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EXPERIENCE
OF THE
GERMAN 1ST ARMY
IN THE
SOMME BATTLE

BY

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(From a British Translation of a German Document.)

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Extracts from German Documents Deal-
ing with "Lessons Drawn from the
Battle of the Somme"

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EXTRACTS FROM GERMAN DOCUMENTS
DEALING WITH "LESSONS DRAWN
FROM THE BATTLE OF THE
SOMME."

1. German Opinion of British Troops.

Previous to the attack the enemy's infantry patrols showed increased activity. The foremost trenches were probably lightly held during the intense artillery fire. The troops for the assault were apparently assembled in the trenches in rear.

The attack on the 1st July was well prepared, and the infantry was splendidly equipped with all kinds of weapons for the close combat. It was provided with a large number of Lewis guns, which were brought into action very quickly and skilfully in newly-captured positions. It is very desirable that our infantry should be equipped with a large number of light machine guns of this description in order to increase the intensity of its fire.

The individual English soldier is well trained and shows personal bravery. Some of the officers, however, are not sufficiently thoroughly trained. They are lacking in ability to exploit a success and to follow it up quickly.

The English infantry has undoubtedly learnt much since the autumn offensive. It shows great dash in the attack, a factor to which immense confidence in its overwhelming artillery probably greatly contributes. The Englishman also has his physique and training in his favor. Commanders, however, in difficult situations showed that they were not yet equal to their tasks. The men lost their heads and surrendered if they thought they were cut off.

Telephone connections were established very rapidly.

The enemy's trench mortars were skilfully served and produced effective results.

The enemy's artillery registered skilfully and inconspicuously. The guns proved accurate: the effect of the shells was good, but the percentage of blinds was high.

2. Description of German Position.

The 1st Line Position will be held if the enemy attacks. It consists of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Trenches, and should have, if possible, two rows of wire in front of each. There should be at least two communication trenches in each company sector from the 3rd to the 1st Trench, but the points at which they enter and leave the 2nd Trench should not be opposite one another. The number of dug-outs should be increased until there are sufficient to accommodate the infantry garrison necessary for the repulse of a prepared attack.

The Intermediate and 2nd Line Positions consist of at least two trenches, each provided with two rows of wire on pickets, and the same number of communication trenches as in the 1st Line Position. Each of the present regimental sectors must be provided with sufficient accommodation for at least one battalion.

Trenches. Narrow trenches with steep sides again proved very disadvantageous and caused considerably more casualties (men being buried) than shallower trenches with a wide sole. One regiment is of opinion that the garrison is better protected if the men lie down or crouch at the bottom of the trench without any further cover, than it is if the so-called "rabbit holes" are used.

A cover trench roughly parallel to the front fire trench is not sound. Such trenches are destroyed by the enemy's fire at the same time as the actual fire trenches. To obviate this, trenches sited in accordance with the ground, and consequently with a certain irregularity of trace, are recommended.

Obstacles. There should be two or three rows of wire, each from 3 to 5½ yards deep, with an interval of from 5½ to 11 yards between each, this interval being provided with trip wires. The outer edge of the furthest wire should be about 55 yards from the trench. It should not always run parallel with the trench, but should follow the lie of the ground.

Dug-outs. The thickness of earth overhead should be from 23 to 26 feet, and more in the case of command posts and the dug-outs for the medical services, telephones and kitchens. The dug-outs for the men should be sufficient for 16 men, with two entrances separated by a traverse. Several dug-outs should be connected up to form corridor dug-outs with accommodations for a platoon. The dug-out recesses should be on the same side as the entrances—not facing them. Entrances should be 4 feet by 5¼

feet, and should be well stayed and braced. Inclined galleries offer more resistance than frames built in on steps one below the other.

Machine Guns. It is advisable to employ the bulk of the machine guns not in, but behind, the 1st Trench. When fixing their siting, the possibility of delivering both frontal and flanking fire must not be forgotten. Used as an emergency garrison for the Intermediate or 2nd Line Position, they may prevent a break through if the enemy succeeds in overrunning the 1st Line Position.

Machine guns must, as a rule, be kept in the dug-outs of their crews until the enemy assaults, and must then be placed rapidly in position at suitable points on the parapet.

Machine gun units are particularly suitable for employment as a commander's mobile reserve.

Retired Positions. The preparation of villages and other strong points afforded by the ground behind the front line, for subsequent defence, cannot be begun too soon.

The first necessities for retired positions and the extremely important diagonal switch lines, are "entanglements, dug-outs and communication trenches." The number of these positions should be increased by continual work, and by making the fullest possible use of all available forces.

