

STUDY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF INFANTRY TACTICS

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COLONEL BECA & A. F. CUSTANCE

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BY
COLONEL BECA

TRANSLATED BY PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR

BY
CAPTAIN A. F. CUSTANCE
*5th Battalion Worcestershire Regiment, and King's Messenger;
Late Captain 26th Worcestershire Regiment.*

WITH A PREFACE BY
COLONEL HACKETT PAIN, C.B.
Commanding No. 7 District Southern Command

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PREFACE

"In any garrison town on the Continent not a day passes but some pamphlet, book, or article is published on something military."

The above sentence from the introduction of the translator of this brochure serves as food for reflection. Can it be said that in its proper proportion the same is the case in this country? On the contrary, it must be admitted that this is not so; this laxity may be attributed to the smallness of the regular forces and to the lack of intelligent interest in things military by the general public, and consequently the "no demand." But although the standing armies of the country are not numerically large, this cannot be said of the armed forces of the crown, which, including the territorial army and the various organized contingents of the oversea dominions amount to the respectable figure of, 700,000 excluding the regular and irregular native troops of India and elsewhere, and consequently it would be thought that there was room for a much more extended output of military writings. Be this as it may, it is a pleasure to welcome this most interesting and instructive study, containing as it does the essence of recent military thought and tracing the evolution of modern infantry tactics from their inception until to-day. In the first place, attention is directed to the "moral factor" so particularly emphasised in this study. The moral factor descending as it does from the very earliest times, is as important to-day as it

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was then, with its record telling of the complete confidence so necessary of the troops in themselves and in the character and will of the commander in whose hands their destinies are placed. But important as is the cultivation of "morale" in the troops themselves it must not be forgotten how much of this "morale" can be derived from the moral support of the nation itself. If we turn to the great military nations of the Continent we see how strong is the sympathy between the army and the nation, how proud are the feelings of the latter in the welfare and development of the former, and what knowledge the people possess of things military. This all tends to the increase of the moral of the troops who feel they embody the patriotic sentiments of the whole people. With us the regular army is small compared to the mass of the nation; a large portion always on foreign service; things military practically unknown to the bulk of the people, and, regrettable though it be, for these reasons the army cannot be said to derive the full measure of moral support from the nation which a wider knowledge of military affairs would undoubtedly create.

Those who have had experience of command on active service of troops of our own, and possibly other nationalities, well know how strongly the human factor comes in. The comments on "morale" in this work can be read with advantage, not only by the soldier but also by the civilian interested in military affairs.

What will undoubtedly interest the reader of this study is how in the course of time the French losing sight of the teachings of Bonaparte became impregnated by a defensive spirit in their tactics, while on the other hand the Germans assimilated the vigorous methods of the great Captain. This is the more extraordinary, as the French possessed first hand the rich store of experience bequeathed to them by that master which they failed to study or forget. This however cannot be said of them to-day, no army studies and practices

the offensive, so suitable to the French temperament, more than the French army, and nowhere are there keener advocates of Napoleonic methods. It may be as well to indicate here, but very briefly, the tactical tendencies in Germany and France. The Germans, relying on superior numbers, moving their columns abreast on a greater or less front according to circumstances—though in sufficient depth—proceeded by the mass of their numerous cavalry, trusting to this cavalry and to their prearranged system of spies to procure intelligence, will, with the utmost rapidity assume the offensive and engage vigorously along their whole front wherever their adversary is to be found, at the same time endeavouring to envelope one or both of his flanks. The employment of strong strategical advance guards is not advocated, nor is the retention of strong reserves, other than reserves already detailed in the various columns, contemplated; the force thus economised being utilised for enveloping movements. The French, on the contrary, do not rely entirely on advanced cavalry, but form strong strategical advanced guards pushed forward to obtain information of the dispositions, line of advance, and strength of an adversary, and thus enable the commander of a force to screen the advance of his own columns, to decide in which direction he will move and to give time for the concentration of his forces in the required direction. According to circumstances, the offensive action of the advanced guard is vigorously continued by further force with the prime object of disclosing, or making, a weak spot upon which the decisive attack will be launched. The French, also, adhere to the employment of general reserves, to give expression to these principles.

The discussion and candid criticisms which arose amongst Continental military experts over the so-called new or Boer tactics of the South African war is interesting, but whatever defensive tendencies might have been disclosed to the Continental critics in our Infantry

Training, 1902, and Combined Training, 1902-3, this cannot be said of the training manuals now in use. Both Infantry Training of 1905 amended in 1908, and Field Service Regulations, Part I., Operations 1909, embody a thoroughly offensive spirit, and it is hoped that the attack with its strong moral backing will always remain the bed rock of our training. Troops must be continually and systematically trained to the attack until it becomes, so to speak, "a matter of course," otherwise when the time comes their inclinations will not be so whole-hearted in the offence, and there will be a tendency to think more of the less daring rôle, the defence. The formations which were adopted by the French at the battle of Coulmiers, their only victory in the war of 1870, when they had nothing but raw troops to oppose to the trained soldiers of Germany is very instructive, showing the difficulties in which the French leaders were placed in order to devise formations which would make up for the want of training and discipline of their troops. Although successful on this occasion it made no difference to the final result of the campaign, and it should forcibly bring home the difficulty of a tactical re-arrangement at the last hour.

Chapter VI. gives the theoretical aspect of modern battle, and commences with the object and uses of covering detachments which are in other words small mobile columns pushed to the front, and the flanks of the advancing main columns of an army and their advance and flank guards. The function of these columns is fully laid down in the latest French Infantry Training, and in recent grand manœuvres in France, these small swiftly moving columns were much used, they generally consisted of two battalions of infantry, one squadron of cavalry, one battery of field artillery, and one field company of engineers; pushed out to various, though not beyond supported distances of the main columns, and employed in many ways: they

fortified and held villages or minor tactical points, gathered information, and were a veritable thorn in the side of the advancing opposing cavalry, whose enterprise they often checked. Mixed columns of this nature can be utilised in various ways, for example, as "bait," holding points d'appui, and in defence to establish false fronts: their strength is sufficient to enable them to set up a determined resistance, and their handiness enables them to extract themselves when necessary and desirable. Judiciously used and well commanded these columns are undoubtedly of great value.

Reference is made to the use of smoky shrapnel. It may not be widely known, but at least one continental military power is in possession of shrapnel shell of this description. Given favourable weather conditions it is hardly necessary to point out the advantage to be gained by attacking infantry supported in their advance by the artillery using shrapnel of this nature, covering the firing line or trenches of the defence with a thick pall of smoke, rendering for the time being, the movements of the attackers invisible. Ordinary shrapnel shell bursting in numbers produces a considerable quantity of smoke but not to the extent of the special shell here alluded to.

Let us for a moment, problematical though it be, attempt a glance into the tactical future, and endeavour to see how more nearly it is likely to affect the soldier. After a careful consideration of this brochure, it will at once be apparent, that the evolution of infantry tactics, as we know them to-day has been arrived at after a long and very gradual process. Born, as it were, during the French revolution in 1792, reaching manhood in 1870, and vigorous age on the field of Manchuria, the history of tactics shows in the thorny paths of controversy which it has traversed, and the many and bloody fields it has witnessed, how gradual and slow this evolution has been, and it will