

TAC NEWS

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The following is a reprint of an excerpt of the Spring/Summer 1994 Tac News

DEBACLE IN THE WEST WOODS

The classical Greek definition of tactics is "the matter of arrangements." Wargamers principally concern themselves with pushing metal and chucking dice. However, intelligence, command cohesion, and other staff matters are key elements in the "matter of arrangements." Any battle analysis shows defeat or victory is a sum total of all these parts. Case in point: the struggle for the West Woods at the Battle of Antietam.

By September 15, 1862, elements of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia occupied the high ground separating Antietam Creek from the Potomac River. In the Union camp, Major General George B. McClellan, due to faulty intelligence and lackluster reconnaissance, believed he faced a vastly superior Confederate force. (In actuality, he outnumbered Lee 3:1) Believing pitch battle impossible, McClellan devised an enveloping double pincer that would swing behind the rebels and cut their line of retreat. After issuing the day's orders, McClellan committed the battle's first blunder; he went to bed.

McClellan's right pincer was formed by Maj Gen. Edwin "Bull" Sumner's II Corps, Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker's I Corps, and Maj. Gen. Joseph K. F. Mansfield's XII Corps. Although they operated to a common purpose, no formal communication existed between the three corps headquarters. First and XII corps were ordered by the army staff to march at sunrise on September 17th, but Sumner received no signal. The general was fit to be tied. His men, roused from their bed rolls at 2:00 am, had been fed and in ranks since before dawn. Sumner rode to army HQ, only to be told McClellan was sleeping. For two critical hours Sumner waited an audience. As Sumner wiled the hours he asked for, but didn't receive, a running battle assessment. The general was at odds with the army staff and this "matter of arrangement" was sluffed due to temperament.

At 7:20am, Sumner finally got his marching orders. Within minutes, Brig. Gen. John Sedgwick's 2nd, and Brig Gen William H. French's 3rd Divisions were moving. Maj. Gen. Israel Richardson's 1st Division formed the reserve. Sumner marched with Sedgwick's division and personally directed the fording of Antietam Creek just below Pry's Mill. Once across the creek, French veered to the south, parallel to Sedgwick, and the two divisions advanced side by side in six parallel lines. Certain the rebels were being driven from the field, II Corps confidence was shaken as it stumbled onto the strewn

wreckage of Hooker's and Mansfield's commands. These two federal corps, mustering some 25,000 men, lay obliterated by a mere 6,000 confederates.

The rebels, however, had lost over a third of their number and were thoroughly spent. Their line lay threadbare; a patchwork of bleeding and dying regiments. To shore up his forces, Major General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, commanding the Confederate left, requested reinforcements. In response, Lee readied Brig. Gen. Lafayette McLaws' division. McLaw's veteran force of 2,500-strong was resting in Sharpsburg. It had just completed a 14-hour forced march, barefoot, over a "macadamized" (rough gravel with tar) road. Despite exhaustion and torn feet, the division was itching to fight.

Less than three miles to the north north east, II Corps' staff stumbled about in an information vacuum. The lack of formal communications between Sumner and I or XII Corps headquarters was now rendered moot; Mansfield lay dead and Hooker wounded. Sumner, smelling blood, spurred his charger to the head of his troops. With his focus forward, Sumner lost the big picture. His reserve lagged a mile behind, no artillery accompanied Sedgwick, and no skirmishers covered his flanks. Left to its own devices, French's division strayed to the south and bogged. Without firing a shot, II Corps was reduced to a single understrength division, a mere third of its muster.

What he lacked in command subtleties, Sumner made up in aggressiveness. He ordered Sedgwick forward. Some authorities suggest Sumner thought he was beyond the shattered Confederate left and could march over the crest of the ridge, wheel left, and cross their rear in classic cavalry style. Second Division filed, still in three parallel brigade lines, from west to south. When the trailing regiments had turned, all three lines halted and faced front, thus forming a column of brigades in line with a mere 50 to 75 yards between each line. The formation's frontage stretched over a quarter mile.

