

After The Whistle

Of Battlefields

By Keith Hackwood

"Some left their horses and putting off their armour looked round for ancient worn-out garments, and took to the road as beggars. But their caution was of no avail, for not a single well-known man among them all escaped. O calamity! To see men lately dressed in armour or purple and fine linen now attired in rags and imprisoned in chains!"

From "The Aftermath of the Battle of Boroughbridge" in the reign of King Edward II

It could be a mountain pass, a desert, a forest, or open ground, a full frontal assault or a prolonged siege. It could be the Greeks and Persians at Thermopylae, Ramses's Egyptians and the Hitites at Qadesh, or the European Crusader knights battling the Saracens at Acre. It might be the Germanic tribes' destruction of three Roman legions at Teutoberg, or Agincourt, Crecy, Hastings, the campaigns of El Cid. Memories arise of the Viking victory at Maldon, or the Roman storming of druidic Anglesey, even the sack of Aleppo by the Mongols. Wherever we look, we find them, battles have taken place in all times and upon all terrains, upon all scales - but here we will explore what is left when the fighting ceases, the archetypal aftermath of massed combat, and what it might offer to role playing.

To What End?

There are many reasons why such an after-battle scene may add to a session or ongoing campaign. Here are a few possibilities:

The shock value (for PCs and players) of the encounter both emotionally/psychologically (does it arouse pathos, horror, despair, or a revelling in the carnage?);

To gather information *in extremis* (by observation, or from an expiring casualty, perhaps through a spell such as *Speak With Dead*);

Perhaps the PCs have been sent by someone to find their son, who ran away to join the Guard, or to retrieve their valuables from a besieged town or to scout the conditions ahead;

To witness tragedy or victory, confirm hopelessness or inspire action. How might such an experience affect a PC's spiritual beliefs? Are there 'costs' to

participating in such horror? How can they find a sense of meaning in the heart of this brutal destruction?

To test the morals of PCs – e.g. do they loot or try to help, or fall and weep in existential despair? Is there any healing they could usefully offer? Or does their sadism emerge amid such chaos and destruction? How might they feel about mercy killings or extra-judicial execution?

To encounter dying/ dead friends, kinfolk, allies, enemies, lords, peers. What happens when they do come upon those they know, the mighty now fallen, or the innocent caught up and destroyed in fate's mad dance?

Setting A Scene

Rather than being participants in the battle itself (which is beyond the scope of this piece), here we are exploring how it is for a lone PC or a party to stumble upon the aftermath of a recent (within a day or two of its end, at most) battle. It may be a battle of which the viewer was unaware (as though it has intruded from another reality), or one of which all in the area would know about. Either way, coming upon the initial sight should be an overwhelming experience, shaking any adventurer in a variety of ways.

The battlefield scene, archetypally, is always encountered near dusk, after the cessation of battle. The viewer is abruptly confronted by a vast sea of death and dying, destruction, abandoned weapons, dead horses and other mounts, the tattered, blood-soaked banners and standards of the protagonists flapping in a fell breeze. Everywhere arise the moans of the wounded, the stench of death, broken machines of war, the evil sight of pickers and strippers (often poor women and children from nearby settlements, or rat-like professional scavengers following the armies for just such an opportunity) seeking a profit or a trophy, competing with the carrion eaters, birds, wolves, rodents, humanoids etc. A scene of utter devastation.

Scaling the scene

The size and scale of the slaughter will be a telling factor – whilst inexperienced or low-level PCs may be horrified by a relatively small encounter, more worldly or experienced adventurers may need a vaster scene to provoke them from their complacency. Here is a suggested calibration:

Roll 1d12

- 1-2 The aftermath of a skirmish of fifty – hundred combatants, perhaps the result of a local tribal or territorial dispute;
- 3-4 The result of company sized battle – up to two hundred and fifty dead and wounded;

- 5-6 A battalion sized conflict, perhaps a thousand casualties at most;
- 7-8 Brigade-sized combat, up to three or four thousand casualties on the battlefield;
- 9-10 Divisional encounter – over ten thousand casualties
- 11 Entire armies have clashed here, upwards of twenty thousand dead on any particular battlefield, and battlefields can be seen stretching into the distance;
- 12 Epochal and catastrophic clash of civilizations – unnumbered casualties, unprecedented scale of devastation and death. Total destruction of entire regions and lands – a world-changing scale of event and aftermath;

Elements

After the opposing armies or forces involved have gone (by slaughter, retreat or the advance of victory), what remains is characterised thus:

Decide upon the weather and other elements; is there burning and drifting smoke, mists, bleak rainfall, snow or frost forming? Is there a sunset or do huge lowering clouds obscure any hint of light? Use the elements just as you would an NPC, bringing depth and mood, tone and portent to the scene.

