

The Second Battle of Behistun

Byzantines v. Sassanid Persians: A *Hail Caesar* Wargame Report

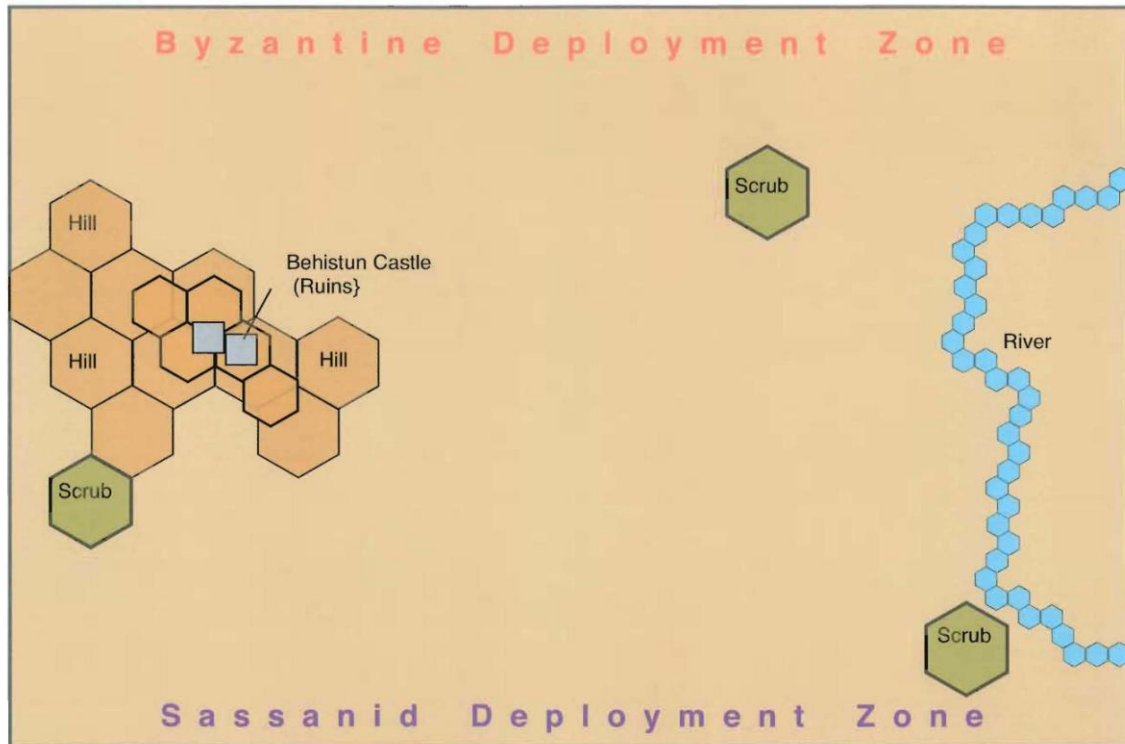
By Chris Hahn

Under the “Orders” heading on page 26 of Rick Priestley’s *Hail Caesar* rules, it reads: “Giving orders is one of the most important parts of the game and also one of the most entertaining aspects of play.” The next paragraph begins with this sentence: “Players should endeavor to state orders aloud, in good time and in a straightforward, robust fashion without conditions or vagaries.” The evidence -- the rules -- cannot be refuted: *Hail Caesar* is written for play by two or more (preferably more) players. In the scenarios and colorful battle reports provided on pages 110-171, four to six players guided by an umpire appear to be the norm. How then, does a solo wargamer approach *Hail Caesar*? Can a solo wargamer even consider staging, playing, and fighting to conclusion, a miniature battle using these well-written, and from all indications, popular rules?

I would like to answer the second question first. Yes, a solo wargamer can stage, play, and fight to conclusion, a miniature battle using *Hail Caesar*. Admittedly, the “talking” to yourself (meaning the verbal expression of orders) is a bit awkward at first, but based on my very limited experience, I find it helps to focus one’s tactical if not also grand-tactical thinking. The personal level of entertainment is reduced of course, but should a member of the family wander by during the course of an especially engaging or critical turn, he or she might be amused or perhaps even a little startled by the overheard “conversation.” As to the first question, well ... it’s really a matter of personal preference. The solo wargamer could, for example, pre-program the orders for one side. If playing as Romans against a horde of barbarians (one of my favorites), then it seems quite historical to simply announce that the various warbands will be charging into contact as soon as possible. The dice, of course, have the final say. If one wishes to be more even-handed, then certain local decisions can be left to the roll of a 1d6. For example, moves by victorious units and or sweeping advances (as explained on page 78 of the rules) can be determined by the unbiased roll of a single die. For another example, there are six possible responses to a declared charge listed on page 60. The decision-making process can be taken out of the solo wargamer’s hands by rolling a 1d6. Granted, the actual process would have to be revised (one cannot have Roman legionary infantry performing the *Parthian Shot!*), but the basic premise and procedure remain valid.

