

Notes for the Overland Campaign

John Ferry

This is my second design title for John Tiller games, and it has turned out to be, in its own way, as much of a monumental effort for the game designer as it was for the generals in Blue and Gray in 1864. The Overland Campaign was like no other campaign before it, and shares more similarities with the First World War than with earlier battles such as First Bull Run and Shiloh. Gone was the old practice of marching out of camp to fight a battle and then, win or lose, marching back to camp to refit before fighting another. Since it was so different historically from earlier campaigns, it follows that replicating Overland called for some new rules and mechanics in the game.

They called it “Enlightened War.” Preparations for the epic campaign of 1864 did not begin until after Grant was promoted to Lieutenant General, on March 9th 1864. Sherman was given command of the Military Division of the Mississippi, Grant’s old command, on March 12th, and the two of them met in Nashville on March 18th. They had no “meetings” as such. In conversations commenced in Nashville and continued on the train to Cincinnati, and finalized in a hotel room there, they came up with the basic strategy. Years later, Sherman summed it up by saying, “Grant was to go for Lee and I was to go for Joe Johnston.

Sherman “goes for Joe Johnston” in **Campaign Atlanta**, designed by Richard Walker and published in 2008. If Sherman and Johnston can be compared to two master swordsmen, fencing a deadly duel across north Georgia, Grant and Lee would be two heavyweight boxers, brawling and bleeding their way through Virginia. For the common soldier, Enlightened War meant days and days of danger without end, until the end.

Components of Scenarios - A scenario consists of a map, an order of battle, and a pdt (Parameter Data Table)

Maps

The master game map is an epic undertaking by Doug Strickler, with 1,078,110 hexes covering the battleground from the Rapidan River to the James River. All of the maps within the main conflict area are sub-maps of Doug’s map. An aspiring scenario designer can make a sub-map, of any size, of any area within the main.

Using standard topographical maps, this writer tried his hand at making his own maps, for New Market, Bermuda Hundred, Piedmont and Cloyd’s Mountain, and also for an early draft of the Wilderness battlefield.

For the historically accurate deployment of forces, extant maps of all descriptions were used in building scenarios. The National Park Service published a series of maps on the Wilderness and Spotsylvania. Six maps, showing regimental positions and movements, cover Wilderness. Spotsylvania, spanning over two weeks of continuous action, consists of 24 maps.

The Richmond Civil War Centennial Committee published a series of maps on Cold Harbor ‘way back in 1961, which were very helpful in understanding that Cold Harbor consisted of far more than the deadly day of June 3, 1864, when U S Grant threw in the only assault he ever regretted ordering.

Perhaps our greatest asset in resolving things like locations, or a field of view from a certain spot, was our “man on the ground.” Ken Jones lived near Spotsylvania Court House for most of the time that this project was in the making, and often went off into the hinterlands in search of a certain landmark, or he would stand at a certain spot on the battlefield and note those areas where artillery and small arms fire would be effective.

Order of Battle

Independently of HPS and John Tiller Games, I have been working on a compendium on the Union and Confederate armies since about 2001. Dyer's Compendium was published before the end of the 19th Century and does an amazing job of documenting the organization of the Union Army, and would have been a monumental task even with a computer. A similar work has not covered the Confederates, mainly because a lack of records made such an undertaking nearly impossible. Stewart Sifakis has published a Confederate Compendium, state by state, while my compendium takes that information and builds the composition of the armies, month by month, for the entire war. While these games feature an "Org File" (an ugly moniker, I've always felt), my compendium's file includes a ten-digit number for each unit, each month, for 48 months. In the case of the Union Army, rather than duplicate Dyer, I only addressed certain months and units involved in major actions in those months. Taking May 1863 as an example, I only included those units in Grant's Army at Vicksburg and Hooker's Army of the Potomac. May of 1864 includes the armies of Meade, Bulter, Sigel and Sherman. Sorting everybody's number as of the First of May, 1864, gave me the start point for an order of battle for each "Epoch" of the campaign.

