

Modern Tactics.

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

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CHAPTER VI.—ATTACK ON A POSITION BY THE THREE ARMS.

BEFORE deciding to attack a position, a commander endeavours, by means of reconnaissances both armed and secret, to obtain every possible information regarding its capabilities. If the enemy's outposts are well posted, and his piquets and sentries alert, very insufficient information may be procurable. In this event a reconnaissance in force is usually sent out to drive in his outposts, and force him to unmask, *i.e.* show himself on the positions he means to occupy.

The command of a reconnaissance in force is entrusted to an experienced officer, and is usually made with a view to bringing on an action.

First Stage.

The advanced guard, reinforced if necessary, drives in the enemy's outposts. At this first stage of the attack on a position, provided the country admits of their manœuvring, the assailants' cavalry can hardly be used too freely or too boldly on the flanks.

1st. To prevent the defenders' cavalry discovering the plan of attack.

2nd. To try and work round the flanks of the position, and discover what natural or artificial protection the defenders have got for them. To ascertain, if possible, the depth of the position, and the position of the defenders' second line and reserves, and also their lines of retreat.

3rd. To cover the movements of their own infantry, moving to a flank, and not formed for attack.

4th. By their pressure generally to harass the defenders, by opposing their cavalry and making feints at charging their infantry whenever an opportunity is given them for delaying, even momentarily, a deployment. The assailants' cavalry, manœuvring on the flanks, can often judge of the effect produced by their own side's artillery-fire, and report on the practice they are making.

A well-handled body of cavalry with a few field guns may play an important *role* in every stage of an action, provided its commander is in touch with the other arms, and is not so rash as to suppose that cavalry alone can engage infantry, unless they have run short of ammunition, or are greatly demoralized, or taken completely unawares.

If instead of charging the British squares at Waterloo Napoleon had sent half his cavalry to the right to harass the Prussians, and a portion of the remainder to work round Wellington's right flank, they might have considerably delayed Blucher's advance on one side, and spread panic as far as Brussels, and subsequently have hovered on the flanks, and in rear of the allies, or rallied on Grouchy's force.

When not operating on the flanks the normal place for cavalry on the field of battle is with the reserves. Cavalry can quickly be transferred to any part of the field when required.

Great caution combined with dash and boldness have been the characteristics of all successful cavalry leaders. Had Prince Rupert possessed the first of these qualifications, he would have been the *beau ideal* of a cavalry general.

A thorough knowledge of the tactics of the three arms is essential to every cavalry officer, without which he cannot hope to seize upon and make the most of the fleeting opportunities in a battle, when a well-judged and skilfully-handled charge may produce a momentary effect, as astounding as it is sudden.

The highest perfection in a cavalry leader is to know when to withdraw, and give way to his own infantry.

The Russians have, perhaps, bought their experience somewhat dearly; but with respect to their cavalry they are making rapid progress in a right direction, and this arm is probably destined to play an important part in their future campaigns.

Cavalry at all times should be capable of being turned into serviceable infantry.

Second Stage.

The outposts driven in and the flanks well scoured, a battle opens with what is called the "artillery duel."

Having approached within shelling distance, the assailants' guns should be massed as much as the ground admits of, and their concentrated fire directed upon some vital point.

If the artillery of the defence replies, the guns of the attack will be directed with a view to silencing it if possible. This is not easy to accomplish. First, because the defenders' guns are generally protected by epaulments. Secondly, they can withdraw them out of action until the assailants' infantry appears. If the defenders' guns are not brought into action the assailants can shell their positions with impunity; but with what effect depends on the amount of cover they afford.

It is a generally accepted maxim that no position ought to be assaulted by infantry until it has been well pounded and shaken by artillery. Nevertheless a good many hours of valuable daylight may often be wasted to little or no purpose, by prolonging a harmless cannonade directed against substantial earthworks.

It has been seen that the direction of the artillery attack will depend at first on the fire tactics of the defence; but eventually the concentrated fire of the assailant's guns must be directed on some vital point, the capture of which has been decided upon.

During the artillery cannonade, the infantry is deployed, and if a turning movement is contemplated, the troops told off for it are marched away, covered, if the ground is open, by cavalry, in skirmishing order.