Scenario Selection & Modifications

For this, my second experience and experiment with *Hail Caesar*, I drew inspiration from Chapter 9 of Charles Grant’s *Wargame Tactics*. [Note 1] The title of this particular chapter is “The Battle of Behistun.” It is a well-written and entertaining report of a large wargame between Byzantines (one of Mr. Grant’s favorite armies) and Sassanid Persians. I am guessing that the rules used were a version of WRG (perhaps 5th Edition), as there were two scorers and an umpire present, in addition to the two highly experienced players (73).



Map 1 - The Terrain and Deployment Areas: The battlefield is rather open and sparse. The 6 by 4-foot table seems designed to promote action in the center sector.

The hills, areas of vegetation, and the winding river of the original terrain were kept intact. I did add one more patch of desert scrub, however, and the actual format of my terrain features is markedly different from the features drawn by Mr. Grant. I am challenged by the limitations of a six by four-foot playing surface (I believe Mr. Grant's wargame table measured nine by seven feet), as well as by the limitations of a basic drawing program on my laptop. Even so, I have come to appreciate the board game (i.e., hexagon) appearance of terrain features used on my table.

I based my orders of battle on the forces described in Mr. Grant's narrative. In addition to increasing the numbers involved on both sides, adding some extra troop types, and "tweaking" the quality of some units, I flipped the deployment areas for the armies. In this, the Second Battle of Behistun, the Byzantines would arrive from the north while the Persians would come onto the desert-like field from the south.

Though larger in size than the original competing forces, my two armies were actually smaller. I revised the frontages listed in the table on the bottom of page 174 in order to make maximum use of my modest wargame table. The frontage for a "standard" unit was 7 centimeters. The large units were 14 centimeters, and the small units were just 3.5 centimeters across. Unit depth varied depending on type. For measuring movement rates and firing ranges, I used the two-thirds scale rulers available from Litko Aerosystems, Inc. [Note 2]

Orders of Battle

Each army contained eight divisions. The specific composition of these divisions differed, of course. Generally speaking, the Byzantine army was divided into formations of heavy infantry and heavy cavalry. Though its inclusion was out of bounds in terms of available historical evidence, I thought it might be fun to include a single unit of Varangian Guard. [Note 3] The Sassanid Persian army, in contrast, did not contain any heavy infantry. The power of this modified army resided in its cataphract cavalry regiments. A comparatively large number of elephants added to this offensive (no pun intended) and fully-armored punch. Rounding out the Persian host, there were masses of light infantry levy supported by bow-armed foot and cavalry.



Byzantines:

1st Division -- Infantry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 2)
- > 3 Standard units of Heavy Infantry with Long Spear and Integral Archers
- > 1 Standard unit of Light Infantry with Javelins

2nd Division -- Infantry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 2)
- > 4 Standard units of Heavy Infantry with Long Spear and Integral Archers
- > 1 Standard unit of Light Infantry with Javelins
- > 1 Small unit of Skirmishers with Bows

3rd Division -- Infantry

- > Division Commander [Army General] (Rating of 9, Fighting Value of 3)
- > 3 Standard units of Heavy Infantry with Long Spear and Integral Archers
- > 1 Standard unit of Heavy Infantry with Double-Handed Weapon
- > 1 Standard unit of Light Infantry with Javelins

4th Division -- Infantry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 2)
- > 4 Standard units of Heavy Infantry with Long Spear and Integral Archers
- > 1 Standard unit of Light Infantry with Javelins
- > 1 Small unit of Skirmishers with Bows

5th Division -- Infantry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 7, Fighting Value of 1)
- > 2 Standard units of Light Infantry with Javelins
- > 3 Standard units of Light Infantry with Bows

6th Division -- Cavalry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 2)
- > 4 Standard units of Cataphracts with Kontos, Bow and Darts
- > 1 Standard unit of Medium Cavalry
- > 1 Standard unit of Light Cavalry with Kontos and Darts

7th Division -- Cavalry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 2)
- > 4 Standard units of Cataphracts with Kontos, Bow and Darts
- > 1 Standard unit of Medium Cavalry
- > 1 Standard unit of Light Cavalry with Kontos and Darts

8th Division -- Cavalry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 2)
- > 2 Small units of Cataphracts with Kontos, Bow and Darts
- > 2 Standard units of Medium Cavalry
- > 3 Small units of Hun Light Cavalry with Bow and Javelins

Sassanid Persians:

Division A -- Infantry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 1)
- > 3 Large units of Light Infantry
- > 2 Standard units of Light Infantry Archers

Division B -- Infantry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 1)
- > 4 Large units of Light Infantry
- > 2 Standard units of Light Infantry Archers

Division C -- Infantry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 1)
- > 2 Large units of Light Infantry
- > 3 Standard units of Medium Infantry
- > 2 Standard units of Armored Light Infantry Archers

Division D -- Elephants

- > Division Commander [Army General] (Rating of 9, Fighting Value of 2)
- > 6 Elephants (crews in howdahs and armed with javelins and bows)

Division E -- Elephants

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 1)
- > 4 Elephants (crews in howdahs and armed with javelins and bows)
- > 1 Small unit of Light Infantry with Javelins

Division F -- Cavalry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 2)
- > 6 Standard units of Cataphracts with Kontos and Bow
- > 2 Standard units of Light Cavalry with Javelins

