



The Fords of Isen

Background To The Game

In the days before the War of the Ring, when Isengard was in friendly or at least neutral hands, the river Isen formed an effective barrier between the Westfold and the outer lands of the wild Dunlending people, who had been displaced and dominated by Rohan. But Saruman's treachery now rendered the whole river useless as a strategic frontier and opened Rohan to a dangerous flanking attack.

There was some debate as to the best way to deal with this new threat – but with King Theoden succumbing to mental decay courtesy of Grima Wormtongue (*what a great, trustworthy name...*) and Saruman, it was left to his son **Theodred** (as marshal of the west-mark), **Erkenbrand** (the lord of Westfold), and **Grimbold** (his veteran marshal) to determine policy.

Unfortunately, they were far too proud and/or optimistic about the power of Rohan to confront the forces now being arrayed against them – not only the fierce (but disorganised) Dunlending 'rabble', but now also the usual hordes of Orcs reinforced this time by the much more dangerous Uruk-Hai and groups of 'anti-cavalry' Warg-riders. The three commanders therefore chose to try and defend the old frontier no matter what, rather than take the wiser, ancient approach and get all the civilians into the protection of the massive fortifications of Helm's Deep while massing the forces of both East and West Mark. Nah, too easy.....

At least the three commanders recognised the strategic value (and tactical advantage) of holding the fords, and so it was that **Theodred** and **Grimbold** brought their mainly mounted force to join the local militia infantry (a sort of 'Fyrrd-type' organisation), whilst **Erkenbrand** (apparently the more switched-on of the three) started preparing the old defences of Helm's Deep – just in case.

The First Battle

Of course, as shock cavalry formed their most powerful arm a purely static defence was out of the question (naturally), plus there was the widely dispersed population to consider. And so they went for the 'best form of defence', splitting their already meagre forces with the bulk of the mounted troops crossing over and heading north along the west bank, leaving only a few men with the levies to build temporary fortifications (something like the staked earthen ramparts of a Roman 'marching fort') and guard the spare horses on the east bank of the fords. And so it was that, about twenty miles above the fords, the vanguard under **Theodred** came across the leading elements of Saruman's army, already dug-in with densely packed pike men behind a makeshift trench.

Theodred immediately implemented cavalry tactic no.1 (of 1) and attacked head on! In a close-fought action, the Rohirrim actually managed to push these defenders back from their position, but as Josef Stalin said, 'Quantity has a quality all its own'. As more of Saruman's huge main body appeared Theodred was in danger of being outflanked and destroyed against the river, and was only saved when **Grimbold** brought-up the rest of the cavalry forces.

Both sides then paused to draw breath, but it was to be a short-lived respite for the Rohirrim as scouts reported signs of another force of Isengard units heading south on the opposite bank. Seems that the absolute cad Saruman had split his enormous forces, and was using different bits to achieve, err, stuff [*I think it's called strat-e-gy, guys*]. Anyway, this new lot were going to isolate and attack the defenders of the fords from the rear, as the rudimentary fortifications on the other bank only faced Eastwards [*Germans please take notes*]. The whole frontier of the Westfold would then be open to attack as the Isengard forces "...spread like a stain across the land..."

Spotting that this would be A Very Bad Thing, the advanced force of Rohirrim retreated as rapidly as they could, but were pressed so closely by their recent opponents that **Grimbold** had to keep using a strong rearguard to stage a series of delaying actions to cover the main body. Thus it was in some confusion that the





whole force arrived back at the fords, with **Grimbold's** rearguard being the last across only just ahead of the pursuit. And then there was the bad news.

No sooner had the bulk of the disorganised and 'blown' Rohirrim crossed (leaving some to beef-up' the fortifications guarding the crossing), but Saruman's force on the east bank then appeared. Although a smaller force than the huge array on the west bank, it was not the usual collection of 'arrow-fodder' but a picked force of Warg-riders, Dunlending fanatics and the new swift, heavily-armed Uruk-hai. These forces immediately attacked and so fierce was the action that the Rohirrim forces were split (again), the forces under **Grimbold** being pushed south along the river bank, with the mainly dismounted troops under **Theodred** now isolated at the fords themselves.

While **Grimbold** was thus being kept rather busy fighting for his life, a reserve group of Uruk-Hai (almost certainly kept for this purpose) now split-off and implemented the next part of the plan by attacking the fords from this, unfortified side. Quickly eliminating the unsupported militia units guarding the 'back door', they then began to wade across and started to assault **Theodred's Eored** (his personal Household troops) which were stationed with him on one of the low, rocky islands (little more than sandbars) marking the fords, the latter having setup his HQ there to more easily direct his part of the battle which had developed on the opposite bank.