Next, decide who, apart from the abandoned dead and dying, is present from the following suggestions:

Battlefield Roll-call

Roll 1d20 (for larger scale scenes, roll twice, for huge battles, roll up to four times)

- 1-2 Mourners and those seeking relatives, friends (locals, in the main);
- 3-4 Prisoners herded together, for slavery or for ransom;
- 5-6 Executions – and, perhaps the collection of heads, hands or ears as trophies;
- 7-8 The gruesome exhibition of broken bodies in gibbets, or hung in irons (particularly for those considered criminals or traitors);
- 9-10 Looting of bodies for coin, jewellery, weaponry, armour, clothing, boots etc;
- 11-12 Camp followers – wives, whores, cooks, children, the wagon/baggage train etc;
- 13-14 If the battle has been a siege, the aftermath of the sacking of a breached or undefended city may be all around – broken defences, shattered and dazed civilians, refugees among the ruins of their homes, now turned to smoking ash and ruin;
- 15 Sutlers, victuallers, ostlers, suppliers of alcohol and luxuries to victorious forces, together with their wares;

- 16 The presence of evil clerics and cultists, seeking personal gain or revelling in the victory of death. Or religious orders of a neutral or good disposition, trying to provide alms and succour to those who have lost everything, to restore balance to such misery;
- 17 Ghosts, allips, tortured souls, banshees, and other forms of haunting spirits, roused by the disturbance of such recent slaughter;
- 18 Ghouls and other undead, necromancers and cultists seeking to exploit the devastation (perhaps recruiting from the ranks of the fallen);
- 19 A presence (as a totemic animal or avatar) from the liminal deities of battle and war – perhaps the Morrigan, Indra, Bellona, Mars, Freyja, Odin;
- 20 The absolute presence of personified death - Thanatos, Yama, Azriel, Santa Muerte, Arawn, Hades, a grim reaper figure;

Initial Reactions Table

Faced with their first sight of the field (or with a specific encounter from the table above) the following reactions *may* occur for a PC (some are immediate; others may take time to appear) – these reactions are based on mid-level human PCs, add any other level/racial modifiers to personal taste.

Roll 1d12

- 1 immediate nausea and vomiting;
- 2 a sense of existential dread and ‘vertigo’ or dizziness;
- 3 full-blown panic attack (as per *fear* spell) for 1d8 rounds
- 4 PC is overwhelmed by grief and horror – weeping and shaking inconsolably for 1d6 rounds;
- 5 PC is traumatised but repressing emotion by an act of will (50% chance of suffering flashbacks and nightmares in future, requiring something similar to a *remove curse* spell to cure);
- 6 PC starts talking and cannot be quiet (using speech and sound to block out feeling) – talking to themselves or anyone around, if left unchecked they may start speaking gibberish (25% risk of becoming dissociated as a result, sullen and morose, requiring *remove curse* or similar);
- 7 PC begins to bemoan the fates and/or gods for allowing such slaughter. Full crisis of faith may well ensue;
- 8 PC experiences symptoms of profound post-traumatic shock a week after encountering the scene and is disabled by fear, horror and meaninglessness (requires *remove curse* or similar);
- 9 Apathy, listlessness, ennui and a feeling of extreme futility overtake the PC;
- 10 PC experiences a massive thrill reaction – pulse quickens, a euphoric sense of joy at being alive, may result in risk taking or

- inappropriate behaviour (such as making cruel jokes or using the battlefield as a collection of props for a 'performance');
- 11 PC appears normal (but later becomes dependent upon alcohol or some other drug, possibly to dependency or even addiction levels);
 - 12 PC feels properly 'at home' for the first time in their life – a sense of 'yes, I was born for this place – I *know* it'. (this may be authentic, or part of a delusional defence with consequences later – CK's choice)

Dressing the Scene

(Roll twice for large battles, up to four times for huge scenes)