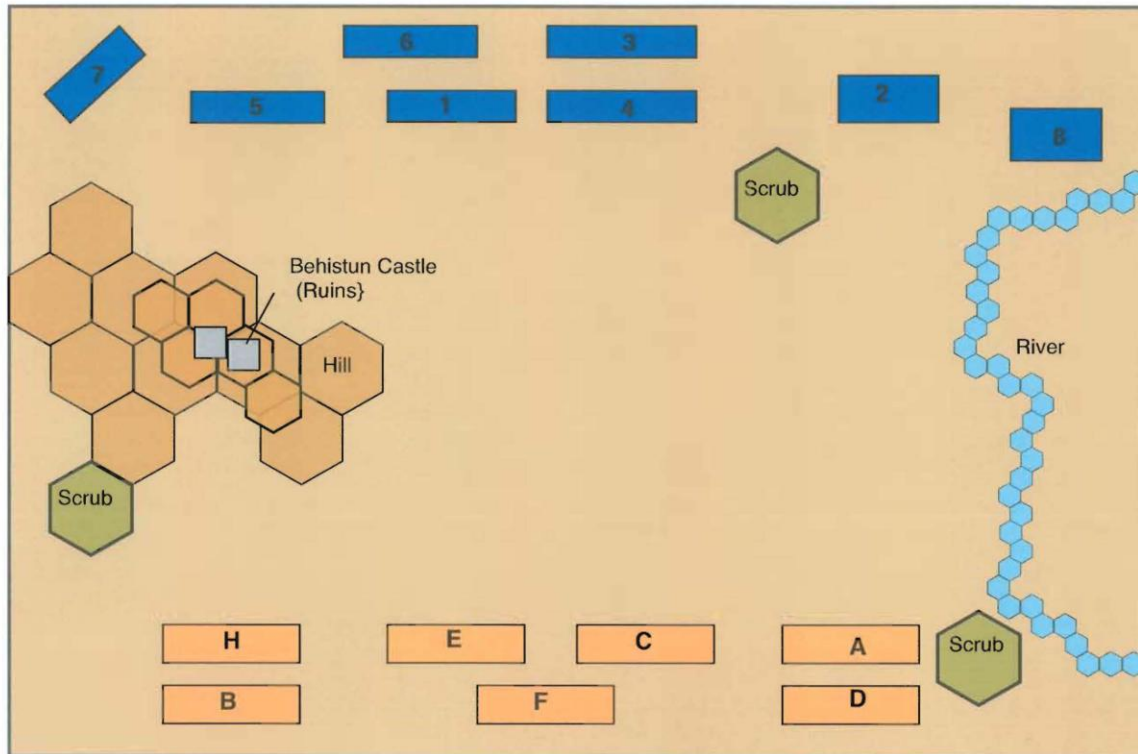
Division G -- Cavalry

- > Division Commander (Rating of 8, Fighting Value of 2)
- > 6 Standard units of Cataphracts with Kontos and Bow
- > 2 Standard units of Light Cavalry with Javelins

Division H -- Cavalry

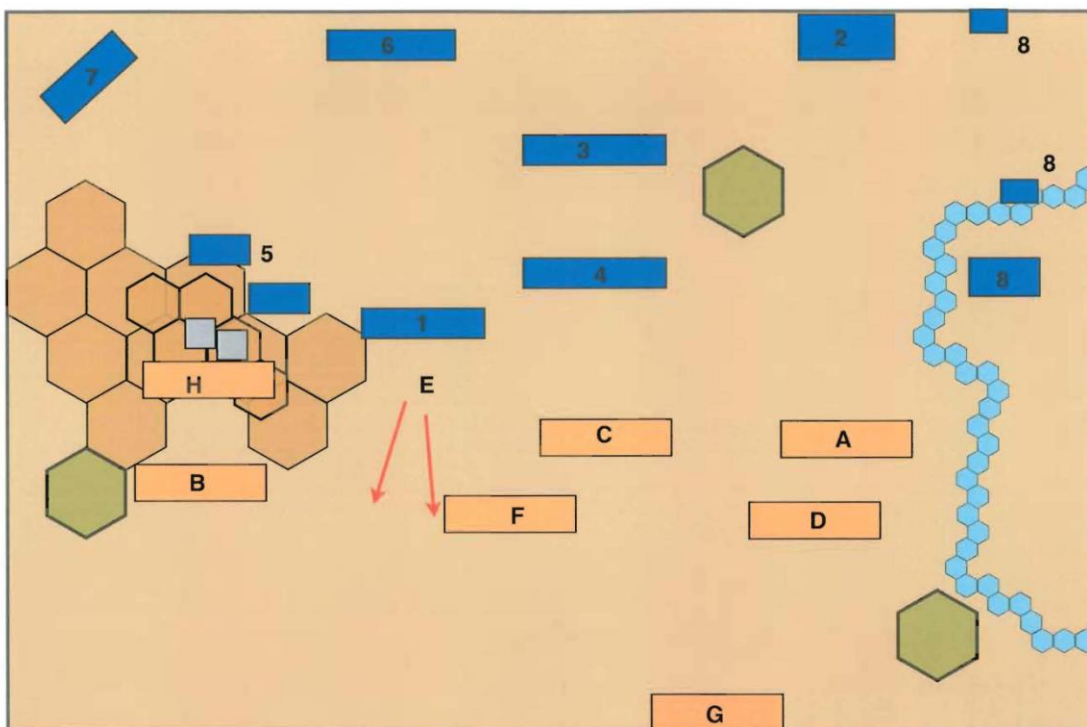
- > Division Commander (Rating of 7, Fighting Value of 1)
- > 3 Standard units of Horse Archers
- > 2 Small units of Camels with Javelins

