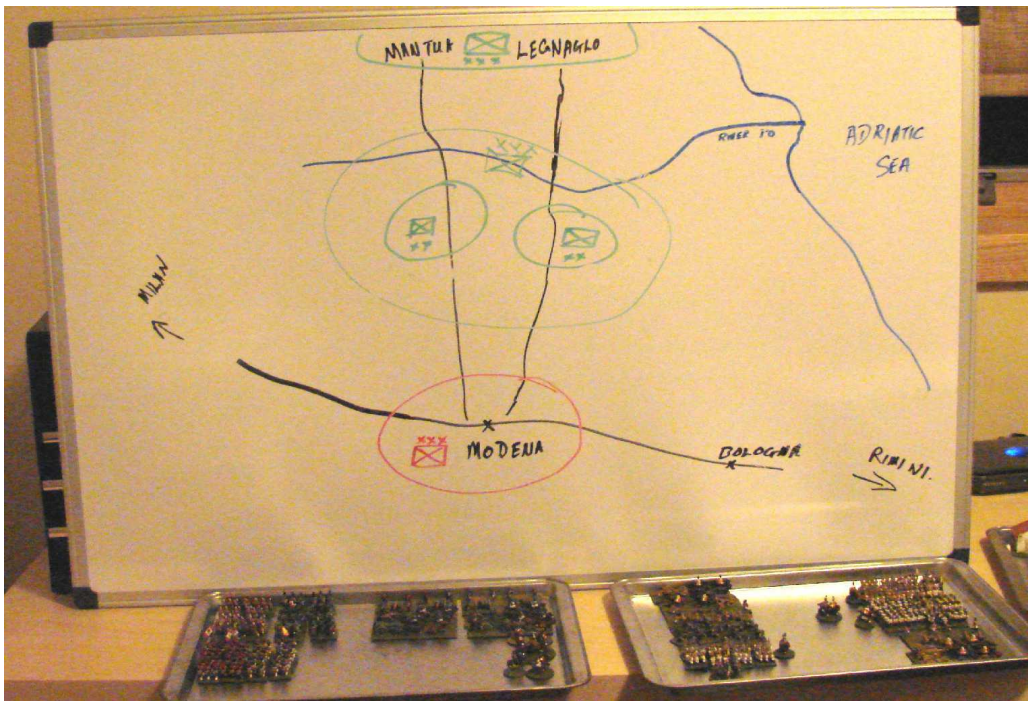
To Reach the Po . . .

On Saturday, 9 May 2015, the Gentlemen Wargamers gathered to play a scenario adapted from Frederick Schneid's *Napoleon's Italian Campaigns 1805-1815.*

In the spring of 1815, as the news of Napoleon's return from Elba spread across Europe, Joachim Murat, King of Naples, saw an opportunity to secure his throne from the incursions of the Austrians into northern Italy. A series of successes got him as far as Modena, but it was rumored that he would be joined by tens of thousands of partisans if he could reach the vicinity of Milan. In order to do that, he needed to get his army across the River Po . . . something the Austrians were determined to prevent. As Murat marched north, Austrian Field Marshal von Mohr was aware that he had a strong defensive position behind the Po, but, what if . . .

. . . what if Murat had decided to move west to the crossings nearer to Mantua, instead of trying to force the defended crossing at Ochiobello? What if Von Mohr had been ordered south of the river to stop Murat's army from ever reaching it? There were two roads leading from the river crossings to the vicinity of Modena, and Von Mohr could not afford to take his entire force along a single route, leaving the other one open to the Neapolitans, so he split his forces, sending a division under General Eckhardt down the eastern route while he conducting a second division on the western road. He could have advanced part of the way south and then taken time to build defensive positions, but as the roads diverged closer to the river that would leave him open to defeat in detail with his divisions unable to quickly support each other. As a result, he resolved to move as far south as he could so his forces would have a chance to concentrate against Murat regardless of which road he chose.

