

MODELLING HILLS IN WARGAMES



By Pete Brown

We are all aware that no battle has ever been fought on a field as flat and featureless as a billiard table. All battlefields have dips and undulations in the ground which may place one unit slightly higher than another or make a unit disappear completely into dead ground. We cannot make purpose built terrain for every battle we wish to fight and so we tend to reflect these minor folds of the ground randomly. For example, if you roll four “1”s then the unit you were shooting at must have been standing in a slight dip, four “6”s and they must have been in the open.

Therefore, the hills that we decide to place on board must represent key terrain features that had a significant effect on the battle. Hills and rises do not have to be very steep or particularly high to give an advantage. A relatively small hill on an otherwise featureless battlefield suddenly confers a significant edge.

Modelling such hills has always had to be a trade between visual appeal and practical use. Contour lines drawn in chalk onto a playing surface may be very practical, and everyone can see the gradient, but it does not impress. Equally, a beautifully modelled hill with steep rocky slopes and scattered bushes may look great, but is not much use if our figures will not stand on it or constantly slide down the sides. A happy medium can be reached by having gently sloping hills which can be flocked and painted realistically but have a shallow enough gradient to allow figures to stand on it comfortably. Whilst this solves the wargaming dilemma it does not often satisfy the look we are after. Cassino would look a lot less imposing, for example, if it were a gentle rise instead of a steep mountain. Also, as we know, not all hills are the same height and creating generic gentle slopes to suit our figures may make our hills all look bland.

A further compromise could be reached by our model hills having low, flat tops on which figures will comfortably stand whilst being obviously “uphill”. This is fine if you are prepared to assume that all of the hills in your game look like Table Mountain in South Africa. Slopes up to the top, but once you get there they are flat. In reality, hills should really have crests, which are easy to introduce even on flat topped model hills. This is best described as an imaginary line running through the centre of the hill where the hill is at its highest point. It could be possible for two enemy units on either side of the line not to be able

to see each other until one crosses the line and appears silhouetted at the summit. Equally, a unit fighting on this imaginary line would have the uphill advantage, but as soon as it is pushed back it is now descending the other side and the advantage will now be with their opponent.

But what if your whole battlefield is on a hill or a significant slope? Culloden in 1746, for example, slopes from the Highlanders line downhill to the Government line. Indeed, the earlier battle at Falkirk was also on a hillside (Scotland is not well known for its flat grassy steppes). Or what about the battle of the Alma during the Crimean War? Here the British would be attacking uphill all across the board. Unless your game is destined for display, or you are a fanatic about that particular battle, it seems foolish to go to the lengths of having terrain specially made for such encounters.

Instead, these battles can be played out on flat surfaces with both players simply acknowledging the presence of the slope (in whatever direction) and agreeing how it will affect the game beforehand. So if the Russians attack out of their redoubts and down the Alma, for example, they

may get whatever bonuses the Umpire assigns for being “uphill” whilst the British will apply movement penalties for climbing “uphill” to attack.

A similar situation can be applied if the battlefield has a significant rise in the centre. At Fontenoy, in 1745, the ground rose from the British position to a crest roughly in line with Fontenoy and the Barry wood in the middle of the battlefield, before falling again to the French lines. The French had to pull guns onto the crest to fire at the British and similarly, after the British had driven off the French guns, they had to drag guns to the crest to return fire on the French lines. Again, it is not necessary to model such a massive hill as it extends to full length of the battlefield. Simply agree that an imaginary crest line exists on your flat battlefield between Fontenoy and the wood and state that no-one can fire at the enemy until they have reached the crest or if both units are within a set distance of the crest.

Simple expedients such as this will save you a great deal of modelling time.

Model hills do not have to be boring. High Ground was always a favoured place to put forts or holy places, and so it is always nice to put terrain features on hills to brighten them up. However, what about making the hills themselves attractive. Dark Age hills were carved with images of horses or, at Cairn Abbess, a Giant. In South America hills were carved with images of animals, such as birds and monkeys, most famous being the Nazca Lines in Peru. Hills can be further decorated with terraced fields, such as you may find in parts of Asia or in South America which not only look great but actually help in moving figures on the slopes. I have seen some great models of hills, with winding paths, rocky outcrops or wild terrain which, whilst generic for all periods, really enhance the battlefield. Given how important the High Ground is in our games, why not spend a little time making it look great?

