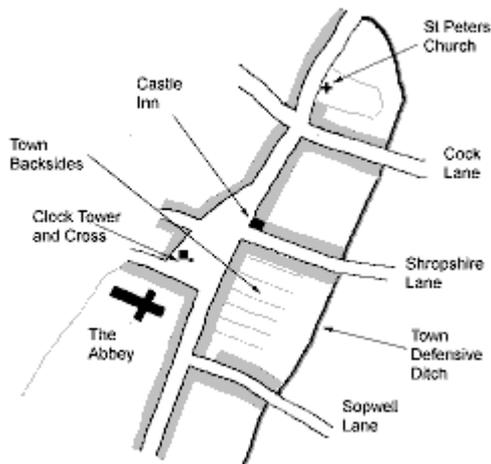## The First Battle Of St Albans.



Mention street fighting or fighting in a built up area and most wargamers will immediately think of the vicious struggle for Stalingrad or perhaps the terrible events in Mogadishu in 1993. As an alternative the first battle of St Albans provides a medieval street brawl with some interesting twists that make a great game. In addition I want to show that this is a battle where the basic principles of street fighting are shown to have made a real difference. To make a comparison I have included some quotes (in bold) from Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain (MOUT) FM 90-10 This US field manual was written in 1979 but there are a number of parallels in the problems experienced by the medieval street fighter.

### Background to the Battle

By January 1455 the already strained relations between Henry VI and Richard, Duke of York had a reached an all time low. The King, recovering from a breakdown, was able to resume the throne from York's "protectorate". The King promptly reinstated the Duke of Somerset, whom York hated and had imprisoned whilst looking after the throne. York, together with Warwick and Salisbury retired to the North to gather their forces and the Wars of Roses had begun!

The King met with his closest allies and organised a council to try to resolve the crises. Summons were duly sent for a meeting of the nobles on the 21st May. However York, concerned that he would simply be arrested decided on the bold strategy of attempting to intercept the King en-route. York, Warwick and Salisbury mustered their men at arms (probably totalling around 3000 men) and marched South to London. Several half hearted attempts by letter to resolve the dispute failed and on the 22nd of May 1455 the two forces clashed at St Albans.

### The Battle Itself

The King's force, of about 2000 men, consisting of the private troops of Somerset, Northumberland and Lord Clifford, was led by the Duke of Buckingham. Their men barricaded the 3 roads into St Albans (from the East) Cock Lane, Shropshire Lane and Sopwell Lane possibly using the remains of the town's defensive ditch.

> "Narrow streets with buildings constructed directly off the street edge facilitate construction of all types of obstacles. Even a few overturned cars or trucks in a narrow street can create an effective obstacle to armor or other vehicular passage. Demolition of structures will also provide rubble for instant obstacles"
>
> " Street barricades require significant resources and time to reduce. Usually these obstacles will be covered by defensive fires. Bypassing these obstructions is difficult because of the unbroken rows of buildings. Infantry units must clear well beyond the obstacles to neutralize defensive fires, permitting the obstacles to be reduced with earthmoving equipment and/or explosives. "

The King remained with a force around the market place in the centre of the town. Negotiations were again attempted but broke down partly because York was becoming increasingly impatient as the defensive barricades were being continuously improved while these negotiations took place.

Note some maps of the battle show only Shropshire Lane and Sopwell Lane being manned (as I have shown in map 2). I find it hard to believe that Cock lane was left undefended. But it could be that when attempts at a parley broke down it was clear that the assault was only
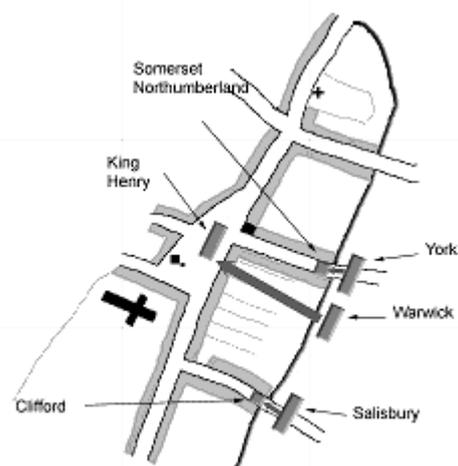
going to hit the two lanes and Somerset and Northumberland's grouped together in Shropshire lane.