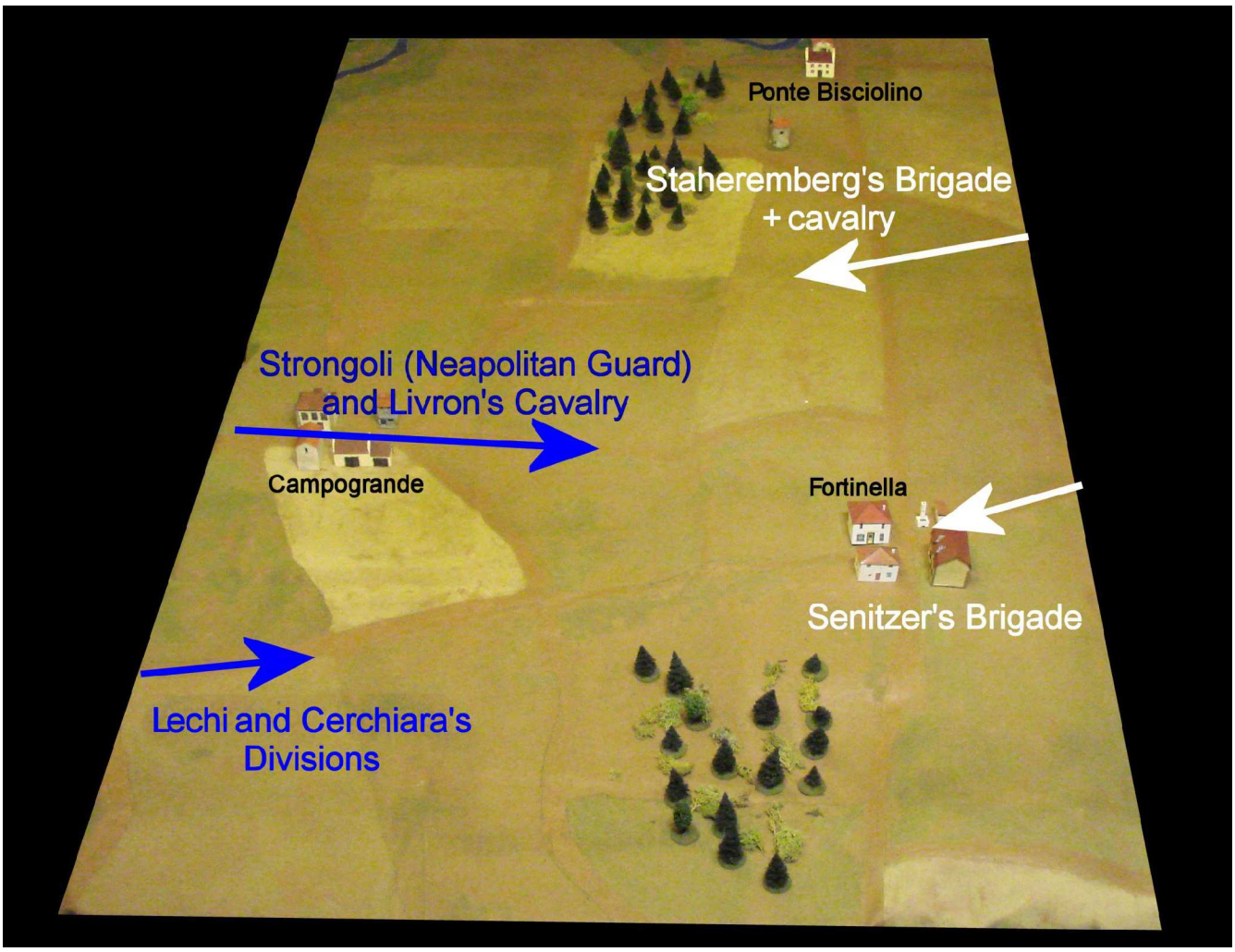
Elliott (the gamemaster) explained the situation on a white board:



The action would take place on a pair of tables, one for the encounter on each road, with the possibility of forces moving between the tables, the delay being determined by how far south Von Mohr's forces had advanced on their converging routes.

Understanding that Von Mohr's advance created the risk of an unfavorable encounter battle, Murat chose to send a holding force up the eastern road while advancing with three divisions on the western road. The supporting divisions of the western detachment were delayed a bit behind his Neapolitan Guard to deceive Von Mohr into thinking that the main effort would fall on the other route.

When the forces met on the western road, near the village of Campogrande, Von Mohr looked over what he was facing (Lechi's division not being in sight yet) he decided incorrectly that the main Neapolitan effort would fall on the eastern division. He therefore directed Sentizer to turn east at Fortinella and march to support Eckhardt. This is a view of the western table, as viewed from the east.