A Summary of the Second Battle of Behistun



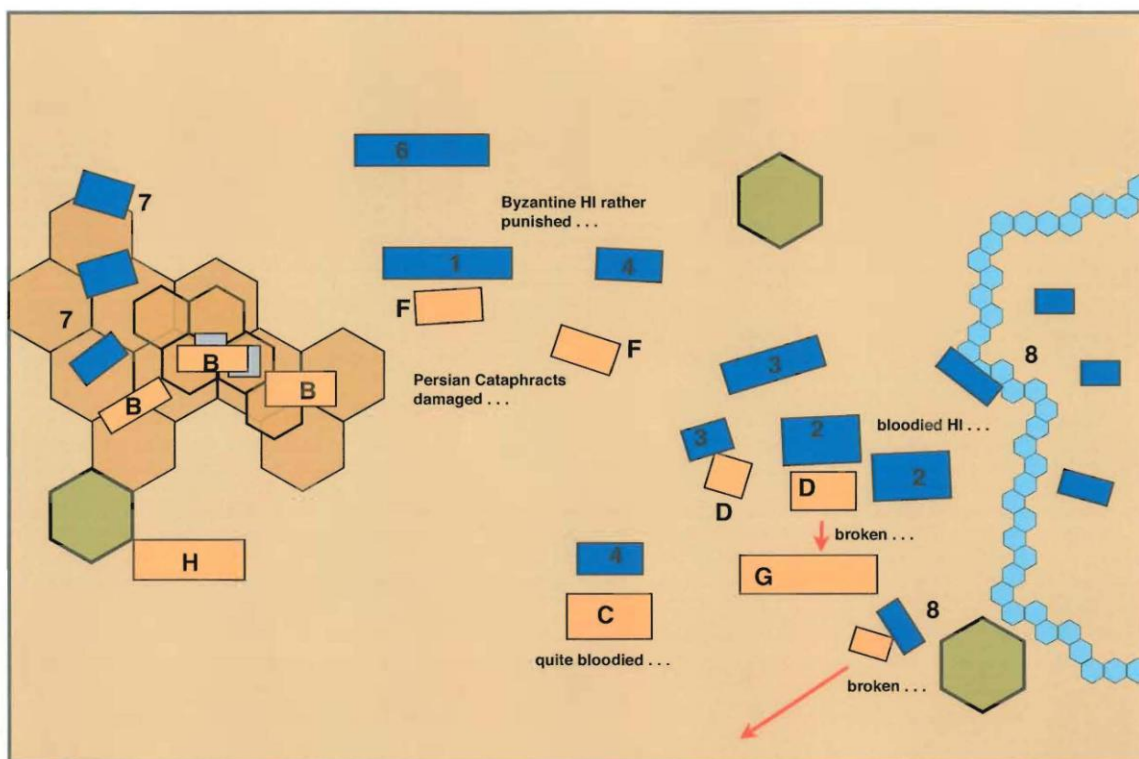
Map 2 - Initial Deployment of Armies: All Byzantine Divisions are on the field. The Sassanids have one division of cataphracts off table, to the rear of Division D. The Byzantines deploy with a strong infantry center. Their cavalry is posted to the flanks or as reserve. Light troops are tasked with taking the castle ruins. The Persians have a mixed deployment. Elephants are in the front line as well as in reserve. Levy infantry is spread across all sectors. The powerful cataphracts are arranged in two groups. One is a central reserve, and one is an off table reserve.

The initial deployment of the opposing armies is shown in Map 2. The Byzantines had a division of cavalry on each flank in addition to one in central reserve. The Persians placed one cataphract formation in central reserve, but held the other division off the table. The horse archers and camels were deployed as a screen on the left of the Sassanid battle line. The elephants did not operate in conjunction. One division was in reserve on the right flank; the other division was placed in the front line on the left-center. The Byzantines put their heavy infantry across the plain. The light troops were stationed on the right end of the line. Their objective was to secure the hills and castle ruins.



Map 3 - Status of Field at End of Turn 3: The Byzantines have scored the first local victory, breaking a division of elephants on the Persian left-center. Movement proves problematic for both sides during the early stages of the battle. The cavalry arm of both forces seems especially susceptible to poor dice rolls once orders are given. The Sassanids are the first to reach the top of the hills and castle ruins on their left, but horse archers prove ill-suited for garrison duty. The Byzantine light troops (5), soon push them away.

Map 3 shows both sides got off to a comparatively slow start. The Byzantines had problems moving their cavalry formations, especially the small units of cataphracts on the far left flank of their battle line. The light troops were not able to secure the hills before the Persian horse archers. First blood and first bragging rights went to the heavy infantry of the 1st Division of the Byzantine force. The integral archers of the three foot regiments showered the elephants, causing a number of casualties. Greater damage was done by the wall of long spears, however. In a series of sharp melees, the first division of Sassanid troops was broken and driven from the field.



