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Major C. G. Vereker R.A.

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JULY, 1911]

THE LAND DEFENCE OF COAST BATTERIES AND FORTRESSES.

By Major C. G. VEREKER, R.A.

IMPORTANCE OF THE SUBJECT.

THE rapid growth of foreign naval Powers, and the regrouping of our own fleets to meet present-day conditions, will render it more and more improbable that, in the initial stages of a war, we shall be able to retain unchallenged command of the sea in all parts of the world.

Until such time as the great naval battles which will eventually decide our fate have been fought, our fortresses and coal-ing stations, at all events those in distant parts, will have to look after themselves, possibly for much longer periods than was formerly considered probable. Our Navy should be in no way fettered with the responsibility for the safety of ports, but should be confident of finding dockyards, coal and stores available at any time, whenever the strategical requirements of a war may necessitate the presence of our ships.

An enemy, on the other hand, may be more than ever in a position to carry out a successful attack upon some distant station, and such an attack will offer considerable temptation, as, by the destruction of coal stores and repairing facilities, the movements and efficiency of our fleets might be very seriously interfered with. The importance of Coast Defence, is therefore tending to increase at the present time, and some consideration as to the protection from the land side of coast batteries and fortresses may not be out of place.

RESPONSIBILITY OF INFANTRY FOR THE DEFENCE OF LAND FRONTS.

This land defence, which is of vital importance, as we shall endeavour to show, should be carefully thought about, and studied, especially by our infantry, who in time of war become mainly responsible for the safety of coast works, and may then have to perform duties in many respects different from what they have become accustomed to, by their training in the field.

"As a rule infantry will be detailed in defence schemes for the protection of all batteries and electric light emplacements liable to attack by raiding parties, and will supply patrols for the early detection of such raids.

"Gunners are in no way intended to perform the duties of protection, but, if not occupied in fighting their guns, will be expected to assist the Infantry in resisting an attack on the rear of the work, except with anti-torpedo boat guns, which may have to be manned at a moments notice."¹

¹ Garrison Artillery Training, Vol. I.

INCREASED VULNERABILITY OF COAST DEFENCE ARMAMENT.

During the past few years greater importance has been placed upon the adequate protection of batteries than was formerly the case. One reason for this is the very greatly diminished number of guns supplied for coast protection and their greater vulnerability to destruction by individuals or small raiding parties gaining access to a work.

In the days of muzzle-loaders a fort was armed with a considerable number of guns on very simple mountings, which it was difficult to damage effectually, and which, even if damaged, allowed of repairs or of makeshifts being employed, so that guns could continue in action. Now, on the contrary, the defence of a harbour entrance may in some cases depend on very few guns, on mountings which are particularly vulnerable below the shield, and which, if once damaged, would be very difficult, and take a long time, to repair.

Then, again, whereas formerly guns were enclosed in strong casemated forts, and could not as a rule be silenced from the land side unless the fort was first assaulted and captured, they are now usually placed in open barbette batteries, which may be exposed from the flank or rear to rifle fire from an enemy occupying commanding ground within range of the guns. There are also nowadays electric lights, position-finding cells, and communications, all important adjuncts of a successful defence, which are particularly tempting objectives to raiders, and the destruction of which, though not necessarily destroying the effectiveness of the defence, may seriously hamper it should vessels attack at the same time.

Yet, in spite of the very great disadvantages under which an attack on coast works from the land side had to take place in the past, as compared with the present, we find on examination of historical examples that, in almost every case of the successful silencing of coast works, this has been effected from the land side, and not by the fire of ships' guns.

COMBINED ATTACKS BY SHIPS AND LANDING PARTIES.

The best results have been obtained by combined attacks by ships and landing parties, but the latter have in nearly every case been mainly responsible for the capture of the work or of the place attacked.

The capture of Fort Fisher illustrates this very well. During the American War a large fleet went in to attack it, and opened a very heavy fire upon it, but the fort made little reply.

"Part of the reason of that was that the garrison considered that it was not of much use sinking a ship, or two or ten ships, because there were an almost unlimited number of ships in the north, and what the garrison wished to reserve themselves for was the attack by the land force. They beat off the land force on the first assault, and it was only on the second assault that the place fell."¹

¹ "Naval Attack of Fortifications," by Admiral May, R.N.