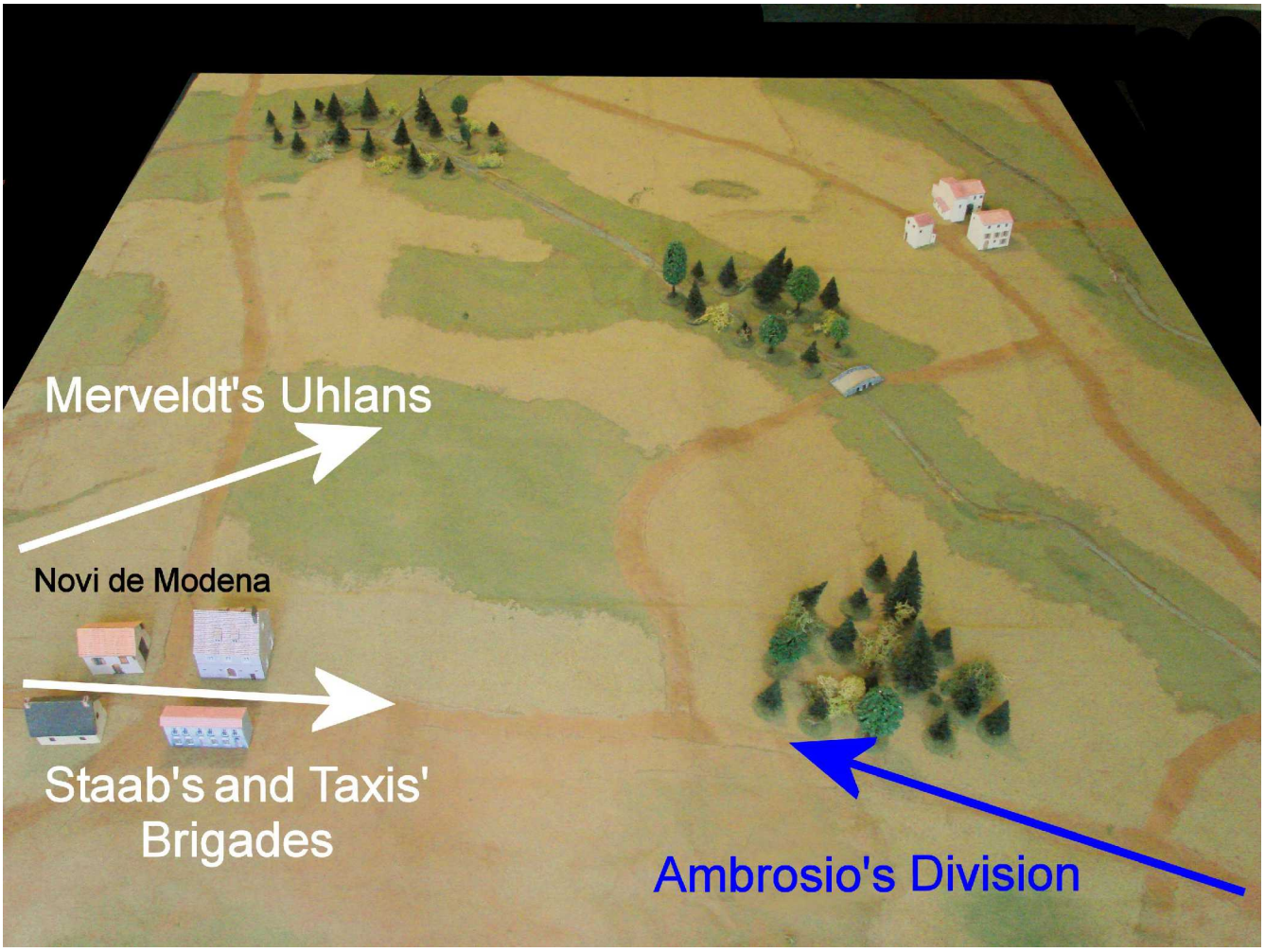
The Neapolitan Guard debouches from Campogrande, screened by their dragoons.

Murat directed his forces north onto the plateau on which stood the villages of Fortinella and Ponte Bisciolino. This resulted in an almost immediate clash between Von Mohr's hussars and the hussars of the Neapolitan guard.

The Austrian hussars deploy on the plateau to cover Staharemberg's columns.

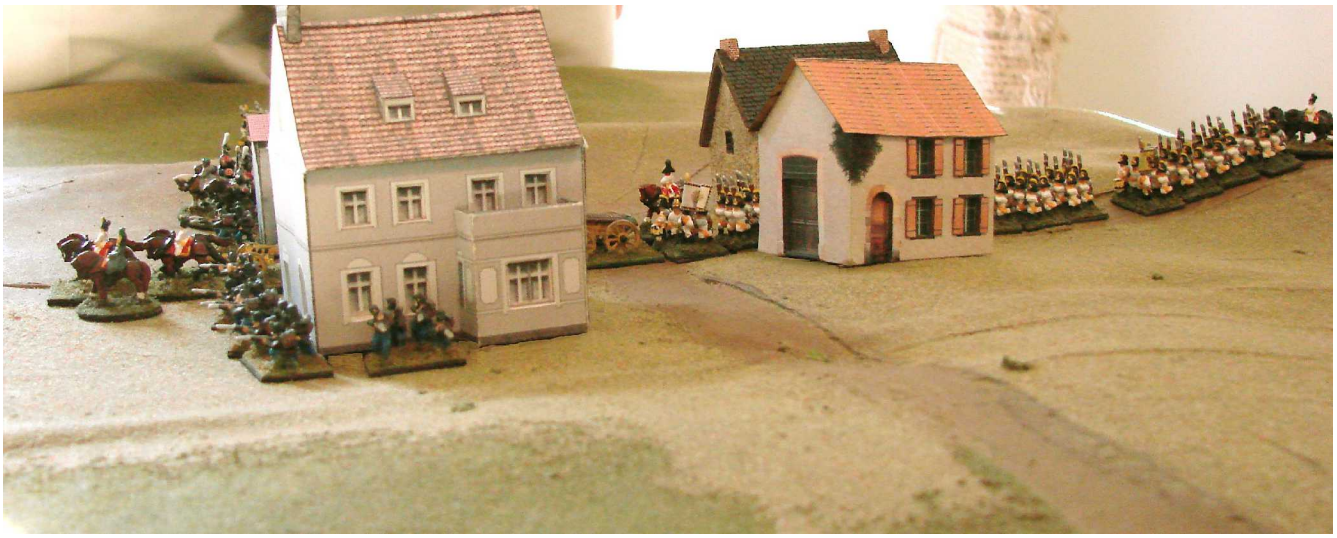
In the meantime, to the east, Ambrosio's division had been ordered to occupy the crossroads south of Novi di Modena, to prevent Eckhardt from reinforcing Von Mohr. Eckhardt had assumed incorrectly that the Neapolitans' main effort would fall on him, and had ordered his Uhlans to occupy the plateau to give his infantry time to arrive and deploy.

