



## General Tactical Review – Fire

### Editorial

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**General Jean Delmas<sup>1</sup> very early on hypothesized that the tactical doctrines had been developed chronologically in three successive stages: they first theorized the association of shock and movement, then the introduction of fire, in general, in the maneuver. Third stage: the consideration of nuclear fire. Nothing has really changed since then, even if some believe that immaterial fields have revolutionized tactics, creating a fourth stage.**

On the other hand, the methods and means of combat have evolved in line with the relationship between war and technology - the increase in firepower in particular, not forgetting its mobility - but also between war and politics. The latter can have a real influence on the former, from a tactical point of view: the methods of opening and using fire defined in the orders of operation are sensitive and concrete proof of this. Moreover, historically, it is indeed fire that has been the source of important, albeit little-known, tactical thinking on "orders" - thin, deep, oblique, mixed. For decades, the apparent opposition between the notions of shock and fire was skillfully fuelled by the greatest theorists: Guibert, Folard, Saxony and Frederick II, the latter stating, somewhat definitively: "battles are won by fire".

But it was above all Napoleon who masterfully combined antithetical concepts in the first approach - movement, shock and fire - and solved a complex dilemma through the judicious use of fire:

to concentrate his forces or to disperse them? The British, for their part, simultaneously deal with fire with a different approach, making an effort on the precision of the shots rather than on the mass of the fires.

The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century gave fire a predominant place in general tactics. The arguments are above all technical: smokeless powder, breech-loading rifles (Chassepot), automatic weapons (machine guns, including the famous Reffye bullet gun<sup>2</sup>) and progress in artillery. Tactically, the increase in power and range suggests that the fate of the decisive battle is deeply linked to the superiority of fire. However, three schools of thought clash on this subject in the twentieth century.

The first is that of the thinkers who are Napoleon's heirs, including Foch, finally: fire does not globally change anything to the maneuver. The advantage remains to the attacker, who is numerically superior; the advantages of the defensive, in terms of fire (artillery preparation that reduces surprise, defensive firing posts, protection against fire) are partially taken into account.

Directly influenced by the Boer War in South Africa and the Manchurian War, the "new school"<sup>3</sup> (remember Négrier<sup>4</sup> and Kessler<sup>5</sup> ) asserts that "modern" fire imposes a reflection<sup>on</sup> new patterns. The dispersion and staggering in depth of units<sup>6</sup> would be a good tactical solution, which would paradoxically pose the problem of concentration of effort and centralisation of command, which is very difficult. Ardant du Picq participates in this debate on another level: the individual moral value of the combatant gains in importance with the increase in firepower<sup>7</sup>. As for the immediate general attack, theorized by Grandmaison, meticulously planned and led by the lower echelons, it takes fire into account with great intelligence.

Other tacticians (Pétain, Maud'huy) demonstrate that fire slows down the offensive and generates tactical prudence. They also agree with the above-mentioned school on the notions of decentralisation and have a synthetic point of view on the defensive<sup>8</sup>. Thus Pétain wrote: "the offensive alone can lead to victory. But, if, considering only one slice of the battlefield, we consider two troops opposed to each other and surrounded, it is obvious that the one of the two troops that will remain on the die will be the one that will be the one to be defeated, and that will be the one to be defeated. It is obvious that the one of the two troops that will remain on the defensive, while it has an excellent shelter and a favorable firing range, will be in more advantageous material conditions than the one that advances in the open. The use of the terrain gives the defence an extra strength that allows it to immobilize a force greater than its own. This is the *raison d'être* of defense."

Another notion that perfectly crystallizes the interaction of fire with general tactics is that of decisive attack. While for some, the choice of the place and time of the attack is the sole responsibility of the commander-in-chief, his opponents use the argument of fire, which is so powerful that it will lead to the dispersion of troops and the decentralization of the decision. As for the much more contemporary tactical issues of the use of fire, they evolve around two main notions: integration and coordination.

Finally, a few words on the General Tactical Review (GTR). The RTG has two purposes: to make people think and to give them food for thought. To make those who are interested in tactics think, from near or far, as enlightened amateurs or professionals, by asking them to contribute, in writing, according to the theme chosen, to the articles in the review: because tactics is a matter for theorists, technicians, but also practitioners, whatever their rank or experience. Even if, as Professor Hervé Coutau-Bégarie<sup>10</sup> stated, few people

manage to be simultaneously, and effectively, strategists and strategists, theorists and practitioners. So, here are a few editorial guidelines to help our journal live and "grow": the pool of contributors must be broadened; articles must be shorter, more alert and less invigorating, and, while treating the subject with precision and exhaustiveness, the articles should be shorter, more alert and less invigorating, and, while treating the subject with precision and exhaustiveness, approach it "Picasso style", turning around it and approaching it from various and complementary angles, thus giving volume to the reflection. Without losing quality. It is a real challenge, on which also depends the second vocation: "to give food for thought". For it is a question of getting the younger generations, in particular, interested in the tactical fact, which, in order to nourish reflection, is based on the historical fact. The creation of the Chair of General Tactics a year ago is part of this ambition. It will be the subject of my next editorial.

Here's to your pens and your books!

**1** General Jean Delmas (1925-2018) was a key player in the rapprochement between the army and the civilian world of historical research. After having served in the Second World War, then in the Indochina and Algerian wars, he acquired the rank of doctor and contributed to the revitalisation of military history by heading the Army Historical Service.e de Terre (1980-1986), then of the French Military History Commission (1991), but also by giving lectures that have marked generations of officers, in particular at the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre and at Saint-Cyr.

**2** Although in 1870 the French army was in the process of modernisation, it did not have an adapted doctrine. The use of the ball gun is symptomatic: it is not used to its full potential and in particular its range.

**3** The "old" one being that of Napoleon.

**4** Négrier (de), François-Oscar, "L'évolution actuelle de la tactique", in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 15 February 1904, pp. 854-885 and 1 March 1904, pp. 110-129.

**5** Kessler, Charles, General, *Tactique des trois armes*, Paris, Chapelot, 1902.

**6** Innovative tactical concepts then appeared: successive waves, thin curtains, mixed columns, diluted formations, autonomy of the echelons, etc.

**7** Queloz, Dimitry, *De la manœuvre napoléonienne à l'offensive à outrance, La tactique générale de l'armée française 1871-1914*, Paris, Economica, 2009, p. 396.

**8** The doctrinal synthesis is more difficult: the 1904 Infantry Manoeuvre Regulations often contradict the 1895 Campaign Service Regulations. Read on this subject: Goya, Michel, *La Chair et l'Acier*, Paris, Tallandier, 2004, p. 29.

**9** Pétain, Philippe, *Tactique d'infanterie*, ISC, Paris, 2002, p. 121-122.

**10** Hervé Coutau-Bégarie (1956-2012) is the founder of the Institut de stratégie comparée. Professor of strategy at the École de Guerre for some fifteen years, former president of the French Military History Commission, he is considered to be the most brilliant strategist of his generation.

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