

## Modern Tactics.

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

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### Chapter I.—Part II.

#### RECONNOITRING.

WHEN the advanced infantry of hostile armies approach each other, the cavalry screens are withdrawn, and form the cavalry divisions of their respective sides. After the withdrawal of the cavalry screen, reconnoitring becomes necessary to procure information concerning the nature of the ground in the immediate front and on the flanks of the army, as well as to discover the positions, the arrangements, and the numbers and movements of the enemy.

Reconnoitring is essentially cavalry duty, but whether cavalry or infantry, or both arms combined, are used for this work will depend—

- 1st. On the nature of the country;
- 2nd. On the cavalry force at the disposal of the commander.

A general must by some means obtain information of what is going on around him, or he cannot hope to act either aggressively or defensively with confidence. Instances of the disasters entailed upon armies and nations in consequence of their commanders' ignorance or neglect of the paramount importance of reconnoitring, furnish the history of the losing side of two out of three campaigns since the middle ages.

There is no need to go far back in military history to verify this assertion.

In 1859 the French army, numbering 125,000 infantry, 11,000 cavalry, and 300 guns, met the Austrian army, 146,000 infantry, 15,000 cavalry, and 600 guns, in full march at Solferino, neither army being aware of the vicinity of the other. Although encamped within a few miles of each other, these great armies took no apparent precautions for discovering each other's movements. The French were marching in a better formation than the Austrians for deploying, and to this they largely owed their success.

In 1866 the Austrians failed utterly owing partly to their inferiority of armament, but also in a great measure to their reconnoitring and patrol system being much inferior to the Prussians'.

This inferiority has been attributed to the want of proper military education among the officers and non-commissioned officers to whom these duties were entrusted—simple duties which ought to be the A B C of every soldier's study of his profession.

In 1870 the French disasters were largely attributable to the same cause.

While the Prussian system (following closely on the well-established principles of the First Napoleon) never allowed of surprise, the Austrians in 1866, and the French in 1870, were repeatedly surprised, and, being taken unawares, severely beaten.

Another striking instance of the disastrous consequences attending the neglect of reconnoitring duties was exemplified during the Russian and Turkish war, 1878. After the capture of Nikopolis on the 16th of July, 1878, General Krüdener, commander of the 9th Army Corps, was ordered to occupy Plevna, and secure the right flank of the Russian army from attack during its contemplated invasion of Turkey across the Balkans. Plevna is only twenty miles south of Nikopolis.

On the 17th July, Osman Pasha, with an army of 40,000 regular troops marching eastward from Widdin, crossed the Vid river on the right flank of the Russians, and occupied Plevna in their immediate front, almost within striking distance of Krüdener's head-quarters. As General Krüdener had an ample cavalry force at his disposal, his ignorance of the enemy's movements as indicated by his subsequent proceedings is astonishing.

On the 18th of July, General Krüdener directed General Schilder-Schuldener, with a brigade of infantry, thirty-two guns, and the 9th Don Cossacks, to march on Plevna and occupy that town. Schilder-Schuldener started the same day, bivouacked half way between Nikopolis and Plevna, and, in spite of his having a regiment of cavalry with his force, remained all that night in ignorance of the "presence" of Osman Pasha with a large army directly in his front.

On the 19th, Schilder-Schuldener continued his march southwards. His cavalry, instead of covering his column, was marching on his right flank, and considerably in rear, presumably looking out for any indications of the Turks, who had slipped past into Plevna two days previously.

On the afternoon of the 19th of July, Schilder-Schuldener reached the heights on the north-east of Plevna, and suddenly found himself under the fire of some Turkish batteries, posted about a mile and three-quarters in front of him, near the site of the famous Grivitza redoubt.

The whole tide of the campaign turned at this point. Without any reconnoissances of the enemy's whereabouts, numbers, or position, on the next morning, the 20th July, the Russian commander attacked an unknown force four times his strength in an entrenched position, and was terribly beaten at the first battle of Plevna.

This battle of the 20th July was followed at intervals by what are known as the second and third battles of Plevna, both equally disastrous to the assailants, and ended in the investment of the place, and the complete collapse of the Russian plan of campaign, which had been so brilliantly begun after paralyzing the action of the Turkish flotilla by the successful passage of the Danube, and Gourko's famous reconnoissance in force. A map of the Balkan Peninsula will enable the reader to take in at a glance the situation of the two forces on the 16th July, Krüdener in possession of Nikopolis, which he had captured from the south side, and Osman Pasha marching along the road which leads from Widdin to Plevna.