This is a view of the eastern table, as viewed from the west.



Taxis was ordered to advance through Novi di Modena and, if he found no opposition, continue on to the crossroads and turn west to support Von Mohr. Instead, Taxis spotted Ambrosio's column advancing with cavalry in the lead, and deployed to defend the village.

Ambrosio's division advancing on Novi di Modena.



Taxis' division deploying in the village, Grenzers in the houses.

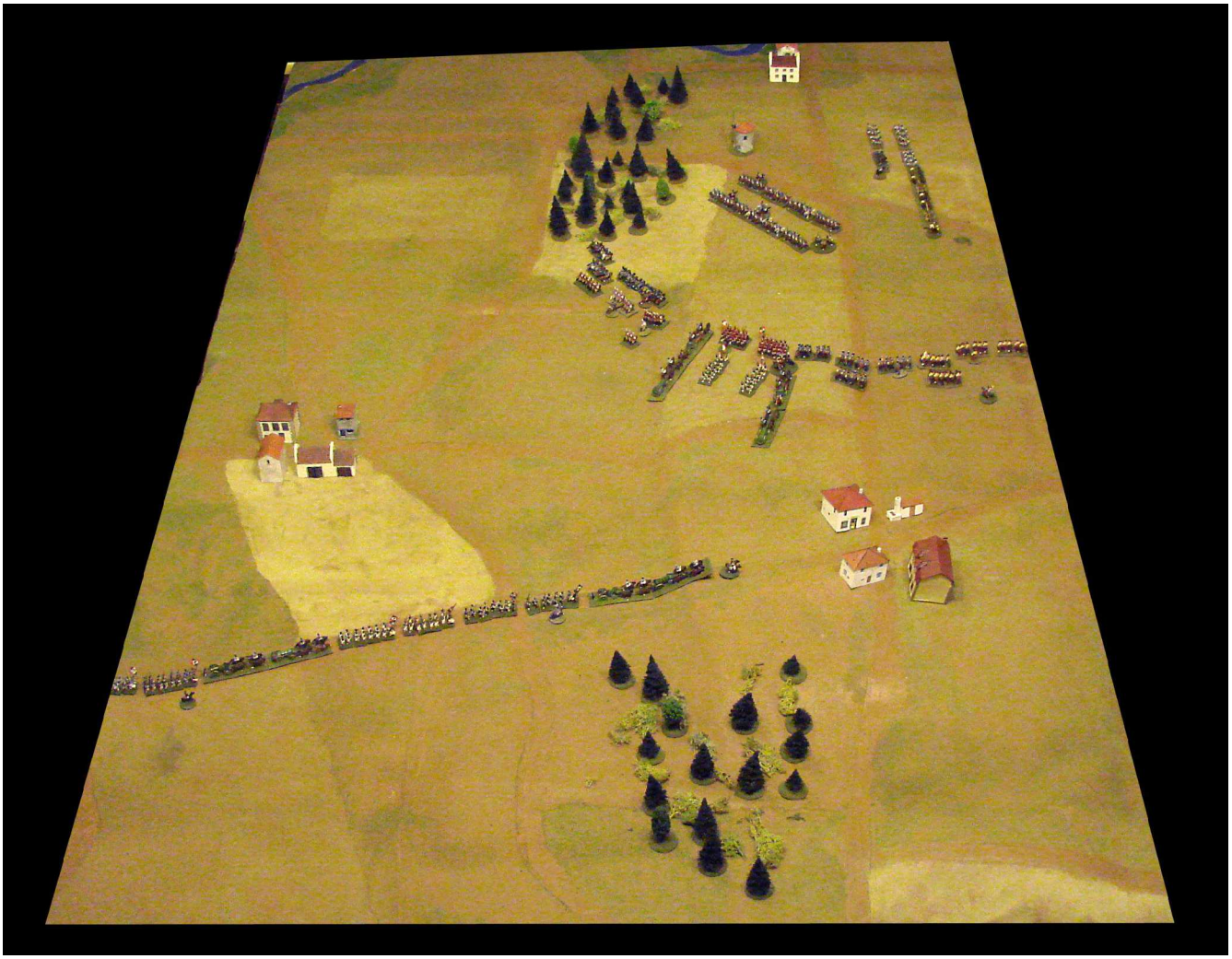
Ambrosio, realizing that the village was defended and that his instructions didn't require him to sieze it, settled into some long range skirmishing with his light cavalry and deployed a battery in support. He sent the 3rd Light into the woods to secure his right flank.

