

Atlantian Rapier Melee Manual  
Draft Chapter on  
**Communications**

Efficient and effective communication is critical to success on the battlefield. The right information needs to be conveyed correctly to the right people under very tight time constraints.

A very basic starting point for a communications strategy is:

- 1) Receive instructions from your superiors
- 2) Convey instructions to your subordinates
- 3) Exchange information and coordinate with your peers

This is simple enough that everyone should inherently understand it. But it is also incomplete. Information needs to be able to flow back up the chain of command and people need to be able to change their role in the battle quickly.

This chapter describes strategies and goals for communications within a large army composed of multiple units at a large event, such as Pennsic. The principles are still useful for smaller units and events, but many of the functions and activities will need to be simplified or perhaps omitted due to size, time, and space limitations.

### Pre-Battle Communications

Commanders should start promoting and building interest in the event well in advance of the event. This rallying of the troops can both increase the size of the available forces and give the commander rough counts on what those sizes will be. Planning and sharing of tactical plans in advance is also extremely useful when it is possible to do.

For a large battle at an event like Pennsic there are generally either two or three levels of planning briefings. The highest level meeting has the battle commander explaining the plans to the various allied commanders. Either commanders of large units are invited to this meeting or a second meeting takes place where the allied commander explains the plan to the unit commanders. Finally, the unit commanders explain the plan to the individual members of their unit.

At smaller events the pre-battle briefing will more closely resemble a five minute football huddle, with the commander of each team discussing plans with the small group of people that make up his entire army. The commander doesn't have time or need for a complex plan. But, he still has the same issues that need to be considered and addressed.

The modern US military teaches its officers that the components of a combat order are 1) Situation, 2) Mission, 3) Execution, 4) Support/Logistics, and 5) Command and Signal. Copies of OCS manuals and handouts from various branches of the military that break down these categories into gory detail can be located via the web.

Most of these apply to an SCA combat scenario as well and should be discussed in a planning briefing at any level. Logistics issues play at most a minor issue in SCA combat, but the other four topics are just as critical to us. Keep them in mind when giving or receiving a briefing to make sure that all of the critical information is conveyed.

If a scenario has a non-trivial topology (e.g. the woods battle at Pennsic) it is extremely helpful for the commanders to arrange for copies of the battlefield map to be distributed. One map per unit is a minimum goal. An 8.5x11" map of the woods is extremely helpful for a unit commander to have in hand while explaining the planned maneuvers to a few people around a table in camp. It is also highly recommended that commanders walk through such battlefields in advance.

It is important that everyone understand their part in the overall plan in each of the various roles they may potentially serve. This means that everyone needs to understand the basics of the scenario concept, scoring scheme, and victory conditions. Everyone definitely needs to know what their own ideal responsibility is, plus the responsibilities of all immediate neighbors (in an organizational sense, i.e. their peers, subordinates and superiors) that they may need to assist or replace.

The pre-battle briefing is generally not particularly constrained for time. If you have questions, ask them. If you're delivering the briefing, try to ascertain that your intent was understood correctly by having people repeat back or discuss parts of their responsibilities. The battle will flow much more smoothly when people have confidence that everyone is on the same page.

### Mid-Battle Communications

The simplified communications strategy from the introduction of this chapter is a good starting point for mid-battle communications. There is substantially less time for discussion than there is during the pre-battle briefings. But, it omits some important details and makes some tricky assumptions that need to be addressed.

#### *Know Your (Current) Role*

One such implicit assumption is that everyone understands their role. They need to know who their superiors, subordinates, and peers are. Unit insignia (ranging from colored helm tape to team tabards) and practicing with your unit and neighboring units can help address this concern.

It is also very important to note that each person's role will naturally change throughout the battle. Commanders can die and a second in command will need to step into the role. Portions of a unit can be detached to go deal with a problem and the detached unit will need a leader. In many/most resurrection battles it is impractical to form up with the exact people you started the battle with. Ad-hoc units become the norm with the most senior or assertive person becoming the unit commander.

### *Know When to Communicate*

There are some important issues with when to communicate that are seldom written down in rules or conveyed in tactics classes. But since people are expected to know them, this seems like a good place to address the issues.

