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THE DESIRABILITY OF THE ACQUIREMENT BY INFANTRY OFFICERS, ESPECIALLY OF THE HIGHER RANKS, OF A MORE IN- TELLIGENT KNOWLEDGE OF THE USE OF FIELD ARTILLERY THAN THEY GENERALLY POSSESS.

By Major C. O. HEAD, R.F.A.

IT is naturally with great diffidence one ventures to make the implication enclosed in the above heading, and the writer must at once disclaim any intention of giving offence to anyone; but his personal experiences, as well as many episodes he has heard and read of as having occurred in the late war in South Africa, have convinced him that the subject is one to which more attention should be directed.

This subject would not be so important but for the fact that the British Army, through tradition, is primarily an infantry Army, and, in spite of the great movement in favour of mounted men in the South African campaign, it remains so still. That is to say, most of its higher commands are vested in infantrymen, who accordingly have the chief part in the direction of other arms as well as of their own. Divisional generals—almost always infantrymen—have under their command two brigades of artillery. In case of the division being split into brigades, each brigade would probably have attached to it a brigade of artillery, which would come under the orders of the brigadier — again usually an infantryman. The relationship between guns and infantry is so close that there is no doubt that this system is a sound one; but a necessary part of it is that the commanders should be equally conversant with the use of both arms, and not merely experts in one of them.

It may be wondered that a nation so devoted to horseflesh as ours should set less store, comparatively, on its mounted troops than is the case in many foreign Armies; but the answer lies in the extreme conservatism of the Army, which has preserved its fundamental ideas from the time when the horse had not attained to the cult in England under which he now exists. The ascendancy of the foot-soldier is of very long standing, and its existence can be easily understood. In our earlier days our pikemen and archers did worthy service, and they succeeded, by their defeats of French and Spanish horse, in firmly implanting in the minds of our ancestors an absolute belief in the superiority of the foot-soldier. The doughty deeds of Cromwell's Ironsides considerably shook this belief, which, however, under the Restoration, grew again and soon prevailed. Once

more it was slightly shaken by the telling results which the genius of Marlborough effected by the expert use of his horse soldiers; but with his infantry equally well handled and successful, their relative positions in the popular estimation were but little altered. Complete belief, however, in the superiority of the foot-soldier was finally established in the long struggle with Napoleon. Wellington, unlike his great antagonist, relied almost entirely on his infantry, and his conduct was usually justified by the gallantry and self-sacrifice with which it extricated him from many difficulties. He made little and indifferent use of his artillery, and was but little more enterprising or successful in the employment of his cavalry. Possibly the want of completeness and small results of many of his battles were due to these facts; and his victories compare unfavourably in these respects with the brilliant achievements of Napoleon—a master of all the fighting arms. However that may be, the British infantry emerged from the long contest with the glorious reputation of being the best in Europe, while their comrades of the other arms could hardly lay claim to a similar distinction. Naturally, therefore, the pre-eminence of the foot-soldier was more than ever accentuated, while the other arms were looked upon more as ornamental adjuncts than as useful allies. Almost all the higher commands in the Army were allotted to infantrymen, while the senior officers of the other arms were rarely permitted a command outside their own particular branch of the Service.

Now there is little doubt that the relative importance of the horse and gun, as compared with the man on foot, has considerably increased in modern times; but it cannot be said that the military "status" of their commanders has risen in quite the same proportion. As it was after 1815, so now infantry officers get most of the higher commands, though not quite to the same extent as formerly. A limited number of the men of all arms attain to general officer's rank through fortune or merit; but of those that have struggled on to it by natural promotion, the immense majority are infantrymen.

A general, as his name implies, should be an adept in the use and command of all arms, and the infantryman is too apt to confine his attention solely to his own arm, relying more or less on experts for the direction and employment of the others. Such a system is absolutely and dangerously wrong, and it cannot be too severely condemned. Cavalry, owing to the detached nature of its duties, may certainly be entrusted to the handling of its own commanders, general instructions being usually sufficient; but with artillery it is quite different.

An unfortunate idea has grown up in the Army that the use of field artillery is an abstruse science, to be understood only of a few, and beyond the intelligence of anyone not directly connected with it. This idea has been, somewhat mistakenly, considerably fostered by gunners themselves; but no greater mistake could be conceived. The appellation of "scientific corps" applied to field artillery is a complete misnomer. The field gun is very little, if at all, more complicated than the modern rifle, and its theory is very similar. Further, its tactics are purely a matter of common-sense, and without doubt very much simpler than those of the infantry. Consequently there is no reason whatever why the infantry officer should not study these tactics and take upon himself the responsibility of directing them.