Neapolitan light infantry occupy the woods.

Back on the western road, Senitzer's brigade was filing through Fortinella and marching east. The Austrian hussars were pushed back by the Neapolitan Guard hussars, endangering the deployment of Staharemberg's infantry, which consisted entirely of jaegers and grenzers. Realizing that he was overmatched, he determined to lead as much of the Neapolitan army as would follow him to the west, towards Ponte Bisciolino.

Staharemberg withdraws to the west, with the Neapolitan Guard in hot pursuit.

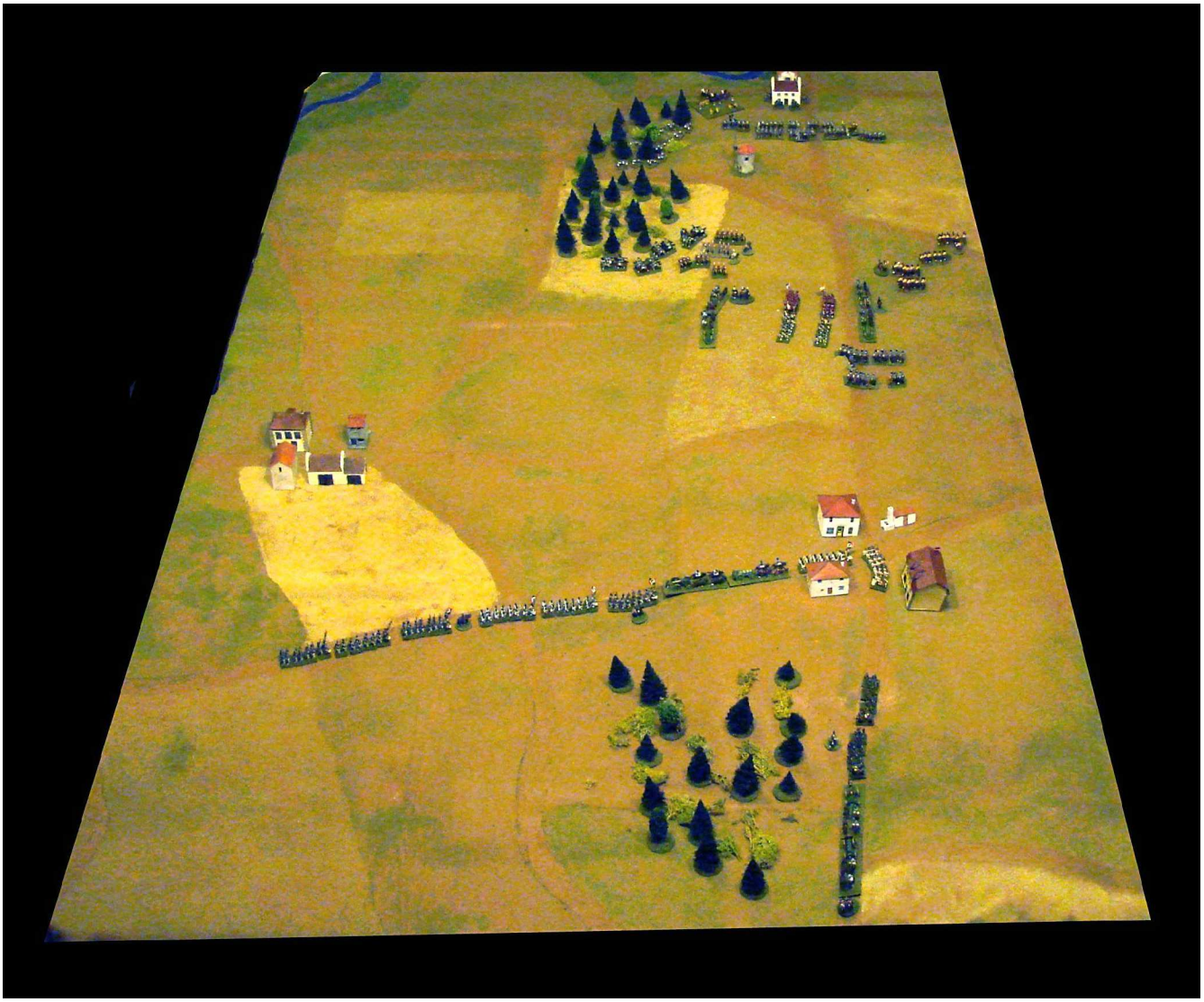
About this time, Lechi's division became visible, advancing on the road to Fortinella. Staharemberg's withdrawal began to take on an aspect of considerable urgency.



