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PACK ARTILLERY AND THE CLOSE SUPPORT OF THE INFANTRY ATTACK.

By Major K. K. KNAPP, R.G.A.

WHETHER the experiment of making Territorial Mountain Artillery proves a success or not, the order for the formation of three mountain batteries in the Highland Division of the Territorial Army is, at all events, to be welcomed, as drawing attention to the want of this mobile form of artillery in the field army, and it gives rise to the hope that the necessity of having some batteries of Regular pack artillery for use with our so-called striking force will be recognised before long.

It is, perhaps, unfortunate that convenience of private transport decided a choice of the Highlands for the experiment, as it tends to strengthen the erroneous idea that pack artillery is only useful for mountain warfare, whereas it is as the immediate auxiliary of attacking infantry that pack artillery will most often prove useful against a civilised enemy.

There is no greater unlikelihood than that the Territorial Army will ever be required to fight in mountainous districts, or in country the hilly nature of which precludes the use of wheeled artillery; but if ever the National Army is called upon to defend our shores against an invader, it is probable that the fighting will take place in the close or open country, which is to be found near the East and South Coasts of England. The real utility of pack artillery would have been better appreciated if the experiment could have been tried in some county, where the local conditions assimilate more nearly to those under which our army for home defence may one day have to fight.

Moreover, much of our English country is very enclosed and thus peculiarly suited to the employment of pack artillery. Undulating country, which is divided by hedgerows into numerous small enclosures and much intersected by streams or interspersed with patches of woodland, offers little opportunity for the tactical employment of wheeled artillery on account of the contracted nature of the ranges, and the difficulty which vehicles must experience in moving over enclosed ground, unless convenient roads exist. There is no question that troops, operating in such country without pack artillery, might find themselves seriously handicapped, especially if the enemy were provided with mobile batteries of this nature; and a force of

artillery, which is maintained for home defence, should therefore include a considerable proportion of mountain batteries.

It is not, however, to the territorial mountain artillery that I would draw attention, but to the urgent necessity of providing the field army at home with some Regular batteries of pack artillery, without which it will often not be possible to give our infantry the close and effective artillery support, which attacking troops require under the conditions that now prevail in civilised warfare.

The Russo-Japanese War furnishes us with many striking instances of the risk of failure and possible disaster, which attacking infantry must run when unsupported by artillery fire, and the useful help which a few low-power mountain guns were able to afford the Japanese infantry on several occasions, when pushed up in close proximity to the firing line, emphasises the lesson that close and effective support by artillery fire is essential to infantry in the attack.

It has been argued that the want of co-operation between the Japanese field artillery and their infantry was primarily due to the fact, that the batteries were indifferently horsed and so not sufficiently mobile to move quickly under fire to the advanced positions, where their support might have been effective. But though it is undoubtedly true that the Japanese field artillery were greatly handicapped by a want of mobility, it is not to this that their failure to assist the infantry can be chiefly attributed. The real reason must be looked for in the change of conditions brought about by recent development in artillery *matériel*.

It was indisputably proved in Manchuria, that changes of position to closer ranges by daylight are now practically impossible for wheeled artillery in the face of Q.F. guns, because the risk of destruction when limbering up, coming into action, or moving under fire, is too great. If, therefore, we neglect now to make the artillery of the field army capable of affording close support to the infantry with other and surer means than wheeled artillery, we have every reason to fear that on the first occasion, when our troops find themselves opposed to an enemy who possesses an effective force of artillery, our infantry may look in vain for support at a critical moment. For while it is certain that our horse and field batteries will not hesitate at any sacrifice, which the endeavour to give this much-needed assistance may entail, it is more than probable that every such attempt will only end in our field artillery suffering heavy losses without any useful result.

The evidence seems conclusive that pack batteries are the only nature of artillery, which can, during an action and by daylight, change position or advance to the support of the infantry under fire. The reasons for this are generally known, but it may be as well to repeat them, as follows:—

Batteries of pack animals can, on account of their elasticity, work their way gradually forward and in extended order, and so have a greater chance of getting across a fire-swept zone than

the most mobile form of wheeled artillery, each vehicle of which offers a large target and runs the risk of destruction, if an animal is shot. An animal shot does not bring a gun, carried on pack animals, to a standstill, and if a casualty cannot be replaced by a spare animal, it will generally be possible to bring on by hand any portion of the equipment which is left behind by some mischance.

Pack artillery is also the most suitable to accompany infantry, because pack animals can go practically anywhere that an infantry soldier can go without using his hands. Hills, woods, broken or enclosed country, which would be impassable to wheeled vehicles, unless roads exist or passages are prepared beforehand, present little difficulty to pack animals, and as the latter will often be able to get cover from hedges, undulations of ground, crops, scrub, etc., which would not conceal the movement of wheeled artillery, batteries of pack animals may often be able to reach decisive ranges without detection.