Epoch? What's an epoch? At some point after the campaign Grant's or Meade's adjutant general put out a directive regarding reports of the past actions. That directive broke down the campaign into five epochs: First Epoch—Wilderness; Second Epoch—Spotsylvania; Third Epoch—North Anna; Fourth Epoch—Cold Harbor; Fifth Epoch—Petersburg. Our fifth epoch only covers fictitious battles if Grant had chosen to directly attack Richmond across the Chickahominy instead of crossing the James River to Petersburg. Another game, yet to be produced, will cover Petersburg.

I also used my compendium's database as a way to track experience and unit quality of the contending armies. Units were basically awarded one point per month of service and ten points for each involvement in a major action. The resulting numbers were subjected to a sliding scale, rounding up for the Confederates and down for the Yanks. Given the odds against the Confederates, this was the only way to give them a chance, especially in the open field.

There are two basic matching sets of OOBs. The set of OOBs supporting the stand-alone battles have casualties from previous battles already subtracted, while the set supporting the campaign scenarios have units at full strength, leaving the campaign to progressively subtract losses as the campaigns are fought.

In the Eastern Theater, in May and June of 1864, it was Meade's Army of the Potomac that stole the show. In fact, the Army of the Potomac was supported by three other forces, each with its own specific mission.

Butler's Army of the James threatened Richmond from the south. Butler was unsuccessful, and but for the colorful phrase that he ended up "as in a bottle, firmly corked," only the most engaged historian would know any more about his meanderings in Richmond's back yard.

Two other smaller forces, under George Crook and Franz Sigel, had the mission of clearing the Shenandoah Valley, with Crook coming down the valley from the south and Sigel advancing up the valley from the north. The only memorable event from that campaign was the Battle of New Market, won by the Confederacy, and given immortality by the heroic action of the soldier-student body of VMI. By the way, the Yankees under Crook were successful, but who remembers the Battle of Cloyd's Mountain?

So we include those forces, and some of their battles will even impact events in our campaign games.

Parameter data tables

All of the components of the game are controlled by the PDTs, from weapon capabilities to march rates to weather. One of our references is “Civil War Weather in Virginia by Robert Krick. It features thrice daily weather reports over a four year period, and those for the Overland period—and Mine Run—were faithfully reproduced in the pdts.

Credentials

- 1 Year infantry combat experience Marines Vietnam 1966
- 3 years Marine infantry
- 17 Years Civil War reenacting and living history presentations. (1994-present
- 20 Years Army experience in personnel, training, supply, security, and intelligence. Computerized conflict simulations for command post exercises, retired as PltSgt E7 Courses at Ft Polk LA, National Training Center Ft Irwin CA, Advanced Leadership training, Fort Benning, GA, and others
- 50 years (+) Military studies, WWII and ACW --produced Civil War database of every unit in Confederate Army to complement Dyer's Compendium which documents the Union Army.
- 1 Published book "Servants of the Wind" Civil War 99% history; 1% fiction
- 1 Play, Heritage, performed in 1995 and again in 2011, as “Servants of the Wind” observing the 150th anniversary of Civil War.
- 1 unpublished WWII short story
- 1 unpublished Vietnam biography
- 3 years guest columnist local newspaper
- 5 years game design with HPS--Mexican War and ACW Overland Campaign
- Wargaming since 1960; computer gaming since 1986--Avalon Hill, SPI, Carriers at War and Decisive Battles (both of Strategic Studies Group (SSG); Age of Rifles, HPS

Ken Jones

Introduction

When Rich Hamilton asked me if I was interested in working on Campaign Overland, I didn't need to think before signing up. Like many of you, I am a student of the Civil War—its strategy and tactics, its campaigns and battlefields, its personalities, its causes and consequences. But the Civil War in Virginia was of particular interest to me, and the Overland Campaign of 1864 was darn right personal. From 1993 until very recently, I lived in Spotsylvania County, Virginia just a few miles from the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and North Anna battlefields. I just didn't read about these battlefields, I walked over them for years with my trusted canine scouts—a beagle named Tucker and later a Brittany named Copper. The Spotsylvania battlefield, in particular, was as familiar to me and my dogs as my own back yard. It was this intimate knowledge of the battlefields themselves that I wanted to bring to the design table for this game.

