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FRENCH NAVAL TACTICS.—NO. 1.

(From the United States Army and Navy Journal.)

There seems to be no apology necessary for offering the following translation to the readers of the *Journal*. The great changes in the style of ships-of-war necessarily involve a change from the system of tactics which prevailed in the days of sailing vessels; but the best authorities have not yet agreed upon the particular system which is to replace the one set aside.

The Prussians have kept up a squadron of evolutions as a school of practice for their navy, and for the purpose of experimenting and striking out a new theory of tactics; and we have some of the results of their labors in the work of Admiral Bontikoff.

The English are constantly exercising their iron-clad squadrons in naval evolutions but the result of their practice have never been fully made public.

The French have also kept up a squadron of evolutions. During the years 1868-'70 the squadron was commanded by Vice-Admiral Jurien de la Graviere, who has given us the benefit of his experience in a paper entitled "Considerations Generales sur la Tactique Naval. Escadre d'Evolution 1868-'70." Coming from an officer of such high reputation, and fresh from two years' schooling in actual command of a squadron composed of the latest type of fighting ships, these "considerations" are certainly worthy of attentive perusal.

It appears from the text that the Admiral was entrusted with the duty of revising the French naval signal books and the system of naval tactics, and it was in pursuance of this duty that he carried his squadron through a complete series of evolutions, manœuvres, and formations, rejecting from the old system all that appeared useless, and retaining those only which seemed of the most utility for the general purpose of fighting and navigation.

The article will be found at length in the "Revue Maritime et Colonies, July 1870."

In former days large fleets were sailed and fought without having recourse to any very complicated rules. Cruising in the English Channel or the North sea, a fleet of eighty sail of the line would perform evolutions with but a small number of signals to direct its movements. These signals were often made by means of a single flag hoisted at some particular masthead or yard-arm, the position of the flag being significant of its meaning. The number of combinations this elementary method admitted of was naturally very limited. It sometimes happened that an admiral entrusted to some officer possessing his confidence the station at the head

of the fleet, to lead it according to a preconcerted plan. It was thus that in the seven-teenth century, that period of great naval battles, fleets were led among the shoals on the coasts of Flanders, entered the Thames, or forced the passage into Rio de Janeiro. It was the same when manœuvring to gain the weather-gauge of an enemy. With this advantage was secured a position for bringing on a decisive action. The only signal then was the example of the admiral. He was the first in the fight, and the others followed to support him.*

When the signal vocabulary grew into a real language, naval tactics lost its simplicity and became a science. This change completely altered the character of naval battles. Desperate encounters were succeeded by a strategy more skillful perhaps, but, if one may be allowed the expression, a strategy less efficacious and less conclusive in its results. The principle was rather to preserve one's own ships than to destroy those of the enemy. Great stress was laid upon preserving the regularly formed lines, which however difficult to break through, produced but little corresponding effect upon those of the enemy. A mere passage of arms took the place of the deadly yard arm and yard arm encounters, and retreats were no longer converted into routs. We have thus all the advantages which flow from order and method, but at the same time must renounce those derived from individual enterprise and daring.

So long as only sailing vessels existed, this judicious system of tactics—which prevented great disasters, even if it shut out all hope of brilliant successes—had, under more than one aspect, sound reason to support it. As ships regained with difficulty a

*It is interesting to observe in this connection how primitive was the method of signalling in use in the English navy up to a comparatively recent period. "James II. we are told, "when Duke of York and Admiral of England, commanding the British fleet in the Dutch war of 1665, was the first who reduced into a system a set of day signals for directing the principal evolutions and movements of a fleet. These signals were indicated by showing flags at particular parts of the ship, and were comprehended in the 'Sailing and Fighting Instructions' issued to the respective flag officers and captains of the fleet. From that period and until the close of the American war they were practiced in the navy." There were also signals without flags, so late as the early part of the present century. The signal to moor, for example was the mizen-top-sail hoisted and cleared up; to unmoor, the main-top-sail hoisted, to prepare for sailing, the fore-top-sail hoisted and one gun. And we read, "The lookout frigate made signal for a strange sail, and then the well-known signal for a fleet, by letting fly her top-gallant sheets and firing two guns in rapid succession." Again, "The frigate made signal by hoisting the Dutch ensign, etc." The Dutch ensign, from the frequency of its use, seems to have been part of the regular code of signals, 1790-1800.

TRANSLATOR.

weatherly position, it became an important point that no part of a fleet should fall to leeward; and in a *melée* friendly vessels might in the confusion be exposed to each other's fire. To avoid these disadvantages there was adopted one invariable order of battle—an order readily formed, and one which was maintained at all hazards. Ranged in one long line ahead, the fleet was ready to bring its broadsides into play, or could easily close its wings on the centre or on either extremity of the line the admiral judged to be threatened.

Great naval captains have sometimes set aside rules likely to hamper their impetuosity, yet their triumphs in no way invalidate the utility of the principles they set at naught. Their victories were due to two causes which in no way affect the scientific discussion. Naval battles, however badly planned, may result in victory through obstinacy and intrepidity. The boldness and determination of Suffren often repaired his faults. In such a case we may attribute success to a moral cause. A difference in the organization of fleets has been in many cases the material cause. The inherent weakness of our (the French) marine justified the rashness of Nelson. Steam tactics are free from the preoccupying causes due to tactics under sail. If they are preserved, they become a source of embarrassment which in time of war is a source of danger. The new motive power leaves no pretext for inaction; why hamper it with theoretical rules? It is not only the facility of movement; it is, above all, the rapidity with which distances may be traversed which distinguishes the fleets of the present day. Formerly time was scarcely ever wanting for the admiral to transmit his orders. Now it may often occur that a movement will cease to be opportune ere the signal prescribing it be perceived. Since, then, a fleet must be so often exposed to remain without direction, it is well to habituate it to do without.

Charged by the Minister of Marine with the task of revising the signal book and the official system of tactics, we have not lost sight of the conditions under which such revision should be made. In studying the naval battles of former times, in order to draw from them deductions applicable to the present, it is not lessons in tactics we should seek for. We should run the risk of being led astray by idle and profitless researches, for the instruments of naval warfare at our disposal to day admit of entirely novel combinations and exclude all servile imitations of the past.

Evolution and the various orders of battle are merely, so to speak, the perishable,