The initial Yorkist assault against the barricades was, not surprisingly, unsuccessful. In the narrow confines of the buildings the advantage of their superior numbers was negated. A fair proportion of the troops on both sides would have been archers so a head on assault of the obstacles would have required a great deal of courage.

> **"Operating from, within, or through urban areas isolates and separates units. Frequently, operations are reduced to a series of small-unit battles. Greater dependence is placed on the individual soldier's and small-unit leader's initiative, skill, and fortitude. "**

It was at this point that Warwick, in an act that established his military reputation, led his men between Sopwell and Shropshire lanes, passing through the buildings (probably literally breaking down walls and doors) in area called the Town backsides. Suddenly breaking out into the market place and with a cry of "a Warwick, a Warwick" his men smashed into the King's troops.

> **"Attack the Enemy Rear**
> **Enemy defenses will usually consist of strongpoints and obstacles arrayed laterally and in depth over the most likely avenues of approach. After disrupting the initial urban defenses, the attacker must secure critical objectives and seek to drive into the enemy rear to find and destroy his control headquarters, combat support, and combat service support units. The attack and isolation of forward defenses disrupt combat service support functions. It also demands that the defender employ his combat support elements, thus aiding the attacker in locating and destroying them. At battalion and company level, infantry forces, infiltrating by stealth or under conditions of limited visibility, should be employed to attack key command, control, and support installa-tions. The division commander should consider utilizing airmobile assets and heavy reconnaissance elements to conduct rear area operations through-out the attack to find and destroy the enemy com-mand and control facilities. The splintering of the defense, along with the disruption of command and control and destruction of support capabilities, will cause the defense to collapse. "**

The men holding the barricades, fearing a rear attack, fled allowing the Yorkist forces to drive into the town

and a large melee ensued. It appears that the group in the market place were completely surprised, the King and the Duke of Buckingham were both wounded by arrows and resistance collapsed. The King was wounded in the neck so it is possible that he had not time to even don his helmet. Clifford was killed in the melee as was Northumberland. Somerset and his retainers found themselves holed up in the Castle Inn (at the junction of Shropshire lane which must mean he was defending Shropshire Lane) and tried to fight it out. Attempting a desperate breakout charge he killed 4 men before being cut down.

**The aftermath**
The victorious Yorkist leaders knelt before the king and begged for forgiveness. Which not surprisingly, as the King had no choice, appears to have been given! The Royal party with the rebels travelled back to London the following day. York maintained this "protectorate" until February the following year. Casualties in the battle seem to have been fairly light (amongst the normal troops anyway). This is probably down to a number of factors. Warwick's sudden attack probably shattered morale of the defence very quickly. There may not have actually been a great deal of natural antagonism within the normal ranks. Later on in the Wars of Roses the battles tended to get bloodier and more brutal as the sides polarised and revenge for previous battles was sought. There may also have been a sense of "go for the nobles rather than the common man" and that the common soldier was caught up in events that were as much political as military.

**Re-fighting the Battle**

**Terrain**
A visit to modern St Albans gives a few clues as to the layout in the 15th Century. Sopwell lane is still there. Cock lane is now called Hatfield Road and Shropshire lane was approximately where Victoria Street is now. The market area was bigger then, extending westwards to include the Clock Tower (the original tower is still there) - although it may have been broken up by temporary shops, stalls and streets. We can assume the road layouts are reasonably accurate. They would have been lined with buildings but how far they would have extended along the lanes is unknown. The "Town Backsides" are basically plots of land extending backwards from the buildings along the market place. I would assume these would have been partitioned with wattle style fencing and would probably look a lot like a modern allotment perhaps with some pens for animals etc. One thing that should be noted is that St Albans is not completely flat - Hollywell street from Sopwell lane down to the river is a fair slope. The rest of the town is broadly level.

The town's defensive ditch was probably not much of

an obstacle by then (We cannot be certain if Warwick attacked with the York group or moved up separately - it certainly is not mentioned as an obstacle to him and it is described as the "remains of the defensive ditch") but combined with barricades would have been enough to hold the line. I suspect that the barricades between the houses were the real obstacle.

