

## Modern Tactics.

[By Capt. H. R. Gall—From Illustrated Naval and Military Magazine.]

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### CHAPTER VII.—REAR-GUARDS.

THE ordinary rear-guard to a column advancing consists of a portion of infantry, with a detachment of cavalry or mounted police. It is a necessary precaution for the protection of stragglers and authorized camp-followers, and brings up the rear of every column of troops on the march, affording assistance and protection to trains and baggage-guards in case of breakdowns.

The duties of rear-guards of this description are often very trying, and tax the patience and good temper of those employed to the utmost, especially in bad weather with bad roads and inferior transport.

There are two other classes of rear guards: 1st, to a force retiring for strategical or other reasons, without having given battle; 2nd, to a force retreating after a defeat.

The tactics of No. 2 class embrace those of a rear-guard of class No. 1; we will, therefore, confine ourselves to a consideration of the former.

At first sight it may appear strange that a rear-guard composed of a portion of a beaten force should be called upon to do what the whole detachment or army has failed to accomplish, viz. stop a hitherto victorious enemy. Experience, however, has shown it not only to be possible, but so generally feasible, that, unless an army remains fighting long enough to be routed before it leaves the actual field of battle, it is an accepted maxim that a rear-guard of some sort ought to be extemporized, under cover of which, and of darkness, the greater portion of the beaten troops can get off the field and reorganize more or less efficiently.

During the first moments of his final withdrawal from a field of battle, a commander looks to his cavalry to cover the retreat of his most severely exposed battalions, while at the same time he organizes a rear-guard composed of his least demoralized troops, usually taken from the general reserve, a portion of which should, if possible, always be retained in hand to meet this special emergency.

A rear-guard action calls forth the highest qualities of a tactician under the most difficult and adverse circumstances, and at no time is the discipline and fine qualities of all arms more surely tested than when called upon to co-operate in covering the retreat of a beaten force.

It may be here remarked that although the words army and general are most frequently employed throughout these chapters, on active service a knowledge of the principles of tactics is as essential to the commander of a battalion or a company as it is to a general commanding a division or an army in the field.

It was during the conduct of a rear-guard in retreat that the Duke of Wellington, then commanding the 33rd Regiment, first distinguished himself in the Low Countries. "On the 15th of September 1794 the French had, on the previous evening, seized the village of Baxtel, from which the Duke of York directed General Abercrombie, with two battalions of the Guards, four of the line, a battery of horse artillery, and a couple of squadrons of horse, to dislodge them. The English, though they attacked with gallantry, sustained a repulse, and, being closely pursued, would have been probably cut to pieces had not Colonel Wellesley, with exceeding promptness, deployed his battalion and checked the pursuers. The village was not retaken; but his judicious move arrested the enemy, and the English were enabled to continue their retreat in good order and without heavy loss.

It was a saying of Napoleon's, "that no man was a general until he had conducted a retreat."

One of the most gallant rear-guard actions of the British army was "El Bodon," September 25th, 1811, when a force composed of 3 battalions, the 5th, 77th (British), and 21st (Portuguese), 5 squadrons—2 of the 11th Hussars and 3 of German Hussars—2 batteries of artillery, retreated for several miles in contact with a force nearly five times their strength, and covered the withdrawal from a difficult situation of three battalions, under Picton, operating on their right flank. A full account of the action of El Bodon is given in Napier's *Peninsular War*, and also in Clery's *Minor Tactics*, with a good illustration in the last-named book.

This action elicited the warm approval of the Duke of Wellington, expressed in terms extremely flattering to the regiments engaged.

The tactics adopted by the French General, Montbrun, would not be applicable to the present day, when a force of even 2,000 cavalry could not hope to attack successfully in the open three battalions of infantry armed with breech-loaders. Modern infantry armed with breech-loaders (not repeating rifles as they soon will be) can develop more than twenty times the amount of fire action of those days, and the assailants would now be exposed to it for a distance of a mile and a quarter in the open, in place of 600 yards as in 1811. This fact has altered altogether the relative strength of the two arms, when directly opposed to each other, to such an extent that even on open ground infantry may confidently be expected to receive cavalry extended in echelon of battalions, or even companies, without forming squares. This alters entirely the tactics of cavalry as practised prior to the introduction of the breech-loaders.

Rear-guard fights, in which cavalry formerly took such a prominent part, belong rather to history than to the study of modern tactics.

#### Composition of Rear-Guards

must depend entirely on the nature of the country, but a rear-guard is usually composed of a force of all three arms with a portion of engineers. The cavalry and artillery,

with a rear-guard, should be equal in strength to the enemy's advanced cavalry and artillery sent in pursuit.