Officers commanding a force of all arms should recognise that their artillery is part of their fighting strength, the employment of which, according as it is good or bad, may make or mar their chances of success, and that they alone are responsible for the success or failure of their commands. A divided responsibility should not be tolerated. In case of success the nominal commander rightly and actually gets all the credit; in case of reverse he should not be allowed to shuffle off the blame on to his artillery commander. Actions have been lost, or nearly so, through the injudicious handling of artillery. The guns have got entangled or been badly posted, and the whole efforts of the force have been directed to the task of extricating them. That, again, has been the fault of the supreme commander; he should have ensured that his guns were well posted, and he would not then have found himself compelled to retrieve the mistake of a subordinate. It must ~~not~~ be supposed that any undue interference with subordinate commanders is here advocated. Far from it; but the general principles of all arms should be thoroughly known by anyone considered qualified for a mixed command, so that any violation of these principles may be at once detected. It is further desirable that what may or may not be expected from modern guns should be clearly recognised, so as to avoid the loss of a valuable effect or an expectation of the impossible. A battery of artillery is not of the nature of a balloon or a surgical operation that can be best entrusted to an expert; it is essentially a fighting unit, and if not intelligently employed in combination with the other arms its value is considerably diminished.

The infantry officer who has had the patience to read thus far may now say: "Yes, I admit all that, but I do understand the intelligent use of artillery." Should he make such a statement, he should be firmly but politely contradicted, unless he happens to be one of the few exceptions which it is admitted do exist. The ignorance of infantry officers on the employment of artillery is astounding, and it is only equalled by their misconceptions of its power. This may seem a presumptuous statement to make of a great many distinguished officers; but it is not intended to be so, as the fact, considered as such, is only the natural corollary of placing artillery matters on a scientific pedestal. Naturally some confirmation or examples of this statement will be expected, and an attempt will be made to supply them, though as most of these examples occurred in the late war it is, for obvious reasons, impossible to particularise them.

Among many which occurred, the following general cases may be noted. Consideration was rarely given to the difficulty of replenishing ammunition, or to a wise economy of the stock in hand. Guns were expected to fire as often and for as long as the various commanders wished. A plea of scarcity of ammunition was considered to denote either obstruction or incompetence. When an army was almost starving, and had hardly sufficient transport for its food, guns were often expected to have an everlasting supply of ammunition, which could be wasted on any object, however trivial. The expense of artillery was seldom calculated. If the arm is useful, which is usually admitted, it should be carefully economised. Guns were often called into action to fire at half a dozen, or even less, flying Boers, and surprise was not infrequently manifested at the escape of the fugitives. It was apparently not understood that artillery

usually required some eight or ten rounds to find its range, and fuse accurately. Then, again, great things were hoped from the artillery "preparation," though such expectation was, it must be admitted, undoubtedly encouraged, if not engendered, by the field artillery drill-book in use before the war. The solemn bombardment of a position was thought capable of producing the most surprising results, quite independent of the fact that the enemy was strongly entrenched, or had even actually abandoned the threatened position, to return to it as soon as the bombardment should cease. Another many-instanced mismanagement of artillery was the bombardment of kopjes, which it was thought might be held by the enemy. Many splintered rocks and jagged holes bear witness to this useless waste of ammunition. Guns are not scouts, and, besides the fact of their doing the work ineffectually, the saving of one or two lives which they may possibly effect in acting as such, does not compensate for the expense and delay in employing them. War is a dangerous game, and lives must be risked when the occasion demands it.

Another idea of many commanders was that if a hostile gun opened fire, however far away, his own artillery must at once engage it. Though this gun might be firing at 10,000 yards range, and, as was usual and natural, was having practically no effect, yet he complained loudly of his own guns which were unable to reach it. If shrapnel fire could not hit men behind kopjes or buried in trenches, it was condemned as useless, and a loud cry was raised, without considering its disadvantages, for a shell possessing more material-destroying powers. What rarely seemed to occur to commanders was that artillery fire, like that of infantry, to reap a real big result requires a good target. Such can only be procured by the skilful use of all arms. A more negative result can be expected from artillery if it is merely required to occupy the enemy's attention, make them keep their heads down while the infantry advances, but then, as has been recently pointed out by the highest authority, the co-operation of the two arms should be close and well timed.