Although initially surprised at this move – given a normal Orcs' hatred of the water – the force here was itself some of the 'best-of-the-best' that Rohan had to offer, and so the fighting grew even more intense. But again, pressed from both sides sheer weight of numbers began to tell and in a scene reminiscent of doomed King Harold and his Housecarls on Senlac Hill (from where Tolkien undoubtedly pinched this bit of imagery), this group of veterans was gradually whittled away, and despite a successful late counter-attack by **Grimbold** (who had spotted the danger to his Prince), the latter was too late to save **Theodred** from being mortally wounded.

The fighting continued unabated for some time, although the Isengard units attacking from the west paid dearly for the little headway they made against the stolid Rohan foot behind their earthwork fortifications. The long-term situation was grim, however, as the whole position had a fatal weakness from the rear – but (in good Hollywood tradition) just as it seemed that **Grimbold** and the entire Westfold force would be overwhelmed, **Elfhelm** (another Marshal of the Mark), appeared with several companies of fresh, elite cavalry. These quickly turned the tables on the remnants of the Isengard forces currently engaged, some driving the bulk back north while the rest (under his personal command) eliminated the elite force of Uruks fighting around the Princes' banner at the fords.

Aftermath

The now combined forces of **Grimbold** and **Elfhelm** waited nervously through the night to see if Saruman's army would renew the attack, but by morning scouts reported that the whole host had gone. Even the remnants of the Rohirrim units which had been pushed south managed to return, as their pursuers also broke contact and withdrew under cover of darkness. The two commanders undoubtedly feared another assault by the full weight of Saruman's army (which they now realised could have overwhelmed even the combined Rohan forces), but little did they realise that the assault had actually achieved its secret aim – the King's son was dead, and the proud Riders of Rohan were now feeling not just fear, but the cold hand of despair.....

A second battle took place some days later which was also a tactical defeat for Rohan. However, as we now know even though the battles at the fords of Isen were defeats, they did achieve two critically beneficial results - the combats had cost Saruman many casualties (especially among the elite forces), and they had been delayed long enough for Rohan reinforcements to reach the fortress of Helms Deep, led by a re-invigorated King Théoden himself. And it was to be the addition of their strength to the garrison which ultimately helped to make the battle of Helm's Deep on the night of March 3rd such a strategic victory.

WHO:





Théodred - Only son and heir of King Théoden of Rohan and Second Marshal of the Mark. He was slain in the First Battle of the Fords of Isen during the War of the Ring.

Grimbold - A Rider of the Rohirrim who fought at both of the Battles of the Fords of Isen. He rode to Minas Tirith, and was slain in the great Battle of the Pelennor Fields whilst commanding the left wing.

Elfhelm - A lord of Rohan and later Marshal of the East-mark; he also fought with Grimbold in the Second Battle of the Fords of Isen after the loss of Théodred.

WHERE:

The ford was the main crossing-point on the upper reaches of the River Isen. As the only direct route between Eriador and Gondor, the Fords had great strategic value, and Isengard was built to guard them. They were the scene of two Battles between Saruman and the Rohirrim during the War of the Ring.

WHEN:

The battle was fought in the night of 2 March III 3019.

FURTHER READING:

'Unfinished Tales' by J.R.R. Tolkien

'The Complete Tolkien Companion' by J.E.A. Tyler





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The Game

The game is actually set at the skirmish level, with a 1:1 figure ratio albeit in the same relationship as the original battle. This was done because (a) we already had a large collection from the wonderful “Armies of Middle Earth” range of toys (see below for details), which look great in 1/24th scale! And (b) skirmishes make for good participation games – speaking of which....

The Game System

As with last years’ “One Ring” game (reflecting our take on the encounter with the Ring-Wraiths at Weathertop), the system is partly based on the excellent but now sadly difficult to find Hasbro game “Star Wars Epic Duels”. The key features of this design are that each player controls a small team, with one main character (say, Darth Vader), plus one or two little helpers (Stormtroopers in Vader’s case). Normal movement is fairly standard, although some variability is introduced by means of a die roll. However, the design really scores because teams also get a dedicated pack of cards which are used for both combat and any unique ‘special abilities’ – such an elegant, simple way to reflect widely varying attributes, and without resorting to thick books of charts and +/- tables!