This column of brigades deployment proved, in hindsight, a blunder. A contemporary account suggested that the formation was based on cavalry tactics, where units formed in waves for mass, rather than in line for firepower. This is plausible, Sumner had a cavalry background. Regardless, the deployment was fundamentally flawed. The rear ranks were too close to maneuver to support the front line, and the entire formation was vulnerable to flank attack.

Sedgwick's division passed through the East Woods, and climbed the rail fence into the infamous "Cornfield." Here they took fire from 25 rebel artillery pieces atop Nicodemus Heights. Picking their way through the debris of battle, the Federals maintained their dress precisely, moving at the common time (90 steps per minute). Sumner, in the lead, crossed the Hagerstown Pike and encountered the 125th Pennsylvania at the Dunker Church. The Pennsylvanians were hard pressed. To their support Sumner ordered the 34th New York of Brig. Gen. Willis German's brigade wheeled out of line at the double quick. The rest of Sedgwick's division scrambled over the post-and-rail fences lining the Hagerstown Pike, dressed on the colors, and plunged into the northern half of the West Woods.

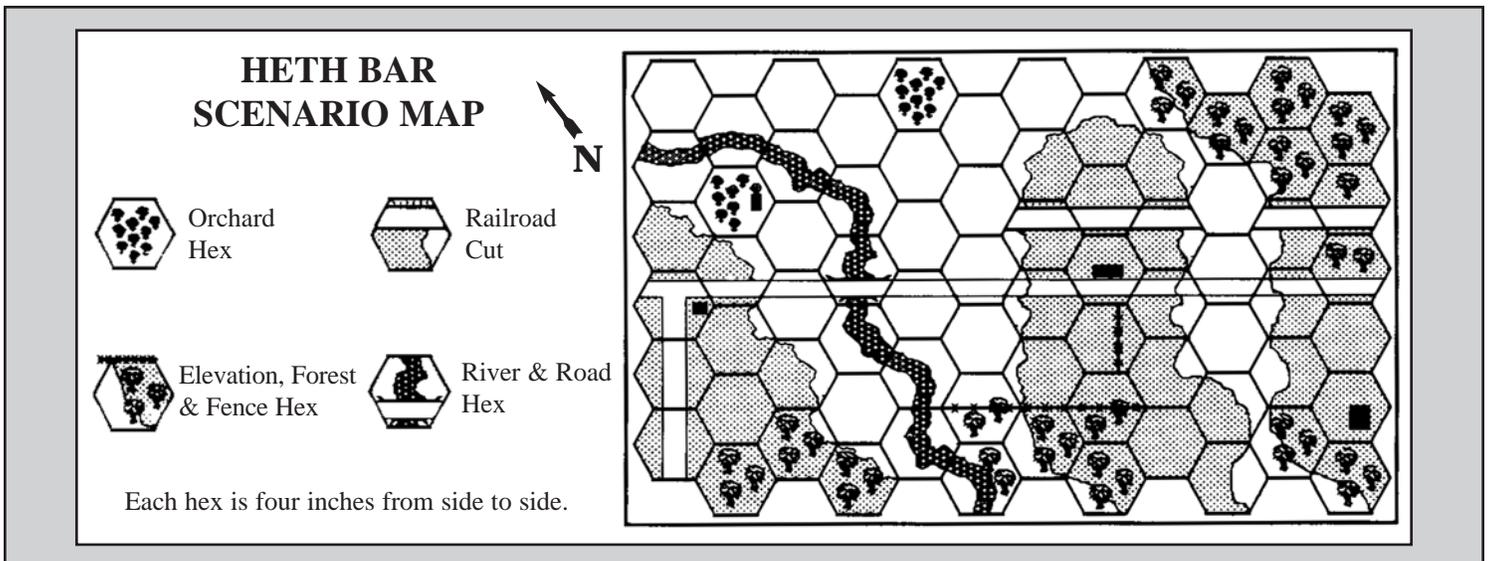
The woods about Antietam Creek were clear of underbrush and presented little obstacle to movement. The blue tide swept forward, flushing Confederate skirmishers. Gorman's men swept through the half mile deep West Woods, and paused at the fence bordering the Poffenburger Farm. There stood Jubal Early's brigade of Virginians and battle was joined. As Gorman halted, no one bothered to stop the two rear brigades. Brig. Gens. Napoleon T. Dana and Oliver O. Howard continued their advance until they nearly collided with Gorman. The federals stood packed like cattle; a mere twenty yards separated the division's front and rear ranks. Rebel fire tore into the densely packed Federal center. Single minie balls felled as many as a half a dozen men. The division's right stood in the woods north of the farm, facing only skirmishers. To support the center, German wheeled the 1st Minnesota to the left, facing them to the southwest. Behind the Minnesotans conformed the 19th Massachusetts of Dana's brigade. But, because their Minnesota comrades masked them, 19th couldn't lend any support.

