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GENERAL SKOBELEFF'S INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE RECONNAISSANCE AND BATTLE OF GEOK-TEPE ON THE 17TH JULY AND 30TH DECEMBER, 1880.

Translated from the "*Revue Militaire de l'Etranger*."

By Captain J. C. DALTON, R.A.

WHEN General Skobelev was summoned to take command of the Russian expedition against the Akhal-Tekkes, the public mind was exercised as to how he would be likely to acquit himself of a task which so many others had failed to accomplish, and what means he would take to ensure success.

The conditions of Asiatic are so different from those of European warfare, that the tactics of the latter must necessarily be greatly modified to suit the former; and it is interesting to know what were those adopted by the young hero of the Russo-Turkish War on this occasion. We therefore reproduce from the "*Invalide Russe*" of April 16th, 1881, a *résumé* of two sets of instructions given by General Skobelev to the troops of the Trans-Caspian expeditionary force—the first on the 17th July, 1880, when on the point of reconnoitring the road to Geok-Tepe; and the second on the 30th December following, when on the eve of attacking that stronghold.

The peculiar nature of Asiatic warfare has for long attracted the attention of Russian Officers: Colonel Kostenko, amongst others, has treated this subject at some length in a work on Turkestan. We would do well to compare the principles he lays down with those recommended by General Skobelev, and we ought to be able to extract from both much that would be useful to know in case of expeditions of a like nature.

I.—INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE 17th JULY, 1880.

"From information received from my spies, I know that the Tekkes have resolved to direct night attacks against the Russian troops as soon as the latter commence to march on Geok-Tepe.

"*Officers in Command*.—Their decision as regards this was made long since, and has not been changed; it is therefore our duty to take it as settled, and act accordingly.

"Aware as I am of the experience and bravery of the Officers who command the troops under my orders, I remind them that, if I were not convinced of their extreme energy, I should not consider myself justified in undertaking a reconnaissance of Geok-Tepe.

"I remind them of the necessity of taking every possible measure to secure safety; and each day, having in view the encampment for the next day, they must study all the roads leading to the position that has been selected, also ascertain the points that are favourable for the assembling of the complete tactical units, and assure themselves finally whether it is possible for the troops occupying such points to move forward on the offensive. Before night sets in, they must examine the country round, not only with the object of ascertaining the dispositions that would be necessary for the defence (which will be settled by the Staff), but in such a manner that each Officer shall thoroughly know the ground in front of that occupied by his own command, and that he shall above all know the means at his disposal to communicate and unite with the fractions on either side of him. I particularly call attention to this last point, because experience of night attacks has proved how difficult it is to direct the fire, even perpendicularly to the front, and firing in any other direction invariably leads to men shooting their comrades, and to endless confusion, unless the Officer commanding the fraction, his Officers and non-commissioned officers, have carefully studied the position by daylight.

" *Non-commissioned Officers.*—It is as well to remind this class of the important part they play in modern warfare. I consider it just as important that they should be informed in detail of the general state of affairs, as that I should communicate it to the Officers.

" The non-commissioned officers will afterwards, in the presence of the Officers, and in a language that can be easily understood by the rank and file, give the same explanations to their men, in order that they may all assist towards attaining the desired object, by intelligently carrying out all that is required of them.

" Every reasonable being requires things to be explained to him ; but where a mass is concerned, it is necessary, in addition, that the chiefs should have as much patience with, as they have love for, their men.

" I desire to draw attention to the utility of establishing conventional signals, well known to all, and which indicate distances exactly. I suggest that bonfires, large enough to burn all night, should be used as signals. In general, I consider it a very good plan to surround the camp entirely with great stacks of wood, prepared during the day, and which could be lit at nightfall. Vedettes and small picquets would be stationed behind these bonfires.

" In the interior of the camp, on the other hand, no fires must be lit beyond what are absolutely necessary, and these must be extinguished in case of attack.

" *Troops generally.*—During any engagement I recommend the troops of all the three arms not to develop the full power of their fire, unless they are forced to do so by the obstinacy of their enemy.

" Consequently, when fighting in daylight, the infantry and artillery, and the cavalry as well (when fighting dismounted), should only employ their best shots at long ranges, and, except in case of need, I insist that only those who are the best shots should be selected.

" Again, if the enemy continues to advance, I recommend volley firing, except in the case of the artillery, who will act independently. But if the enemy cannot hold together and disseminates, then the commanders of companies and squadrons may permit temporary independent firing on the condition that they order 'cease firing' the moment it becomes unnecessary.

" Even in European wars it is most important to observe the foremost groups of the enemy : it is not really the mass of individuals present on the ground that decides the victory, but the progress which, thanks to different circumstances, a few brave men may make, advancing in isolated groups. Consequently one must ever pay attention to the appearance of groups of this nature, and direct on them, by means of volleys, the full power of one's fire, for if one neglects to inflict great losses on them, these groups increase in size in a wonderful way and decide the affair in their favour.