But we need not go so far afield or so far back as 1878. England has had her own lessons in South Africa, in Afghanistan, and in Egypt; demonstrating nearer home that the first principle of war, "gaining early and accurate information of the enemy's movements," cannot, even when fighting against half-armed savages, be neglected with impunity.

If these disasters have awakened us to a sense of knowledge and not only of fear, then we may yet profit by them before it is too late, *i.e.* before Great Britain is called upon to take part in another European war.

It is on the cavalry arm that the important duties of reconnoitring usually devolve but should the nature of the country preclude the employment of cavalry, or, as so often happens, in the absence of that arm, reconnoitring duties in all their details must be performed by infantry.

Officers in command of reconnoitring parties are liable to be captured or disabled, and their duties and responsibilities, owing to the uncertain fortunes of war, may at any moment devolve on their subordinates in the ranks of the non-commissioned officers.

Reconnoissances have been divided under two general heads:—

- I. Armed Reconnoissances.
- II. Secret or Individual Reconnoissances.

Under the first heading is included:

1. Reconnoissances in Force.
2. Reconnoitring Parties.

The reconnoitring patrols furnished from outposts are not included under the above headings, as they form part and parcel of the outposts, and will be considered in their proper place with outpost duties.

A reconnoissance in force usually consists of a body of troops comprising all three arms, or of a body of cavalry and artillery.

In the case of all three arms being employed, the object of a reconnoissance should be clearly defined. The commander may be instructed to unmask an enemy, *i.e.* try and make him disclose his positions and numbers. To effect this a considerable display of actual aggressive force would probably be needed before the enemy's outposts yield sufficiently to oblige the army they are covering to turn out, and occupy the ground they actually intend to give battle upon.

A practical and experienced soldier, seeing the enemy getting under arms, and forming to be ready to give battle, will rapidly gather a lot of valuable information regarding his numbers, artillery positions, naturally strong and weak points, flank defences, and the suitability of the ground he occupies, both for defence and counter attacks. It will then depend on his orders how he acts. The commander of a reconnoissance in force will have received his instructions either to attack if a favourable opportunity presents itself, depending on the main body for support, or to fall back under cover of the main body. Or he may be instructed to tempt the enemy to try and cut him off, and endeavour to lure the opponents out of a good position, falling back before them, much in the same manner as outposts fall back on the positions they are covering.

Strict obedience to orders is always essential to success, and many a battle has been unadvisedly brought on through over-confidence or mistaken zeal on the part of those entrusted with these important operations. A good example is furnished by General Gourko's reconnoissance in force over the Balkans, July (12 to 18th) 1878. On the 30th June, three days after the passage of the VIIIth Russian Army corps over the Danube, the Grand Duke Nicholas gave orders for a reconnoissance in force to be formed under General Gourko, which was directed to push forward to Tirnova and Selvi, and be ready on receipt of subsequent orders to gain possession of a pass in the Balkans by which the army could cross, at the same time sending his cavalry forward south of the Balkans to cut the railroads and telegraph, and gain as much information as possible regarding the numbers, movements, and disposition of the Turks.

The force placed at Gourko's disposal was:—

- 10½ battalions of Infantry.
- 32 squadrons of Cavalry.
- 32 guns, including two mountain batteries.
- 14,000 of all arms.

Starting from Tirnova at the head of his flying column on July 12th, in eight days Gourko gained possession of three passes in the Balkans, overcoming the most extraordinary obstacles, the difficulties of the road rendering it necessary for the guns to be dragged by infantry for a distance of several miles. Debouched into the valley of the Tundja, Gourko dispersed various bodies of regular Turkish troops, disarmed the populace, and lived on the country.

After capturing the Shipka Pass from its southern outlet on the 19th July, between that date and the 5th of August General Gourko's cavalry carried panic into the heart of Turkey, destroyed portions of the railroad and telegraph on the principal lines, gathered accurate information concerning the strength and positions of the Turkish forces advancing towards the Balkans, and, finally, when directed to fall back (owing to events on the north side of the Balkans) Gourko covered his retreat with his cavalry in presence of an army three times superior to his own force.

During these operations the Russian commander committed the grave error of dividing his force, which nearly cost him his infantry.

A full and interesting account of this brilliant reconnoissance is given by Lieutenant Greene, U. S. Army, in his valuable work on the Russian and Turkish War 1877-78.

(To be Continued.)