Roll d%

- 1-5 at the fringe of the battlefield, as wild dogs chew at corpses, two combatants still barely live – recent enemies, now united in their wounds (one has a deep stab wound to his belly, the other is missing a leg);
- 6-10 beneath a fluttering banner you discover a trumpet, still clutched by its butchered owner (it is a *Horn of Blasting*);
- 11-15 a body in the war-gear of a chief or general seems to move as you approach – investigating, you find a child (or a gnome or halfling) hiding beneath him – the child looks at you, terrified and says 'A...a...are they gone?'
- 16-20 scavengers are picking over a rank of bodies – when you approach they hiss at you and mutter curses; the bodies they were working on are clearly those of elite troops (excellent armour, masterwork weaponry, one or two magical items);
- 21-25 two elderly men (Bernardo and Kufu) are stoically carrying bodies, by the arms and legs, and stacking them ready for a mass pyre – they have tears in their eyes, and handkerchiefs over their mouths, and avoid eye contact if they can;
- 26-30 a war-horse, peppered with arrows and crossbow bolts, lies across the smashed legs of a knight. He seems to be alive, but delirious with thirst and pain;
- 31-35 a man-at-arms in livery stands and surveys the scene – you approach him from the back, but he doesn't answer you – if you touch him he collapses. A lance penetrates his torso diagonally and had been supporting his weight (he wears a +1 longsword and a pot-helm +1);
- 36-40 two low and ugly figures are visible, crouching among the dead – up close you can see that they are armed with daggers and appear to be slitting the throats of the wounded, and sawing off fingers to get at rings;

- 41-45 a woman (Eemah) lies over the mutilated body of a warrior – she appears to be asleep (this man (Porto) was her fiancé, and they were to have been married – she is mad with grief);
- 46-50 strange incantations rise from behind a pile of bodies – there is a priest of some sort intoning prayers, he is accompanied by two acolytes, who support the body of a dead officer;
- 51-55 three armed men stand guard over a dozen walking wounded who appear to be digging a mass grave – as you approach, one of the guards casually cleaves a prisoner with his battle-axe, then laughs in your direction;
- 56-60 two filthy soldiers (Narnu and Ghent) are sat on the charred remains of a wagon, swigging whisky from a jug – they are both completely drunk and highly unpredictable;
- 61-65 a pack of dogs runs, barking, across your path, as though fleeing in panic from some unseen presence – the mist has a weird greenish hue just here;
- 66-70 a team of four clerics is passing among the dead and dying, apparently giving last rites, and identifying those who may yet be saved;
- 71-75 a group of women with two handcarts or barrows seem to be undressing the dead, piling the clothing into their carts and making for a mule-drawn wagon – they repeat the trip again and again;
- 76-80 there is a great pile of heads stacked into a rough pyramid, next to which stands a man with a scroll, he appears to be counting;
- 81-85 a wolf sidles past you, unafraid and brazen, holding in his teeth a severed arm, which is still clutching something (if it is recovered, the arm's fist is wrapped around a brooch depicting the head of a god – it is an amulet of protection, +2);
- 86-90 you find an officer's trunk upon the battlefield (locked, perhaps trapped, CK's discretion) – within it are coins, a number of gems and a folio of correspondence with some obviously secret diplomatic papers, perhaps some interesting looking maps. There is also a flask of healing (*Cure Serious Wounds*, 5 draughts);
- 91-95 as you approach the field you see a line of shapes approaching, slowly but methodically (they are zombies, 2d12 of them, raised 'fresh' by some nefarious power);
- 92-94 you encounter a murder of crows picking at carrion, one is noticeably larger and more intense than the others (a deity in crow form?);
- 95-97 as you pass by, a man you took for dead begins to whisper, he calls you close to him (he pleads for water, is quite incoherent, but manages to tell you that he is Camran, a farmer from Hemmaler, also to pass you an engraved ceramic token – 'give this to my wife, I beseech you' – then he begs that you put him out of his misery);
- 98-99 children throw stones at you as you walk the field, women ululate and point and make gestures – you feel decidedly uneasy and exposed;
- 00 as you kneel to check a corpse, it suddenly inhales and seizes your arm – you feel a freezing chill run through you, and cannot move or speak a

voice in your head says 'I am the Lord of Death. Why do you disturb my work?'

Final Thoughts

With Skeel's allied forces destroyed, Nashtaman elected to end the siege and withdrew back down the valley. While casualties for the Battle of Koumas are unknown, records show that around 14,000 humans and elves were captured by Nashtaman's forces. In a fit of rage Nashtaman ordered that they be divided into groups of a hundred, and ninety-nine in each be blinded. One man in each group was left with one eye so that he could guide his comrades home. The sight of these prisoners returning overwhelmed Skeel, and he died later that year. His death marked the beginning of the end, and Nashtaman completed his conquest of Pendoria in 4089.

(Loosely based on accounts of the Byzantine conquest of Bulgaria – AD1018)

Leaving the battlefield may be a decision the PCs take quickly (who would blame them?), or perhaps they are chased off in some way – then again, a night spent camping amidst this scene would be highly charged, and perhaps by morning, in some mysterious way, the scene has changed or cleared – as is the way with archetypal arising.

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