" As we have to deal with a fanatical mob without organization, I counsel the chiefs of all fractions to keep a watchful eye on the appearance of these advanced groups ; there is not a doubt but that, in annihilating them, we destroy (in the germ) all the initiative force of the rest of the mass. That is why I cannot too strongly urge on commanders to have the fire of their men under command ; and in order that this grand maxim may be reality and not merely empty words, it is necessary that each commander of a unit should '*know how to make the hearts of his soldiers beat in unison with his own*' before the battle.

" He must have his troops completely in hand at the critical moment of the action, and they must be in his hands an instrument which serves him to express with a supreme energy, his thoughts, will, and feelings.

" Though in a battle by day, success is obtained by the *gradual* and rational utilization of the ground and resources at our disposal, circumstances

" may so happen during the night, that it may be necessary to produce the maximum effect with *one single blow*. This is why, in night actions, we should always adhere to volley firing.

" We must remember that, at night, all judging distances is illusory ; it is also of the first importance to keep impressing on the men to aim low.

" *Artillery*.—I have too much confidence in the artillery under the command of Colonel Verjbitzki to lay down rules for its employment in action ; I only recommend that its fire should be concentrated when the opportune moment arrives and that the nature of the projectile should be carefully selected. This last point is of paramount importance in this country, where the great number of small walls renders shrapnel shell with percussion fuzes quite useless. I beg Colonel Verjbitzki to pay particular attention to the value of mitrailleuses when arranging for the defence of bivouacs, as they produce an irresistible effect when they are worked at ranges which have been measured beforehand.

" *Cavalry*.—I again impress on the cavalry all that I said before to them before quitting Bami : and in all the engagements they may have before them, I specially draw their attention to the coolness necessary when fighting dismounted ; and to the importance of volley firing."

II.—INSTRUCTIONS ON THE 30TH DECEMBER, 1880.

" The corps which took part in the reconnaissances of the 18th July, and of the 16th, 23rd, and 24th of December, are acquainted with the enemy and know how to fight him. But to-day our column contains some troops who have not yet seen our adversaries ; it is therefore indispensable that they should be made acquainted with the following conditions under which we have to fight.

" Each undulation of the ground will be desperately contested ; our enemy is brave and excels in individual combat. He shoots well and has excellent swords (*armes blanches*). But he fights in no regular order, and in isolated groups, paying but little heed to the wishes of his leader ; and consequently he is not well suited to act and manœuvre in organized bodies.

" Although many circumstances, as, for example, the distance and nature of the theatre of war, condemn us to be inferior in number to the enemy, still we are constrained to take the offensive.

" Owing to the weak effective strength of our columns, we are unable to employ the same dispositions for battle as are used in Europe. In the open country, long deployed lines are constantly threatened by the enemy's cavalry, which is very brave, very well mounted, and understands the use of its weapons perfectly.

" *Infantry*.—On the contrary, infantry well massed, even without regularity, but ardent, vigorous, and understanding how to use their weapons to the best advantage, will, if they await firmly the hand-to-hand attack, end by establishing the chances of the contest in their favour. We may take this maxim as a fundamental one in Central Asia, '*Compact order is all-powerful*.'"

" Again, in the enclosed part of the country when fighting against an enemy intrenched on a position covered with gardens, buildings and small walls which he has fortified at his leisure and to which he attaches a special moral importance, firstly on account of his successes last year, and secondly because the families of the defenders are collected there with their property, we shall have to overcome an obstinate resistance behind each shelter. We must in fact engage in a desperate contest against the knife and yataghan.

" In cases when the enemy's masses may suddenly appear, then those deployed lines which are so flexible and in which the troops move about easily in the hands of the commanders, resolving themselves into small isolated

"groups, independent of one another and of the commanders, do not oppose to the enemy that strength which is obtained from regular formations, from that fire discipline so intimately connected with the latter, and from that mutual support of the groups to one another. The *ensemble* of these principles applied with decision and discernment 'constitutes the essence of our tactics in Central Asia,' and gives us the right to rely on victory, in spite of the great number of our adversaries.

"We will beat the enemy by using against him arms that he does not possess, we will profit by our discipline and by our rifles. We will beat him by employing compact formations (supple and manageable), by our accurate volleys, by our simultaneous efforts, and by the points of our bayonets, always terrible in the hands of men whom discipline, sense of duty, and the shoulder-to-shoulder contact have soldered together to form this great and powerful body which we call a column.

"The charges of the enemy's cavalry will be received by executing, if necessary, a change of front to the desired direction, and by delivering volleys at a short range. I recommend also the formation of squares, even by battalion, if circumstances allow.