Sumner's advance had not gone unnoticed by Confederate generals. Stonewall Jackson again called for reinforcements. Lee, with characteristic decisiveness, pulled troops from quiet sectors and called up his reserve. Drums sounded the assembly in the streets of Sharpsburg as McLaw formed his division and marched by the left flank towards the West Woods. Confederate staff work, however, also had its faults and one brigade wandered off. Nonetheless, ten rebel brigades closed on Sedgwick's Union division.

McLaws ordered "by company into line" as his van neared the Reel Farm. Each company swung up and to the right, forming a column of companies at full distance. He then bellowed "forward into line!" The lead company continued straight ahead, every other company wheeled 45° to the right and, at the double quick, jogged until their captain swung them up onto the line. Under McLaw's adroit leadership, his division deployed from a route column to a line of battle straight ahead in under five minutes, while on the move. During this maneuver's execution, Brig. Gen. Joseph Kershaw spotted the 125th Pennsylvania with the 34th and 78th New York in the vicinity of Dunker Church. On his own initiative, Kershaw ran the 2nd South Carolina to their left until they flanked the federals. Although the South Carolinians were outnumbered in rifle strength by 5:1, they had the advantage of position and a common command; the three Union regiments each came from a different brigade. Enfilade fire drove the federals across the pike and cleared the southern West Woods/Dunker Church area. Through this gap poured McLaw's center. They rushed past Dunker Church and swung north, into the rear of Sedgwick's division.

As the cry went up, "They're behind us!," panic spread amongst the Federals and their line came unglued from south to north. Sumner rode by the 19th Massachusetts shouting, "Back, boys, for God's sake, move back. You are in a bad fix." Total catastrophe seemed imminent. Dana and Howard's brigades disintegrated. Gorman's brigade, outnumbered 3:1, was turned in the flank and rear. To disengage his brigade, Gorman ordered "to face by the right flank," but only one of his regiments, the 1st Minnesota, executed the order. The 19th Massachusetts, under fire from front and flank, executed a change of front to the rear on the first company. This maneuver refused the entire regiment and brought them onto line with the 1st Minnesota. The two regiments gave ground stubbornly, in good order, covering the division's routed remnants.

The West Woods battle is a typical American Civil War action. As such, it provides an interesting historic yardstick by which to judge Civil War rules. Before radio communications and aerial reconnaissance, "matters of arrangements" were especially critical. Through bungled staff work and waffling leadership, McClellan's right was reduced by a third without taking a shot in anger. Second Corps was reduced to an understrength division by a brave man lacking the breadth of leadership required of a corps commander.



Tac News Scenario #3



SET-UP & SUGGESTED VICTORY CONDITIONS

Buford's cavalry set-up east (to the right) of the creek. The entire creek is fordable, but it will disorder crossing infantry. The Confederates then enter the western (left) side of the board.

The Confederates win by driving the Union cavalry off the board within two hours. The Union wins by occupying six contiguous high ground heres at game's end. Any other result is a draw.

TIME LINE

Battle runs from 8:00 am to 10:00am

HETH BAR

Gettysburg, July 1st 1863

Brig. Gen. John Buford, commander US 1st Cavalry Division, knew his position's strategic importance. By contesting the ridges west of Gettysburg with reinforcements from Maj. Gen. John Reynold's I Corps, Buford intended to buy the time necessary for the Federal army to occupy the surrounding high ground.

