

Modern Tactics.

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

(Concluded—Continued from Page 438.)

LIKE all other attacks, that on a wood should, if possible, commence by a heavy cannonade directed against the defenders' guns, with a view to silencing them if they show, and then particularly concentrated on two or more salients which it has been determined to carry by assault. Guns should also be distributed to keep the defenders generally employed all along their front, and especially on the flanks if they can be reached. The best formation to carry a wood is in successive waves of skirmishers pressed on one after the other, until a footing has been gained somewhere. The reserves should then be poured in as fast as they can be got up, and the defenders pressed back vigorously until the farther edge is reached, or a second line of defence has to be carried. This is seldom a serious undertaking if the defenders of the first line are vigorously followed up, as their presence prevents the second line from acting unless the means of retreat are ample, and the discipline very superior. The moment the infantry gain a footing the guns should gallop up, going round the flanks if they are permitted to by the defenders holding other parts of the position; if they cannot get round, some light guns should follow the infantry through the wood, with a view to bring up to aid them by their fire to hold the far edge against counter attack.

As the assailants attacking a wood have generally to cross the open, and usually suffer heavily from the fire of an invisible enemy of unknown strength, a repulse is very discouraging, and the most strenuous efforts must be made to press forward at all hazards. To call upon repulsed battalions to make repeated efforts shows either bad direction in the first assault, or recklessness which is not to be classed with valour.

CHAPTER XV.—VILLAGES.

On a field of battle, one or more villages usually form prominent tactical points for the possession or retention of which the most strenuous efforts are made. A village is often situated at the junction of two or more important roads, and is then of the first importance. Villages, hamlets, farms, or large mansions, with their surrounding out-houses, all come under the same classification, though their tactical importance will depend on their situation, and to what extent troops holding them can be supported.

In connection with a position there are five kinds of villages, or groups of buildings, one or other, if not two or more, of which are likely to be met with:—

1. A village on a flank.
2. A village in or about the centre of a position.
3. A village in front, within artillery range of other portions of the position.
4. A village in front beyond artillery range, but still too near to be disregarded.
5. A village behind a position, or on a line of retreat within range of it.

Without seeing a position it is impossible to say which is the most important; but a village, unless it can be held in connection with the rest of a position, ought rarely to be occupied, as it is pretty certain not to be attacked unless its possession is essential to the assailants. No unnecessary sieges, is a maxim of strategy. No unnecessary assaults, is equally applicable to tactics.

The defence of villages comes under the head of field fortifications rather than tactics; but it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a line between field fortifications and tactics in these days of hasty redoubts and intrenchments in connection with modern battle-fields.

The following are the salient principles connected with the defence of villages, which may conveniently be divided under two heads, viz.:—

1. Villages held in connection with a position or a line of investment.
2. Isolated villages.

Isolated villages are extemporized forts, and with time and labour available can be made capable of necessitating almost an investment. They are generally utilized for depots on a long line of communications, and should as a rule be selected in preference to small towns, the civil population of the latter being an additional source of anxiety and trouble. Again, isolated villages are often held at the exit or entrance to mountain passes, or where they command the approach to a bridge or ford over a river.

The only difference between the defence of an isolated village and one held in connection with a position is that the former is generally prepared for defence all round.

If a village is to be held to the last, or until reinforced, a reduit or

keep must be prepared for the garrison to make their last stand in. If, on the other hand, it is only to be held for a certain time, and then abandoned, it is useless to prepare a keep.

Villages held in connection with a position are usually so important that their recapture will often have to be undertaken, in which case a reduit must be kept quite separate from the rest of the defenders. The object of a reduit in this case is to keep a foot still in a place after it has been carried. A few bold men inside can assist greatly in the recapture of a village while their presence in the enemy's ranks, so to speak, must have a more or less paralysing effect.

Four Principal Considerations which influence the Defence of a Village.

I. To what extent it commands, or is commanded by, the surrounding country.

II. The nature of the obstacles in its immediate vicinity, and to what extent they can be utilized in the exterior line of defence.

III. Nature and construction of houses, width of streets, and situation of strong buildings capable of being grouped together or formed into a keep.

IV. Time and means available for putting it into a satisfactory state of defence, and number and description of troops for defending it with.

Steps in Defending a Village.

I. Establish exterior line of works.

(a.) To prevent surprise.

(b.) To occupy during the artillery bombardment. This zone of defence should not, as a rule, be more than 120 yards from outside houses of villages, or less than 40 yards. If more than 120 yards it would require too large a garrison to defend it; if, on the other hand, less than 40, it would not fulfil either of its objects, for the village might be surprised and rushed in the dark, and the shells directed against it would burst back and injure the defenders occupying outer zone.

II. Establish interior zone of defence by connecting outside houses, garden walls, etc., and loop-holing them.

III. If the village is defended all round, or intended to be defended to the last, establish a reduit or keep in some strong building, situated in a commanding position, the junction of several roads, for instance.

IV. Clear the front of exterior zone of all cover for enemy, and also the space between the exterior and interior zones or defence.

V. Divide the village into sections for defence if large, and mark out clearly the lines of retreat.

VI. Post garrison. (The strength cannot be laid down, as no two villages are alike; but two men per pace of exterior zone, including firing-line, supports, and reserves, is a good average proportion.) In placing the garrison, the men of the firing line should take up their places along exterior line, each company keeping one section as a support, behind some sort of cover in a suitable situation. The reserves should be kept out of harm's way, and clear of the houses. If there are enough troops it is advisable to keep the defenders of the two zones separate, and those in the outer zone should be instructed to fall back round the flanks of the inner zone, or through openings specially provided for them, and to form up in rear as reserves.

VII. The best place for guns, provided they command the approaches, is on the flanks, outside the village, in which case they must be provided with epaulments and cover for the waggons and teams. When not on the flanks guns may be posted on any commanding ground in the vicinity from whence their fire can be brought to bear upon the approaches.

Guns (machine guns excepted) should rarely be placed in interior zone of defence, and when they are should not open fire until the assailants have carried the exterior line, as they attract the concentrated fire of the assailants. For the same reason guns should not be placed along the exterior zone, and also because they are liable to be captured and turned on the village, and their epaulments give useful shelter to the enemy to rally behind.

The Attack on a Village

is generally attended with severe fighting; it should invariably commence with the concentrated fire of guns directed on the most vulnerable points.

The defenders' guns should be silenced if they show. The assaulting battalions should be simultaneously directed on two or more points, with supports and reserves close at hand; cavalry acting on the flanks. At the moment of closing on the village all three arms should be well up to co-operate. Before entering upon the assault the different brigades or battalions should be given general instructions where to rally, and, the village being carried, preparations should at once be set about for putting it into a state of defence against counter attacks. In all cases the reserves should be kept well in hand, and only introduced as required, a portion being kept back to meet unforeseen emergencies.