

Flesh and Steel - The Invention of Modern Warfare (1914-1918)

Comments: Battalion Commander - BEAUDOIN Hubert - 121st promotion

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Histoire & stratégie

In this book, the author analyses in detail the effort to adapt the means and methods of combat during the First World War. Thanks to this effort, mainly carried out during the war, the French army was to become the most modern army in the world in 1918, while in 1914 it was still fighting in a similar way to the armies of the First Empire.

1/ THE AUTHOR

Officer of the navy troops, Lieutenant-Colonel Michel GOYA was born on 19 April 1962. Married and father of three children, this officer wrote this book in 2004 when he was a battalion commander in the teaching office of the Research and Feedback Division of the Centre for Doctrine and Use of Forces. A direct EAI NCO, he served as a group leader at 170°RI from 1983 to 1988. Major of his promotion at EMIA, he chose the Marine Troops in 1990. Assigned to 21°RIMa as a section chief, he then joined RIMaP-NC, still in the same function, and then as a deputy officer. Unit commander at 2°RIMa then editor at BOI, he took part in many operations notably in Rwanda, Sarajevo and Bangui. In 2001, he joined the EMSST as a major in the Human Science section. In addition to his military career, he has a good academic background as he obtained a postgraduate degree in contemporary history in 2003. He published numerous articles concerning the French Army at the time of the Great War, notably in La Revue Historique des Armées.

2/ SUMMARY OF THE WORK

21. Spirit of sacrifice, quarrels and lethargy during the inter-war period 1870-1914

211. Doctrine

The French army experienced a terrible trauma in 1870 - "the terrible year" - which led it to develop a contradictory feeling of revenge and inferiority complex in relation to the German army. From then on, French military regulations were inspired by German regulatory writings, and French officers learned the German language. However, the immediate post-war period, although it was conducive to military reflection without censorship, did not lead to a real doctrine for lack of a "doctrine". stable centralizing body (43 ministers of War between 1871 and 1914, ministerial instability coupled with the dissociation of the functions of generalissimo and chief of staff). Indeed, the young III^e Republic, anxious to prevent any coup d'état, put at the head of its armies a three-headed organisation, which prevented the centralisation of military thought.

The military thought of this period was influenced by the human sciences, including the culturalist current. It was then that the myth of the ardent, spirited and enterprising Frenchman against the supposedly rigid German developed.

At the end of the 19th century, the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre became the heart of military thinking. The dogma of the offensive at all costs, the only victorious option, was imposed there. Different currents confront each other in the military world: the particularly conservative Lieutenant Generals (Second Empire), the "Young Turks", who were adept at overkill and who saluted "sacrifice as the only way out in the face of the enemy", and the "Young Turks", who were in favour of an offensive at all costs, as the only way out in the face of the enemy. Finally, there were those who foresaw, with the arrival of new weapons, the importance of firepower, which would call into question Napoleonic tactics.

212. Instruction

There were major problems with training between 1870 and 1914. Thus Raoul Girardet, historian of the 1914-1918 war, described teaching in officers' schools as purely academic, favouring docility and not imagination, nor authority and even less audacity. As for the generals, they almost never had the opportunity to command training units the size of those entrusted to them in wartime.

Many regulations are written before the war, but their ephemeral nature makes them difficult to assimilate; a great discrepancy will be noted from the beginning of the first world conflict between what is written and what is mastered! The great annual manoeuvres sometimes resemble walks in the forest where the exercise lasts no more than half a day and where stewardship concerns outweigh all other considerations.

In addition, the lack of training facilities - camps, firing ranges, etc. - makes it difficult for the men to carry out their training. - In addition, the lack of training facilities - camps, firing ranges etc. - is especially glaring when compared to the German infrastructure.

Moreover, the complementary training and updating of reservists was totally neglected during the pre-war period. The German reserves, which were younger and better educated, proved to be far superior to their French counterparts.

Finally, in France until 1917, the troop aroused mistrust and, as a result, training was seen as training that prohibited any initiative on the part of the soldier. Thus, for shooting, it was the leader who decided on the objectives where he would concentrate the fire.

213. The men

The French army suffers from a shortage of men, but the number of corps continues to be favoured over their density. This phenomenon distorts the framework that persists in commanding by voice undersized cells in peacetime compared to their volume in wartime.

Numerous quarrels of men mark the French armies: The Saint-Cyrians, with a taste for melee weapons, and the Polytechnicians, oriented towards scholarly weapons, are in competition; the direct officers - a true aristocracy - despise rank and file officers and reservists.

214. Material

The period leading up to the 1914-1918 war was marked by many technical innovations: rapid fire artillery, automobiles, machine guns, airplanes etc. At the same time, the Manchurian and Transvaal conflicts show how much firepower increased and tended to limit manoeuvre. But in France, the aristocracy of Saint-Cyria, mostly made up of infantrymen and cavalymen who were not very receptive to new technologies, did not develop doctrine and failed to acquire certain equipment that would make German superiority during the first three years of the war, such as rapid fire artillery.

