



The 5th Engineer Regiment in the Madagascar campaign (1895)

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Published on 09/08/2018

Histoire & stratégie

The example of the 5th Engineer Regiment in Madagascar is easily transposable to current operations. In 1895, it made a major contribution to the conquest of the island, by providing concrete solutions to facilitate manoeuvring, and then contributed, through the development of the country, to the stabilization-normalization phase.

The origins of the conflict

France first set foot in Madagascar in 1601 and Colbert named this territory "île Dauphine". It is only in 1811 that England, taking advantage of France's troubles in Europe, seized the island. But five years later it is obliged, by the treaty of Paris, to give Madagascar back to the French. It was then that a period of unrest began: the dominant ethnic group, the Hovas, worked by the English, refused to accept any foreign presence. A first expedition was led by Admiral Pierre in 1883. The indispensable reinforcements were sent parsimoniously through the metropolis, which was increasingly absorbed by the difficulties encountered in Tonkin. In spite of the small number of personnel, the Navy inscribed pages of glory in Madagascar, crowned in 1885 by a treaty to the definite advantage of France. This breath of fresh air enabled the metropolis to withdraw most of its troops and to concentrate on Indochina.

This period of relative calm did not last. Indeed, tensions reached their peak in 1890 when England and Germany officially recognized the French protectorate over Madagascar. From then on, the French on the island knew no respite, being even physically threatened. Metropolitan opinion was gradually won over to a major intervention in Madagascar, and it was in 1894 that it was decided.

The geography of Madagascar is dominated by the contrast between two major regions. The high plateaus occupy all the center of the country and constitute the most fertile and healthy area of the island. The coastal countries are difficult to live and exploit, but are naturally open to the sea. To access the plateaus from the coast, one has to cross deep

valleys where swampy water often rots. On the other hand, large rivers provide easy access from the coast to the central plateau.

As for the Hova army, it consists only of a band of looters and corrupt officials, but with twenty thousand men, it is large enough to be taken seriously. Each man is equipped with a rifle, but must provide for his own clothing and food. A hundred cannons and twelve machine guns complete this equipment, but the instruction on these weapons is more than doubtful. Faced with this army, France decided to send an expeditionary force of 15,000 men.

After outlining the main features of the French expedition, we will highlight the courageous action of the sappers in Madagascar, then the continuation of their action after the end of the fighting.

The Madagascar campaign

To take the capital Tananarive, you have to choose between two coastal cities to land. To the east, Tamatave offers the shortest route to reach the objective, but the track there is impassable to cars, so much the landscape is tormented there. It would take years of work to get there and the western route was preferred, landing at Majunga on January 16, 1895.

The lack of experience in guiding tropical expeditions and the inadequacy of the equipment and tactical choices to the climatic and geographical conditions of the island should be highlighted. For example, the Navy refused to provide the riverboats that could have saved time and men to the land troops. In addition, there is a lack of medicines for fever and dysentery. Finally, the tactical choice of the western route could have been avoided if mules and coolies had been preferred to cars. This would have made it possible to take the eastern route, with a few basic adjustments, saving the expeditionary force a few precious weeks and, above all, a large number of human lives. These errors help us understand why this expedition was later so decried by French public opinion.

When landing at Majunga, the line of attack that naturally imposed itself on the expeditionary force to march on the capital was to follow the Betsiboka River and its tributary, the Ikopa. This march of about five hundred kilometres covers a region composed of three successive plateaus rising up to Tananarive. The Betsiboka is navigable on its first quarter to the city of Marololo, but the lack of information on its navigability prevents it from being considered a safe communication route. The progression of the French troops along the chosen route encountered a number of difficulties, starting with the slow landing of troops and equipment at Majunga. This slowness was due to the lack of port facilities authorising this type of landing. The other major difficulty is the climate and the unhealthy conditions in the coastal areas. These two elements hampered the progress of the French vanguard, but the fighting itself caused few losses.

In view of the fatigue accumulated by the first three months of operations, the command decided to make a one and a half month stopover in Marololo and to build a secondary base that would serve to support the fighting as far as Tananarive. As for the operations themselves, they consisted in seizing the successive positions held by the enemy on the road to Tananarive and began in the first days of March.

After the halt at Marololo, the offensive resumed on both sides. An enemy attack inflicted

a few casualties on the French who, finally, easily regained the upper hand and, above all, the initiative. The posts are removed one after the other, but this time the Hovas set fire to villages and crops before retreating. At the end of August, we are three-quarters of the way there and the rainy season is approaching. The command then decided to stop the road that had cost so many lives at this point to finish the fighting with a light column supplied by mules. The last part of the offensive march on Tananarive takes place in a much healthier region than the areas previously crossed, but the Hova resistance is becoming stronger as one approaches the capital. This one is taken quite easily, after a particularly adjusted artillery fire on the palace of the queen. The triumphant entry of the commander of the French troops in Tananarive takes place on October 1st, after seven months of fighting in a country with a particularly trying climate.