#### Rear-Guard Tactics.

are essentially defensive. All the principles of modern defence are applicable to them, especially the use of hastily constructed field-works. Like out-posts, the mission of a rear-guard is to retard rather than repel an enemy, to gain time rather than to inflict loss. The assumption being that any success can only be temporary, as the enemy's advanced-guard will shortly be reinforced by his main body.

The art of rear-guard fighting is—

1st. To occupy successive positions which directly cover the retreat of the columns in rear, and by taking every advantage of the natural strength of such positions, freely supplemented by artificial means, to oblige an enemy to approach them with caution.

2nd. To know when and how to withdraw without appearing to be hard pressed.

If the enemy's cavalry presses forward, a rear guard commander should withdraw his squadrons to the flanks and, carefully masking his guns, endeavour to draw it on to his infantry, deployed and ready to receive it with well-directed volleys, delivered at "medium," or, if possible, "short" distances.

If the enemy's cavalry is beaten off, a rear-guard commander should not let his squadrons pursue, but rather open fire with his guns, bearing in mind that his cavalry has far more important duties to perform than cutting up a few of the enemy's troopers.

The duty of the cavalry is reconnoitring widely to discover any indications of the pursuers creeping up by parallel roads to cut off the rear-guard.

A rear-guard commander should seldom engage the enemy's artillery, but, directly his infantry appears, open fire on it at the longest effective ranges to oblige it to deploy and so gain time. A rear-guard commander can dispose of all his troops in his front line, and thus occupy a much more extended front than in the ordinary defence of a position.

Special circumstances may demand a prolonged resistance such as the defence of the approaches to a defile, a bridge, or a deep ford still to be traversed by the retreating army hampered with its sick and wounded, and possibly sorely delayed for want of sufficient transport.

On these and similar occasions rear-guard tactics scarcely differ from those used in ordinary defence, and under certain conditions a rear-guard may be directed to hold out to the last extremity, *i.e.*, until it is forced to surrender.

A rear-guard defending the entrance to a defile still in front of the army it is covering will occupy a position as far in rear of the main column, as the configuration of the country, the condition of the roads, and the strength and proximity of the pursuers justifies.

At the entrance to the defile, if its flanks are accessible, the main column will have a sufficient force of infantry and artillery to hold the flanks and command the approach and so protect the retreat of the old rear-guard, and prevent the enemy from entering the defile with it. This affords a favourable opportunity to relieve the old rear-guard and allow it to rejoin the main column.

If the flanks of the defile are inaccessible, as in the case of very steep heights, the main body will leave a detachment in front of the entrance to cover the retreat of the rear-guard, and will construct successive barriers half-way across the defile itself to aid the rear-guard in retarding the pursuers; but in this case the main defence will be in rear of the defile to crush the head of the enemy's column as it issues from it.

Care must be taken to withdraw the rear-guard quickly through a defile, or over a bridge or causeway, as the enemy is certain to press on briskly in the hope of issuing pell-mell with the defenders, and so nullifying the defence in its rear. After passing a bridge it should be blown up. A ford should be rendered impassable. In the case of a causeway (a road over a morass) the tactics in defence are similar to those adapted to a defile with heights inaccessible, *i.e.*, the main defence should be in rear of it on the side farthest from the enemy. The withdrawal of troops left in front of it is always a difficult and dangerous operation. Across the entrance to a defile through which a force is withdrawing a deep and wide ditch should be dug, provided with a temporary bridge, and preparations made for removing or blowing up the bridge, as soon as the last of the rear-guard troops have passed over. An engineer officer, with a party of sappers, should, if possible, be told off for this special duty.

If the pursuit is slackening a rear-guard commander should send word to his main body (*i. e.* to his commander-in-chief), and still keep touch with the enemy. If the pursuit stops altogether, touch must still be maintained, and, if necessary, a detachment left to watch the enemy's movements. A rear-guard retiring over the open should be withdrawn gradually. 1st. A portion of the guns sent back to the next position. 2nd. The remainder of the guns. 3rd. The infantry in echelon of battalions; those on the most exposed flank being first withdrawn. 4. The cavalry withdrawing slowly on the flanks.

The general line of tactics adopted by a rear-guard must depend on the special circumstances in which it is placed. If its own main body is close at hand, and much hampered with its trains, and sick and wounded, more time must be allowed it to get away, and, as under these circumstances the pursuit is likely to be vigorous, a desperate and prolonged series of rear-guard actions may be imperative.

If the country is generally favourable for defensive tactics no good opportunity should be lost of checking the pursuit; but under no circumstances should a rear-guard action be unnecessarily prolonged.

The strength of a rear-guard can only be decided on the spot. If possible a large proportion of cavalry and artillery should be detailed for this duty (unless the country is unsuited for their effective action). The cavalry to check that of the pursuit, and to reconnoitre widely to the flanks. The guns to compel the pursuers to deploy at a distance.

(To be continued.)