22. Tenacity, great adaptability and intelligence of the command during the 1914-1918 conflict

23. Doctrine

The war begins according to the exclusively offensive doctrine, sometimes forgetting the artillery support: it is the hecatomb! But from mid-August 1914, the Great Headquarters (GQG) reacts and opposes this type of action. If the doctrine is not immediately challenged, the artillery already becomes indispensable. Very quickly it is the reality of the front line that puts pressure on the hierarchy to change the doctrine and direct the industrial offer. The pace of doctrinal evolution quickly becomes very high with a new regulation of manoeuvre every year (every ten years before the conflict).

The first stage in the evolution of the French Army was tactical adaptation. Through the reciprocal adaptation of tactics between adversaries and the constant demand for innovation, research is led from the front.

Little by little, the war of position was imposed and the hope of a short war was dwindling.

In this new type of warfare, a new queen of battles is imposed: artillery. In 1914, the French artillery numbered 400,000 men and 8 models of guns; in 1918, there were three times as many models of guns; the number of men and the material equipment doubled.

A succession of doctrines followed in an attempt to gain the upper hand over the enemy:

- The breakthrough by abrupt attack until 1915.
- The scientific conduct of the battle (Somme 1916).
- The Verdun school with an attempt at a decisive offensive on the Aisne in 1917.
- The joint battlefield 1917-1918: combination of great strategic mobility with limited tactical actions involving the artillery-infantry-aviation trio. It is a very effective doctrine, but requires significant resources and very extensive training. With this latest doctrinal development, the French army outperforms the German army.

Unfortunately, as soon as the war ended, we see in France an impoverishment of the doctrinal debate and of the means of learning: the French army condemns itself little by little to have to adapt again in the emergency.

222. Instruction

Training, the poor relation of the pre-war French army, became, with the arrival of Pétain at the head of the GQG, the essential factor of efficiency of the French troops. The self-instruction that had been in force until then was abandoned, particularly because of the high rate of statutory production and high human losses. Training was then centralised and organised. Numerous training centres were created for executives, troops and instructors.

The main innovations in this area were the creation of specific instructions for operations, the combination of weapon and joint training and advanced courses for heads of corps and generals.

223. The men

As early as 1914, the high command assumed its responsibilities and did not hesitate to dismiss many incompetent generals. The command finally showed itself to be skilful in combining firmness, situational awareness and listening to units in contact.

Within the armed forces, men do not easily change their mentality. Thus, despite the appalling losses, prejudices persist: reluctance to entrench, offensive ardour, phobia of lost ground.

These are the same men who will experience the hell of the trenches. The image that remains of them today is only partially accurate: if fear, nightmare visions, the stress of the bombardments and the cohesion of the Hairy Ones are a reality, hand-to-hand combat with bayonets is more a myth than an everyday life for infantrymen.

224. Material

As soon as the fronts froze, many micro-innovations in the trenches imagined by ingenious soldiers (the whole nation is in arms, including the engineers) were made. (ing engineers who put their skills to use in the progress of military equipment...) are relayed by the divisional generals until they are industrialised.

This conflict is the scene of many technological revolutions: explosion engines to equip planes and tanks, combat gas, mines... The horse, unsuited to modern warfare, is gradually disappearing from the battlefields.

It is in this context that aviation becomes essential: first to inform and regulate artillery fire, then to bomb and finally to chase enemy aircraft.

Of course, the tank came to unblock the immobility by solving the problem of boarding the trenches. But its development will be chaotic before becoming the inseparable complement of the infantry. The latter is not to be outdone and also undergoes

industrialization: it is the end of bayonets in favor of hand grenades, rifle, howitzers, machine guns, FM etc..

3/ OPINION OF THE EDITOR

This book offers an objective study of the preparation and then the conduct of the war. It is of real historical interest, the result of meticulous and well-documented work. We propose to apply the same dispassionate approach to today's armies in order to draw lessons for the preparation of forces for operational engagement.

First of all, let us look at the relationship between troops and doctrine. The a priori on staffs persists and the - supposed - superiority of experience often justifies reluctance to accept doctrine. It should also be noted that the - excessive - volume of regulations, which made it difficult to appropriate this doctrine, remains an obstacle today more than yesterday, probably because of the even greater volumes.

The other major teaching relates to the use of new equipment, which among the military, naturally inclined to conservatism, often gives rise to criticism. Let us simply remember the words of Colonel Estienne, the inventor of the tank: "To realize is to deliberately resign oneself to doing imperfect work" and let us not fear modernity!

It is also interesting to note that the French armies of 14-18 showed great adaptability but that they had hardly been able to anticipate. Even today, the French army still struggles to plan and excels in leadership. In the event of a high-intensity conflict, the time taken to react can be costly in terms of human lives. Better planning will save the lives of our soldiers.

Finally, the ascendancy over the enemy upon Pétain's arrival was partly due to the training effort, responding to the technical and tactical complexity of joint warfare. Today, this complexity has increased. It is easy to deduce from this that it is imperative to give priority to training, and not to be content with declarations of intent, in order to reap the benefits of technology and doctrine.

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