Lechi's division leads the reinforcing column in from the south.

Staharemberg's infantry hustles westward.

Von Mohr need not have worried about the new arrivals. Murat, feeling the situation was well in hand, ordered Lechi to head eastward in pursuit of Senitzer. Lechi turned his column east at Fortinella, away from the impending action at Ponte Bisciolino.



Lechi's column heads east toward Novi di Modena.

Meanwhile, on the eastern table, Merveldt's uhlans had advanced across the plateau. With rising ground to his right and woods in his front, below the high ground, he observed no enemies at all. He heard the sound of artillery coming from the vicinity of Novi di Modena, but his orders were to keep the ground in front of him from being occupied by the Neapolitans, so he waited. Eckhardt had already sent a message instructing him to turn west and move on the crossroads, but the courier had not arrived.

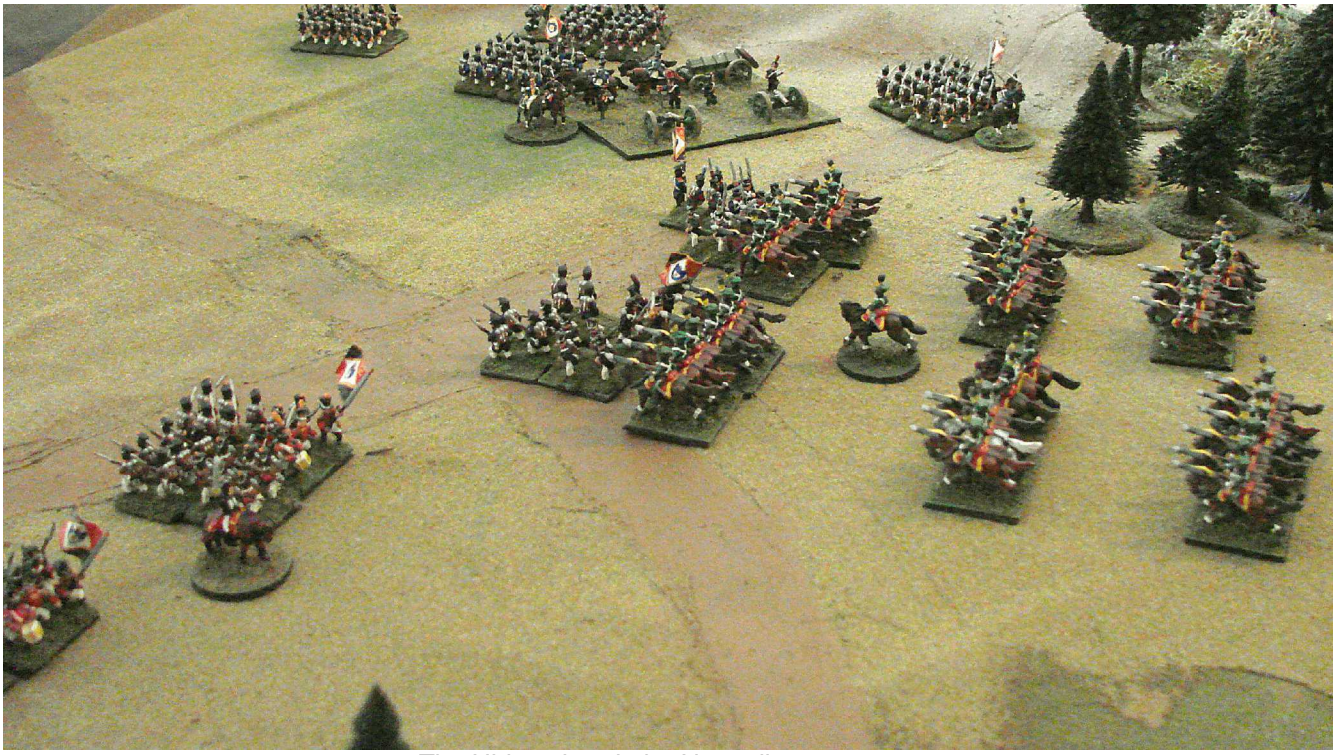
Merveldt's Uhlans deploying in front of the plateau.

At Novi di Modena, Ambrosio observed the arrival of Staab's brigade and realized he was not strong enough to hold his position. He began to pull his infantry back, and ordered his cavalry regiment to delay the Austrians by charging the infantry deployed outside the village. They advanced, but the combined artillery of the two Austrian brigades caused heavy casualties among his flank squadron and the charge stalled. Musketry from the steady Austrian infantry poured in, and the cavalry broke and ran.

The courier sent to Merveldt had arrived, and he swung his cavalry around the woods and headed directly into the flank and rear of Ambrosio's shaky position.

Merveldt's Uhlans approach Ambrosio's flank and rear.

