Battle Formations

By Esteban Ruquet

INTRODUCTION

Warfare is a staple in most fantasy stories. A huge lot of them like to depict vast armies stretching across the horizon, arrows flying across the sky, massive phalanxes clashing with shield walls and heroic cavalry charges. Although D&D is a game focused on small groups of characters, such epic conflicts are an awesome resource for adventures. Because the battlefield is a nasty and turbulent place, the characters can be thrust into new situations and new dangers at a moment's notice.

But classical medieval warfare is complicated to depict in D&D. There are several facts that difficult a lot the clash of armies and the most iconic formations. The most obvious one is magic: a pike phalanx can be easily destroyed by a single fireball, and a wizard battalion can be devastating in a battlefield, even when 5th Edition has toned down a lot the power of magic with mechanics like concentration, and updated the math to keep anonymous masses of low-level mooks relevant at higher levels. Nevertheless, the body count is still pretty brutal even with no-brainer options. Almost every party knows how to deal with a horde of orcs: fireball them. They have little defense against that.

Nevertheless, it *should* be possible to play a full-scale battle and use the beautiful Unearthed Arcana Battlesystem even with wizards around.

Battle Formations is a rules supplement for the Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition which acknowledges this. It's a DM's resource that provides the tools to challenge its players in a battlefield, even in small skirmishes. It's also a players' resource to improve their options and tactics when it is commanding an army, or even a small platoon of ten fighters.

The main inspiration of this booklet is a feat: *shield master*. This amazing feat allows a mundane character, such as a fighter, to cover from the direst threats, such as a red dragon's breath, with a reaction to interpose its shield. The benefits are similar to half-cover, also. This iconic image resonated in me as possible by first time in the history of D&D, and gave me the idea to expand this, even without the feat. And remembered me something: arrows are also artillery, and have countermeasures attached to their use. Thus, the shield wall was born.

In this booklet you will find several formations that deal with shields as cover more than armor. Interlocking shields were used historically to protect melee fighters from arrow volleys –and we can also add non-concussive spells. Arrow volleys were designed to deal area-of-effect damage. Cavalry charges were born to destroy formations and archers, avoiding volleys, and mounted archery was born to skirmish against heavy infantry, and phalanxes in the Middle Ages were retooled to protect poor peasants against heavy cavalry. Each tactic has a counter-tactic associated.

All of them are mundane. There is no "magic" in these formations, but all of them can interact with magic: an arrow volley is a destructive force against a dreadful monster, such as a dragon, or a wizard's platoon, as they outrange them. A *testudo* can protect entirely against magic, as it provides total cover. Cavalry charges can dodge fireballs (much as the XIX century's cavalry dodged cannon fire), but magic still could destroy the piker's phalanx. A wizard could still be protected by a shield wall, or generate an opening for the cavalry to attack.

Magic is a very versatile force, but shouldn't be absolute. In many cases, is akin to siege engines in ancient battlefields. They were useful, even indispensable in some scenarios, but by no means prevented (or even replaced) the other units. This is the team's spirit of the most popular RPG.

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Battle Formations

Battle formations are specific combat maneuvers and positioning which grants some benefits or hindraces on the battlefield. From the simple circle formation to the complex testudo, all of them require coordination and some training to be performed. Every formation requires an Intelligence check to be performed, assigned by the DM, that can be done by the commanding officer or by the lowest intelligence member if the group is improvised. A failed check wastes the action and movement of the entire group. A long standing military unit has advantage to the formation, and a newly formed one or one composed by chaotic-aligned creatures has disadvantage to the roll.

New Skill: Military training. A character with this skill can apply its proficiency bonus to Intelligence checks made to direct or teach a formation, train people in basic units, recall lore about fortifications, strategy and battle tactics or about ranks and offices in an army. This skill can be learned by Fighters, Paladins and Bards, or people with the Soldier, Noble or Knight backgrounds.

Arrow Volley
Difficulty: Easy

If at least ten archers are in the same line, they can release a high, arcing volley of arrows as an action. Rather than aiming at a specific target, they concentrate their arrows in an area, striking anything here. The creatures under an arrow volley must succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity Save or being struck by 1d6 arrows which deal their normal damage without Dexterity modifiers. A *testudo* formation or a high shield wall protect as normal.

Because they fire in a high arc, they can ignore any form of horizontal cover, such as horizontal shield walls or trenches.

Cavalry Charge
Difficulty: Average

Cavalry charges are shock tactics. A cavalry charge starts with a dash from the horses with a polearm such as a lance automatically wins initiative, and makes an attack when enters in its weapon's reach. If it hits, the weapons doubles the damage dice (EG: a lance in a cavalry charge deals 2d12+str. modifier piercing damage) and the target must succeed on a Strength Saving Throw or being knocked prone and trampled by the mount.

