

# Small Unit Fighting

(Fighter 201)

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## Preface

When I originally wrote the outline for this class, I was under the impression, mistakenly, that I was writing about general melee fighting. My first outline was three pages covering everything from line fighting to battlefield strategies and tactics. Later, when I found that I only had 45 minutes to cover small unit fighting (what I feel that all fighters should know about basic melee awareness), my first problem was logistics. How to teach a seven-man unit to react to battlefield conditions - knowing that I would not have enough combatants to simulate the environment that I wanted my pupils to be aware of. I needed a large area and numerous combatants to effectively teach small unit fighting. Dilemma.

I took my original outline, I purged the parts that I thought irrelevant and extrapolated on the remaining relevant topics. I presented my first draft to my squire, Gaius, and received excellent feedback. In that discussion, it dawned on me that the basics of small unit combat (any melee fighting, really) breaks down to three basic principals: awareness, efficiency; and mobility. I rewrote my lecture based on those principals. When I was reviewing my final draft with my squire, Hengest, he asked if I was going to use playing pieces to simulate combat. That insight was brilliant! Syr Andrew Lyon of Wolvenwood has taught us a melee-chess game that he came up with to simulate small unit combat and how fighters could use combined arms together in melee. It seemed only fitting to include.

This work you will soon be reading is the lecture copy that I presented at War College, April A.S. XXXIIII. It has been augmented to include insights that came up during the two classes that I presented it to, including comments that I emphasized when speaking about specific points. It also answers some points that weren't originally address. The response I received from the class was very positive, and I continue to welcome comment and discussion on the issues contained herein.

The drills I cite were taught to me by Sir Lars Viljalmsson; the picto-grams are from Viscount Ternon de Cearleon's "Book of Rattan Death", and the melee-chess game is the creation of Syr Andrew Lyon of Wolvenwood. The remaining comments of this work are mine, based on my observations, experience and philosophy regarding SCA combat. When writing, I primarily had Pennsic in mind, but the conditions are relevant throughout the Society's wars. Feel free to distribute this work, giving proper credit to the respective authors. I challenge anyone reading this to improve their melee skills. I can't teach you how to approach melee fighting, but I can tell you what I've seen work, and that can be a good jumping off point to develop your own command and leadership skills.

-the Falcon Flies

-Duke Chrystofer Kensor, EAldorman Calontir, KSCA, OP, etc.

## Small Unit - Fighter 201

### Awareness. Efficiency. Mobility.

The purpose of this class is to acquaint the fighter with the small unit and how the small unit can best react to different battlefield situations.

The small unit is a microcosm of the bigger army. Tactics used in a small unit can be translated up to bigger units or even down to the individual combatant. These tips are presented from a commander's point of view. The thinking behind that is that if everyone is capable of taking command of a small group of fighters, then everyone should know what will be expected of them in a small unit scenario.

Small units differ from skirmish or cavalry units due to their purposes.

- **Skirmish** units generally are a part of the army that screens incoming stray fighters or delays an attack while the army forms up. At that point, they fade back into the main body of the army.
- **Cavalry** units are often called on to support the army when a hard attack is called for in a specific area.
- **Small units** are just that, a small group of fighters who may or may not have a specific purpose but who are on their own to survive for a limited amount of time (as long as they remain unattached to the main body of the army).

#### Small Units

Regarding the complement of the small unit:

When having the luxury of being able to compose a small unit, one formula is the "pyramid" method of building: for every two shieldmen, have one pole-arm; for every two pole-arms, have one spear. This formula keeps your artillery well covered by your infantry a good balance of firepower and maintains the quick response and mobility of your unit. You might substitute a spear for the second pole, when a number of poles are not available (giving you range with less numbers). Any given situation will demand new reasons to increase the number of a particular weapon style. Adaptation to the needs of the objective is a crucial consideration in every case.