As more modern examples, we have the capture of Port Arthur and of Wei-hai-Wei by the Japanese, in 1894, and of Santiago by the Americans, in 1893. In each case, though the attackers were practically in absolute command of the sea, no serious attempt was made to take the forts by bombardment, but an army was landed, and the works were captured from the rear.

Still more recently we have the capture of Port Arthur by the Japanese. The majority of the Russian vessels had been seriously damaged, the free exit from the port of the remainder was to a great extent blocked, and there was at one time probably no force to cope with the Japanese fleet except the still distant Baltic squadron; yet practically no attempt was made to attack the coast defences, and finally crush the fleet they were protecting, except by a distant bombardment from a position out of reach of the Russian guns.

The risk of approaching too close was exemplified by the loss of the *Hatsuse* and *Yoshima* on the same day through striking mines placed off the fortress; this disaster went near to seriously imperilling the Japanese command of the sea, and thereafter the Navy was content to play a waiting game while the defences were slowly but surely attacked and taken from the land side.

SPECIAL POSITION OF THE UNITED KINGDOM.

In considering the subject of land attack, there is one point which is very often overlooked—namely, that we are in an absolutely different position from any other nation in the matter of coast defence, for we are, presumably, only exposed to attack during a comparatively limited time, and if we can hold out long enough, a relieving fleet is bound to come to our rescue. If we have so entirely lost command of the sea as to possess no relieving fleet, the game is up, as, sooner or later, the British Isles must be starved into submission, and our colonies, coaling stations, etc., must fall in due course, and no amount of resistance will affect the ultimate end. We must, therefore, assume that the existence of our fleet is vital to our existence as a nation, and need only consider attacks during local or temporary loss of command of the sea.

It is improbable that an enemy will, under these circumstances, undertake a regular bombardment of coast forts, and risk damaging his ships and exhausting his ammunition, with the possibility of having to fight a naval action subsequently, nor will he have time to collect and land a large force and undertake a regular siege; but, on the other hand, he will be very much tempted to try and take certain of our coaling stations and coast fortresses by a *coup de main*, probably with a view to destruction only, and for this purpose he will employ a land force, which must of necessity be comparatively small, and is not likely to have any guns heavier than those which can be landed in boats.

These attacks will all, more or less, partake of the nature of a raid, and their success will depend upon rapidity of action and surprise.

RAIDS BY TORPEDO CRAFT.

The most probable form of raid will be an attempt by torpedo craft to penetrate the defences with a view to the destruction of ships-of-war lying within. Attacks of this nature may possibly be delivered before a declaration of war; this liability, therefore, imposes on the garrison of a port the necessity for great vigilance at a time of political tension. The nearer a port to the enemy's bases, the more liable it is to this danger, but ports out of range of sea-going boats are still liable to attack by smaller types carried or towed by battleships or cruisers. The loss of even several torpedo vessels would be amply compensated by the great damage others could do, should they succeed in running past our defences, and we may take it for granted that the enemy would endeavour by every means in its power to assist the attack.

Landing Party in Co-operation with Torpedo Boat Attack.

This assistance can obviously be best given by a force acting in rear of the defences, and either silencing or worrying the quick-firing guns by enfilade or reverse fire, or destroying the electric lights upon which we are dependent for successfully repelling a night attack. Under cover of darkness it should not be difficult for a resourceful enemy to put a small party ashore unobserved, and, if these succeed in getting through the troops protecting the land side, they may be able to do great mischief, will, in any case, unsettle the defenders, and in the resulting confusion, will have a very good chance of escaping.

Secret Agents.

Or, again, secret agents might be employed with orders to destroy lights at a given time or on a given signal. The existence of such secret agents is not always taken very seriously, but it is desirable that we should be on our guard against them, especially when we remember that many of our coast fortresses abroad are situated in places which contain a very considerable number of aliens, who are continually coming and going, and the movements of whom could not be effectually watched, even by the best police in the world. A few well-paid agents, provided with bombs or guncotton, wherewith to destroy electric lights or engine rooms, or who succeeded in unearthing and cutting the cables joining these, might very materially assist a raid by torpedo craft. For the protection of electric lights we are dependent upon infantry who should be able to ensure that no unauthorised persons approach within bomb-

throwing distance of any of the projectors or gain access to the engine-rooms.