"Against an enemy advancing to attack, commence the volleys at a range of about 500 yards, but do not lose sight of the fact that volleys are still very effective, even at greater distances, on compact masses, whether they be stationed in open ground, or even hidden behind walls or parapets. In a case of this kind, one might commence firing by volleys at ranges of 3,000 paces, by raising the sight to its full extent and aiming at the top of the intrenchment or wall, should the enemy be behind these obstacles. A plunging fire of this kind, which is very effective up to 3,000 paces, should never be undertaken by a less unit than a company, and it behoves the commander to control it most carefully.

"*Artillery.*—The artillery should be placed in accordance with the following rules:—The mitrailleuses will accompany the troops in the same manner as the regimental guns used to, in order to support the infantry directly.

"The other guns will be kept provisionally in reserve, in order to be employed simultaneously, when opportunity offers; this will increase the efficiency of the artillery, by concentrating the fire of a number of guns under one command.

"The artillery will not quit the reserve without my order, but the choice of position and object to be aimed at will be left to its own immediate commander. The famous saying of Souvaroff, '*Artillery should pass anywhere it wishes to*,'¹ must be ever borne in mind, not alone by the commander of that arm but by those who command the troops to which it is attached, but only up to the moment when '*the solemn hour for the attack*' sounds.

"In this supreme moment the artillery must absolutely lose all thought for itself, and be prepared to sacrifice itself entirely to support its comrades. It must at all hazards precede the attacking troops, and thereby by means of its fire, which is so terrifying at close quarters, shake the courage of the enemy.

"Then all purely technical considerations must be laid aside. In these decisive moments '*the artillery must have a soul*,' for the gunner is not simply a mechanic (*sic*).

"The artillery must allow itself to be destroyed, if necessary, to ensure the success of the attack, as absolutely as the infantry sacrifices itself when it rushes on the enemy. The troops charged with the duty of protecting the artillery will not abandon it. If the guns are lost, no disgrace is attached to the artillery but to the corps supporting it.

"*Cavalry.*—The cavalry will be entirely in reserve up to the moment when

¹ In the sense of being allowed perfect independence in selecting positions, &c.

"circumstances admit of its being employed in masses. It must not be frittered away in individual encounters against the numberless mounted men of the enemy, who have excellent horses and are accustomed to use their weapons from childhood.

"Except when the enemy's cavalry is disorganized, makes a mistake, is embarrassed by some obstacle, or in a defile, &c., our cavalry must avoid encountering it mounted.

"To pursue the Tekke cavalry when retreating would be useless and would cause us to break that tactical union in which lies our greatest strength. When charging, the cavalry must keep close order, which it should be impossible to break, whether in column of regiments or squadrons.

"In charging, rapidity is less important than order, and maintaining the touch (*botte-à-botte*); consequently, except of course in the case of exceptionally favourable circumstances, these charges should not be pushed too far, in order that the men may be kept well in the hand of the commander, and that the blow may be strong and effectively delivered.

"In one word, the fundamental principle of tactics for our cavalry when acting against that of the enemy should be, extreme prudence and circumspection.

"On the other hand, it is an entirely different matter when dealing with the confused undisciplined masses of infantry as are generally found in Asiatic armies: the cavalry will then charge thoroughly and with the utmost energy; though here again the intelligent boldness of this arm must be supported by the échelon order of battle, and the concentration of the reserves rightly understood and applied; and finally when the collision takes place, by the use of the lance and the *chachka*.

"*General Rules.*—I again remind everyone of the necessity to take the strictest measures to ensure the safety of the camps before Geok-Tepe. The commanders of advanced posts must satisfy themselves of the importance of the roads leading to the bivouacs, and of the points at which the enemy can assemble in masses to attack.

"Each commander of a unit must study the zone of ground in front of him, and arrange in his own mind in what manner he can best assist those on each side of him in case of attack; for, I repeat, in the art of affording mutual support has always lain, and will always lie, the secret of victory. The ground in our front must be thoroughly studied, and the ranges and distances must be carefully measured."

NOTICES OF BOOKS.

The Duties of the General Staff. By Major-General Bronsart von Schellendorf, Chief of the General Staff of the Guard Corps. Translated from the German by Captain W. A. H. Hare, R.E. Vol. II. London: C. Kegan Paul & Co. 1877. Price, 7s. 6d. Size, 8½" × 5½" × 1¼". Pp. 308. Weight, 1½ lbs.

A NOTICE of the first volume of this work appeared in No. XCIII, vol. xxi of the Journal. The translation by Captain Hare, R.E., of the second volume has recently been published, and every word of it is worth reading. In it are dealt with, the Composition of Armies, Ordre de Bataille, Distribution of Troops, the War Formation of the German Army, Office Duties in the Field, Marches, Rest and Quarters, Supplies, Maintaining the Fighting Efficiency of Troops in the Field,