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SOME NOTES ON OUTPOST DUTY IN SOUTH AFRICA.

By Lieutenant R. M. G. TULLOCH, 2nd Bn. Royal West Kent Regt.

THESE few notes on Outposts are not put together with the idea of suggesting any new theories, but are simply given as a record of experiences gained from some two years' work in South Africa, which may be useful. At the present time with smokeless powder, and officers and men dressed in a uniform harmonising with the surrounding colouring, the question of the outposts being invisible to an enemy becomes one of the most important points to be considered when posting the sentries and picquets.

In the daytime, the concealment of a picquet is comparatively easy, as it can be placed in a fold of the ground, or behind a house or hedge, but where the difficulty presents itself is in the placing of a sentry where he can see and yet be himself invisible. The most difficult position is one on a grassy, round topped, hill or ridge, and in such a case it is generally well to put the sentry several yards down the hill on the enemy's side, as he can then sit still and observe, the chance of his being seen against his similar coloured background being extremely remote, provided he keeps still. The objection to placing him on the actual hill-top is, that his head shows up clearly against the outline of the hill, especially with a helmet on, and the least movement catches the eye. The helmet showing so much can be greatly minimised by putting grass and bracken on it. On a hill-top covered with scrub and boulders, the question of hiding the sentry is comparatively easy, but even among rocks care must be taken that the soldier's head does not show up over the top of a rock against the skyline. It is even preferable to set him down in front of a stone on the enemy's side, as, on a rocky hill, a man in khaki in the open is most difficult to find even though his approximate position be known. In referring to a skyline of a hill, it must be remembered that this varies as one approaches a hill or recedes from it; so much stress is laid upon this point of not showing on the skyline, because when scouting it is to the skyline of the enemy's position the scout looks for information and usually obtains it.

When a sentry is placed down a hill on the enemy's side, the question of where to place his group and of his being visited by patrols arises. The group can be placed just behind the top of the ridge some distance from the post, and if the visiting patrols and reliefs crawl quickly over the skyline and down to the sentry, they only show for a few seconds, and as their visits only occur at long intervals, they are very unlikely to show where the sentry is. A danger to be carefully guarded against is that of the visiting patrol walking along the top of a ridge in full view, and stopping or disappearing when it comes to a sentry. When

scouts are watching a hill which is supposed to be held, if the visiting patrols show up when going round, the sentries can soon be found, however well they are concealed, and often a single man showing himself may point out exactly where the picquets or groups are.

When scouting for the purpose of reconnoitring an enemy's outpost line, a very good method is, for one or two scouts to work away to a flank and keeping well hidden, fire off a few rounds, when the enemy's sentries will at once move about, and try to find out where the shots came from, and, probably, some of the groups, and even the picquets will come on to the skyline to have a look, thus giving the scouts all the information they require.

It may be rather outside the scope of these notes to refer to the defences made by the picquet when on outpost; but at the same time, one or two examples may not be out of place. When holding a stony hill, covered with big scattered rocks, the best method is to build small sangaars for two or three men in among the larger rocks, care being taken to build these sangaars well down the hill-side. This has the objection of rather splitting up the picquet, but on the other hand, by making small sangaars, and keeping them off the top of the hill, it is impossible to see the defences from even 200 or 300 yards away—whereas a wall, 20 or 30 yards in length, would at once catch the eye. At another time when entrenching on level ground among scattered ant-heaps, it would be found best to make short lengths of trench, with the parapet made into mounds similar to the surrounding ant-heaps or general slope of the ground, as the trenches would then be extremely difficult to see at even short ranges. The object in all cases being to make the defences resemble their surroundings as nearly as possible, so as to give the attackers nothing to aim at.

Before leaving the subject of day outposts, it may be well to draw attention to the fact, that sound carries a remarkable distance on a still day, and that any unnecessary noise in the outpost line, such as the shouting of orders, should be carefully avoided. It is no exaggeration to say, that in South Africa, men could be heard talking quite 500 yards away, and the writer has noticed the same thing in the high country in Ceylon on a still morning. In the still early morning, it is wonderful how far the smell of tobacco goes; on one occasion in South Africa, an ambush, fortunately successful, was laid out for a party of Boers, and one of those captured said they were given their first warning of danger by smelling tobacco smoke when quite 200 yards away. The men in ambush had been allowed to smoke, it being broad daylight at the time, and no one thought the smell would carry so far.

As night outposts are by far the hardest and most trying, reference will now be made to some of the practical experience gained in carrying them out in the late war. The position of the sentry at night on open level ground should, whenever possible, be in any slight hole or hollow, as he is then lower, and can see any person approaching against the skyline, while being himself less visible. As an example of this, when going round sentries in South Africa on a moonless night, when near a sentry but not quite sure of his exact position, the writer of these notes, by lying or crouching down, was often able to see him against the stars, whereas on standing upright the

sentry could not be seen at all. So much was this point remarked upon, that on open ground, when time permitted, a small hole, a foot or two deep, was dug for the sentry to stand in, so as to make him less visible. When the outposts were entrenched on a hill in small sangaars, as was often the case, it was found best to place the sentry a yard or two in front of and down below the sangaar, where his group was sleeping, as he did not then show up to anyone approaching from the bottom of the hill, as the sangaar formed the background for him.