Modeling the Terrain from Maps and Field Studies

Terrain often is an important determinant in the outcomes of many battles, but I believed that this was particularly true about the fighting that occurred in the Wilderness and around Spotsylvania Courthouse in May of 1864. In the Wilderness, the rolling terrain was thickly covered with a second growth scrub forest that limited visibility and mobility. Combined with the smoke from musketry and ground fires and one can only imagine the chaos that must have accompanied the fighting there. Under these conditions, it comes as no surprise that

“friendly fire” changed the course of the battle—as it had in the fighting at nearby Chancellorsville the year previously. Though housing developments and small businesses have transformed parts of the Wilderness battlefield, the key acreage still remains relatively undisturbed with trench lines and old burial sites still visible over much of the area.

The fighting in the Wilderness was, at least for the first day or two, a meeting engagement. The two opposing armies were both on the move—with the Army of the Potomac trying move south along the Brock Road to get around Lee’s right flank, and the Army of Northern Virginia trying to interrupt that movement and force the Union army to fight in the forested terrain of the Wilderness where the AOP’s superiority in numbers would be limited. Using the two east-west roadways, the Orange Turnpike and the Orange Plank Road, Lee’s ANV was able to successfully initiate a fight in the thickets of the Wilderness on May 5th. Consequently, the fighting in the Wilderness was focused along the road network and a few small farm clearings, both because the armies were on the move and because the thick forests severely restricted off-road movement and line-of-sight. Hence, places like Saunder’s Field, Widow Tapp Farm, and the Brock Road Intersection have become well known landmarks of the Wilderness Battlefield. Two days of fierce fighting, however, found the armies exhausted and defensively entrenched.

Despite the casualties and the tactical setbacks that came with the Wilderness fighting, Grant was undeterred. In what some have noted as a decisive turning point in the campaign, Grant ordered the Army of the Potomac to pull up and continue the move south down the Brock Road towards Spotsylvania Courthouse. In a dispatch to Washington, U.S. Grant had vowed to “fight it out along this line all summer” if that is what it would take to destroy Lee’s army. And so the next battle, in what became known as the Overland Campaign, would be fought around the crossroads of Spotsylvania Courthouse.

The battlefields around Spotsylvania are even better preserved. There the trenches still outline nearly the full length of the Confederate defensive positions from the Po River on the left to the County Courthouse on the right. The Spotsylvania Battlefield is one of the best preserved battlefields that I have had the pleasure to explore. Much of the landscape is protected by the national park and the fields and forests have been “restored” to their approximate shapes and acreages that existed in 1864. The careful protection afforded the Wilderness and Spotsylvania battlefield parks is largely due to the past and ongoing efforts of the National Park Service and preservation groups like the Civil War Trust, the Central Virginia Battlefield Trust, and The Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield, and other various “Friends” groups. Thanks to the preservation efforts of these groups, I was able to identify and transfer key terrain features, trench lines, and elevations more accurately to the digital fields of Campaign Overland.

At Spotsylvania terrain was again a key determinant of the outcome of the fighting. But here, I believe that an understanding of the terrain on a micro level is really important in comprehending the intensity and concentration of the fighting in this campaign. It is only when one stands at the west angle of the salient at Spotsylvania—that 40-50 yards or trenches that would become infamous as the Bloody Angle—that one can truly comprehend why the opposing forces would fight so desperately and in such close proximity for nearly 20 hours on that fateful 12th day of May in 1864. From the west angle, one possesses, not only a commanding view of the open fields of the Landrum farm over which the Union troops had to cross to make their assault, but a view of the entire north and west faces of the Rebel defensive works in what was known as the “Mule Shoe” salient. Control the west angle, and you controlled the entire center of the Confederate defensive line.