Map 5 - Status of Field when game was called during Byzantine segment of Turn 10: The commanding general of the Persian host is wounded as his division of elephants is broken during prolonged combat against the long spears and big shields of Byzantine heavy infantry. With casualties in all formations except the cataphracts of Division G, with a crumbling right and weakened center, and with only one group of unharmed troops to engage the successful Byzantines, the Sassanids decide to quit the field. Three divisions are broken, the troops of Division C are quite bloodied and disordered, and the cataphracts of Division F have suffered a bit of damage in extended melees with enemy heavy infantry armed with long spears.

By the mid-point of game turn 10 (as depicted in Map 5), the writing seemed to be very much on the wall for the Sassanid Persians. Their overall commander had been wounded while leading his elephants against Byzantine heavy infantry formations. Indeed, his division had been broken by a succession of bloody melees. Fortunately, none of the pachyderms stampeded. (A division of cataphract cavalry was deployed in support of the losing elephants.) There were more bloody melees in the center sector of the field, as the cataphracts of F Division had finally charged home against the waiting Byzantine infantry. The drilled regulars gave almost as good as they got, however. Their regiments were disordered and shaken, but the dice rolls showed that their morale held firm. The numbers of cataphracts decreased with each new round of combat. At one point, a unit of the very heavy horse simply ceased to exist. At another point, a regiment failed its morale check and had to withdraw in disorder.

As the Persian general was fighting alongside his elephants, a forward unit of Byzantine cavalry managed to advance into the right rear of the Sassanid army. A light cavalry unit was tasked with stopping this incursion, but was broken after two rounds of charges and counter charges. There was no response to the series of urgent orders sent to groups of cataphracts in the ranks of G Division.

Grimacing in pain as a surgeon tightened the bandage around his bleeding shoulder, the Persian general took a long look at the state of the field and the condition of his forces. His right and center were in tatters. While he did have six untouched regiments of cataphracts in reserve, that was *all* he had in reserve. The levy way over on the left of the field were in possession of the hills and castle ruins, but were threatened by the slow advance of Byzantine cavalry. The enemy had one full and fresh infantry division as well as one more full and fresh division of heavy horse. To make matters worse, there were Byzantine cavalry behind him, and more were threatening to join this number by crossing the shallow river. It was time to gather his personal bodyguard. It was time to go.

Evaluation

Acknowledging the fact that I am often my own worst critic, and accepting the fact that this solo wargame marked only my second experience with Rick Priestley's *Hail Caesar* rules, were I to grade this project and effort on an academic scale, I would give myself a C minus. (This equates to slightly below average, but is still a passing mark.)

On critical reflection, it appears that I may have involved too many troops (divisions) for a solo wargame using newly acquired and recently learned rules. (The technically incorrect inclusion of a unit of Byzantines "designated" as a kind of mercenary elite/guard armed with two-handed weapons has already been noted.) Before the miniature engagement dissolved into a kind of "organized chaos," I do think that the tabletop looked very nice with the ordered armies set out on a desert-like terrain. While the hexagon-shaped terrain pieces are throwbacks to board games, I have found them to be very functional on my comparatively small playing surface. Additionally, the features assembled from these various pieces are much easier to map or draw with the limited software on my laptop.

I guess I should not compare this second battle with the first *Hail Caesar* contest as they were, obviously, completely different actions, but it is difficult not to do so. In brief, the first battle was more entertaining and engaging than this most recent action. The battle between Byzantines and Sassanids, while larger and more of a spectacle, was slower-paced, and proved in several places, to be frustrating as well as boring. This assessment should not be taken as a complaint against *Hail Caesar*. It did become more apparent to me during this second experiment that I had to "unlearn" a lot of previously learned rules. (I have spent a number of years playing with ARMATI, and have dabbled in WAB, *Vis Bellica*, and Phil Barker's DBA volumes.)

On the positive side of the assessment spectrum, this wargame did keep me occupied during the week of Thanksgiving. I could relax as either general instead of battling crowds on Black Friday. (Though it does seem like the "craziness" is spreading into Thursday) And I could burn off the calories consumed during the feast and turkey-sandwich-filled weekend by "fighting" for an hour or two. Finally, I could build on the lessons learned during this less than completely satisfactory solo wargame. It seems a rare occasion when the execution of a particular project is as good as the idea.

Speaking of ideas ... I've been toying with an adaptation of the First Battle of Bull Run. What if it was moved back in time 900 or even 1,800 years? Of course, one cannot have Confederates and Yankees present, but there might be room to engineer some kind of Roman Civil War scenario involving a stone bridge, a few fords, and perhaps a tribune or legate named "Thomasius Jacksonius."

NOTES

Note 1 - My first *Hail Caesar* battle was based on several chapters of Book 4 of Caesar's *Commentaries*. I staged what might be described as a "Saving Private Ryan" version of the Roman landings on the shores of Ancient Britain.

Note 2 - I purchased a set of these rather costly rulers at a LITTLE WARS convention, when I was still heavily into *Armati*.