Generally in a small unit (for our purpose, we assume that a small unit is less than 15 fighters), you are trying to either accomplish a specific task or get back to the main body of the

army. In any case, we assume that there is no way to gain the aid of a bigger unit, and you are faced with tactical and logistical situations. In trying to do either, you may be faced with challenges and opportunities that the unit will have to overcome to survive. How do you maintain cohesion of the unit to accomplish your task or make it back to reinforce the main body of the army? Three key concepts: awareness, efficiency, and mobility.

### **Awareness**

Always be aware of your environment. Look around at all times unless you are directly engaged. Look for tactical situations developing. Is the unit in front of you getting ready to charge or disengage? Is that a big unit on the move? Look around every opportunity you get to see what kind of opponents you are facing. When you encounter another group, know the size, make-up, and when possible, what they are doing/where they are going.

Look to see if this is a major army with multiple companies/reserves or a small unit like yourselves. If at all possible, try to get an accurate estimate of numbers. If you run into an allied commander, you can act as a scout and inform them of those three elements of the unit you encountered. Saying that there's a bunch of blue tape over there doesn't help that much.

The make-up of the unit you encounter is equally important. What is their balance of weapons? Look to see if the unit is armed with shields (and if they are war shields or regular shields) or artillery. Get an estimate of the ratio of shields to poles/spears if you can. This can give you clues to their potential assignment or where they could be a threat later. Also look for key targets. Kings, dukes and other command types of people that might have heraldry.

Knowing heraldry also gives aids you in determining what kind of unit you are facing. By recognizing the heraldry of a unit, you can begin to tell how specific units fight: the Black and Purple unit hits hard; or the unit with White Stages on a Green Field runs and guns, those guys with the fur and no armor are 'crazy'. Knowing how a particular unit fights a particular way, and seeing them across the field, you will have a greater knowledge of how to react to them.

Banners or specific scenario objectives are good to know about. Specific units, like a roving pack of knights or Tuchux are hunter/killer groups sometimes assigned to just run around and kill off resurrecting fighters or other small units. You might run across a small, disorganized band of fighters coming from resurrection point. NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POTENTIAL THREAT

FROM ANY SIZE UNIT. Just because they don't look nasty, doesn't mean they aren't.

It is equally important to know the make-up of your own unit, the skill level of those who will fight beside you (as well as their war experience), and what weapons you have to work with. This knowledge of your unit's potential and limitations will aid your decision-making when decision-making time is a premium.

Know also the physical health of your unit, as well as their morale. A group of fighters who just came out of a hard fight aren't going to be able to run back and take a banner. Likewise, morale is equally important. Fighting should be fun, never desperate.

By a few moments' observation (or just by passing by the unit encountered) you may be able to discern what the enemy is up to. They may be engaged on one side, and you've come across their rear/reserves. If they are defending a key target, they may have skirmishers to keep you at a distance. Keep at a distance and look past the skirmishers to see what they are guarding. They may be a decoy. If the unit is on the move, look to see if they are marching or are at a faster pace. Shadow them if they let you. They may be taking you to a desperate fight that one of you needs to win (or not).

Be aware of your physical environment as well. Know the lay of the land, including boundaries, hazards, marshals, chirurgeons, and bubble-holds. This knowledge will help you move from point to point faster and let you put the whole battle in perspective as you observe what is going on. Keep away from anywhere you don't want to fight. Know where your best escape route is. A small unit can move through dense or even crowded terrain much faster than a big unit. Use terrain to hide in, escape, and deter your opponents.

Also keep an eye for the occasional 'gonzo' fighter who will charge you from a blind side. ALWAYS be aware of everything around you.

### **Efficiency**

When you engage in combat as a small unit, you ideally want to do the maximum damage with the minimum effort, take little or no casualties, then leave the fight intact. With a small number of fighters, you need to do those things perfectly, of which your unit is capable. You can't change that there is a unit of 30 combatants that you have to get through, but you can out-manuever them, draw them out so another unit can take them more readily, string them out to kill them more efficiently, or hit their flank when they're engaged so that you now face a smaller threat.

The bad thing is that when you take any losses, your unit's strength is greatly reduced. When I think about the make-up of units/armies and trying to split them up, I think in percentages, as they better translate to any size unit. You need to quickly dispatch your opponents, or move rapidly to your objective, without interference. A small unit can do these things with mobility and focus.