It was this insight into the terrain—gained from my many “scouting” expeditions with family and my canine friends—that I hoped to transfer to the virtual battlefield maps of Campaign Overland. And judging from the maps and the game testing that we’ve done, I think we were successful. I believe we captured the essence of the

terrain at Spotsylvania battlefield particularly well. The micro-terrain features at Laurel Hill and in and around the Mule Shoe Salient are as accurate as one could possibly hope for. Similarly, breastworks and trench lines have been laid out on the virtual maps in such a fashion as to capture the essence of their defensive nature while recognizing the practical limits of the game engine. Because of this, I think the scenarios will play out more historically than might otherwise be the case.

Similar efforts to put “boots and paws” on the ground greatly improved the maps at North Anna and Trevillian Station as well. Unfortunately, we didn’t have enough boots to walk over and study all of the terrain around Cold Harbor, so we had to rely on other sources of intel for those efforts. The large map of the eastern theater of operations was built by Doug Strickler from national geologic survey maps. We added additional detail for much of the area traversed by Overland Campaign by consulting the maps from the Library of Congress’ Civil War Map Collection [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/collections/civil_war_maps/cwmabout.html] and from the National Park Service maps depicting troop movements at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor battlefields. Additional detail on specific battlefields and micro-terrain features were added based on our on-the-ground mapping capability. As mentioned previously, this was made possible by the well-preserved condition of the battlefield parks themselves—a lasting testament to the dedication of the National Park Service and the various civil war preservation groups that have fought to keep these historic fields safe from development for future generations. Because of this, many of the important terrain features on the battlefields can still be found and studied. One can still walk the miles of trenches that outline the position of the armies at almost all the battlefields comprising the Overland Campaign.

I can remember specific scouting missions to various Rapidan River crossings, Saunder’s Field, the Widow Tapp Farm, the Lacy House, the abandoned railroad cut that made Longstreet’s Flank attack possible, Craig’s Meeting House, and the Salem Church on the Catharpin Road, Laurel Hill, the Po River bridge, the woods road used by Upton in his famous attack on the Salient using a “column of regiments”, the Mule Shoe Salient, the Landrum House, Heth’s Salient, the Harris Farm, Ox Ford, the North Anna Battlefield, Haw’s Shop, Cold Harbor, and Trevillian Station. It was all good and I will always remember and enjoy those walks across Virginia’s countryside in search of Civil War history. Standing at specific locations highlighted in the chronicles of the battles and the campaign really brings history to life like few other experiences. My sense of the “lay of the land” was also enhanced by an aerial tour of the Spotsylvania battlefields—courtesy of my brother Tom—an avid flyer and fellow civil war enthusiast. Some of the pictures from these scouts have been included to enhance your perspective of the terrain that featured so prominently in the Overland Campaign. But I strongly encourage everyone to visit the fields themselves when they get the chance. Then you will “see” what we tried to show on our digital battlefield maps. I hope you enjoy the game.

Project References

Artillery and Ammunition of the Civil War	Ripley, Warren	Very detailed. See Round Shot and Rammers
Back Door To Richmond The Bermuda Hundred Campaign	Robertson, William G	How Ben Butler managed to NOT take Richmond
The Battle of New Market	Davis, William C	Breckinridge versus Sigel in the Shenandoah Valley.
The Battle of the Wilderness	Rhea, Gordon C.	Rhea's first of four volumes on the Overland Campaign
Battles and Leaders of the Civil War Volume 4	Yoseloff (publisher)	A classic. Good OOB source and basic accounts