Note 3 - See page 61 of Book 3 (476 AD to 1071 AD) of the *D.B.M. Army Lists*. The Sassanid Persian list is found in Book 2 on page 60.

(Photos of the action are below.)

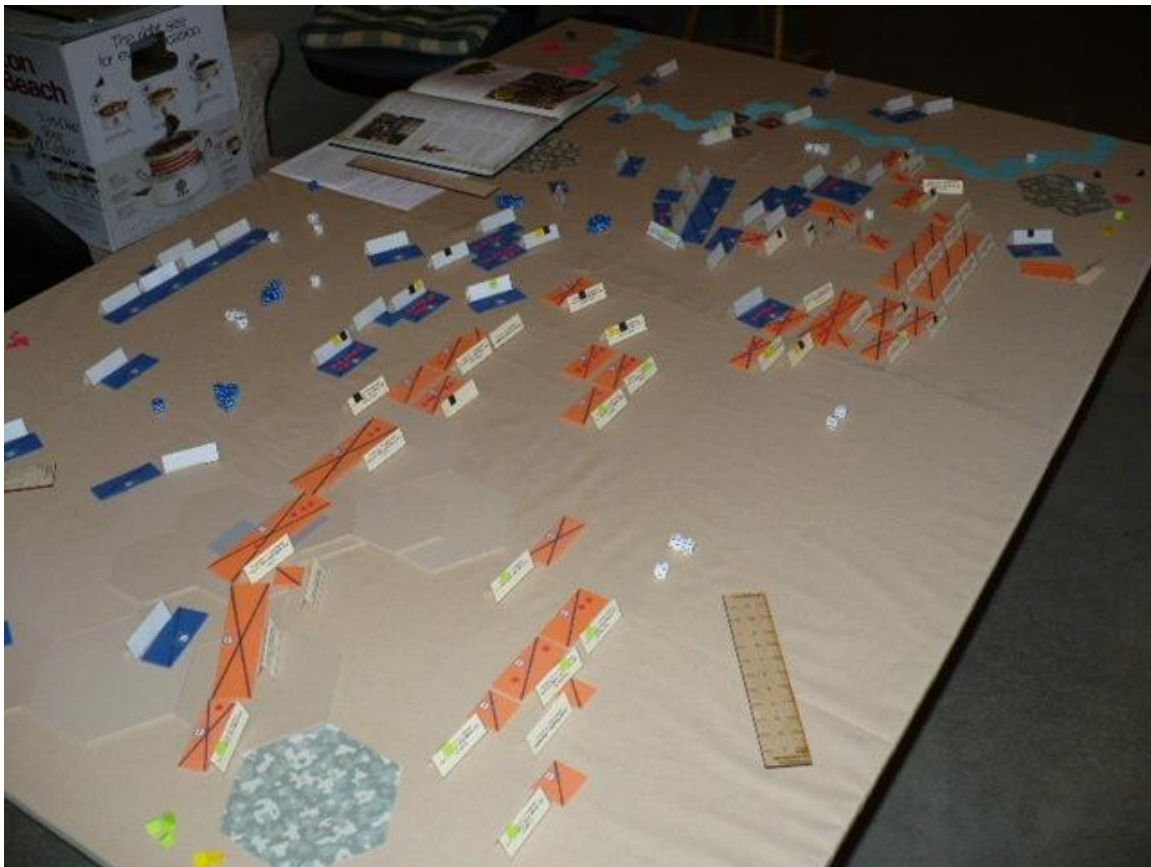


Photo 1 -- Taken from the left rear of the Persian battle line, this shows the state of the field at the end of the wargame. While the Byzantines have been bloodied, they have

held firm. The Persians have been bloodied even more and have lost a number of divisions which resulted in the general's decision to surrender the field.



Photo 2 -- Taken from the left rear of the Persian battle line, this picture shows the two opposing forces ready for battle. The terrain features should be evident (the hills and castle ruins are directly in front of the Persian left flank formations), and the clean lines of both armies should be apparent.



Photo 3 -- Here is another view of the two armies deployed for battle. This shot was taken from the Persian left of the tabletop. The castle ruins are in the foreground; the winding and shallow river is in the background. Map 2 goes along with this photo.



Photo 4 -- An aerial shot of the Byzantine right and Persian left. The horse archers are in temporary possession of the hills. They are trading arrows with the light troops of Byzantine Division Number 5. Three ordered regiments of Heavy Infantry are about to clash with four units of elephants. The main forces of each army are still some distance apart.



Photo 5 -- A close-up of the Byzantine right flank, showing the cavalry of Division Number 7 finally moving toward the enemy. The Persian levy has secured the ruins, if at some cost. The red markers should be visible on the counters representing the large units of light infantry.