The fighters in the small unit must work together to ensure survival. There is no reason you can't maximize your killing potential by working together and devastating any small group (maybe even up to twice your size) if your shields and artillery work off of each other and remain fluid and mobile. Support each other by capitalizing on targets (just as in line fighting). DON'T belly-up fight (engage a unit head on), unless you can either disengage easily, blow through the line, or devastate your opponent quickly.

### **Mobility**

A good point about the small unit is that one person can generally command the unit without having interference from different stimuli (i.e., a small unit generally can only fight one fight at a time, unlike a company which can be fighting on two fronts at once). One commander can focus the unit's attention. One fighter can readily give direct commands to everyone in the unit, without the confusion of a sub-commander. This greatly aids in quick, concise decision-making. Communication is much easier, and the small unit can hit harder, quicker, and disengage more readily than a large unit.

Due to the size of your unit, there are few tasks you can take on successfully in a heads-up fight. Mobility effectively changes the size of your unit. A small unit that faces a bigger unit, line to line, will easily get devastated by the large number of fighters in front of them. A small unit that is mobile can run and gun, hit the larger unit on virtually any side, or even penetrate through the unit, causing chaos in their ranks and possibly breaking it up. The best example of that tactic is a mad-dog<sup>1</sup> type of maneuver.

A small unit moves faster (a unit's movement is generally limited to the movement of its slowest fighter). A small unit can move more readily through hazardous terrain. No commander of a large unit is going to follow a small unit through dense forest, or through a pass between other units, for fear of losing cohesion of the unit. Small units can also react quicker to a given situation. A large army takes longer to regroup, turn, and engage. A small unit can do all this in a fraction of the time.

## **Fighting the Fight**

ATTACK WHERE THE ENEMY LEAST EXPECTS IT (they hate that!)

Tactical fighting generally isn't directly in front of you. That's the fun part of command - knowing what's going on and how your unit can be the most devastating in regard to the situation. Sometimes you need to fight those guys behind the line, or in the second rank, that think they're doing a great job killing your spearmen. Using a small unit's mobility, you can easily create havoc where you want, and this aids in an overall control of the battle.

Have a small unit charge through a line and get in the backfield. Do a wide flank - really wide (out to the edges of the hard boundary if time permits) - and get in back of their army. Get small or walk unassumingly, as people sometimes discount the fighters who look like they're walking back to resurrection point (not paying attention to tape color or even that big golden falcon on your chest). Never lie when asked if you're dead though, and don't go out of your way to look dead (NEVER CHEAT). Be prepared to run away. If a big unit is coming at you, maybe you should keep your distance. Know how to charge through a group of fighters without engaging. It's hard but rewarding when you come out in back and see the unguarded banner (Getting back out is another problem.)

Once in back, you can hang out and relax for a while (a while may be a fraction of a second or as long as you can stay unnoticed) and observe the situation to see where your unit can do the most damage. Look for corners/ends of lines that you can come up against or gaps where the enemy line is breaking up. Look for thin lines you can break through. Look for key targets, commanders, spearmen, or banners you can take out. Again, you're running a lot and are under a great deal of fire often. Don't ignore shots; expect to be hit from behind. Expect to be hit hard (Like I said, they really hate it when you're running amongst them.)

Running through the back of the enemy line can cause chaos (We like a nice controlled chaos.) By crowding the foemen together where they can't swing, pushing them (politely but firmly) out of ranks, or tying up their weapons or shields where they can't swing or block you are creating a distraction that the enemy must deal with in addition to the front they are facing.

If you are discovered and need to get back to your unit, they're right in front of you. Be careful when you run through the back of the enemy lines to return to your company. You might be confused with a charge and be killed by friendly fire. If you can signal to your friends that you're either going to be a

disruption; they can have time to monopolize on it, or that you're coming through, and you'd like them to help you out of that situation you've put yourself in. Even those big purple tabards don't indicate your intent when you're charging out of an enemy line into the Calontir army!