By now you are probably thinking: this is all very well but to play this game I need to rebuild St Albans and that is going to be expensive and time consuming for a one off battle! There are a number of approaches you can take for this. You could lay out the streets and assume the rest is built up area and avoid the need for physical building models (essentially fighting on a map). However this is not very visually appealing and we are talking about miniature wargaming here! A different approach is to use paper cut out buildings. These have the advantage of being cheap and ready "painted". There are a number of internet sites offering free download graphics for medieval buildings. Most of these sites are aimed at the fantasy market but are more than suitable for our purposes having a medieval feel to them. This method allows you to put together a town in a matter of a few hours of cutting and gluing (and you could always give the players the links to the sites you like and ask each of them to turn up with a few models each.)

In terms of the layout of the terrain on the table top. That way the basic area of the battle can be represented on a 6ft by 4 ft table.

### Troops
Figures for this period are not a problem either. Several manufacturers do 25mm Medieval figures. My personal preferences are for Front Rank but Corvus Belli and Foundry do some nice figures too. Although men at arms had distinctive armour by this time lesser troops can be mixed with 100 years wars figures. Alternatively if space is a premium you could fight the battle in 15mm with multi figure bases. I used a figure scale of 1:50. This puts a fair number of figure bases into play but still gives a small unit skirmish feel.

The troops of this first part of the war would probably have been drawn from the full time retinues of the nobles concerned. They would have been professional soldiers and probably reasonably experienced and equipped. All troops would have fought on foot (not only because it was in a town but because it was a standard practice for all but a few parts of an army). A fair proportion of the troops, perhaps one fifth would have been archers. The rest men at arms with varying amounts of armour. The best armour of the period was very good indeed and would have provided a very good level of protection. The fact that both the King and Buckingham are said to have been to wounded by arrows may suggest that they

were caught unawares and were not completely armoured at the time.

### The Players
The great thing about this period is that you can assign different players to different historical characters which can add an extra dimension to the game as they can have different victory conditions

For a straight re-fight it is obviously better if the players



don't know the details of the battle. If one player does know the history then that person can play Warwick to allow him to use historical knowledge to advantage. If that is the case brief the other players that they can only move via the streets but brief Warwick in secret to allow him to break through to the market. You should use some form of hidden movement here to ensure surprise. If all the players do know the details of the battle then this is a great opportunity to try to improve on the historical outcome for the King! Peoples initial dispositions tend to vary somewhat when they know what is about to happen. As we have seen if the King had been able to read FM 90- 10 he might have done things differently!

### Rules
To re-fight this I used Skjaldborg . This type of large scale skirmish battle does fit the style of rules. The following dispositions are designed to fit these rules but can easily be used for other rules. I would suggest a skirmish style rules set rather than and Ancient/ Medieval large battle set which don't tend to fit battles with restrictive terrain very well.

We don't know the exact numbers of each retinue so we can basically break them up fairly evenly. I suspect that the King's group in the market place may have been a little smaller than the forces manning the barricades. In terms of troop qualities I rate their fighting ability as Average (you may want to give the nobles a lift to Elite), Their stability as Normal and their initial morale state as Nervous (note the Nervous is not so much because

these were panicky troops but because of the uncertainty of the political situation and the need to fight - this is the start of a civil war remember). For morale tests if any unit breaks into the market place I give that an "objective Gained" morale boost for the assaulting troops and a "Cause Lost" for the defenders. In terms of victory conditions York needs some form of victory or bargaining position to win - a inconclusive result is a victory for the King!

When breaking through buildings I would allow troops to use obvious doors in the buildings as normal but classify the breaches as linear obstacles. To make a one figure sized breech the figure must complete a short task. (I assume that most buildings were timber framed with wattle and plaster walls that could be broken through relatively easily.). Note that doors and breeches are obviously only going to allow the passage of one base at a time.

### Conclusions
The parallels with modern street fighting are uncanny with this battle. The obvious danger of assaulting directly down a street into the teeth of fierce resistance. The use of the indirect approach, going through buildings rather than around. Also of interest is the speed with which resistance collapsed once the breakthrough was made. All in all The First Battle of St Albans offers something different for the medieval gamer.