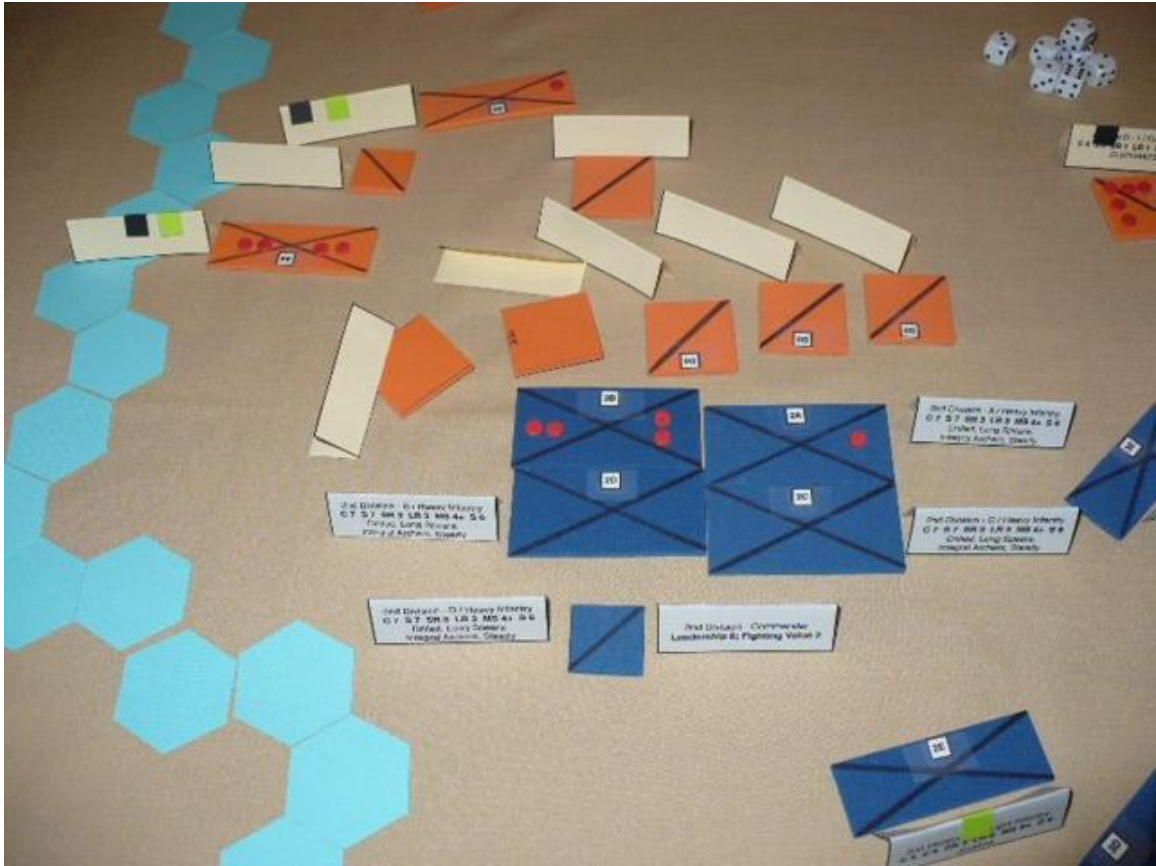


Photo 6 - A close-up of the action on the Byzantine left flank, where the Heavy Infantry of Division Number 2 are heavily engaged with the elephants of the Persian general's division. The remnants of Persian Division A can be seen in the back, near the river. These units are disordered (black marker).

