



HISTORY OF TACTICS, FROM GUIBERT TO OUR DAYS – Part 1/6

"War, a simple art and all execution" – Napoleon

Colonel Claude FRANC - CDEC / division Doctrine

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Photo: Maurice de Saxe at the Battle of Fontenoy (11 May 1745)

Sometimes decried as a minor art, with only strategy being worthy of interest in the eyes of its detractors, tactics nevertheless constitute the essential foundation of warfare. Art or science?

The debate, essentially inherited from the Age of Enlightenment... is not here. Closely applied to the terrain, rigorously executed, tactical designs always decide the fate of the battle: choice of position (the abandonment of the Pratzen plateau by the Emperor), respective roles of the infantry and cavalry (the winding of the Spanish tercios by the cavalry of Condé at Rocroi), use of artillery fire (the large battery at Wagram), to consider only a few old examples. This battle, won or lost at the tactical level, can have incalculable consequences at the politico-strategic level.

It was the furious charge of Sobieski's cavalymen against the Turkish troops of Kara Mustapha Pasha, under Vienna in 1683, which sealed the fate of the Ottoman power in Europe for more than a century; the judicious measures taken by the Marshal of Villars at Malplaquet in September 1709 allowed Louis XIV to save his reign; the same year, Poltava Day erased Sweden from the European powers and consecrated the advent of Russia; Fontenoy, in 1745, placed Louis XV in the position of arbiter of the European powers and consecrated the apogee of monarchical France. It was the redoubts built by the Russians before the battle that defeated the Swedish attacks at Poltava and it was by crushing the Cumberland column that Maurice of Saxony took the decision away from Fontenoy. Based on these examples from the Great Century, this article proposes to retrace the evolution of Guibert's tactics up to the present day, identifying the permanence that can be observed and the major breaks that have occurred. There are several reasons for taking the second half of the eighteenth century as a starting point for this reflection.

First of all, before this period, except in exceptional cases, the maneuver is reduced to its

simplest expression because of the indivisibility of armies that always act togetherHence the success of the siege warfare in vogue at that time, giving rise to slow maneuvers in narrow spaces. Secondly, it was then that a real revival of the art of warfare appeared with a new generation of tactical writings and treatises, dominated in France by Folard, Bourcet and Guibert. Finally, from 1763, when the Treaty of Paris ended the Seven Years' War, to April 20, 1792, when the Legislature "declared war on the King of Bohemia", France experienced its longest period of peace since the advent of Hugues Capet. 2...eight hundred years ago. This period of peace is superior to the recovery of two generations of the time, a stabilization that led to a real regeneration of the military tool by an in-depth reform led by the Count of Saint-Germain, Louis XVI's Minister of War.

It is this old royal army, amalgamated with the young and ardent battalions of volunteers that forms the army of the Revolution, the crucible of the imperial army that resisted for nearly fifteen years to the coalesced Europe. Insofar as the battle, the finality of the tactics, aims at resolving the war and is no longer content to be an episode of it, the generals in charge of conducting the operations are looking for the means to win it decisively. Among these means, in addition to the military leader's own capacity to dominate his art, two seem major and timeless, the number of combatants, which has continued to grow ("Victory always goes to the big battalions", Napoleon said), and the power of weapons, which is evolving in parallel with technical progress. In this centuries-old struggle between the cannonball and the armour, the industrial revolution brought a new element, mobility. This same industrial revolution has a direct effect on tactics in that, by providing the military leader with an ever-increasing range of weapon systems, military art, over time, has become extremely complex.

1 For the Marshal of Saxony, "Yes, war is a science, but its principles are veiled, all is dark. Napoleon I, an artilleryman by training, uses alternately one word or the other, considering that according to the level of responsibility where one stands, each is necessary and complementary in varying proportions.

2 Participation in the American War of Independence involved only a very small corps of volunteers and, for France, consisted mainly of a naval effort.

Title :	Colonel Claude FRANC - CDEC / division Doctrine
Author (s) :	Colonel Claude FRANC - CDEC / division Doctrine
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Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte, Count of
Guibert (1743-1790)