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# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECT IN THE TRAINING OF MEN.

By LIEUT.-COLONEL C. G. HIGGINS, C.M.G., D.S.O.

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“ Time—the essence of training.”

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THE necessity for constantly altering and modifying our ideas in training to meet the ever changing situation and tactics employed by our enemy will be admitted by everyone. What is suitable one day may be entirely inapplicable a short time hence.

The difficulty, however, that arises in war is to be able to so time our training that its full effect will synchronise with that phase of operations or that change of enemy tactics with which it has been designed to cope.

A commander who solves this difficulty solves the problem of training in war.

But it might be contended that “ a trained soldier ” is a man so trained as to adapt himself instantly to any form of warfare. Even if this were true about a professional standing army, it is not true when applied to a nation called to arms in a time of emergency ; it is not true when applied to the man torn from some sedentary civilian employment, at the age of 40 or more ; it is not true when applied to the boy of 18 years and 6 months, thrown into the melting pot after 14 weeks of training.

As soldiers—whatever we may say or write to the contrary—we know from long experience of this war that it is necessary constantly to change and revise our training ideas and methods, before we can hope to make the best use of the material at our disposal.

It is true that the fundamental principles of our Field Service Regulations are as applicable to-day as when they were written. They are elastic and when intelligently interpreted the correct line of action for any situation can be read in them. More than this we should not expect. It would be impossible and, indeed, harmful for them to try and depict every single incident that might arise in war, and furnish the solution for it. For as Clausewitz says : “ He who intends to move in such an element as war must bring with him nothing at all gained from books, save the education of his mind.” We must, therefore, train ourselves to do our own thinking. Mere personal experience in war does not necessarily imply military ability. The remarks of Frederick the Great, that “ a mule might have been through the wars of the Prince Eugene, but would still have been a mule at the end of them ” is equally true to-day.

I will endeavour, in this paper, to show that there are certain psychological factors in connection with the training of a mass of men, factors that are not always considered by those who have not studied this subject. I will try to show that time—the essence of war—plays a larger unconscious part in the essence of training than it is generally given credit for in these times of emergency and constant change, and that, therefore, a commander, unless he trains ahead, will be constantly defeated by time. For the particular phase, the specific conditions he is training men to combat with, will be past. He will be locking the stable door after the horse has gone out.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AFFECTING TRAINING.

I have shown the necessity for the constant change of ideas and methods, if training is going to keep in step with the ever changing situation. We will note how the psychology of a collection of men is affected by change. Changes and new ideas are always unpopular in an army because all masses, all collections of men, are ruled not by reason but by sentiment.

Even when a new idea has undergone the necessary processes to render it digestible by a mass of men, it will only exert influence when it has entered the realm of the unconscious, when it has, in fact, become a matter of sentiment.

If we suppose that it is merely necessary to prove the justness or correctness of a new idea to a collection of people for effective action to follow, we shall be wrong. In support of this thesis, the French writer, Le Bon, says : “ this fact can be easily demonstrated by noticing how slight is the influence of the clearest demonstration on the majority of men. The evidence if it be very plain may be accepted by an educated person, but the convert will be quickly brought back by his unconscious self to his original conceptions. See him again a few days later and he will put forward afresh his old arguments in exactly the same terms. He is, in reality, under the influence of anterior ideas that have become sentiments.”

Truth is never palatable to a mass of men ; rather would they worship error, if error be clad in seductive form. History teaches us that men will lay down their lives in thousands for the sake of a phrase or catchword, even if that phrase has become meaningless, had it ever possessed one. Earth and the ocean hide the bones of millions of men who have perished, victims of words and phrases they have never understood.

But we must not regret this hold of sentiment as against reason on the masses. Were it otherwise, the finest virtues of a soldier—patriotism, self-negation, the will to die for his country—would be lacking. We wish to note it and guard against it where it adversely affects our training.

## THE EFFECT OF SENTIMENT ON TRAINING.

We can clearly follow the hold of sentiment as against reason and the great importance attached to phrases by a collection of men in the study of the various evolution of tactics and natures of weapons employed during the years of this war.

The difficulty of persuading a mass of men to adopt willingly through reason anything that is new, and the still greater difficulty of getting them to abandon it when all reason for it has passed, can be clearly shown.

Let us begin by tracing the employment of hand grenades, or what was popularly known as "bombing."

Before 1914 the modern hand grenade was unknown in the British Army. Its use had never been practised; no form of "drill" had been laid down for it; no "language," with its accompanying phrases and catchwords, which I have endeavoured to show so strongly influence the minds of men in masses, had been devised for it.

The influence of sentiment was therefore lacking in its connection. And so, in the earlier stages of the war, even when the supply of these grenades began to come forward in sufficient quantities, it was only with the greatest difficulty that men could be induced to use them.

During a certain period it is true to say that men would be bombed rather than bomb. Then started the era of Bombing Schools. The terms and phrases came in its train. A "language" was created. The sentiment was now here. The expressions "Bombing Block," "Bombing Sap," "Bomb Post," "Bomb Sentry" became household words. It was now no longer possible to stop men bombing. They would throw unfused bombs rather than none at all. They would throw bombs on patrol in open country and inflict injuries on themselves.

The proficiency of a battalion came to be judged by the number of bombers it professed to have in its ranks. An instance is recorded of a soldier who pursued one of the enemy for nearly half-a-mile and, on catching him up, hit him over the back with a stick bomb, remarking at the same time "Take that, you —— !"

And so, when the tactical situation changed in 1917 and the form of warfare no longer rendered bombs suitable weapons to employ, great difficulty was experienced in getting many commanders and all men to abandon this method.