The Battles for Spotsylvania Courthouse and Yellow Tavern May 7-12 1864	Rhea, Gordon C.	Second of four volumes on Overland Campaign
The Bermuda Hundred Campaign	Schiller, Herbert M	More backup info on Butler being the best general the CSA ever had
Bloody Angle	Cannan, John	Detailed account of the Battle of the Mule Shoe, May 12, 1864
Bloody Roads South	Trudeau, Noah Andre	Good overview of Overland Campaign
The Civil War Dictionary	Boatner Mark M	Brief bios on participants, info on Battles, campaigns etc
Civil War Weather in Virginia	Krick, Robert K	Daily temps and weather for five years 1861-65
Cold Harbor Grant and Lee May 26-June 3 1864	Rhea, Gordon C.	Last of four volumes on Overland Campaign
Compendium of the Confederate Armies (9 Vol)	Sifakis, Stewart	State by state histories of regiments, battalions and batteries
The Confederate Order of Battle. The Army of Northern Virginia	Sibley, F. Ray	Fills in a lot of the blanks found in Battles and Leaders OOBs
General Lee's Army	Glatthaar, Joseph T	Very interesting detailed study of the makeup of Lee's army, morale, civilian background, more
Generals In Blue	Warner Ezra J	Biographies of all Union Generals
Generals in Gray	Warner , Ezra J	Biographies of all Confederate Generals
If It Takes All Summer: The Battle of Spotsylvania	Matter William D	Very good detailed study of the battles around Spotsylvania Courthouse
Lee's Colonels	Krick, Robert K	Biographies of regimental commanders and staff in Army of Northern Virginia
Long Arm of Lee Vol 2	Wise Jennings C	Story of Lee's artillery, Gettysburg to Appomattox
Mine Run: A Campaign of Lost Opportunities	Graham Martin F	The Army of the Potomac's last campaign under the old organization
More Generals in Gray	Allardice, Bruce S	CSA general officers whose commissions were questionable
Not War But Murder (Cold Harbor)	Furgurson Ernest B.	For years, the primary source for Cold Harbor
Nowhere To Run The Wilderness May 4th & 5th 1864	Priest, John M.	Soldiers' stories from the Wilderness 1st volume

Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies & Atlas	Us Govt Printing Office	On CD. Great reference source
Round Shot and Rammers	Peterson, Harold L	A more basic overview of 19th century artillery. Not as detailed as Art'y and Ammo, but good, uncomplicated info
Staff Ride Handbook for the Overland Campaign	King, Robertson & Clay	A very thorough analysis of the campaign. Full staff ride is three days on the road in Virginia!
The Spotsylvania Campaign	Cannan, John	May 7-21, 1964
The Spotsylvania Campaign	Gallagher, Gary (ed.)	Contains a chapter by R. Krick on the fighting of at the Bloody Angle -- perhaps the best account of the fighting there.
The North Anna Campaign: "Even to Hell Itself", May 21-26, 1864	Miller, J. Michael	A nice account of the strategies and fighting during the North Anna Campaign
To the North Anna River Grant and Lee May 13-25 1864	Rhea, Gordon C.	Third of four volumes on Overland
Trench Warfare Under Grant & Lee	Hess, Earl J	Good fortification study focus on the Overland Campaign
Union and Confederate Databases	Ferry, John D	Ongoing project month by month order of battle, Jun 1861-Jun 1865
The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II	Starr, Stephen Z	Details on the cavalry battles during the campaign
Units of the Confederate States Army	Crute, Joseph H Jr	All CSA combat units, all in one volume
Victory Without Triumph The Wilderness May 6th & 7th 1864	Priest, John M.	Soldiers' stories from the Wilderness, 2nd volume
Who Was Who In The Civil War	Sifakis, Stewart	More detailed biographies on Military, societal and political figures
The Wilderness Campaign	Steere, Edward	I read this book nearly 50 years ago. It is still the standard by which all other Wilderness books are judged