



□ Mountain combat, or the need to train tactical leaders in the specificities of warfare in difficult environments

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Land Forces Doctrine Review

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Engagement opérationnel

The end of the war in Afghanistan, which was particularly favourable to the employment of mountain troops, did not mark the end of the specific employment of French mountain troops. Indeed, border surveillance, particularly in the Alps, has once again become a concern and already calls on the specific skills and capabilities of the 27th Mountain Infantry Brigade (27th BIM). Above all, the mountains remain a formidable training and training ground forging valuable combat tools.

To this end, the role of the High Mountain Military School (HMMS) is to train military leaders for combat in the mountains. These leaders do not necessarily have to be mountain people by birth, but they must have a taste for effort and a curiosity to learn.

Although mountain fighting has existed since the earliest days of human warfare, it is still very much present in contemporary conflicts. Moreover, the environment in which it takes place is particularly constraining for the army's operational superiority factors (OSF). Thus, a proposal to reinforce the principles of warfare, through six additional principles of use, makes it possible to anticipate, at the tactical level, the many difficulties of this combat.

Permanence of combat in the mountains

It must be said that war, which has been taking hold in the mountains since antiquity, has not left it. Already in the 6th century B.C., Sun Tzu refers to mountainous terrain to narrate the indispensable adaptability of armies and leaders to contingencies. Xenophon, in the 4th century BC, fought in the mountains of Anatolia during the retreat of the Ten Thousand. Then, during the Second Punic War, Hannibal crossed the Alps in 218 BC. Initially a peripheral battleground, the mountains then became a priority focus of interest for European states anxious to defend their borders. This is how the great generals of the 17th and 18th centuries, notably Vauban and de Bourcet, invented new tactics and theorised mountain warfare. Napoleon used them during the battles of the Revolution on the borders of the Alps and during the Italian campaign in 1796. But he will later fail in Switzerland and Spain, facing guerrillas who will take advantage of a terrain that they

know how to make favourable to their structure and action.

In the 20th century, despite the advent of technological warfare, war did not desert the mountains. During the First World War, the Vosges were the scene of particularly deadly confrontations. Fighting also took place in the Dolomites, between Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as in the Caucasus, between the Ottoman and Russian empires. Each time, the specificities and difficulties of this particular battle are particularly striking, revealing the physical and moral strengths of the combatants. The Second World War also had its share of battles in mountainous areas. Between 1940 and 1944, the Alps were also the scene of a change in this war, as it became a war of attrition in which numerous maquis in particular became famous. But it is probably in the Chinese massifs that the modern war of insurrection was born, following the strategic retreat, between 1934 and 1935, of Mao's Red Army through the Sichuan and Shanxi massifs. Western armies will find this form of war in most of the peripheral conflicts of the Cold War, especially in the face of the many anti-colonial movements they will have to face.

Even today, mountain warfare is still a topical issue. France has experienced an intense engagement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2013. During the conflict, the projection of battalions of alpine hunters every winter became essential, given the topography of the Hindu Kush mountain range. Overseas, high intensity fighting is still taking place in Yemen. Iraq also remains concerned, as witnessed by the bloody episode of the Sinjar massacres in 2015 against the Yezidi populations.

The historical approach to mountain fighting proves that it does not only concern specialists. However, today, in the Army, only mountain units, mostly belonging to the 27th BIM, are capable of being engaged in operations in the mountains and extreme cold.

Impact of the mountainous environment on the FSO

First of all, the particularity of the mountainous relief puts to the test the endurance and moral strength of men and materials. On the one hand, the physical fatigue of the fighter is exacerbated. The risks of rock falls, slides and avalanches are permanent. The climate can be extreme, the effect of negative temperatures is aggravated by wind and precipitation. The soldier is then exposed to the risks of frostbite, hypothermia, hyperthermia and lightning strikes. He must therefore draw on his reserves and fight against the environment, which spares him nothing. The high altitudes also carry potentially fatal physiological risks, in particular cerebral and pulmonary oedema. On the other hand, equipment is subject to premature wear and tear, and must resist particularly violent stresses that can freeze fluids or even break up solids.