Another idea, also, it must be confessed, entertained by some artillery officers, is that the fire of guns gives a moral support to their own infantry. This fire need not necessarily be effective, nor even aimed; the noise apparently is all that is required. Surely this must be wrong. To begin with, it presupposes something nearly akin to cowardice in the infantryman, a condition of mind which he certainly does not possess to a greater extent than any of his comrades of the other arms. Would it not be better to create in him the belief that his own guns are not firing simply because it is not worth their while; but that, when they do begin, they will do so to some purpose? It is very doubtful if German, Russian, or French infantry would require this kind of "dopirg" support, and our men would probably require it less than any of them, were they not encouraged in it. At any rate, if this random, useless firing improves the spirit of our infantrymen, it has a still more exhilarating effect on the enemy, who is overjoyed at its poor results. No, let us work up to high standards, and not pander to weaknesses. Let us, if necessary, inform our men of the dread and anxiety caused in the allied fleets at Trafalgar when the "Victory" and her followers bore grimly down upon them without firing a shot, or of Soult's trepidation when Wellington's matchless infantry made its perilous flank march without shot of gun or rifle to

help it, between the French on one side and an impassable river on the other at Toulouse.¹

There were many unfortunate occurrences in the late war, resulting from the ignorance of the use of artillery, displayed by commanders. Gunners were often asked to do the useless or the impossible, and because they thought it their duty to point out the folly of such a proceeding, they were freely censured, with the natural result of a baneful friction. Other people, less cognisant of the power of field artillery, but willing to oblige, attempted the impossible and did the useless, so obtaining credit; but the actual result was still more futile. A gunner was even ordered to take his battery on to a position held by the enemy, in order to engage a hostile gun that, at a range of about 10,000 yards, was inflicting casualties on an infantry brigade at the rate of about one man per hour. Luckily the order was not insisted upon, or another "regrettable incident" might have taken the place of what eventually proved to be a creditable and successful action.

At peace manœuvres this lamentable ignorance is very apparent, as here there is not the correcting influence of the stern lessons of war. On one field-day one battery was adjudged to have bested another simply because it occupied the higher position of the two. The question was settled to the satisfaction of the umpires by saying it had the better "command." It was apparently not realised that the value of "command" is merely a matter of vision. As long as the target is visible low ground may be as good for a position as high ground, and guns can shoot as well up hill as down. The battery on the higher ground had its guns on a forward slope, and all its teams and waggons on the sky-line, while the battery on lower ground was tucked away in one of its folds, with its horses out of sight. These facts, however, completely escaped notice. The experiences of the rifle, if applied here, might have caused some hesitation before this decision was given. Superior command did not ensure the possession of Majuba Hill, nor did the want of it by Cronje's men in the river bed at Paardeberg diminish the number of the casualties inflicted on the British, when the latter attempted to storm this position.

How often, again, at peace manœuvres do we not see long lines of infantry advancing across quite open ground in the face of unshaken artillery—walking solemnly up a bare glacis, which, if swept by a storm of shrapnel, would provide a last resting place for the great majority of them, and an uncomfortable couch for the fortunate survivors for as long as their nerves allowed them to remain on it. When infantry officers go to see artillery practice they commonly complain of the targets as unserviceable, and when allowed to place

¹ Since writing the above, I have read the remarks of Captain Ram, the Dutch Military Attaché on the Boer side, in his "Observations on the War in South Africa," published in the JOURNAL of the R.U.S.I. for February, 1904. This officer states that the "moral" effect on the Boers of the British artillery, especially of their common and lyddite shells, was very great indeed. I cannot, however, but still think that, even if this opinion is accurate, of which I am certainly not convinced, it would be dangerous to expect the same effect to be produced on better disciplined troops. I think it is safer and wiser to calculate on a certain material or useful effect than on a doubtful moral one.

them themselves they dot them about behind every stone and in every crevice that can be found on the ground. The number of hits obtained on such targets is consequently small, and not unlike what would result from firing over a rabbit burrow; but it does not justify the absolute disregard of artillery fire which usually pertains to field-days. What is overlooked in this case is that though the material effect on the warren is probably *nil*, still the fire, by keeping the rabbits underground, would prevent their doing much damage. For no other reason should such a target be fired at.