From his vantage point atop the Lutheran Seminary, Buford observed the Rebel vanguard, consisting of Maj. Gen. Harry Heth's division, advancing down the Chambersburg Pike. Heth, under orders to avoid a general engagement, believed Gettysburg garrisoned only by militia. He ordered Brig. Gens. J. J. Archer's and J. R. Davis' brigades to sweep the amateurs away. The Confederates attacked at 8:00AM without the benefit of artillery. The guns, located back in the column, would take another hour to deploy. Thus began the Battle of Gettysburg.

SUGGESTED SPECIAL RULES

1. Buford is a superior commander of average troops
2. Heth is an average commander of average troops.
3. The Federals were armed with breech loading carbines, the Confederates with rifled muskets.
4. Confederate artillery support starts at 9:15AM.

The Railroad Cut was excavated for a rail line, but the track had yet to be laid. Model it by slicing a slope section out of a standard hill hex. Cut the section down to the 1/2" base hex with a coping saw. The base of the cut should be as wide as your stands, and the banks should be steeply sloped. Finish it to look like open dirt with scattered weeds.

1ST US CAVALRY DIVISION, Brigadier General John Buford



1ST BRIGADE Col. W. Gamble

3rd Indiana Cavalry 300 men
8th Illinois Cavalry 500 men
12th Illinois Cavalry 200 men
8th New York Cavalry 500 men

2ND BRIGADE Col. T. C. Devin

17th Pennsylvania Cavalry 300 men
9th New York Cavalry 350 men
6th New York Cavalry 400 men
3rd West Virginia Cavalry 100 men

Battery A, 2nd U. S 6x 3-inch Ordnance Rifles



HETH'S DIVISION, Major General Harry Heath

Letcher Virginia Battery: 2x 12-pdr Napoleons, 2x 10-pdr Parrotts

Percell Virginia Battery: 4x 12-pdr Napoleons, 2x 10-pdr Parrotts

Pee Dee South Carolina Battery: 4x 3-in Ordnance Rifles

Crenshaw's Virginia Battery: 2x 12-pdr Napoleons, 2x 12-pdr Howitzers

Fredericksburg Virginia Battery: 2x 12-pdr Napoleons, 2x 10-pdr Parrotts

DAVIS' BRIGADE

Brig. Gen. J. R. Davis

2nd Mississippi 500 men

42nd Mississippi 580 men

55th North Carolina 640 men

ARCHER'S BRIGADE

Brig. Gen. J. J. Archer

5th Alabama 320 men

13th Alabama 300 men

1st Tennessee 280 men

7th Tennessee 240 men

14th Tennessee 220 men

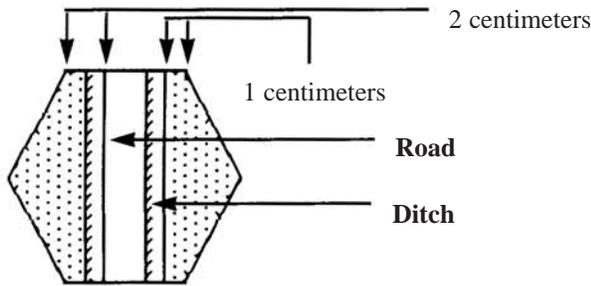
AFTERMATH

Buford's troopers held, but after two grueling hours of combat, were "all played out." In the nick of time the Iron Brigade, spearheading Brig. Gen. James Wadsworth's 1st Div., I Corps, swept over Seminary Ridge and hit the Confederate infantry. Heth, contrary to orders, was now thoroughly ensnared in pitched battle. The issue was in doubt until mid-morning when the Confederates were reinforced by Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell's II Corps. By dusk that day, the Yankees were routed off Seminary Ridge and out of town. Buford, however, had accomplished his purpose. The Army of the Potomac now occupied the strategic high ground south of Gettysburg.