Moreover, agility, as well as the mass effect, can hardly be achieved in this hostile context. Indeed, the topology of the terrain restricts the opportunities for unit concentration, and the fronts are often discontinuous. The troops are thus naturally isolated, they are therefore all the more exposed to the shock of combat. The mobility of armies is reduced due to a strong channelling, which leads to a significant increase in travel time. Finally, technological superiority is de facto levelled, since the nature of the terrain multiplies the masks and significantly reduces the effect of weapons, and because concessions on protection are imposed by the desire to retain freedom of manoeuvre. Light aviation is particularly penalized, since its carrying capacity and availability are

greatly reduced.

Finally, the characteristics of the environment significantly bias the understanding and performance of command. Communication means can quickly become inoperative because of natural barriers blocking the waves, which can complicate the coordination of operations and militate in favour of the design of simple manoeuvres. In addition, obtaining surprise can be very tricky, since manoeuvring in highly compartmentalized spaces does not provide the conditions for it. Here the defender seems to have an advantage over the attacker. Similarly, the reversibility of an operation may prove to be reduced, if not impossible. Moreover, the difficulty of the environment increases the resistance capacity of mountain populations. It then becomes more difficult for armies to find refuge with the populations and to influence them.

Ultimately, in order to engage in the mountains and minimise the restrictive effects of the environment, an army needs specific training and education, as well as good acclimatisation. It also needs specific equipment and infrastructure to train, live and manoeuvre in the mountains. Finally, it needs to adapt the articulation of its units, as well as its standards of engagement.

Mountains constrain the application of the principles of war because they limit freedom of action, make it difficult to concentrate efforts and complicate the economy of means.

Employment principles as a lifeline

Preamble

Historically, the qualities of mountain leaders are the ability to anticipate and adapt, a state of mind resolutely on the offensive, audacity, and finally humility and prudence in the face of the natural elements. Since the application of the principles of warfare in the mountains is strongly constrained by the environment and is not self-evident, it is necessary to rely on principles of use, or principles of mountain warfare, which will complement the timeless principles of warfare. The environment adds variables to the constants of the equation.

First principle of use: preparation of lcommitment

It is a question of hardening the men, physically and morally, that is to say to harden the troop. The training of the leaders, technically and tactically, is also essential. The provision of specific equipment is a necessary condition for this. Finally, it is a question of making the units capable of dominating the environment.

The application of this principle of employment allows Finnish troops to be victorious in January 1940 at the Battle of Suomussalmi, against the Soviet divisions, which were far outnumbered but less well prepared. Conversely, the heavy Saudi losses in Yemen during the Saada war in 2009, partly result from their lack of adaptation to combat in the mountains.

"Any troop that operates in the Alps, before entering into battle with the enemy, enters

into battle with the terrain [...]. Captain Simon PAUL, *The Principles of Alpine Warfare*, 1901.

Second principle of use: ubiquity

The aim is to put the enemy's device in omnidirectional danger in order to paralyse its manoeuvre, to dumbfound it, and then to deal it a fatal blow. The terrain makes the maneuver predictable and forces, at least initially, the deconcentration of efforts. In an offensive situation, it is necessary to create a deadlock around the enemy's position, maintain uncertainty and concentrate efforts at the right moment. In defence, it is necessary to aim for the deconcentration of forces and to have reserves, then to vary and slow down.

The key points are speed, surprise and boldness. Only the third dimension offers undeniable capacities to close a hoop from high points and to obtain an effect of surprise on all or part of an area of action. Nevertheless, this capacity cannot be considered permanent due to employment constraints limiting its availability.

In May 1944, the breakthrough of the Liri Valley, during the battle of Monte Cassino, is carried out simultaneously by the ups and downs. The axis of effort is not detected, which prevents the enemy from committing his reserves. On the contrary, during the Italian campaign in May 1794, General SARET's troops suffered heavy losses during the attack on the pass of Monte Cenis. The concentration of efforts of the attacking forces enabled the enemy, installed in defence, to anticipate their manoeuvre.

...] what characterises mountain defence is perfect passivity since the defender is condemned to immobility ..."...] The attacker, for his part, can maneuver and break through the line of defense, either by bypassing it or by concentrating his forces at a single point....
Carl von CLAUSEWITZ, *Of War*, 1830.

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