Engineers during the campaign

The Engineers of the Expeditionary Force is composed of four companies commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Marmier, of the 5th ^{Engineer} Regiment. The work entrusted to him is not always carried out by the army's workforce alone, but its development and direction invariably remain in the hands of the engineering officers. During the preparation of the campaign, the missions entrusted to the engineers are the organization of the maritime base and a sanatorium, the construction of the road and bridges, telegraphy and aerostation. The aerostation had no employment in Madagascar, telegraphy quickly came up against the difficulties of the relief and the unsuitability of the equipment, and the major work was, by far, the construction of the road and bridges between Majunga and Mangasoavina. The entire expeditionary force spent four months of exhausting work on 313 km of road, seven major bridges and forty-five culverts. During the campaign, a new mission appeared for the engineers: the service of the stages. This consisted of setting up posts along the road to build up reserves, control the flow of supplies forward and build lodgings along the route where troops could be temporarily stationed in safety.

The major difficulties encountered by the sappers in the construction of the road were first of all the vast swampy areas of the coastal regions, disease carrying them away faster than expected, and then the steep terrain from which one cannot escape to reach Tananarive from the coast. The Malagasy soil is made up of red clayey soil in majority, very fine white sand along the coasts and quartz in great quantity on the heights. The presence of clay is an important concern for the sappers since in rainy weather the soil digs deep trenches that are difficult to cross and especially to stabilize. The course of rivers is also marked by this material, their beds often extending over large areas. The areas crossed by the road are almost uniformly covered with bush, fairly hard tall grass and few trees. However, the species of these trees are of good quality, which will be very useful for engineering works. The road is not intended to last beyond the countryside, i.e. it must hold out into the rainy season. Therefore, the road should be built as soon as possible, without designing a rainwater drainage system and without dwelling on the healthy parts of the section. Thus, some parts are simply deforested and weeded and the dune areas are simply covered with reeds. Instead, the work of the sappers is focused on swampy areas, rock barriers and cuttings in the terrain. In the most difficult areas, the working technique adopted by the companies is to put the captain in the lead to define the route, then sections that trace a narrow track with a constant slope, and finally teams of coolies that increase the width of the roadway to three metres. Swampy areas involve the construction of a large number of culverts, all built on the same principle: piles are driven deep into the ground to serve as pillars for the deck and planking. This technique, in view of the limited resources available to the engineers, requires considerable effort in areas that are unhealthy by definition and often infested with caimans, whose ferocious appetites must be kept away. Ahead of the construction site, reconnaissance carried out

by engineering officers is essential for the continuation of operations. Difficult in a territory almost devoid of any means of communication, they nonetheless determined the progress of the construction site, and therefore the pace at which the troops in contact were supplied. The pace of the manoeuvre therefore depended on the reconnaissance and the ardour of the sappers.

The last section of the road required the participation of all the troops, the engineers having suffered important losses and having to concentrate on the construction of the bridges. Seven major bridges were built along the road, the longest of which, the Betsiboka Bridge, was 413 metres long. These bridges use regulation equipment, the Birago Bridge, but are not always used according to the regulations. This equipment being in insufficient quantity, it is especially on the ingenuity of the engineering officers and on the local resource of raw materials that one must rely. The principle is always the same, whether it's with the regulatory equipment or with locally manufactured equipment: trestles are set up every five to six metres to support the bridge deck and planking. The difficulty lies, on the one hand, in driving the piles of the trestles and, on the other hand, in the displacement of the banks and the significant variations in water level. The latter, added to the frequent passages of heavily loaded vehicles, require periodic repairs and even, in the case of the Betsiboka bridge, successive extensions of up to fifty metres over and above the initial length.

The extension of the engineering action

The campaign to re-conquer Madagascar ended, as we have said, in the first days of October. Most of the troops left immediately for mainland France to make themselves available for further overseas engagements. Only a small number of troops remained on the island to keep order on the island, protect our citizens and contribute to economic development. It is in this last mission that the engineers continued to carry out brilliant actions that bring honour to them.

