

# The Art of Melee: Infantry Tactics in WDS Napoleonic Warfare



Melee is often perceived as the most direct and dramatic form of combat - soldiers closing with cold steel to resolve the engagement. In reality, throughout military history, physical clashes rarely determined outcomes on their own. Battles were decided by the interaction of physical and psychological forces, where intangible factors often outweighed material ones. In practice, three immaterial elements shape the success of any assault:

- Space dictates opportunity
- Time dictates advantage
- Psychology dictates collapse

A skilled tactician who understands this does not launch a melee simply because contact is possible. He launches it when all operational factors align - the position is favourable, the timing is correct, and the psychological pressure will amplify the physical blow. Steel alone rarely breaks a line. Space, time, and morale do: the positioning of troops relative to terrain, the location of reserves near the threatened sector and the defender's will to resist.

At the tactical level, infantry melee is one of the most decisive tools available to players because it produces several cascading effects:

- The defender must take a morale check.
- The defender is pushed back one hex, disrupting the defensive line and potentially exposing neighbouring units to rout.
- Even when the morale check is passed, the defender is likely to remain disordered.
- The defender accumulates double fatigue compared to the attacker.

Because of these combined effects, a well-prepared and well-timed series of melees can trigger a rapid collapse of an enemy position and have a cascading effect on the defending player's morale. This article examines how to create the conditions that maximise the chances of success.

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## 1. Defining the Objective

*“No one starts a war... without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war.” – Carl von Clausewitz*

Melee planning begins with defining the objective. Less experienced players often commit units to isolated, piecemeal melees whenever an opportunity appears. This is rarely optimal. The broader tactical and operational objective must be defined first.

- Are you attempting to dislodge the enemy from a village which is likely to be defended heavily? In this case, you likely need a force to sustain the effort and a one-off isolated melee will certainly fail.
- Are you conducting a rearguard action and in the event of a successful melee your units will advance one hex just to become isolated by the enemy in the following turn? Melee is a bad idea in this case, no matter what the outcome is.

Melee must serve a clear purpose within the overall battle plan. It has to be put into context of the overall grand tactical situation.

## 2. Timing

Timing, though an immaterial factor, is critical in war. Melee should ideally be executed in coordinated waves to maintain pressure and exploit disorder at the decisive moment. Attacking too early, piecemeal and stack by stack, before other units are in position, often leads to isolated advances that are quickly counterattacked.

On the other hand, striking the entire enemy line in a specific sector in the same turn is the most impactful, as the defender may struggle to retaliate by concentrating enough reserves to counterattack your attacking echelon. A simultaneous assault across an entire defensive sector can also cause cascading disorder throughout that section of the enemy line as routed units will disorder adjacent units and those positioned behind.

More importantly, a synchronized attack can overwhelm your PBEM opponent, forcing too many decisions at once and paralyzing his ability to respond effectively. The psychological factor is probably one of the most underestimated. Generally, the aim of war is not to kill the enemy but to destroy his will to fight.

The PBEM context is, first of all, a contest between individuals made of flesh and emotions. When confronted with the collapse of an entire defensive sector, players are more likely to make poor

decisions, falling into “it’s all lost” panic mindset - even when the attack could still be beaten back. A crushed spirit blinds us (just as euphoria does) and players become more prone to errors.

### 3. Force Allocation

As part of the planning phase, you need to define the assaulting echelons and what units are to go in the first and second waves. Hence, melee planning needs to be started at the divisional level as this is the first organisational level where enough units can be mastered for concentrated attacking stacks in the first wave and supporting reserves for the second wave. For example, the 1<sup>st</sup> brigade of the division can be in the first wave and the 2<sup>nd</sup> brigade as a reserve 2-3 hexes behind, ready to go in the second wave.

Moving one level down to the organizational level, tactical battle groups [attacking stacks] should be defined at the brigade level. This will remove the negative impact of Mixed Organizational Penalty optional rule, which, for the sake of realism, should be enabled by default.

### 4. Forming Battle Groups

*“Throw the mass of the forces upon the decisive point.”*

*— Antoine-Henri Jomini*

Ideally attacking stacks need to be maximised so they inflict maximum damage to the defenders. Usually, a large attacking stack made of 1700-1800 infantrymen would cause around 130 losses pushing the enemy defending battalion straight to medium fatigue zone (above 600 fatigue) effectively making it unfit for active combat for the rest of the day.

The objective is to maximize the density of troops within the attacking stack (within stacking limits). Greater concentration per hex offers two advantages:

1. A large stack causes more damage to the enemy.
2. A larger stack is more costly and risky for the enemy to counterattack.

