Take command! - Take turns in your small local unit. Command gives you better insight on how things work. When you have to figure out where to commit your troops in a heavy fight, you soon begin to learn what works and what doesn't. Even if you never command a large army, you will have a better understanding of why the generals issue the commands they do.

- Read, game and research - After the practice, hang out with your comrades-in-arms, war game together, play chess, read about tactics and strategies of wars and battles. Practice thinking ahead.

These are just ideas to get you started. Be innovative. Continue to practice and learn from any source available. When you see something that needs done - do it! When you see a hole in the line - fill it! Improvement of our army comes from each one of us, from the beginning shield-fighter to the veteran commander. Tactical conditioning starts with the individual fighter, and spreads throughout the army with repeated training and exposure (to combat; to new ideas). Take a leading role in the Calontir army and prepare yourself for the next time Their Majesties call us to arms!