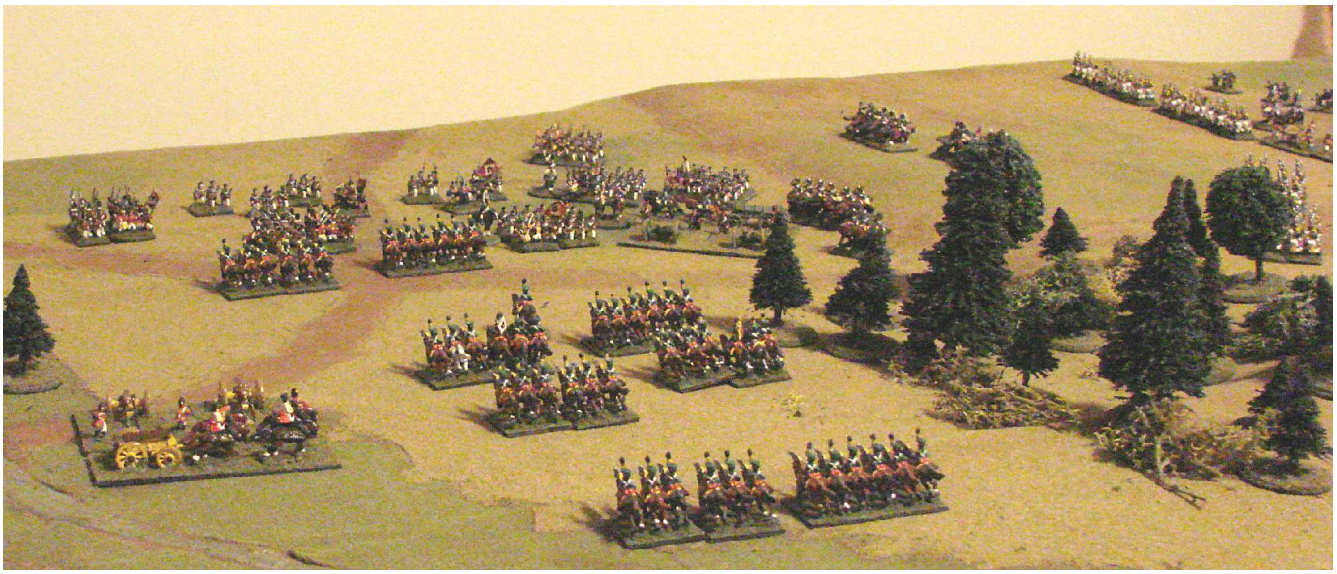
To protect the division's vulnerable rear, a few Neapolitan battalions hustled into the gap between the woods on either side of the critical crossroads and formed square. The Austrian Uhlans forded the stream, and plowed right into the squares, breaking two of them.



The Uhlans break the Neapolitan squares.

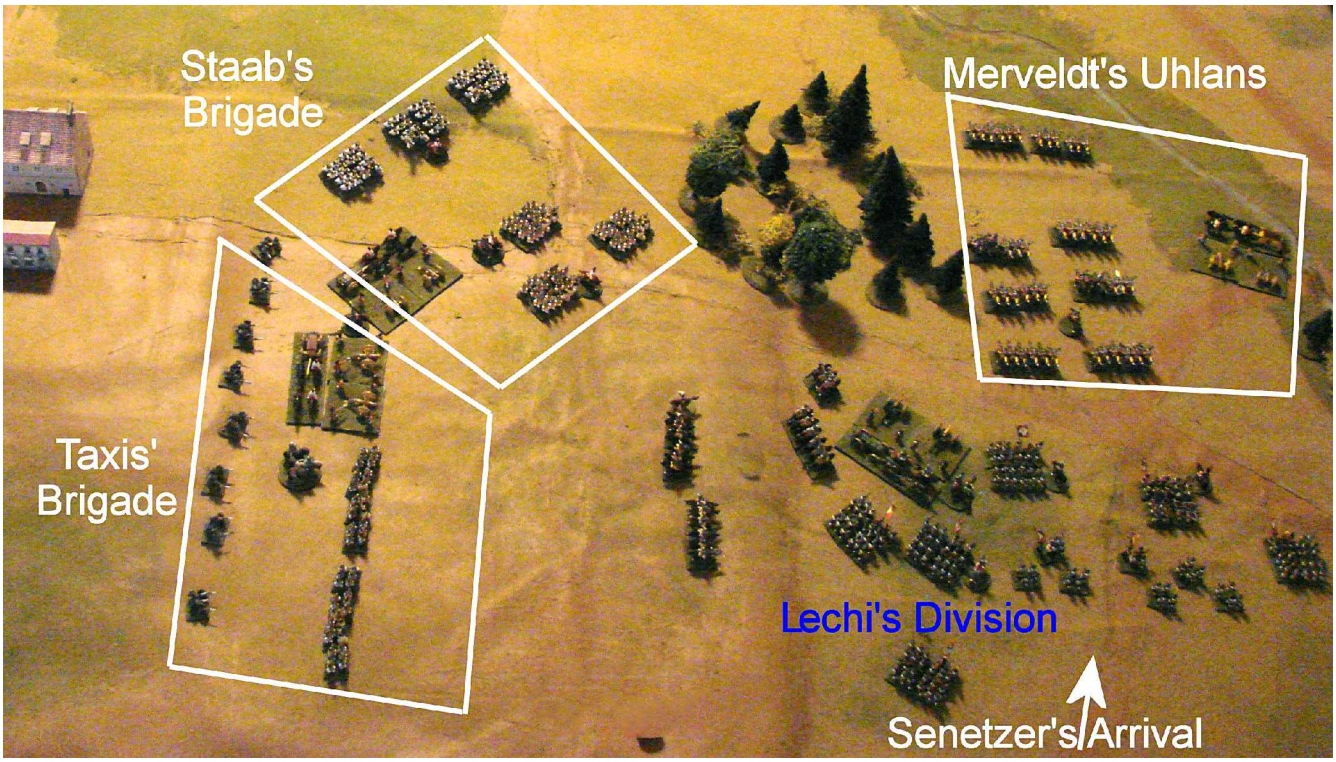
Ambrosio's position was now desperate, with units falling back out of control, uhlans in his rear, and now Sentizer's brigade approaching from the west. Lechi's column was following behind Senitzer, but about an hour away, not soon enough to keep Ambrosio from being crushed.