There is a downside however, as large stacks will suffer higher casualties from the enemy defensive fire due to hex density modifier.

To maximize the punching effort, an optimal assault stack typically is to be made of 3-4 line infantry battalions in column formation. Light infantry battalions usually have better things to do and are best not used in assault roles, except when operating as skirmishers. Adding several skirmish companies to the assaulting stacks is highly recommended for two reasons:

- Skirmishers will help to push the stack to the theoretical maximum (1,800 men), maximizing offensive output.
- Skirmishers will absorb a share of melee casualties, reducing fatigue accumulation in the line battalions. Because losses are distributed across more units, the line battalions of the attacking stack are preserved more effectively.

Below is a real PBEM example of an assaulting battle group made of two grenadier battalions, three skirmish companies, all totalling 1,698 troops in a stack, led by a brigade commander:



Also note that the formed battalions within the stack face two sides, projecting ZOC into three hexes and covering both flanks of the stack. Further on this below in section 6.

## 5. Spotting the Weakness

*“In war, the way is to avoid what is strong and strike at what is weak.”*

— Sun Tzu

Attacking a well-formed enemy infantry stack of 1,000 men will often achieve little while exhausting your own troops through fatigue and losses. Instead, maximize the odds of success by targeting:

- Smaller enemy stacks
- Disordered enemy units
- Enemy units likely to be fatigued
- Enemy units with exposed flanks

If no such opportunities are available, be patient and consider steps to shape the battlefield to soften the enemy line first. The goal is to create conditions that give your forces a clear advantage before committing to decisive action.

Combined-arms tactics are the key to shaping the battlefield. Infantry, cavalry, artillery and light troops must work together to expose their flanks through maneuver, ideally force the enemy infantry to form squares and then to disorder enemy formations, inflicting fatigue and losses through artillery and musket fire. However, if time does not permit preparation, focus on the weakest enemy hexes rather than the strongest ones.

## 6. Initiating the Melee

At this stage, you have defined the objective, allocated the appropriate force, lined them up in waves, formed battle groups, softened the enemy line and synchronized the timing. It is now time to move the assaulting stacks into contact. A few things you need to address while doing so:

1. Consider assigning a leader to the attacking stack. For minor melees in secondary sectors, it may not be worth the risk. However, for the main assault sectors, involving large battle groups, it is often advisable to maximize the odds by stacking brigade commanders and other available leaders from less critical or already weakened formations into the attacking hex. Anonymous colonels are often the most useful for these tasks.

This not only increases melee effectiveness due to the +20% leader bonus, but also ensures command and control. Brigade leaders stacked with their own battalions keep their troops within command range, reducing the level of Command-and-Control micromanagement required. Once the assault begins it is likely that the attacking troops will end up outside of their leader command range as things can quickly become chaotic. In such situations, players often overlook the location of brigade commanders and the assaulting troops remain disordered post melee.

Finally, if you are playing with Movement Threat enabled (and you should as it enhances realism), having a leader present in the stack reduces the risk of disorder while moving into contact.

2. When initiating move to contact, it is a good idea to move skirmish companies ahead of the assaulting stacks to provide cover against enemy defensive fire.
3. Attempt to deploy the attacking columns within the stack so they cover three hexes to the front, projecting Zone of Control (ZOC) into all three hexes (see the example image in Section 4). This creates a continuous ZOC front, reduces the risk of exposed flanks during a likely enemy counterattack and establishes a continuous ZOC line across your entire attacking echelon.
4. Do not fire muskets before initiating melee. The engine provides a +20% bonus to attacking units that have not fired prior to melee. This bonus effectively simulates an advance to point-blank range followed by a final volley before the bayonet charge. Historically, this was the most damaging use of musket fire, and likewise in the game it consistently produces better results than attempting to inflict damage through a player-initiated preliminary volley.
5. There is a technique to minimize losses from enemy defensive fire when advancing to initiate melee. The engine offers a special Attack Movement (see page 26 of the manual) which is best used when moving large formations into contact.