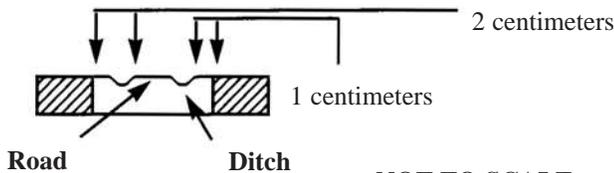
TERRAIN MAKER® WORKSHOP

MAKING SUNKEN ROADS

CONVENTIONAL ROAD HEX TEMPLATE (TOP VIEW)

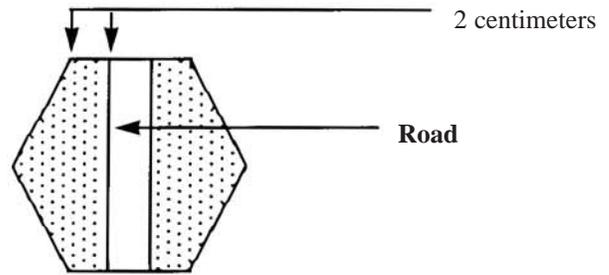


CONVENTIONAL ROAD HEX TEMPLATE (SIDE VIEW)



NOT TO SCALE

SUNKEN ROAD HEX TEMPLATE (TOP VIEW)



SUNKEN ROAD HEX TEMPLATE (SIDE VIEW)



NOT TO SCALE

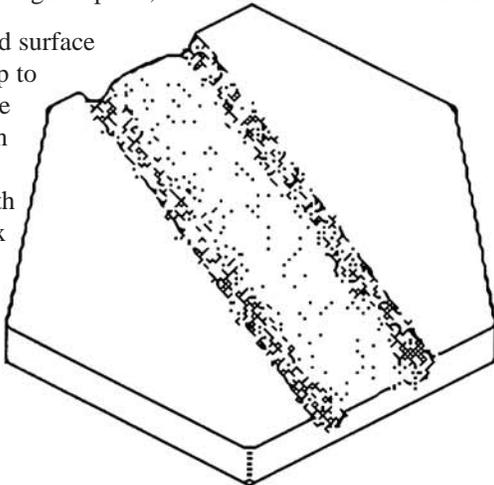
These diagrams appear in GHQ's Terrain Maker® how-to book NORMANDY in the chapter "How to Make a Road Hex"

1. A sunken road lacks the drainage ditches of a conventional road. Therefore measure two centimeters in on the hex edge to establish the road side and ignore the one centimeter measurement for the ditch.
2. Draw two lines connecting the measurements on where the road will enter and exit the hex.

3. Roll a piece of fine grit sandpaper into a cylinder. For curved roads, or roads on elevations, the sandpaper needs to be flexible. For straight roads you can wrap the sandpaper around a pencil.

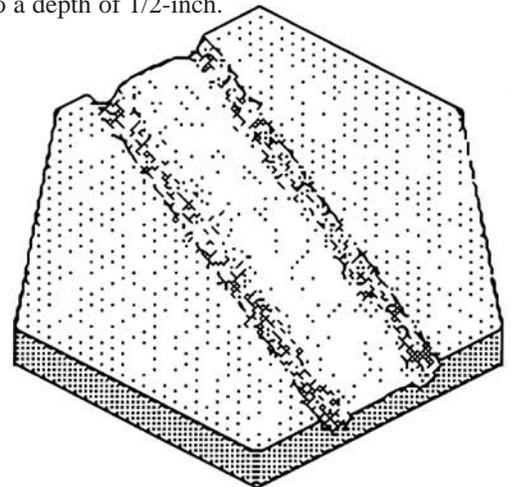
4. Lightly sand the road edges to a depth of 1/4-inch as illustrated below. This represents the erosion and cuts caused by wagon wheels. The center of the road is its highest point, about an 1/8-inch below the hex surface.

5. Score the road surface with a paper clip to represent surface wheel ruts. Then paint only the road surface with tan interior latex house paint and allow to thoroughly dry.



6. Finish the hex as described in the pack instructions.

7. Sunken roads can also be placed on elevation hexes. Where the road crosses an elevation crest, sand the road to a depth of 1/2-inch.



Terrain Maker®'s standard road system is based on a dirt or paved road designed by engineers and built by laborers. In rural areas, or less developed nations, roads are created by centuries of travel. Cut and compacted by horses' hooves and wagon wheels, these roads tend to evolve along paths of least possible resistance. Being lower than ground level and lacking drainage ditches, sunken roads actually collect water and become sodden even after a light rain.

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