At all times when within view of an enemy, and especially when moving to a flank, every possible advantage should be taken of any cover from view. This is often obtainable from much gentler undulations than men are accustomed to utilize in drill.

Third Stage.

There are three courses at this stage of a battle more or less open to the assailants.

First.—To endeavour to envelop a position, and gradually close on it, without exposing a flank to counter attack. This plan necessitates a great superiority in numbers.

Secondly.—To make a holding attack in front, and a wide and deep turning movement round one or both flanks. This plan also implies a considerable numerical superiority, and entails the most careful and accurate calculations of time, to ensure the combined action between the front and flank attacks, without which they become isolated and liable to be beaten in detail.

A skilful general will provide artificial flank defences to his selected position when natural ones do not exist, in rear of either or both exposed flanks.

The probabilities ought to be that a turning movement to be successful will have to outflank these entrenchments, in which case it must be very wide, and can only be undertaken when the assailants feel themselves strong enough to divide their forces, and still repel any concentrated counter attacks delivered by the defenders acting on interior lines, at the time when their opponents are at their widest point of separation.

The danger of dividing an army on the field of battle, has been fatally exemplified too often to need further demonstration.

Still, if a turning movement is accurately timed, and secretly and skilfully executed, so as to ensure the two attacks, *viz.* that in front of a position, and that on its most exposed flank, being simultaneously delivered, it justifies the presumption that it may be carried.

The third course open to the assailants is perhaps the most generally adopted, and, in the event of the preponderance in numbers not being much in favour of the attacking side, is certainly the least risky, *viz.* to make a demonstration along the front of the defenders' positions, to keep them generally occupied, and by means of local and general reserves to attack a vital point with local superiority.

In order to do this the commander must throw his reserves into the fight exactly at the right moment. Battalions, brigades, divisions, must be launched not one after the other, but as nearly simultaneously as the cover they are taking advantage of will permit.

The general plan of attack will be influenced—

1st. By the configuration of the ground and the amount of lateral communication between the centre and flanks.

2nd. The quality of the assailants' troops.

3rd. The quality of the defenders.

4th. The mistakes of the defenders and the accidents of battle.

To take advantage of the latter so as to turn them to immediate account is the highest aim of tactics.

The Duke of Wellington, when asked to state the opinion he had formed of Napoleon as a tactician, is said to have replied, "Napoleon's presence on a field of battle is equivalent to forty thousand men."

If no cover exists, successive waves of skirmishers pressed on vigorously in rapid and never-failing succession can alone hope to capture an entrenched position resolutely and scientifically defended.

General Skobelev, who seldom failed to carry the numerous entrenched positions he attacked, said, that in every attack there was a critical moment when the reserves must be thrown into the fight, either to re-establish confidence or to confirm victory.

This moment has arrived when there is any signs of wavering on either side.

It must always be borne in mind that a vital point has not only to be carried, but to be held when captured, and made secure against counter attack, and during the final rushes the assailants, owing to their proximity to the enemy, lose whatever support they may have hitherto received from the oblique fire of troops co-operating on their flanks, as well as that from the artillery-fire directed over their heads against the defenders.

Any infantry attack formation founded on the supposition that companies are not to be mixed up, however good in theory, can hardly be expected to meet the requirements of modern warfare.

Experience has shown that in the attack on an entrenched position, not only do companies become mixed, but battalions, brigades, and divisions, before steady troops fighting behind earthworks, will abandon good cover to be shot down retreating over the open, by volleys delivered at point-blank ranges.

The Prussian losses within 300 yards of the French positions in 1870 were almost nil, but the experience of a more recent campaign has shown that resolute troops can hold entrenchments to the last against breechloaders.

The odds in favour of the defenders, if carefully and scientifically entrenched, are very great, and with repeating-rifles they will be greater still.

However, positions have been assaulted and carried against fearful odds from time immemorial, and will have to be again when nations go to war.

The breech-loader has developed fire action in the open, to the exclusion of what was called shock; but the spade, as demonstrated at Plevna and in the Shipka Pass, has beaten the rifle; and before entrenched positions resolutely and scientifically defended can be captured, the next great war will probably show that rifles will frequently have to be clubbed and bayonets crossed.

(To be continued.)