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THE DISTANT ATTACK AND THE NEAR ATTACK IN FORTRESS WARFARE.

Translated from the *Rivista di Artiglieria e Genio* for
September, 1909.

By Colonel Sir E. T. THACKERAY, V.C., K.C.B., late R.E.

THE *Kriegstechnische Zeitschrift* of last year contained a valuable study under the above title, written by Lieut.-Colonel D. Frobenius, of the German Army.

To the notable increase in the range of artillery fire during recent times, the science of fortification has replied by surrounding fortresses with a band of outworks, on which, in a great measure, depends the principal defence.

By loosening the chains that bound the enclosed city, not only does the garrison obtain liberty of movement in the ground in front, not only is the position of the defender rendered independent of the antiquated permanent works, but the fortress by its enlargement, and thanks to the said artillery, has acquired the possibility of compelling the enemy to undertake his attack at a distance before he can proceed to the near attack of the principal defences. The great range of the guns which it was thought would be utilised for the exclusive advantage of the attack, is no longer a gain, but in many respects a loss, as it concedes to the defence the means of prolonging its resistance. General opinion tended to extol the effects to be produced by guns of great calibre and imagined that the artillery would be able to destroy the enemy's works at a great distance, so that the near attack according to the old tradition would not be necessary, and that the infantry advancing by long rushes would be able to capture the enemy's position, and reap the fruit which had been matured to ripeness by the artillery. Even among engineer officers there were many who thought that the capture of the fortress would be a short affair, and that the unique moment of difficulty for the attack was the first alignment of the artillery. It is undeniable that the idea of the fall of a fortress only by means of the artillery was an alluring one for strategists, and this optimistic opinion resulted in the division of the attack into two successive periods; the first comprised the artillery attack having for its task to subdue the guns of the fortress so that the infantry attack would be reduced to a simple march. Protected by the attacking batteries which hoped not only to silence the enemy's guns, but also to damage the works to such an extent that they would not be able to resist an assault, the infantry would in a short space of time,

by successive rushes, obtain a position from which they could advance to the assault. It is not to be wondered at if the attack by the infantry presented in such a simple manner did not require any preparation in peace times.

The near attack being eliminated in such a manner, together with its hard and sanguinary struggle, its principal subsidiary appliances and its technical troops became useless. It was no longer necessary to instruct the troops in fortress warfare, and they came to be posted more and more to the service of the artillery. Such was the opinion of those who followed the times, placing blind confidence in the omnipotence of the artillery, and asserting that the near attack was a mere accessory of the least importance, and that the idea of the capture of a powerful fortress in a very short time was an accomplished fact. Facts have not been in accordance with these views, and have confirmed the opinion of Brialmont that the increasing power of the artillery is more an advantage to the defence than to the attack.

At Port Arthur the powerful guns at the disposal of the defence, perhaps from their number, or possibly from their defective positions, were at such a disadvantage that the question of a strife of artillery, properly speaking, could not be answered. But notwithstanding this, the fire from the rifles of the defenders and the guns at close quarters, which showed the impossibility of silencing the less powerful cannon mounted on works of doubtful value, have constrained the near attack to a combat of such duration and difficulty as no one could have expected.

The author continues in more detail, and refers to the problems of the distant and near attacks.

THE DISTANT ATTACK.

Referring generally to the principles on which the conduct of modern fortress warfare are based, the author proceeds to treat particularly of the two phases of the attack according to his views. For long it has been admitted that the artillery cannot establish its first position at a distance of less than from three to four kilometres from the fortress; many, however, believing that the lines of investment should be at a much greater distance (from six to seven kilometres). When, however, it may be possible to push back the troops near to the fortress, the preparations for the first alignment of the artillery may be risked at a nearer distance. As long as the infantry is not supported by artillery it is unable to advance, and its duty is then limited to covering the dispositions of the subsidiary arms. The sooner this can prepare its alignment undisturbed, the sooner will the infantry be able to move out of its entrenched position and to subdue, step by step, the ground in front. Only when the infantry commences to advance the

defenders will commence the struggle for the ground in front of the fortress, retiring step by step, and retarding the advance of the adversary's infantry.

The duty of the attacking artillery is then to draw the enemy's fire from its own infantry and to attract to itself the fire of the defender's batteries and to endeavour to silence the latter. An artillery duel may ensue, but any decisive effect to a strife of that kind is not highly probable, and may only result in an enormous waste of energy and ammunition.

The siege of Port Arthur does not offer many points as a basis for judging the difficulties that the infantry have to meet on coming within the zone of fire from the rifles of the fortress, because the Russians retired precipitately from the heights in front of the place, on which the attacking artillery aligned itself, and retreated immediately within the fortress. When, on the 28th July, 1904, they were forced to abandon the position Laotsuschan-Iupilasa, and to take up a position behind, they did not think it of importance to reinforce the new line of defence, persuaded that the Japanese would not immediately proceed to a new attack. The new position was evidently unprepared, so that the weakened garrison was unable to resist the sudden and impetuous attack of the 30th July.