In the winter following the end of the fighting, Lieutenant-Colonel Marmier conducted reconnaissance for the improvement of the road from Majunga to Tananarive and for the creation of two additional roads. The first would open up the large southern city of Fianarantsoa and the second would link Tananarive to Tamatave on the east coast. The road to Fianarantsoa is being built using local labour led by engineering cadres. The road from Tamatave to Tananarive should become the major axis of the island's economic development since all goods imported and exported from Madagascar will have to pass through this road. However, this road existed before the events that led to the French intervention, the popular tradition mentioning it in his memoirs. Colonel Marmier is therefore only exhuming this old road carefully hidden by the Hovas in the eyes of the French. It is thus a barely visible trail that the colonel rediscovers under the foliage, but he immediately gets to work, gradually uncovering a much more practicable route than the one he had opened on the other side of the island a year earlier. Once again, the sappers worked hard to create this time a real road suitable for receiving convoys of goods leaving or arriving at the port of Tamatave. However, the economic development of this colony was such that very quickly, the road was no longer sufficient and a more efficient solution had to be found. The authorities naturally turned to the sappers.

In 1897, a mission of officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the rank of the 5th Engineer ^{Regiment} was charged with the reconnaissance and the raising of the railway between Tamatave and Tananarive. This mission is led by Commander Roques, future Minister of War during the First World War. Several routes and preliminary projects are

recognized and studied by the railway engineers and it is finally the route from Andavorante which is retained by the command. The route was particularly difficult because after going up one valley, it had to cross two before reaching the capital.

In spite of the magnitude of the task, the construction site was entrusted to local companies, but very quickly they gave up in the face of the difficulty. It was therefore the engineering officers who took over the management of the work. This delay in the start of the project explains why only 30 kilometres were inaugurated in 1902. It was not until 1908 that the 270 kilometres of railway line linking Andavorante to Tananarive were completed. To complete this work, the track was extended to Tamatave in 1910 and 1911, bringing the length of the track to 369 kilometres.

The economic scope of this work is considerable. The island can finally emerge from the agricultural era and exploit the immense wealth of its soil. On the technical level, the work turns out to be a real feat. Thirty tunnels had to be drilled, eight viaducts launched and an average of ten bridges, aqueducts or gutters built per kilometre of track. The railway engineers paid a heavy price for this work: three officers and several non-commissioned officers lost their lives.

Another major project was to come into being a little later: the construction of a track linking Tananarive to Antsirabe. This project, initiated in 1911, was carried out between 1913 and 1923.

A total of 855 kilometres of track will be built by railway engineers in Madagascar, in a very rugged country whose climate imposes a fierce energy, often at the risk of life. The country has 893 today.

The glory of the 5th genius

The 5th ^{Engineer}, as we have seen, was not the only one to constitute the expeditionary force of Madagascar. But, on the one hand, he constituted the major part of it, and on the other hand, he extended his stay long after the end of the conflict. His work thus takes on two different aspects, each bringing its first pages of glory to a very young regiment.

- The first is the direct participation in the fighting, not through spectacular and one-off actions, but through a long and discreet road-building mission. If the engineers had not paid so dearly for such a commitment, their action might perhaps have remained unknown. But the insalubrity of the Malagasy climate decided otherwise and it is in letters of blood that this regiment wrote the first pages of its history. Beyond the sinister accounting of this sacrifice, essential values mark from the outset the cohesion of this corps created six years earlier. This is what the Minister of War wanted to show to posterity as an example by inscribing Madagascar 1895 on the folds of its flag.
- The second is the high technical quality of the officers and non-commissioned officers of this regiment. The relevance shown by their recognitions and their reports allow the command to immediately ensure the security of the island. The development of fast and safe communication routes shortens the distances and therefore the response time from one point to another on the island. It also makes it possible to develop trade considerably, thus bringing wealth and killing in the bud any ferment of discontent of a population that is not angry at coming out of the dictatorial power of the dominant ethnic group. It can therefore be said that the 5th ^{Engineer} has been a most effective tool in the hands of a political power that is short of military manpower, at a time when a vast colonial empire is forcing

France to dilute its armed forces as much as possible.

Finally, the action of the 5th ^{Engineers in} Madagascar, a long and difficult action, will have allowed France to re-establish its authority there and to preserve its interests. Episode among many other colonial epics, the fact remains that great pages of glory were written there and as such, it deserves to be written in history.

Saint-Cyrien de la promotion Commandant Morin (1994-1997), battalion commander Raoul Deleuze was section chief, deputy and works company commander in the 5th regiment du génie, in Canjuers, but also in OPEX (Kosovo and Côte d'Ivoire), before taking up the post of works officer in the operations and training office. He is currently following the technical diploma of the School of Engineering.

Title :	le chef de bataillon Raoul DELEUZE
Author (s) :	le chef de bataillon Raoul DELEUZE
Release date	12/02/2021
