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# Hindenburg's Huns Hindered by Prepared Positions

## AN ARMY IN RETREAT

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### Introduction.

The critical posture of affairs, at the moment of going to press, and the tension of the minds of all of us as to what is taking place now in France has tempted me to go somewhat beyond the technical duties of Engineers and endeavor to explain the significance of the present movements of the armies on the battle front in France. Or, it would be better to say, to explain, in theory, what we believe should be taking place in accord with the theory of war at this time. To do this we must omit, for the present, any detailed consideration of the elements which go to make up the system of field positions, such as was intended. And at the outset I shall acknowledge indebtedness for much herein to Lt. Col. Azan, of the French Army, author of a recent text book, entitled, "The War of Positions".

### Defensive Scheme.

First, briefly as to the defensive scheme. Along the continuous fronts of the two opposing armies, all places are not equally important. From a strategic standpoint certain localities are of highest importance: Such, for instance, Ypres on the road to Calais, whereas from a tactical standpoint, certain places lend themselves more readily to defence.

Where the artillery dominates, the whole infantry zone of defence is arranged for the defence of the artillery and its direct observation points. The frame work of the infantry defence is made up of machine gun positions with well protected deep dugout entrances, "Trenches" to give concealed access to the rear, from side to side, and to form a defensive outpost system around the clusters of machine guns, with "outposts" which serve the purpose of preventing surprise attack and holding the enemy so that the main force can engage it in on ground most favorable to the defenders. These outposts are meant to give way, after accomplishing their purpose, thus the enemy will be engaged under particular concentrated artillery fire and under machine guns flanking fire. Obstacles such as wire and trenches are sited with this object. With an army behind a single trench, the outposts will be small groups up ahead, but in present warfare, the front trench becomes outpost for the forces behind. The whole front system may become outpost for other forces in

rear. Thus the giving up of a whole front line system will, in a well disciplined army, mean only that it has accomplished its purpose of engaging the enemy in such manner as to inflict a maximum, while receiving a minimum of loss. Outpost positions are now always "tenderly", not stubbornly held without regard to losses, falling back upon the real resistance in rear, organized in similar manner. The spots most capable of defence are those which offer concealment from enemy observation, and are known as "centers of resistance".

### 'Positions'

The infantry defence line, then, instead of being continuous trenches is really a great number of scattered spots within supporting distance of each other, and these in turn may be composed of one or a number of lesser centers, or "supporting points", such as a wood, a village, a quarry, a height, all in one "center of resistance". One or more centers of resistance make a "position", which is generally called by a local geographical term, perhaps of a village, as Langemarck.

In any position, the size of the garrison depends upon its importance, not its area. The term "sector" is properly the frontage occupied by a military unit, as a division or a brigade. In an important position, sectors will be narrow, along unimportant portions of the front, "sectors" will of course be wider. It is important to keep in mind that it is from the fire of resistance centers both large and small, if rightly organized, that the enemy meets his greatest losses, also from the flank. So, too, when the enemy is able to break through a part of the line, which he can hold, he is able by enfilade to make untenable the field works on each side. And thus there will be, as the tide of battle surges back and forth, constant rectifications in the line so that it may be kept safe from the enfilade fire of the enemy. This is true even in case of a successful advance, the elements going too far ahead must fall back into line.

### Retreat in Defence.

We may assume then, in the defensive line, the closest cooperation between the infantry, machine guns and artillery. I shall pass over the enemy's bombardment, the assault, the methods employed to meet it. This is all perhaps well enough known. The enemy, however, gains a foothold, from which the counter attack fails to dislodge him. The advantage is followed up by masses of men, they

too, working with infantry, machine guns, and artillery in closest possible cooperation. Stubborn fighting has taken place in the interior of the position. The enemy are overwhelming at that point, and retreat is ordered. Retreat will become necessary from a reverse in the position itself, or in an adjacent position. It is performed in an orderly way to positions already prepared behind—sited, organized, so as to DRIVE THE ENEMY BACK FROM THE GROUND HE HAS TAKEN.

### Realignment.

"Realignment of the front" is the term used to describe voluntary withdrawals from a small or larger part of the front. It means withdrawal of both men and war materiel.

Realignment is as much as possible done at night, keeping the enemy ignorant. The greatest difficulty is in withdrawing the artillery. If removed gradually the enemy notices the slackening fire, and may decide upon a sudden attack, the infantry without sufficient support is crushed. If not removed until the last moment, there results congestion along the roads, and there follows a critical moment when attack by an alert enemy will mean loss of the guns and the infantry must run for it.

But the falling back permits of traps being laid. The comest of these is to leave in the evacuated position a thin line of infantry and engineers, who seek to divert the enemy. As soon as attack begins, the infantry retire, the artillery massed behind and ready delivers its carefully prepared fire, while the engineers explode prepared mines and fougades. The enemy may thus pay highly for his advance and the defenders lose only slightly.

Orderly retreat is only the retirement for the purpose of continuing in a new position a resistance which for the time being is impossible in the old.

### Premature Retreat Dangerous.

The General in Command is the sole judge of circumstances and time. No unit leader must abandon on his own initiative the terrain he is holding, he fights to the last, unless he gets the orders. Sometimes such sacrifice has become necessary to save larger bodies, for the premature retreat of one element may endanger all.

In the violent fighting, communication becomes very difficult. Telephone wires are cut, messengers killed or wounded, signalling impossible. Considering all this, the Command determines the time and the conditions of

the retreat in such a way that the advanced elements can be notified. Acknowledgements of orders are carefully verified. The Command is now working with perfect order and method.

### Orderly Retreat.

In every case the units receive definite orders when and where to march. "The lines of march are chosen to avoid crossing, crowding, and delays. The roads are chiefly reserved, in principle at least, for artillery and material. Such is a well ordered retreat.

The evacuation of the artillery is most difficult, as it is of the greatest use up to the very last. The heavy guns are started back first, the field pieces follow. Very much now depends upon the coolness and judgment of the commanders. The retreat of the various troops, including first line artillery is carried out under protection of rear batteries that remain in position, keeping up a barrage fire on positions the enemy would have to cross. Machine guns and automatic rifles are kept ready for instant action.

### Delaying pursuit.

All sorts of obstacles are used to hamper pursuit. The communication routes, roads, railway lines, etc., are destroyed as completely as possible. Counter attacks at the right moment when the enemy pursuit is weakening, are now most effective in stopping pursuit.

The retirement may be to a new line of positions and trenches, a short way behind the first. But a remoter line will offer better advantage. It is held as being often the much better plan not to contest to the utmost step by step, but to make a sudden and rapid retreat, holding the enemy back by artillery fire, and at night by a curtain of troops; "and then", in the words of Col. Azan, "to reorganize in a position against which he will hurl himself in vain, suffering losses which will be greater in proportion as he fancies himself certain to succeed."

### The Present Battle.

We may be sure that the heroic British army is giving ground reluctantly, but yet in order, to well known, prepared positions.

The return offensive will follow, we may be sure, when the enemy has reached the length of his lunge, while imperfectly organized, while his communications are yet much broken and imperfect.

Some correspondents are writing that we have reached "open warfare" again. Not at all. Not yet.