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The Use and Value of Obstacles in Trench Warfare

By Major R. W. Powell, M.C.,
C.E.

The employment of wire entanglements in the present form of warfare in my mind is most interesting. Most entanglements erected in front of trench, say, within $\frac{1}{2}$ mile of the front line, are built there for a purpose not understood by the civilian. If the wire in this sector is in direct view of the enemy, it will never serve as a hinderance to attacking troops for the reason that what is known as wire cutting operations, which is done by the artillery with H. E. shells, will in most cases completely demolish such wire; but remember for this condition, that the obstacle must be in direct view for the enemy artillery observers.

During the quiet periods of trench warfare, the artillery busy themselves registering on such targets as trenches and wire, and make note of the proper range angle of sight and the fire required for efficient work at these targets. It is therefore only a question of a short time to create the bombardment necessary to destroy a line of wire, as there is no "ranging" necessary.

In a low gully or, say, just in rear of a ridge, in a bush or in a trench, where the observer cannot see the effect of each shell, the operation is a most difficult one to perform, although it is evident from aerial photos that wire exists in certain localities. The effect of

wire in this forward area, under this last condition, is very great and the number of men lost and trenches lost or unobtained, because of obstacles, as the result of the wire not being cut, is tremendous.

I have seen a case on the Somme where two of our attacks failed as a result of this condition, and for the third effort the artillery cut

wire every afternoon for six days, and each night a patrol would report as to the effect of the artillery on the wire that afternoon; on the sixth day the patrols and scouts reported that there was no wire left and twelve minutes after our zero hour on the seventh day (zero hour being the time the attack commences) the enemy trench was in our hands, with many prisoners.

You might say, well, what is the use of building entanglements where they are obviously exposed. In answer I would say, that in front of the front line, they are of great value even if they are completely demolished by a preliminary bombardment. A soldier may be led to believe that no time, labor, material or expense is spared to provide every protection possible.

Moving Up British Tommies



On the British Western Front in France. — French troops on the roadside moving up with British Tommies near the line.

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