Vulnerability of Exposed Batteries.

If the quick-firing guns are open to rifle fire from the rear, we must likewise depend upon infantry to watch all commanding ground, and prevent its occupation by raiding parties who may have effected a landing unnoticed. An enemy succeeding in taking up a position within 1,000 yards of an exposed battery at night could practically silence its fire; the flash of the guns would show up the detachments to him; and the demoralising effect of rifle fire arriving from the rear would be sufficient to make accurate laying at a fast-moving torpedo boat very problematical.

The obvious remedy for such a contingency is to watch the coast line so as to prevent raiders landing, and to so guard the approaches to batteries that raiders may be intercepted, even should they successfully elude the vigilance of those watching the coast.

RAIDS AGAINST DOCKYARDS AND STORES.

Next to a raid by torpedo craft, the form of attack coast fortresses abroad may most have to fear, is one having as its object the destruction of a dockyard or of the coal and stores kept in reserve for our fleet. Such a raid would only be undertaken if an enemy was in temporary local command of the sea, and, for reasons already mentioned, his object would probably be to complete the work of destruction and re-embark as quickly as possible, and before the arrival of a relieving fleet. He would, therefore, desire to effect a disembarkation at the nearest convenient distance from his objective. We may, however, take it that any good landing places in the immediate vicinity of a dockyard, although possibly not under the fire of the main batteries, would be protected by the fire of fixed armament guns.

Alternative Methods of Attack.

The enemy, therefore, has the alternative of risking some of his ships in silencing coast works in order to obtain a suitable base fairly close to his objective, or of effecting a landing at some more distant point, and advancing overland to the attack, as, for example, the Japanese did in the case of Port Arthur.

Should he select the former alternative, he would endeavour by every means in his power to silence, or render as ineffective as possible, the fire of the guns commanding the point selected as his base, without exposing his ships to more damage than necessary. The means employed to effect this might be:—

- (a) To destroy guns or blow up magazines by means of secret agents or small landing parties effecting an entrance into the work.
- (b) To destroy position-finding cells and to cut communications by the same agency, in order to hamper the defence, and to render long-range fire more inaccurate.
- (c) To put a small force ashore during dark with orders to take up a position on ground commanding the guns from the rear, and to pick off the gun detachments and battery commander and staff as the ships attack at dawn.

To meet the above, very carefully thought-out plans of defence are necessary. All probable landing places must, of course, be guarded by infantry, but as, however good the watch kept, a resourceful enemy is pretty sure to succeed in putting men ashore at some point or other undetected, we cannot altogether trust to this first line of defence, and must take steps for the closer protection of individual works.

Necessary Defence Measures.

The details of defence necessary to guard against the above forms of attack are briefly as follows:—

(a) Modern mountings are usually very vulnerable behind the shields. A slab of guncotton or charge of high explosive detonated at a suitable point could more effectually silence a gun than hours of bombardment by ships. Magazines stocked with cordite are no longer so easily exploded as in the time of Guy Fawkes, and more elaborate arrangements are necessary nowadays. It is, however, obviously as well not to allow anyone to exert his ingenuity in this direction!

To prevent the entry of unauthorised persons into batteries infantry guards are required, whose duty it should be to watch and patrol the approaches; the batteries themselves, if situated in old pattern forts, are usually surrounded by deep ditches, but some modern ones may have only so-called "unclimbable" fences, which—as no fence has yet been invented which will stop a good climber provided with the necessary easily carried articles for surmounting it—should be further supplemented by barbed wire entanglements.

The artillery should find sentries on guns and magazines, so that even should the infantry outposts and the obstacles be passed, the attackers may be discovered and stopped.

The essence of effectual protection against such attacks is, however, an offensive defensive, and we should not be satisfied to sit down near the guns, and wait for the enemy to come and attack them.