If more than half the cavalry units succeed on trampling their targets, it is considered a successful charge, and the enemy formations are broken. The targets must succeed a DC 15 to 20 (if the cavalry is at about the same number of the defenders) Wisdom saving throw or being Frightened and flee of the battlefield.
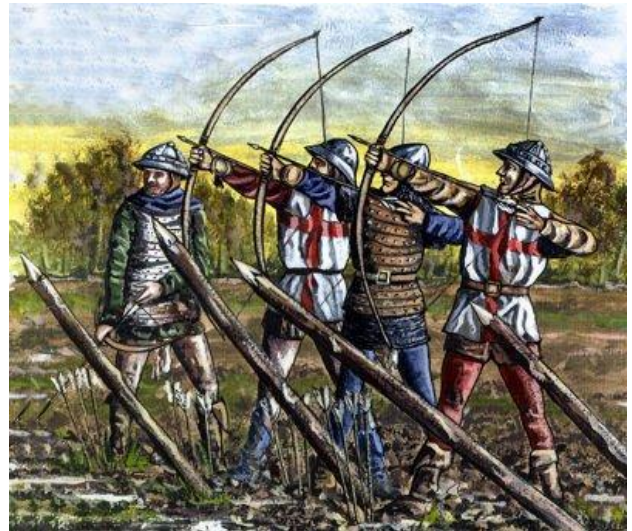
The cavalry charge needs relatively flat, featureless terrain and cannot be performed on a difficult terrain, such as going up a hill or a forested plain.

Also, infantry units can prepare for a cavalry charge if they have reach weapons and a disciplined formation such as a phalanx. If the phalanx readies an action to engage, they act first and the charging cavalry takes double damage and must succeed a Strength saving throw or being dismounted and knocked prone.

Cavalry Dash
Difficulty: Average

A cavalry dash can be done only by trained horsemen and mounts. A cavalry dash has the same effects as any dash action, and doubles the movement of the mount. Any action with an area of effect (such as an *arrow volley* or

fireball) requires an Intelligence check with a DC of 8 + 1 for every 10 feet covered dashed or fail. This way, a warhorse cavalry moving 120 feet has a DC of 20. Also, even when the check is successful, the cavalry gains Advantage in dexterity saving throws.

Circle/Square Formation
Difficulty: Easy

Creatures on a circle formation move at half speed but cannot be flanked. It is one of the easiest defensive formations.

Line
Difficulty: Very Easy

The line is the base formation. Creatures in a line don't hinder each other's attacks and can focus fire and prepare to receive a charge. The main advantage of the line is its difficulty to be flanked, the protection of the rear ranks and the possibility to focus fire effectively. A line can move at their standard movement,

Parthian Circle
Difficulty: Average

A Parthian Circle is a fast archer's cavalry formation. The cavalry can use a reaction to move up to their horses' speed when an enemy tries to approach to melee range or use a spell. Also, enemy projectiles have disadvantage to reach the formation.

Phalanx
Difficulty: Hard

As an action, a phalanx formation crams several creatures in a tight polearm formation at the cost of speed and attack capability.

A phalanx reduces the movement speed by half, but allows cramming twice as much fighters in the same space. The phalanx must attack with polearms or spears, or do it at disadvantage. Any creature attacking frontally a phalanx does it at disadvantage, and automatically provokes opportunity attacks from anyone on reach if it doesn't take the Disengage action. A phalanx can be combined with a shield wall or testudo for maximum defensive effectivity.

Shield Wall
Difficulty: Easy

Anyone on the front rank of a shield wall has all the benefits of half cover; anyone in the second rank has three-quarters cover, and anyone beyond that has total cover. This formation reduces the speed of the creatures forming it in 10 feet, and attacks from weapons without a long shaft (like spears or battleaxes) are made at disadvantage. If the creatures pass the Saving Throw, they receive no damage from effects that require a Dexterity saving throw.

Use: This is an effective formation to minimize the effects of area of effect spells, such as fireballs, as the first ranks may fall, but the second and third don't.

Skirmish Formation

If the soldiers in a formation are concerned about large area effects, they sometimes advance at their speed every round and then ready an action to disperse if they hear the warning.

When a formation disperses, the soldiers as a reaction can move up to their speed away from the center of the formation, and everyone else moves to a space not adjacent to any other soldier. This dispersal can help to reduce the casualties from a catapult or ballistae projectile or a powerful area of effect spell, such as a fireball. Even if they are in the center of the effect, the creatures have advantage in Dexterity saving throws as they are prepared to receive the spell, as if they had taken the Dodge action, although none of the other benefits applies.