It is not intended to imply that wheeled artillery can never give effective support under modern conditions, for in theatres of war, where the ground offers little obstacle to the free movement of highly mobile wheeled artillery, and ample cover exists to screen its advance, batteries of horse artillery, suitably equipped, might accompany the attacking infantry and give them timely and effective support. But there is no doubt that conditions will more often favour the use of a nature of artillery, which is rarely hampered by difficulties of ground and not easily stopped by fire, and the addition of some batteries of pack artillery to the Regular Army at home is therefore necessary to ensure the infantry close and effective support under all circumstances.

This is a matter which very closely affects the Army at large, for it is only by the success of the infantry attack that battles can be won, and it is therefore to the interest of all arms of the Service to see, that the artillery of the field army is equipped in the manner best calculated to ensure the infantry all the support that they require. This support is threefold: first, the engaging of the enemy's artillery, and, as far as possible, the establishment of a superiority of fire by the heavy and field artillery; second, the paving of the way for the infantry attack, which will usually be carried out by the heavy artillery and such of the field batteries as are not required to keep down the enemy's artillery fire; third, the close support of the infantry attack. It is in the want of mobile batteries, which are suitable for this third purpose, that the artillery of our field army falls short of the desirable, and this is made evident by the instructions in our training manuals. For in §85 of the Field Artillery Training, the necessity for close co-operation between artillery and infantry is clearly laid down as follows:—

“As the attack progresses, it will be necessary for the artillery to co-operate closely with the infantry; such co-operation

with an infantry attack is not possible at distant ranges, unless the country is unusually open."

But the difficulty of giving infantry this close support with the artillery available for the purpose is also made clear at the end of the paragraph in the following sentences:—

"But such changes of position are attended with considerable risk, unless it is clear that the enemy's artillery have been overpowered, or that the ground to be traversed is concealed from his view. When this is not the case, the movement may have to be carried out under cover of darkness."

This does not sound very reassuring for the attacking infantry, for it is not possible to foresee with any certainty, when and where this close support will be required. It is not only the supporting fire of artillery against the enemy's infantry position, that the attacking infantry look for, but they require effective and opportune assistance in case of either general or local counter-attacks.

The time and direction of such attacks will probably come in the nature of a surprise, and if the necessary support for the attacking infantry is not forthcoming at the critical moment, owing to the conditions being adverse to any previous forward movement of horse or field batteries, the repulse of the infantry and failure of the attack is a possible, if not probable, result. How much more satisfactory for the infantry it would be, if pack artillery were available and these instructions read:—

"As the attack progresses, it will be necessary for the artillery to co-operate closely with the infantry. For this purpose batteries of pack artillery will accompany the attack and take up positions to assist the advance, wherever necessary. Making every use of cover, these batteries will gradually work their way forward with the infantry as opportunity offers, until they reach a position at decisive range, from which they can afford the infantry close and effective support in the final stages of the attack."

Apart from the actual assistance, which such close co-operation of artillery must afford by means of effective fire, the knowledge, that batteries are near at hand and support at critical moments is assured; cannot fail to give the attacking infantry greater confidence to advance, than if they know that artillery support may only be forthcoming after nightfall, unless the enemy's artillery is previously overpowered, or the ground to be traversed is concealed from view.

Nor is the employment of pack artillery confined to supporting infantry in the attack. For in the defence of woods, for turning movements in broken or hilly country, in temporary forward positions occupied by the defence, and in counter-attack, much useful purpose may be served by artillery, which is independent of roads and essentially mobile.

Batteries of pack artillery may be useful also in the passage of rivers to accompany the covering force, which is sent over the river to cover the crossing of the army. For though there

may be no suitable means immediately available for passing wheeled artillery across the river, there would be no difficulty in devising some way of transporting light equipments, which can be easily taken to pieces; and even if it were not convenient to send over the pack animals at the same time, it would always be possible to bring the batteries into action by hand, and so ensure the infantry some artillery support. Similar opportunities for the use of these batteries might occur in the disembarkation of an oversea expedition.

Enough has been said, I hope, to show that Regular pack artillery is an essential part of the field army, and there is no doubt whatever that the work which this artillery will be needed for can only be carried out by highly-trained and thoroughly efficient units. It would be a fatal mistake, therefore, to trust to hurriedly improvising these batteries, when the necessity to use them arises, and it is to be earnestly hoped that the formation of Regular pack artillery at home will be provided for at no very distant date.