By pressing Shift + right-click, you can move the entire formation forward as a single group, advancing simultaneously:

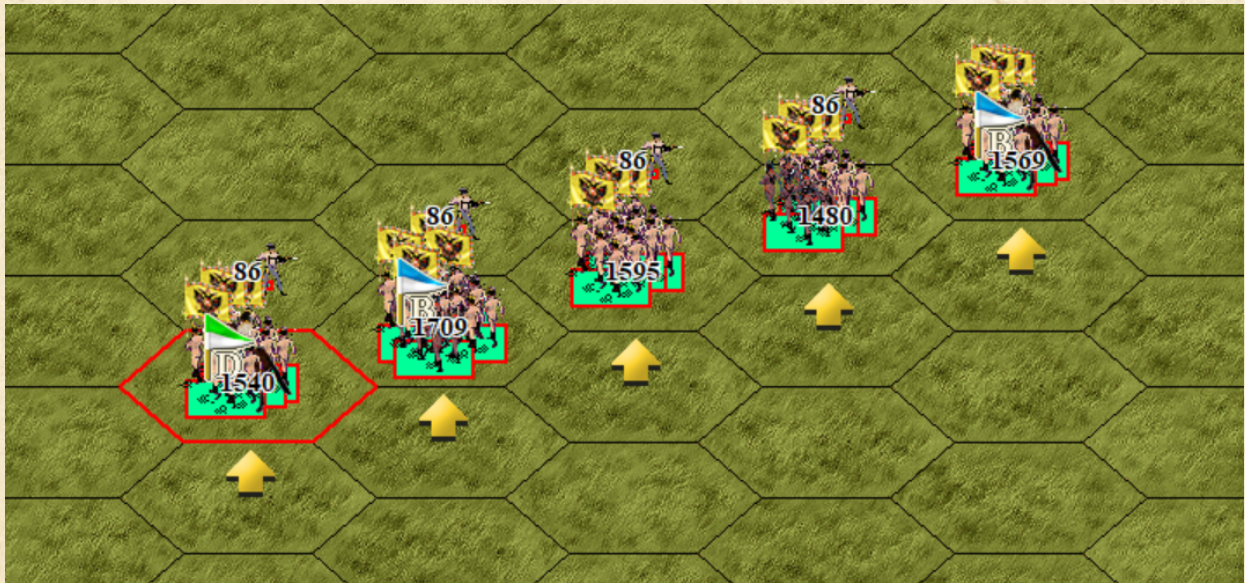


A few conditions must be met for this special type of movement:

- ✓ The assaulting stacks must be deployed in adjacent hexes.
- ✓ All units you desire to move need to be facing in the same direction.
- ✓ All units must be in the same type of formation (column or line)
- ✓ All units must belong to the same lowest organizational formation (the same brigade).

This is another reason to avoid mixing brigades when forming battle groups. Keeping assault stacks within the same brigade improves coordination and allows formation movement to work properly.

Alternatively, you can use this advance technique using the divisional formation:



In that case, the divisional commander should be present within the assaulting echelon and be positioned with the attacking formation.

6. Finally, when advancing to contact, it is best to screen the advancing echelon with light troops by deploying skirmish companies ahead of the assaulting stacks. The light companies will reduce enemy defensive fire by 20% and can be absorbed into the attacking stacks once the formed battalions move into hexes adjacent to the enemy line.