When out in the field, distractions can be a useful tactic to promote killing also. One small unit can easily distract an entire wing of the enemy line. The more of their fighters engagement you can control or detain, gives your army greater odds in the overall fight. You need to be aware here, that your unit is not needed elsewhere, that your unit is not holding less than 1:2, and that your army isn't losing the fight altogether.

You might also have one fighter run past the line, maybe engage and break off quickly, then have the small unit attack while the enemy is focused on the running fighter. The same can be done by splitting the unit in two, having the first half of the unit do a pulse charge and disengage. Then, as the enemy is pulled out, the second half of the unit can hit them in the flank, and the first unit can reinforce the second attack. Do take into account the size of the unit you're engaging, and think about your alternatives before engaging.

Before committing to any situation, have a good idea of the outcome and what your next alternative might be if you survive. Is this pulse charge into the back of the Eastern army going to do anything or just get your guys killed with no significant tactical achievements? Can you actually take that banner and have a good chance of getting out or just weaken the banner guard so that another unit can finish the task (check to see if there's another unit who can back you up before such commitment)? Remember, once you're discovered as a threat, the commanders will want to exterminate you. You need to move quickly to your objective, accomplish what you set out to do, and get out of the situation quickly! Remember Princess Leia to Han Solo, "When you came in here, didn't you have a plan to get out?" Always think about what happens next.

### **In summary**

The keys to the best achievements in battlefield scenarios are awareness of the surrounding environment, quick purposeful movement, and efficient combat skills (quick and 'proper' reaction to the situation). Know who to fight for the best possible outcome of the overall scenario. Only put your unit in a situation that you can control and that will fit a key piece to complete the strategic puzzle of the battle.

Below is an outline of tips of what to look for and drills that can be done to train these concepts. The drills can be preformed with as little as three fighters.

Awareness can be trained best through knowledge of what to look for. Keep in mind the following when in a battlefield situation:

- Know your unit. Know the complement of weapons available and the skills of the fighters with you.
- Be aware of changing battlefield situations. Expect the unexpected.
- Be aware of the enemy, the complement of their unit, how they stand, how they move, and what their posture is overall. Pay particular attention to key facts like number of fighters, make-up of weapons, and if there are any scenario objectives they might be guarding. Look for heraldry that might signify kings, or other commanders.
- Be aware of your physical environment. Know the lay of the land. Know what the best routes are from strategic point to strategic point. Keep away from areas you don't want to fight in, including hazards and boundaries.

Efficiency should, to an extent, already be part of a soldier's basic knowledge. These are some basic drills that can be adjusted to accommodate any number of fighters greater than two:

- Practice two-on-one drills where the object is to knock out your opponent as quickly as possible. Use high/low and leg and leave techniques. Protect your friend while eliminating the enemy as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- Practice two-on-two drills using movement and range to your advantage. Know how shields and poles best work together, and capitalize on efficiency.
- Practice running a gauntlet or breaking through a line without engaging. Get through alive and hit the enemy where they don't expect to be hit.

Mobility is often the key to the survival of the small unit. Being able to get to where you need to be, then getting out quickly ensures the survival of the unit. Practice:

- Movement to Control - In any combat, the unit having the control of movement, will control the fight. Be conscious of this when you fight one on one. See how much control you have over the fight when you are in command of mobility.

- Know how to use terrain features to your advantage. Fight down a hill (from on top), using trees as immortal shieldmen. Know the best escape routes.
- Know how to do more advanced maneuvers like pulse charges<sup>2</sup>, flanking maneuvers<sup>3</sup>, and how to bug-out<sup>4</sup>. Being able to disengage at a moment's notice is stunning to an enemy.