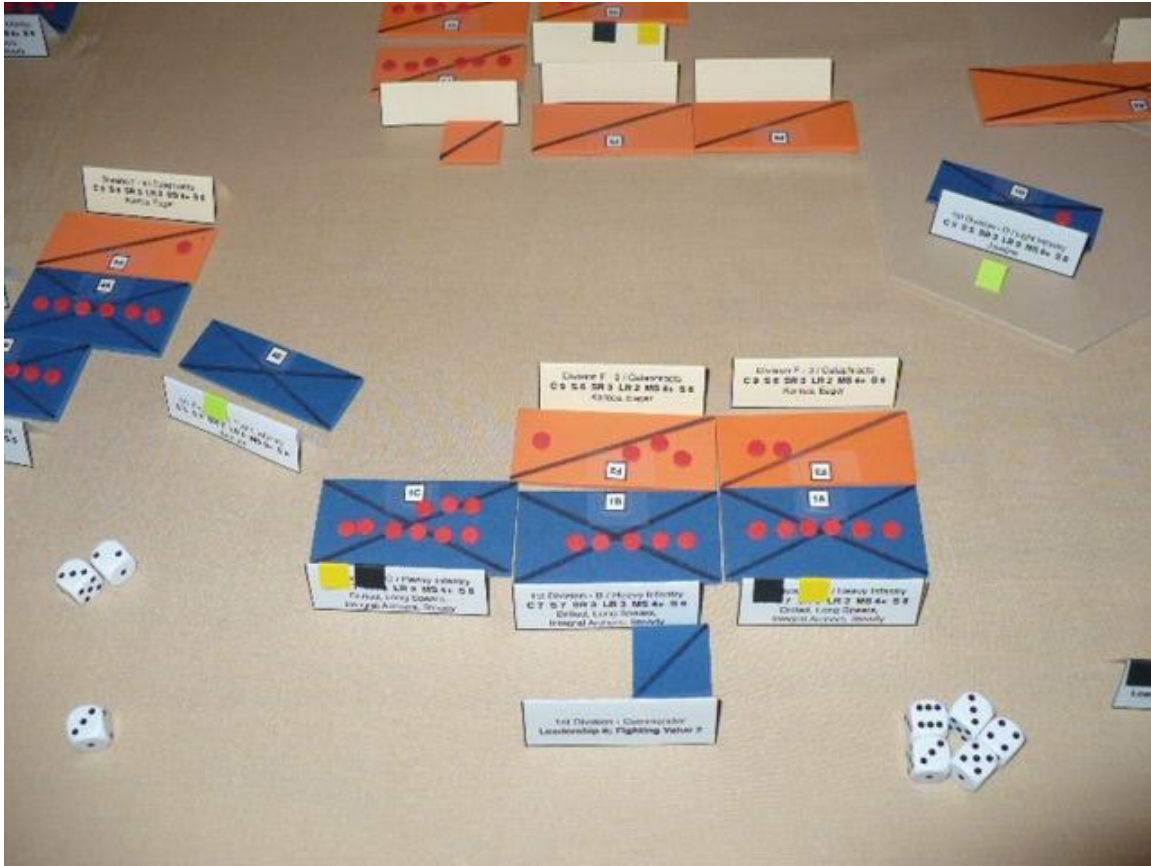


Photo 7 -- This picture shows the extent of the blood-letting in the center sector during the melees between the Persian cataphracts and the Byzantine infantry. The yellow status markers indicate “shaken,” and the black markers indicate “disorder.”

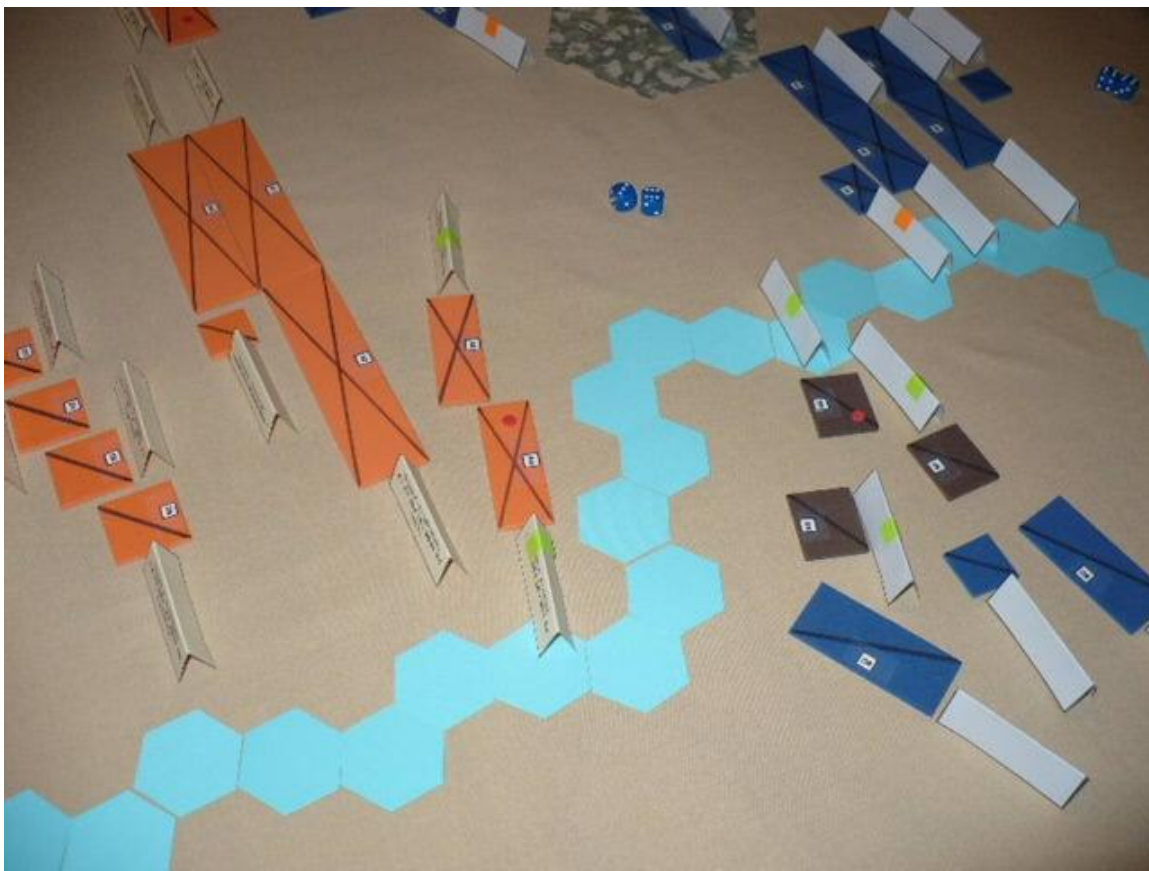


Photo 8 -- Over on the Persian right, early in the battle. The archers of Division A are exchanging arrows with the Hun light cavalry of the Byzantine cavalry formation across the river. The Huns proved to be fairly poor shots, in addition to not being too good at following orders. However, once the Persians were broken by the hard-fighting troops of Division Number 2, the Huns suddenly started following orders and showed an interest in getting into the fight.