Staab's brigade closing in on Ambrosio's battered division, with the veteran *Erzherzog Karl* regiment in the lead.



Ambrosio's division, beset from two sides with a third opponent approaching from behind.

This is an overview of the unfortunate Ambrosio's predicament:



When Lechi's column arrives in about an hour (with Cerchiara's even farther behind), it will find little left of Ambrosio's force, and be facing four brigades that have had time to rally and reform, in a good defensive position, and who outgun him four batteries to two. He will have little choice but to fall back on Murat and the Guard.

To the west, meanwhile, Von Mohr has reformed his small force in a fallback position at Ponte Bisciolino, where he hopes to keep Murat's Guards busy for a while longer. Even if he is forced to retreat further, the Neapolitans lack enough strength to force their way across the Po. Murat's advance has been blunted.

Von Mohr's defensive position at Ponte Bisciolino.

As the Neapolitan pursuit approaches, the Grenzers take shelter in the woods.

NEAPOLITAN ORDER OF BATTLE

Commander: Gioacchino Napoleone Murat, King of Naples
Neapolitan Guard
Infantry: General Prince Pognaelli Strongoli
1 btl 1st Velites
1 Btl 2nd Velites
2 Btl Voltigers
1 Heavy Battery

Cavalry General Livron
4 sq. Hussars of the Guard
4 Sq Dragoons of the Guard
1 Light Horse Battery

2nd Infantry Division - General Ambrosio
1st Brigade.
2 btl 3rd Light Infantry
2btl 2nd Infantry
2nd Brigade
2 btl 6th Infantry
1 btl 9th Infantry
1 Light Battery

3rd Infantry Division- General Lechi
1st Brigade.
2 btl 1st Light Infantry
1 btl 4th Infantry
2nd Brigade
2 btl 7th Infantry
1 btl 8th Infantry
1 Light Battery

4th Infantry Division- General Cerchiara

1st Brigade.

2 btl 4th Infantry
1btl 7th Infantry

2nd Brigade

2 btl 8th Infantry
1 Medium Battery

Cavalry Division - General Rossetti

4 Sq. 2nd Chevau-legers Rgt.
4 Sq. 3rd Chevau-legers Rgt.
4 Sq. 4th Chevau-legers Rgt.

All troops are trained but with morale of 1 to represent their command failings in discipline.

AUSTRIAN ORDER OF BATTLE

Lieutenant Field Marshal Mohr,
1st Brigade General Staheremberg
1 Btl Tyrolean Jager #9 (rifles)
3 Btl Grenz Reg No. 61 “Saint-Julien”
1 Light Battery

2nd Brigade General Senitzer
3 Btls IR No. 40 Herzog von Wurtemberg
2 Btl IR No. 43 Simbschen
1 Btl Grenze Infantry Regiment No. 62
1 Light Battery

8 Squadrons Hussar Rgt. No. 5 “Prinzregent von England” (veteran unit morale 4)

Forces available to General Ekhardt

General Staab, 3rd Brigader
3 Btls IR No. 3 Erzherzog Karl (veteran unit morale 4)
3 Btls IR No. 19 Prinz zu Hessen-Homburg (Hungarian)
1 Light Foot Battery
General Taxis
2 Btls IR No. 27 Chasteler
2 Btls Grenze
1 Light Battery

8 Sqr. Uhlan Rgt. No. 1 Merveldt
1 Light Horse Battery

All troops trained with moral rating 2 except as noted.
Hussar & Ulhan Regiments maybe spit into 2 units of 4 Squadrons each, as desired