**Footnotes Regarding Terms used in this Work**

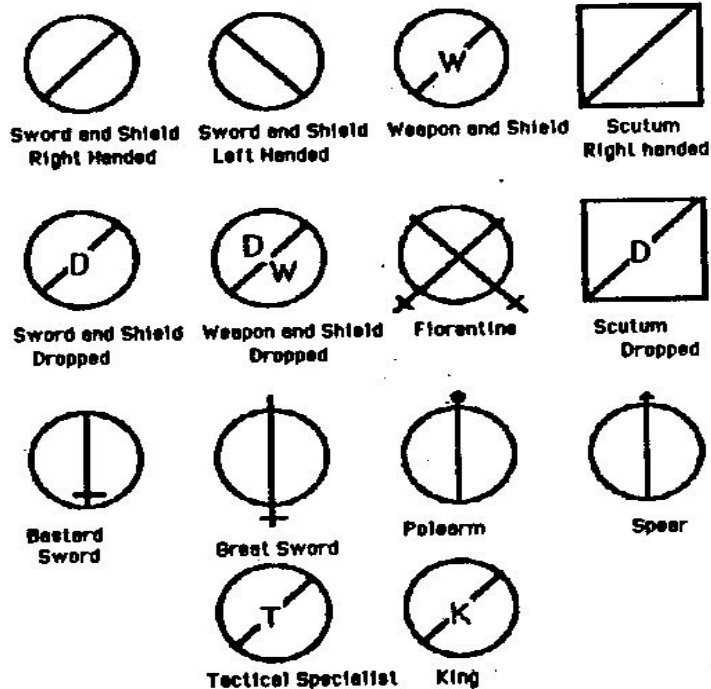
1. Mad-dog - A flanking maneuver. Your army runs wide, left or right of the enemy army (mad-dog right/left), and continues to circle the enemy, just in range, throwing shots at any opportune target. The enemy will try to track you as you run by, only to be hit by an upcoming fighter. The mad-dog maneuver continues until your unit has the superior odds, it breaks out into small melees, or a counter measure is taken by the enemy, splitting your line, and reducing your momentum.

2. Pulse Charge - A charge intended to push the enemy rank back and then disengage.

3. Flank (v.) - Moving out of range of the enemy, usually to one side, either to hit from the side or to pass by without engaging.

4. Bug-out - The situation is hopeless, you're taking heavy casualties, you stay here, and you die. There may be times when survival is more important than holding ground. Bugging out is disengaging from a hopeless fight to regroup elsewhere.

**Combat Pictography**  
 Viscount Sir Ternon de Caerleon



## Sir Andrew's Melee-Chess Game

This is a game that Syr Andrew-Lyon of Wolvenwood created to simulate melee combat using readily available pieces.

### Playing Pieces

Piece	Represents	Attack			Special Rules	
		Range	Defend	Move		
Pawn	Sword/Shield	1	5	1		
Rook	Pole-Arm	2	4	2		
Bishop	Spear	3	3	2		
Knight	Duke (two weapon)		1	6	3	Gets two attacks
King	King	1	5	2		Reduces defense -1
Queen	Archer (Optional)		4	2	4	

### Initial Play

Each player rolls to see who gets initiative each round. The winner decides if they want to move first or not. The player who moves first, moves any number of their pieces (all, some or none). Then the second player moves any number of their pieces (all some or none).

### Declare Attacks

Next, the first player declares his attacks. He may attack with any, all, or none of his pieces. Pieces may fire over one another from either player's pieces the number of squares in their range. One piece may be attacked from multiple pieces (i.e. three shieldmen in a range of one pole-arm, may each attack that pole-arm). However, when the target has been killed, the remaining pieces may not declare a different attack that round. The second player then declares his attacks in like manner.

### Attack/Defend

The attacks are next resolved. The first player goes through his declared attacks one at a time, the defending player rolling the single die for results. If he rolls below the defend point, he successfully defends from the attack, and nothing happens. Should he roll the defend point or above, his defense failed and his piece is dead, and should be removed only after his play. Pieces killed during the first player's turn get to make their attack even if they are killed. This is to simulate concurrent combat conditions.

### **Special Rules**

The duke gets two attacks per round. He may use them on the same target or two separate targets.

The king effectively gets a +1 to hit. He reduces his opponent's defense by one point.

### **Play Variations**

You can play this game as a field battle using the whole board. You can play as a limited front using only a few squares. You can play different scenarios, like to the last man, or kill the king.