## 7. Combined-Arms Integration

*“Infantry, cavalry, and artillery must act in concert.”*

*— Antoine-Henri Jomini*

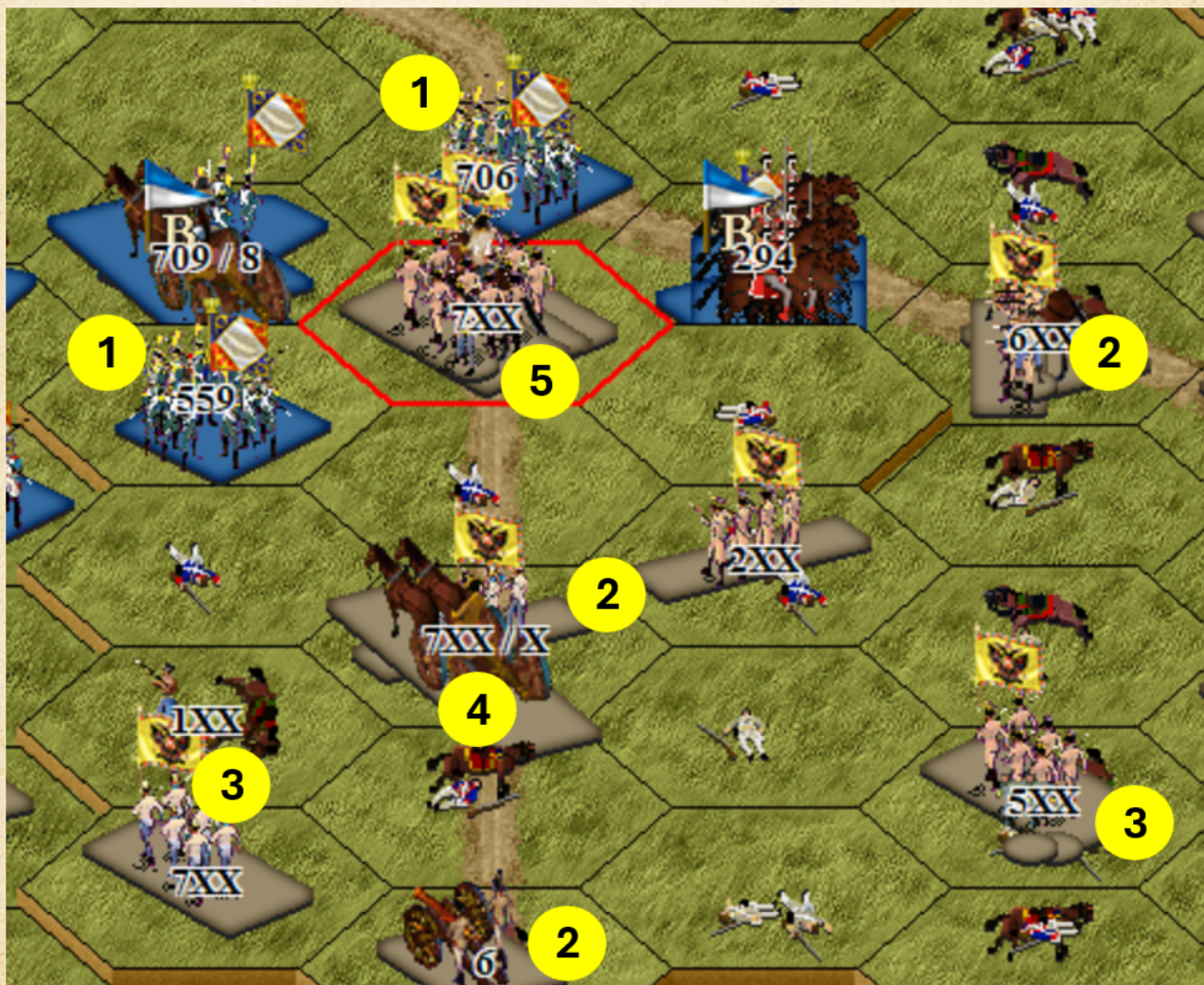
Realistically, shock action should not be used in isolation. It is most effective when also coordinated with firepower and supported by cavalry.

Assaulting columns can be backed by lines positioned a few hexes behind. The lines can consolidate gains, replace disordered first-wave units, and make any enemy cavalry counterattacks very costly by delivering musket volleys into the charging cavalry.

Artillery should follow the advance and deploy 3–4 hexes behind the first echelon. Just do not forget to allocate a battalion for protection to be stacked with the guns. From this position batteries can

provide defensive fire, delivering devastating canister fire against counterattacks. The mere presence of artillery can discourage enemy counterattacks and help to secure the captured ground.

Cavalry positioned within charging distance from the enemy line can support the assault by forcing the defenders to form squares in the first place and exploiting breakthroughs. The image below shows a PBEM situation where Austrian combined arms effort preceded infantry assault:



1. French infantry formed squares in response to Austrian cavalry threat.
2. Austrian battalions in line and 6-gun battery begin softening the enemy squares.
3. Two Austrian battalions in column, with two skirmish companies, form the second wave.
4. Additional Austrian artillery battery is moved forward ready to unlimber in the next turn.
5. The assaulting stack is attacking a disordered French square in melee. It is led by a colonel and composed of two battalions and two skirmish companies:

<p>375 Men Strength 44% Quality D Movement 14 Fatigue 140 Restricted</p> <p>3/Kaunitz IR20 2/2D/3AK Column [E]</p>	<p>391 Men Strength 46% Quality D Movement 28 Fatigue 105 Restricted</p> <p>3/Kaunitz IR20 2/2D/3AK Column [E]</p>	<p>24 Men Skirmisher (P) Quality B Movement 28 Fatigue 362 Light</p> <p>1/Peterward_GZ9 2/3D/3AK Skirmish</p>	<p>124 Men Skirmisher Quality D Movement 28 Fatigue 52</p> <p>1/Kaunitz IR20 2/2D/3AK Skirmish</p>	<p>Col. Anonymous 1/3D/3AK</p>
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Not an optimal theoretical assault, as only ~925 Austrian troops are concentrated in the assaulting stack, and both battalions face the same direction, failing to cover the flank with their ZOC, nor is

the 6-gun battery protected by formed infantry. PBEM realities, however, are a lot harsher than theoretical models. Nevertheless, quoting Clausewitz on the matter:

*“...theory becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it lights his way, eases his progress, trains his judgment, and helps him avoid pitfalls.”*

*— Carl von Clausewitz*

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