It is, perhaps, in examinations for tactical fitness for command that the ignorance of infantry officers on artillery matters is most clearly demonstrated. Most of them refuse to have anything at all to do with the handling of this part of their commands, but rely entirely on their artillery commanders to do all that is necessary. No doubt in their state of ignorance this is the wisest thing they could do; but it cannot be repeated too often that such a system does not produce the most effective combined action. At a recent examination the candidate sat down and wrote out the most detailed orders for his infantry. He then contented himself with some verbal instructions to his cavalry, and apparently seemed satisfied that nothing more of that sort remained to be done. His artillery commander approached him and asked if there were not any orders for him. The answer was: "No, you're a gunner, and I would not presume to give orders to gunners." Though we, as a regiment, might consider this officer deserving of our sympathy for the high opinion which he presumably had of us, yet few of us would admit that such complete confidence was a sufficient qualification in a man under whose command we might some day find ourselves. It must be added that this officer did not pass his examination, though the cases of many others have proved distinctly that a knowledge of artillery matters is not a necessary requisite for success.

Enough, perhaps, has now been said on the subject, and it can only be repeated that the intention is not to give offence to anyone, but to draw attention to a matter of importance which requires amending. For the faults that have been mentioned a system is responsible, and not individuals. The infantry officer can perfectly well acquaint himself with all that is necessary of artillery action, and he should be made to do so before any guns are placed at his disposal. It is not for a moment intended that he should worry himself about details; but a few points which he might consider carefully may be recapitulated:—

1. The choice of the artillery main position is the most important. A good or bad selection may have the most beneficial or baneful consequences respectively. Besides, it is necessary to see that guns do not occupy the ground required for the deployment of the infantry, as then the fire of the former might be masked at a critical moment, or they might have to be moved, movement of guns on the battle-field being generally objectionable.
2. Care should be taken to avoid firing at impossible targets, a procedure which, besides wasting ammunition, gives confidence to the enemy.
3. The value of guns should be carefully calculated; how far it is necessary to make sacrifices to save them from

capture, or whether it might be more expedient to abandon them, a practical policy being usually adopted rather than a sentimental one, though no doubt a great deal can be said for the latter.

4. In the attack, the accurate timing and close co-operation of the artillery and infantry require careful study. One hand alone can effectively combine them, and a dual control should be avoided. The same remark applies almost equally to the defence.
5. The power of artillery, too, should be accurately known so as not to form expectations of it which cannot be realised. The merits and drawbacks of forward slopes, reverse slopes, and crest-lines, as artillery positions should be studied, as also the useful ranges of the gun and the advisability, on occasions, of pushing them within the enemy's effective musketry range.

In all these matters the advice of the artillery commander will naturally be sought, and due weight given to it; but the supreme commander must remember that his is the responsibility, and he should know enough about these matters to recognise when they are being ably managed or otherwise. No doubt some of the points that have been mentioned are still of a debateable nature, and even divide the most expert artillery minds; but till the true solutions of them are arrived at, infantry officers would do well to examine them for themselves, and in the absence of definite decisions, to form their own conclusions upon them. A little outside assistance is often very useful in clearing up doubtful problems, its advantage being that it brings to bear an open mind unhampered by traditions and prejudices, which in the new circumstances may not apply.

Unfortunately many infantry officers have been extremely doubtful of the possession of any real value by field artillery. They have recognised that it existed, and that they had got to make the best of it, though a nuisance; but they would much rather have been without it. For the benefit of such as these, if they are still of the same mind, attention might be drawn to the action on the "Mournful Monday" preceding the siege of Ladysmith; to the action at Ladysmith on the 6th of January; and to the engagement at Pieter's Hill, which finally effected the relief of the town. These are but a few instances of an intelligent use of artillery, and if carefully studied they should convince even the most sceptical that artillery, well handled, can render its side very great assistance. But all our own experiences of this sort are put completely in the shade by the brilliant results achieved by the close and intelligent co-operation of the Japanese infantry and artillery. Sufficient information of their action has, however, not yet been published to enable us to draw any conclusions from it affecting the subject of this paper.

Many instances occurred in South Africa of a distinct lack of co-operation between infantry and artillery, entailing little or no success, while a few instances occurred in which the bad handling of artillery produced an effect almost disastrous. These cases cannot be specified; they are merely noted to point out the great importance of the close co-operation of the two arms, and the necessity of insisting on the most skilful employment of artillery.