First, dead men tell no tales. If you're dead, you cannot exchange useful tactical information with your teammates. It is recommended that you sing out with a loud "Dead!" as you are slain. Do not elaborate further. If it's a resurrection battle, you can talk after you've resurrected. If not, chat quietly with your fellow corpses until after the battle.

Second, no tactical discussions should take place during holds. During the all too frequent time outs, exchange pleasantries with your opponents such as their name and where they're from. Mentally plan what you're going to do next, but don't talk about it.

Finally, operational security is an issue on our rapier battlefields. When you spot an allied unit sneaking up behind the group you're engaged with, it's important to keep that approach a secret for as long as possible. Your unit commander may even have you engage with a bit more energy so that the opponents don't have time to look behind them. Don't shout out a greeting until after the trap is sprung. You should also be careful about sharing information such as estimated elapsed time and estimated current score when keeping that information secret is advantageous.

### *Know What to Communicate*

The first important path of information is down the chain of command. From time to time instructions will arrive from your superiors. These are likely to be very general. You will need to determine how to accomplish the general instructions and supply specific instructions to your subordinates (if any).

The second important path of information is with your peers. Part of this should be to build and share your situational awareness, e.g. "There's a small unit flanking us through the woods over there." Another important part of this is one-on-one coordination of tactics, e.g. "I'll sweep the guy in the blue and you kill him." Similar information should flow at each level of command. Unit commanders should coordinate things like "we'll lightly engage that group to pin them down and you hit them from the left."

The final important path of information is up the chain of command. This can be to convey local information such as "there's a group in the woods on the left trying to flank us". Another vital upwards flow of data is to the overall commander, particularly in cases where the commander cannot see everything that is going on (such as in the woods at Pennsic). The overall battle commander will generally set up a command post near the resurrection point. He or she will be totally dependent on scouts and resurrecting fencers for information. A large visible map of the battlefield is recommended for clarity of communication. If they are not otherwise occupied giving commands, give a short report

as you go by (after resurrecting) “Flag 1 is safe,” “Flag 1 is getting overwhelmed,” or whatever so they know where additional resources should be directed.

A common theme in each of these information flow paths is the creation and sharing of situational awareness. It is everyone’s responsibility to watch as much of the battle as possible for both potential opportunities and potential problems. This can be difficult for a front line fighter who is actively exchanging shots, but it is one of the main responsibilities of every level of the command structure. Communicating this awareness to the people who need it is very important.

An example: One of the other team’s hot sticks has snuck into your backfield by himself. His task is to disrupt and confuse rather than to directly cause combat damage. Your job is to notice him and communicate his presence to people who are near him and can watch him. Then, you need to forget about him and focus on your assigned task. Either the commanders will continue to monitor him to reduce the disruption, or one of our team’s hot sticks will be assigned to run the lone wolf to ground. If he manages to get half of our team watching and responding to him he has accomplished great things for his side. Proper communication allows him to be dealt with much more efficiently.

A second example: You notice a gap in the enemy’s defense. If your unit is not otherwise occupied, you may choose to exploit the gap. If your group has other responsibilities, you need to convey the opportunity to a unit that is free. And you need to do it without alerting the other team to their mistake. Both options call for noticing the gap, communicating it within your unit, evaluating your options, then communicating your intentions to your teammates who either need to cover for your absence or who are able to move quickly into the hole.

Another random note that never gets written down: work very hard to avoid the use of the word “Hold!” for anything other than stopping combat. Phrases like “hold the line” are very common and should be avoided. Even calling for a rally of nearby Free Scholars with “Gold Scarves to me!” could easily be misheard.

### Post-Battle Communication

After the battle is finished, there are still a number of important communications tasks.

Immediately after the battle is the time to shake hands with your opponents, praise any of them that particularly impressed you, and thank the marshals, water bearers, heralds, etc. Any unresolved marshaling concerns should be addressed.

At some point, a brief post-mortem of the battle should take place to identify approaches which worked well and those which need improvement. This will likely just be a small group of the senior commanders, so relay any concerns for this meeting through an appropriate person.

One of the most important parts of the post battle discussion is the story telling afterward. It's particularly important for commanders to praise the efforts of their units so that people feel motivated to show up for the next such battle. Some of this praise should take place throughout the battle, some immediately after, and a little for years after as part of your collection of "no shit, there I was" stories. Particularly notable feats should be brought to the attention of appropriate crowns, coronets, and members of the Academie for more concrete recognition.