3. Distribution of the German Infantry.

Method of Holding the Position. One of the most important lessons drawn from the Battle of the Somme is that, under heavy methodical artillery fire, the front line should be only thinly held, but by reliable men and a few machine guns, even when there is always a possibility of a hostile attack. When this was not done, the casualties were so great before the enemy's attack was launched, that the possibility of the front line repulsing the attack by its own unaided efforts was very doubtful. The danger of the front line being rushed when so lightly held must be overcome by placing supports (infantry and machine guns), distributed in groups according to the ground, as close as possible behind the foremost fighting line. Their task is to rush forward to reinforce the front line at the moment the enemy attacks, without waiting for orders.

The essential conditions for success are, therefore, that the various formations should be organized in depth but that their units should be employed side by side.

The garrison of the 1st Trench of the 1st Line Position should be strong enough to repulse the enemy's attack, assuming that the men reach the parapet in time, but no stronger. It is, as a rule, sufficient to have one man to every 2-3 yards as an emergency garrison in the 1st Trench.

The 2nd Trench of the 1st Line Position is garrisoned by the Supports, one portion of which is specially detailed to defend the entrances to the communication trenches, while the other portion consists of strong specially formed bombing parties, which are held in readiness to rush forward at once to the support of the foremost trench.

Reserves. Even the Company Commander must, in no circumstances, neglect to provide himself with a reserve consisting of a few groups and, if possible, of machine guns as well. The Sub-sector Commanders must also have at all times sufficient troops at their disposal to be able at once to drive the enemy out, by means of a counter-attack, should he succeed in penetrating into the position.

The fighting strength of both the front trenches would soon be exhausted if the Sector Reserves were not put in. These must therefore be brought close up in good time, either into the 3rd Trench or into special reserve trenches. In case of an attack they should be moved forward into the 2nd (or 3rd) Trench to replace the reinforcements which have already gone forward (the Supports) and continue the task allotted to the latter.

In critical situations it is not sound to quarter reserves in villages immediately behind the front. It has nearly always proved impossible to assemble the troops quickly when they were scattered in numerous cellars, etc., in a village which was being heavily shelled. In such cases the reserves should be in the trenches.

In the 5th Division, a 4th platoon was formed in the infantry companies. At first, these reinforcements for replacing casualties were kept back with the 1st line transport (field kitchens). They were sent forward only when the losses of the three other platoons made reinforcements necessary. When they went forward, the 4th platoons took with them all that had been found necessary in the particular fighting (hand grenades, entrenching tools, rations, etc.). This arrangement proved very successful.

4. German Tactics.

Approach March. Before bringing up troops into the zone of the enemy's artillery fire, the commander must obtain a clear idea,

by means of clever scouts and by his own observation, how the enemy's fire is distributed over the ground to be crossed. When selecting the route, areas which are hardly or not under fire will be taken into consideration rather than the nature of the ground and the cultivation. Depressions and sunken roads which are invisible to the enemy are, as a rule, under such heavy barrage fire that it is not advisable to make use of them. "Villages which lie in the enemy's zone of fire are to be avoided on principle."

Action When Heavily Shelled. It has been found to be a good plan, during the continuous heavy bombardment of incomplete front line positions, for the garrison to advance 100-200 metres and to lie down in the open without any cover.

Over ground which cannot be observed, and at night, the unaimed but horizontal **barrage fire of infantry and machine guns**, during and immediately after critical periods, affords rest and protection to troops who are probably shaken for the moment, and not only scares the enemy but inflicts losses on him.

The excellent results obtained from selected **snipers** posted at good view points in trees, etc., are particularly emphasized by one Regiment.

The detailing of **assaulting parties** in an attack has proved very useful. Their chief advantage lay in the freshness of the specially selected personnel who had not been engaged in previous fighting. The careful training beforehand of the assaulting parties resulted in these troops proving themselves quite equal to all tasks which fell to their lot in village or wood fighting. They felt that they were a body of elite troops, which indeed they proved themselves to be.

When Attacking in a Wood, it is preferable, instead of the usual skirmish lines, following one after the other, to employ small assaulting columns following a single line of assault.

Relief of Infantry and Engineers. When troops are relieved, it is of the utmost importance that the out-going troops are careful in handing over. Whenever the tactical conditions permit, this should take place on the spot, the various commanders meeting together for the purpose. At any rate, it is absolutely essential that the in-coming troops should be thoroughly informed as to the tactical situation, by means of personal conferences between the commanders, with the assistance of maps and sketches which will be taken over by the former. A perfectly clear picture must be given of the state of the positions, etc., particularly of their weak points, and also of any work which it had been intended to