Whilst the “One Ring” game was perfect for a straight adaptation of this team-based, low-figure count approach, this year we wanted to give some idea of mass on the table, while still keeping to the spirit of the skirmish-style structure. For this reason, and to reflect the ‘hap-hazard’ nature of combat in pre-professional eras, when their turn comes around each player will now simply select two or three groups of figures from the mass to be ‘activated’ this time - and yes, it is thus possible that your carefully positioned force from last time may be hijacked by an ‘ally’ before you can get to use it again! Not that we’re suggesting such a dastardly idea....

Movement is still basically the same, using a modified die roll to generate movement points, albeit with new variations to account for the mounted troops of Rohan, and Saruman’s Warg-riders – oh, and the effect of the river (Orcs especially do not like getting wet... unless driven to it). Some special moves are also possible with the cards, such as the ever-popular trampling others under hoof, or ‘rallying’ (i.e. reorganising) those grouped around a leader or banner, or – in the Lesser Orcs’ case – being driven into combat by the Uruks having a whip-round! The other change is to allow an option to ‘advance after combat’ if successfully clearing all occupants from a hex – unless they were behind those pesky earthworks.

As with previous outings, the use of the dedicated card packs adds so much to the ‘period flavour’ of the game, hopefully reflecting the different combat options and other unique actions of the various Rohirrim, Orcs, Uruks and Wargs. For example, the Orcs can gain advantage by deliberately sacrificing figures, whilst the Rohan archery and spear-throwing are deadly. A charging Rider of Rohan is something to be avoided (as long as he can keep moving), whereas the roar of a Warg is sometimes scary enough to make the feint-hearted take a step backwards... And whilst your immediate choice of tactics may be affected by the cards in your hand, like any ‘real’ historical combat, victory will go to the side which can maximise their peculiar advantages whilst exploiting the weaknesses of the enemy.

The objective within the scenario this year is for the isolated Rohirrim at the ford to either be eliminated by Saruman’s combined forces, or relieved by the arrival of a mounted contingent. All that the Orcs know is that their target (Theodred) is one of the armoured and cloaked figures at the ford, but not precisely which one – so you’ll have to kill them all to be sure! But this force in turn is limited by their sense of honour and duty - they may not simply run away at the first sight of the enemy, as the sacred borders of Rohan must be defended – yeah, well...





PLAYER TURN SEQUENCE:

- Select three 'units' (occupants of one hex)
- Roll a dice to determine each unit's movement OR play a 'special move' card
- Now choose two actions – either:
 - o Pick up a card from one of the packs (hold up to 10 cards)
 - o Play a card (normally combat-oriented, but may also involve 'special actions')

CREDITS

Figures:

The basic figures all from the fabulous "Armies of Middle Earth" (AOME) range by PlayAlong Toys and ToyBiz. This vast range covered everything from the RingWraiths and Fellowship used last year, including no less than three different sets of Orcs/Uruks, five different Wargs and numerous Rohirrim, as well as a number of special sets (like the great Uruk siege crew) whose multi-pose members can be pressed into service. Unfortunately, as with many of my recent games their availability seems to diminish the closer we get to Salute! However, if you want to risk it a quick browse on eBay still pulls up a fair number of hits, which is OK to provide all you would need for a normal skirmish. In particular (despite problems elsewhere on eBay), I'd really, really like to thank sellers "NDROBOHOBBITS" and "SARAS-SMIAL" for their help, advice and occasionally as warped a sense of humour as my own!

Photos:

John Treadaway. All figures from the collection of Peter Merritt.

Modelling:

- Hills, rocks and special 'ford island' created by the ever-helpful *Gary of 'TerraScenics'* – contact him at <http://www.terrascenic-online.co.uk>
- Giant trees were from *Andy* at 'The Last Valley' (email andy@scrappie.karoo.co.uk)
- Reeds and swamps courtesy of the fish tank section of my local Pets World
- Earthworks were by a great new guy I found on dodgy old eBay, who fortunately also does commissions - 'Eris Artwork' (email eris_artwork@yahoo.co.uk)
- River Isen courtesy of DIY shower dept at my local B&Q
- Basing & remodelling of figures was by Peter Merritt and Daisy Everett
- Finally, the large hex-cloths are only a fraction of the range created by a superb, helpful character from the USA, one *Eric Hotz* – see <http://www.hotzartworks.com/> - whose ever-expanding product list (and interests!) are worth adding to any wargamer's browser.

Game Development:

Today's system was composed by Peter Merritt, then decomposed by the likes of Brian Cameron, Ivan Congreave, Kevin Dallimore, John Merritt, Chris Steadman and John Treadaway. I thank them, together with my long-suffering wife Sarah, for their help and encouragement.