Lieut.-Colonel Hannika, who has recently written on the employment of artillery in fortress warfare, is in favour of increasing the distribution of mortars of large calibre and capable of destroying the cemented and armoured fortifications of the present day; but if we admit of the adoption of such a measure the siege park would be increased by heavy pieces of artillery to a greater extent than would be compatible with economy. The construction of a field railway which obviates the transport of material by manual labour saves always a great waste of time and energy; but, on the other hand, it requires a greater width of the trenches of approach, with relative greater requirements of time and workmen.

Another task for the artillery which should not be overlooked is that of firing at the enemy's aerostats. It seems necessary to abandon the hope of constructing a cannon that will satisfy all the conditions for striking the aerostats directly, and of impeding their observations. Not succeeding in this it is always possible to endeavour to destroy the plant from which they derive their power: the gas depôts, the balloon sheds, and the like.

THE NEAR ATTACK.

This, in the author's opinion, is the more important, and perhaps under normal circumstances the more difficult. The infantry is pushed forward to about 800 metres from the fortress, and it is supposed that its advance cannot be impeded by the fortress artillery, which has been damaged to a greater or less extent by the fire from the attacking guns. In the

progress of the attack the task of the infantry is always rendered harder not only for the attackers but also for the defenders. It may be that the latter still occupy light advanced trenches, while for the attacking artillery it may be possible to fire over the heads of its own infantry, taking for its targets the guns of the fortress, as against their protective shields the projectiles from rifles would be ineffective.

The Japanese always endeavouring to advance rapidly in the near attack, almost always conformed to the regular approach by sap.

The methods to be adopted for the works of the besiegers will depend essentially on the behaviour of their adversary, on his ability, on the value of his fire-arms, and especially on his moral qualities. It is well to remember that in the near attack more than in the distant one, it may be necessary to resort to a systematic procedure of taking cover, and the advance will require to be organised on a well defined plan, possibly in accordance with Vaubain's well known type. It should not, however, be forgotten that the construction of works of approach constitute for attacking infantry a hard necessity, and should be resorted to only when compelled by the enemy's tactics. In any case, it is necessary to be ready to profit by any favourable circumstances so as to be able to advance quickly, either by flying sap or by assault.

Attack by assault may be directed either against the field entrenchments thrust forward by the defenders in the immediate neighbourhood of the place or against the outlying fortifications. Such attacks, however, do not offer the same probability of success, and require many different predispositions. The advanced positions being more organised, and less visible, do not offer eventually any cover of advantage to the attack; they do not form continuous lines which can be used as parallels, and for the most part consist of low entrenchments provided with additional obstacles. It should not, however, be difficult by flanking movements to seize these advanced works if weakly guarded. As an example, the rifle pits and trenches constructed by the Russians before the works of Erlungshan and Sungschahschon, which at 40 metres of distance were captured by assault on the 26th October, and were at once connected with the zigzags of approach.

The author is of opinion that attacks by assault on forts at intervals defended by obstacles are not to be advised, because these forts with their flanking fire render it difficult to overcome the front of the obstacles. Even supposing that the pioneers succeeded in opening the road for the attack, one cannot calculate on the probability of success, and that the attacking infantry will be able to overcome on a large front. The deep columns crowded in the narrow opening, exposed at the same time to front and lateral fire, could not advance without being destroyed.

For the attack by assault to have any chance of success it is necessary that all the obstacles in front should be removed, or at least that the assailing troops should not have to remove them during the action. At one time it was hoped that the obstacles might be removed by supplying the assaulting column with proper tools and implements of destruction. This hope has had to be abandoned after the experience which has shown that under the enemy's direct fire such work is quite impossible. Only under the cover of night or mist it may be possible for isolated detachments to approach the obstacles that surround the works, and to effect partial destruction.

If then, says the author, the artillery is not competent to satisfy such a hope, what then will happen? By what means are we to remedy this, since our pioneers are not instructed in bridging? Are we to improvise such a service at the moment of need? Do we not remember the sad experiences before Strasbourg of improvisations of this kind? Finally, should we, placing blind faith on the effects of artillery, let slip from our hands all the latest technical inventions of the pioneers? No, it cannot be admitted that these questions, which are of vital importance for the technical arms, can be heard with indifference by the whole of the army, as it were hypnotised by the marvellous progress of the artillery. To the Japanese came the well-founded idea of promoting a change, and opening to the pioneers the road for the organization of the near attack in fortress warfare.

The author concludes in full confidence of overcoming the extraordinarily difficult task that a modern permanent fortress offers to the attack.