A fresh sentiment had to be first created. A new "language" had to be written. In the meantime, time was being lost. If we choose to trace the history of the employment of trench mortars throughout the war we shall find an exactly similar evolution of thought and feeling has gone on.

We will pass on to the question of the evolution of formations to meet tactical requirements.

In the year 1916 all, or the vast majority of, our attacks in their initial inception took place from trenches and were directed against parallel trenches, generally speaking, relatively only a few yards apart

from one another. The objective in these cases could and had been seen clearly for months. There was no doubt where the resistance would be met with ; no doubt where the hostile barrage would come down.

The question of any manœuvre being necessary to enable the troops to reach their objective once they had started was not in the proposition. The formation, therefore, most suitable to meet these requirements was one which would enable the attacking unit to pass through the barrage zone and reach its objective in the quickest space of time and with the minimum derangements in its ranks.

To conform with these requirements a formation known as the " normal formation " or, better still, " the wave formation," was devised. Like all innovations and new ideas, it was unpopular until, like others, it had passed into the domain of the unconscious and had become a matter of sentiment.

A year later, during the third battle of Ypres, the situation had again changed. It was no longer a question of a trench-to-trench attack ; it was no longer possible to say either whether the main centres of resistance would be met with or where the hostile barrage would come down. The " normal " or " wave " formation was therefore no longer applicable. It had become necessary to devise a formation capable of elasticity, a formation capable of manœuvre in order to enable it to deal with centres of hostile resistance after it had first forced them to disclose themselves. A formation of small columns of sections in file, preceded by small parties of scouts and followed by larger columns in formations enabling them to manœuvre, was found to admirably satisfy the new requirements. But this was no more popular at its inception than any other change is. There were commanders who still voted solid for the retention of the " waves." They still had some men left who had fought in waves on the Somme, they said ; they had the book with the picture of the waves—a book now a year old and so, of course, endeared to all hearts—and, in short, they would rather perish in their waves than live in any other formation.

It was not until the new formation had earned for itself the name of " The Blob " formation that it became acceptable to the minds of the majority.

By this time we had reached yet another phase of warfare.

Instances might be multiplied indefinitely to show the power these words and phrases exert on men in the mass. But enough has been said to turn the thoughts of the student of training in this direction. And the power of these words has often no relation to their significance and is merely bound up with the images they evoke. Yet the mere repetition of these syllables will often come to be regarded as the panacea of all evils. It was Napoleon who justly remarked that the only figure of importance in the art of oratory is repetition.

We see, therefore, that it is useful to employ some phrase, some catchword, if we wish to seize and hold the imagination of a collection of men. Nevertheless, the excessive use of phrases and catchwords must be guarded against in the course of military instruction, for if these are employed recklessly they become mere vain sounds, whose principal

utility consists in exonerating the person who employs them of all obligation of thinking.

Armed with the latest stock of military phrases and catchwords and possessed of a perfect self-assurance, we often now see the neophyte to war jumping from obstacle to obstacle as easily as a chamois from boulder to boulder. He should be secured before he can bring harm on himself and others.

### CONCLUSION.

I have endeavoured to show as briefly as possible in these short and scanty notes that the mere demonstration of a new truth, however clear the evidence may be in its favour, or the mere issue of orders by a few powerful individuals, however apt or relevant these orders may be to the subjects they touch on, will not affect their purpose in the matter of working a reform or changing the ideas of a mass of men. For no progress will be real, unless it is spontaneous. It must come from within and not from without. So long as the mass is satisfied with itself, so long as it is sure of the accuracy of its own opinions, the most beautiful truths will be wasted on it. Directly it can escape from its rulers, if only for the briefest period, it will revert to its old ways. We must reach *the mind*. If, as a trainer of men, we leave the mind untouched, we have failed in our purpose. It might not, therefore, be amiss if the student in training gave some thought to this vast and complex subject of the study of the human mind.

Buckle says: "To trace the movements of the human mind, it is necessary to contemplate it under several aspects, and then to co-ordinate the results of what we have separately studied. By this means we arrive at certain general conclusions which, like the ordinary estimate of averages, increase in value in proportion as we increase the number of instances from which they are collected. That this is a safe and available method, appears not only from the history of physical knowledge, but also from the fact that it is the basis of the empirical maxims by which all men of sound understanding are guided in those ordinary transactions of life to which the generalizations of science have not yet been applied," and he then goes on to point out that these maxims when collected together form in the aggregate what is called "Common Sense."

And lastly, in the study of the psychology of a mass of men, let us not forget or under-estimate the personal influence of the leader—it is paramount still. For, as we have shown in every class of life, as soon as a man ceases to be isolated he comes under the sway of a leader. He no longer, now he is one of a mass, possesses any clear or reasoned views on any subject. He does not wish, in the vast majority of cases, to think for himself; far rather would he that someone thought for him. And so, the personal influence of the leader of a mass of men, either in training or in battle, remains as strong as ever. It would be impossible to exaggerate its power. Its effect on the mass for good or ill will last long after he has passed away himself. It will influence individuals who formed part of

the mass the whole of their lives. If we do not find this influence then there is no leader.

The inherited characteristics of our race from which all sentiment springs remain the same when any number of that race are brought together for any purpose. The Londoner, the man from the South, from the Midlands, and from the North, have all shown an equal valour and skill on the battlefield. What one may lack in physical stamina or in natural stoicism he will make up for in his ready adaptability to novel conditions and by increased power of self-sacrifice.

If, therefore, in our national army we find units or formations possessing a materially lower standard of military qualities than the majority, we must seek other causes for it than territorial or racial ones, and they will be found to arise in some wrong direction of ideal or spirit in training ; a lack of leadership when leadership was most wanted.