(b) Position-finding cells should be sufficiently protected by a small guard of infantry, as the value of their destruction would not be sufficient for the attackers to risk losing several men in an attempt to do so.

Communications are liable to be interfered with, either through the cutting or short-circuiting of air-lines, or the cutting of cables. As such damage would probably be carried out by individuals during the hours of darkness, it is very difficult to guard against; good patrolling and the prevention of movements of all unauthorised persons at night are the only means available. Such damage would, however, usually only affect the defence temporarily.

(c) If "snipers" can be put ashore at night, and can get within range of open works, their fire at dawn would have a most demoralising effect on the gunners; by the time they were discovered and dislodged by the defending infantry it is probable that the enemy's ships would have effected their object of closing with the work, when—with their great preponderance of armament—they might silence it at close range.

It is therefore important that all possible protection against such fire from the rear should be afforded by means of parados and other cover; and that, if the battery is commanded by any high ground, such ground should be carefully patrolled and searched by infantry a little before dawn to prevent the possibility of its being occupied by the enemy.

The difficulty of getting away again, is, however, likely to prove the best deterrent against such attempts, as, should the enemy fail to effect a landing in force, the fate of the "snipers" would be sealed, for they could usually be hunted down and captured during daylight.

Measures for opposing a Disembarkation.

Should the enemy succeed, by fair means or foul play, in silencing the fire of fixed armament guns bearing upon the point selected for disembarkation, or should he select a point out of reach of the fire of the fixed armament, we have to depend upon infantry, supported by guns of the movable armament, to prevent a disembarkation, if possible, and, failing this, to hold such positions as will delay the enemy's advance and prevent him from effecting his object of reaching the dockyard or attacking the coast batteries from the rear.

As it is probable that an attempt would be made to put an advanced party ashore, and to capture a covering position during dark, movable searchlights at all the most probable landing places are very desirable, and infantry and maxims, supported by guns of the movable armament, should be available to oppose a landing, and to prevent the enemy from obtaining a footing on shore until such time as the local reserves—which should be kept in hand ready to move at short notice to any threatened point—can be brought up.

Guns of The Movable Armament.

Some of the movable armament guns would probably, on mobilization, occupy positions commanding landing-places, and,

if an enemy were aware, through his spies, that guns were so emplaced, and that they covered his prospective point of disembarkation, he might endeavour to destroy them by small raiding parties during the night prior to, or in combination with, the landing of his covering force. To prevent such an attack from succeeding, guns in exposed positions should be protected by barbed wire or other obstacles, and should have an infantry escort detailed for their protection.

The guns should not be placed too near the shore, even at night, as they can do their work just as well some distance back, where they are less likely to be rushed, and are able to assist in holding a defensive position should the enemy succeed in landing an attacking force.

The landing of an enemy's force and its subsequent advance would, in all probability, be supported by the fire of ships; this fact must not be lost sight of in selecting positions for movable armament guns, and in determining how they are most likely to be employed. The heavier guns might have to take up indirect fire positions from which to engage an enemy's transports or supporting ships; but, if they are required to fire direct, they should be most carefully screened and protected, especially on the seaward flank. The lighter guns—the targets of which would be troops disembarking in boats, or infantry advancing—would usually have to fire direct, and should trust to concealment and good entrenching in order to offer as difficult a target as possible to the enemy's ships; it might, in some cases, be advisable not to disclose their position until a good target—such as troops landing in boats—offered itself for attack by rapid shrapnel fire.

Should the enemy succeed in effecting a landing and securely establishing himself on shore, the checking of his advance and the taking up of successive positions—should a retirement become necessary—does not differ in the case of a coast fortress from similar work in the field, with the exception that advanced coast batteries or forts may sometimes serve as defended points in the case of a retirement; they should, therefore, be made as impregnable from the land side as modern fortification can make them.

The question of the land defence of coast batteries and fortresses is one that must be seriously considered during peace, and too much should not be left to be thought out and done upon mobilization. It is only by attention to what may appear, at the time, trifling and unimportant details, that "regrettable incidents" are avoided when it comes to actual fighting.