The main disadvantage of this practice is that tight groups of soldiers, such as a line formation, have advantage against the dispersed formation. Creatures in a very close formation, such as a phalanx, have disadvantage in the formation check.

Total Cover
Difficulty: Average

As an action, a group of creatures with shields spends all its movement and form an improved shield wall which grants total cover and advantage on Strength saves in one direction. A group in total cover cannot attack, automatically fails Dexterity saving throws and has disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight. If the creatures already are in a shield wall formation, it only takes a reaction to form it.

Use: The Total Cover is the poor man's testudo formation, as it doesn't need as much training to use. Creatures with proficiency on shields can use it at a command to protect themselves against projectiles.

Testudo
Difficulty: Very Difficult

Trained creatures can spend an action to perform a testudo (a bonus action if they are already in a phalanx or shield wall formation). This formation consists on several creatures to form a close formation akin to the shield wall,

but with a "roof" of shields too. Creatures under a testudo have total cover against any ranged attack or spell, and the same benefits of a shield wall against melee attacks or spells. Creatures inside a testudo halve their speed, and their attacks are made at disadvantage.

Use: The testudo formation is the most effective defensive formation, but it has its weakness: it is very slow, and it is very easy to flank.

Also, as the maneuver is highly coordinated, it is impossible to use it without proper training and coordination (such as a soldier background, military training or the fighter class): only professional soldiers such as hobgoblins can use it. Chaotic creatures are impossible to coordinate, and neutral creatures form a testudo in twice the normal time.

Besides, creatures in a testudo formation have problems to attack enemy formations. Besides, a testudo can be easily broken by massive solid projectiles, such as a catapult's fire, a ballista missile or a giant's rock. Against such weapons, the soldiers forming the testudo automatically fail any dexterity saving throw.

Wedge
Difficulty: Average

A wedge formation is used primarily for attack other formations. A wedge formation consists on a reinforced center to break the enemy lines and two "wings" to prevent being outflanked. The wedge has advantage against static or line formations on the first attack. Also, the units moving inside an enemy formation don't provoke opportunity attacks
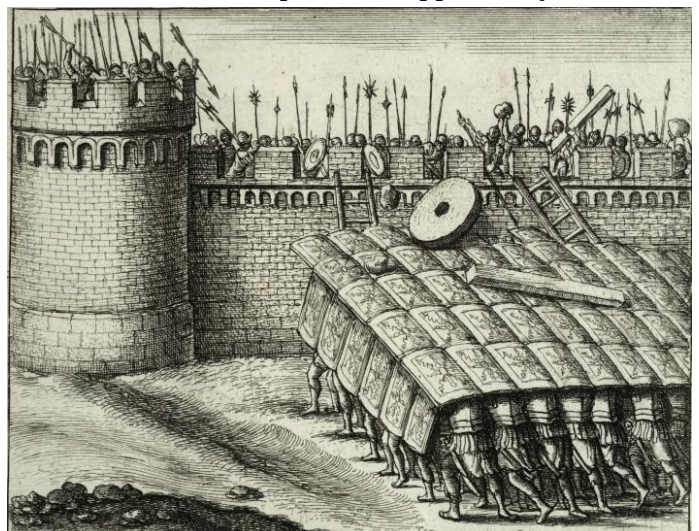
from them.

Use: This formation is usually used by heavy cavalry but also by heavy infantry to engage against enemy lines. Its main weakness is the dependence on the central column of attack. If the formation is pinned down, it can be broken easily and the enemy may flank it.

Formation	DC	Time	Effect
Arrow Volley	10	Action	Area of effect 1d6 arrows' damage.
Cavalry Charge	15	Action	Wins initiative, weapons deal double damage; it frighten enemies if it breaks formations. Receives double damage by polearms.
Cavalry Dash	15	Action	AoE effects need a 8+1 per 10 feet covered DC skill check, and the cavalry has advantage in Dexterity checks
Circle	10	Action	Half movement, cannot be flanked
Line	5	Movement	Normal movement, difficult to flank, don't hinder attacks.
Parthian Circle	15	Movement	Can dash as a reaction, attacks against it have disadvantage (light cavalry only).
Phalanx	20	Action	Half movement, provides opportunity attacks against anyone entering a rank's reach, doubles the amount of units in the same space, doubles damage against charging creatures.
Shield Wall	10	Bonus Action	Provides half cover in 1st rank, ¾ in 2nd rank, total cover in 3rd; a successful dexterity save prevents all damage from that source (soaked by the shield).
Skirmish	10	Reaction	Can move as a reaction against an AoE.
Total Cover	15	Readied Ac.	Movement becomes 0. Provides total cover in one direction.
Testudo	25	Action	Half movement, provides total cover, attacks are at disadvantage.
Wedge	15	Action	Breaks enemies' formations, prevents opportunity attacks if breaks in.