In undulating country, the groups and sentries were, when possible, placed in the dip between two ridges, the sentries could then see any enemy approaching over the ridge in front, as he showed even on very dark nights when crossing the skyline, while the groups and sentries being at the bottom of the hollow were quite invisible.

Another point which took a very long time for sentries to learn was that at night as well as by day they must keep perfectly still, as the moment a sentry moves he shows where he is, and also the noise made by moving about might prevent him hearing anyone approaching.

At night, our sentries had orders to lie down when challenging, as lying down the sentry could see the person approaching while being himself invisible. Several times when visiting sentries, the writer, after answering the challenge, found it necessary to call to the sentry to say where he was, to enable him to advance and give the counter-sign.

While referring to the subject of challenging, the British soldier is far too fond of shouting at the top of his voice, even on the calmest night, so that an enemy within 500 or 600 yards can tell exactly where the sentry is. Under these circumstances, all that an enterprising scout would have to do would be to lie down some 500 yards outside the line of sentries and note the exact position of each sentry as the visiting patrols went round. Besides, the excessive noise of such challenges, there always seems to be a very unnecessary amount of challenging in an outpost line, however well it may be done.

It would be a great saving of unnecessary noise if the visiting patrols and officers of a picquet, when going the round of their sentries, could have some private arrangement of whistles, say for each company or picquet, which would take the place of the challenge, except in the event of the signal not being answered correctly, when the sentry would challenge as well. (This is now prescribed in "Combined Training.") Of course anyone approaching from the front and officers visiting the whole picquet line would be challenged in the ordinary way.

Being an outpost sentry is always rather "jumpy" work, so that, if time and means permit, any slight obstacle that can be placed in front of each group to prevent it being rushed, gives a decided feeling of security. Even a few strands of barbed wire, if available, laid loosely on the ground, or, better still, raised about a foot on stones or wooden pegs, is a most awkward obstacle to come across in the dark. Empty jam pots and tins of any description scattered here and there on the ground about 20 yards in front of the sentry are very effective, as on a dark night it is impossible to walk through them without knocking against one or two and so giving an alarm. The idea, at one time very prevalent in South Africa, of hanging tins on a wire fence or wire entanglement, so that anyone getting through or over

the obstacle would rattle the tins, is not at all good, as on a windy night the tins swing and rattle to such an extent that it is impossible to hear anything. If tins are available, it is far better to adopt the method of scattering them on the ground in front of the obstacle, or else attaching them to a trip wire so that they cannot swing with the wind.

If the sentry line should be fairly permanent, as in the case of holding a town or fort, a very good system is that of running a trip wire along about 20 yards or more in front of the sentry or even along the whole line of sentries. This wire should be stretched taut, and should run through loops on supporting sticks, and be so arranged that, if kicked against, a tin or stone would be made to rattle close by a sentry.

While on the subject of night outposts, it may not be inopportune to refer to the work of reconnoitring patrols which is so important a branch of the subject. It was found that the average reconnoitring patrol of a non-commissioned officer or old soldier and a few men was very nearly useless at night, as they were continually getting lost in consequence of not being able to work by the stars or landmarks when away from roads. Also owing to the noise made by accoutrements rattling, and by the men in ammunition boots stumbling and kicking against stones, etc., an enemy had plenty of warning of their approach and could either lie quiet till they had passed, or capture them if preferred.

What is suggested for reconnoitring purposes would be a couple of men (scouts) thoroughly trained to work across any country at night by the stars, etc., and who had learnt the art of walking quietly, perhaps even being provided with some rough covering for the boots, such as a puttee, to deaden any sound. These men could be trusted to do their work well and quietly, and would be sent out for a stated period, part of which time might be employed in lying perfectly still listening for any sounds or movements on the part of the enemy.

It is confidently believed that any officers on picquet would far prefer to have one such patrol that knew its work to three or four of the ordinary kind which go stumbling about giving everybody warning of their approach. (These scouts are now provided for with a minimum of sixteen per company.)

With reference to the question of how the picquet should sleep so as to be ready for an attack, it was found best to extend the picquet and allow the men to sleep actually where they would have to be in case of attack, and, as each man slept with his rifle beside him, on an alarm being given all that was necessary for him to do to be ready, was to roll over and seize his rifle. This arrangement rendered it unnecessary for men to get up and move about, which so often leads to confusion, and shows the attackers exactly where the picquet is.

Before closing these notes, it may be as well to refer to the fact of the absolute invisibility of khâki at night on dry grass or sandy soil, even when there is a certain amount of moonlight. The writer has on several occasions approached to within four or five yards of men in khâki lying on withered grass without being able to see them. The knowledge of being invisible at night, when lying down against a favourable background, gives a great feeling of confidence, especially when out reconnoitring.