



□ Combat in the mountains, or the need to train tactical leaders in the specificities of warfare in difficult environments 2/2

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.

The second employment principle : opportunism

It is a question of being able to use the particular characteristics of the terrain, to multiply the effects of one's manoeuvre and outclass that of the enemy. Since the terrain limits the possibilities of maneuvering, no opportunity should be missed.

The key points are movement, a guarantee of safety in the mountains, speed to overtake the enemy, and the availability of sufficient reserves. Winning the intelligence battle is essential, as manoeuvring in the mountains rarely gives a second chance. Then there must be autonomy of decision delegated to the lowest levels, to be able to seize every opportunity.

History shows the importance of this principle during the Second World War. In 1944, during the Battle of the Vosges, the 2nd Armoured Division took advantage of the capture of the Dabo Pass to capture Strasbourg. In 1945, the 7th BCA79 ski scout section, commanded by Lieutenant PAGANON, took advantage of the night to climb the north-eastern corridor of the Belleface rock to ensure its conquest.

"Guerrilla forces with a low level of technology can use the terrain to their advantage to multiply their capabilities, inflict serious damage on a better equipped force and escape its blows. » Patrick VILJANEN, Observation of Mountain Operations in Afghanistan, 2003.

Fourth principle of use: domination

It is a question of controlling the highs in order to have a decisive advantage, because it allows to dominate the battle space, and thus to take the initiative on the enemy, but also to exploit from the lows. In addition, holding the high points allows better coordination from one terrain compartment to another and to consider effort shifts. Finally, it allows to have a certain psychological ascendancy over the enemy. The seizure of high points is thus part of the initial effort of any manoeuvre in the mountains.

For the attacker, the key points are speed as well as physical and moral strength. For the defender, it is advisable to control the approaches to observation posts and to have sufficient reserves. Ultimately, mobility is a decisive element in any mountain manoeuvre. The use of helicopters can ease the difficulties of the terrain by providing room for manoeuvre and a definite psychological ascendancy over the enemy.

The capture of Mount Majo by Moroccan troops of the 2nd Moroccan Infantry Division in May 1944, whose fall made Cassino vulnerable, is a convincing example. The situation was different when, in 2002, during Operation Anaconda, the Americans entered the Shah-i-Khot Valley without having secured possession of the tops. This shortcoming had consequences for the rest of the operations.

"The dominant position is only decisive in the mountains. » Carl von CLAUSEWITZ, From the War, 1830.

Fifth principle of use: complementarity of the lights

It is a matter of having the shortest possible time for fires to reach their target, whatever the terrain, thanks to the complementary nature of the means of delivery and the effects of the weapons. Achieving this objective is not easy, since the terrain constrains support, access to manoeuvring areas, availability over time, ballistics and the effect of the ammunition.

The key points are then to have observers on the front line equipped with specific means, as well as a variety of munitions and vectors, in order to produce the effects by adapting to the terrain. The redundancy of means ensures the permanence of fire. Finally, it is better to favour precision in the face of saturation.

To be convinced of this, it is interesting to realize the difficulties of the Syrian regime's troops in 2014 in Qalamoun, because of the configuration of the mountainous terrain that offers a natural barrier to the rebels. This was not the case in 1940 at Chaberton, when the precision of the French artillerymen prevailed over the attempts to saturate the Italians.

"All infantry officers must be able to regulate or trigger artillery fire because it is unlikely that artillery units can provide sufficient observers. » Battle of Siachen between India and Pakistan, 1998.

Sixth Employment Principle: Siege of the enemy

It's about waging war on the enemy's communication routes. Mountain fighting can be compared to siege fighting. Here, more than on the plains, communication routes are a

major stake in the success of the manoeuvre, whether offensive or defensive. Indeed, the partitioning of the terrain limits their number and causes their congestion, even saturation.

The key points are therefore to cut the enemy's umbilical cord, while protecting his own lines of communication. It is thus necessary to develop its means of communication, physical or not, by appealing to the third dimension, but especially by increasing the troop's capacity for self-sufficiency.

The Battle of Suomussalmi is a good illustration of this principle of use. Facing the Soviets, the Finns apply the motti tactic, which consists first of all in dividing the opponent in order to create locally favorable balance of power, but also in attacking its weak points, the columns of vehicles are then stopped. In 1982, during the Panjshir offensive, the Red Army also found it very difficult to fight against the Afghan mujaheddin, who avoided the balance of power and concentrated on their opponent's weak points.

"... the genius of this [mountain] war is to occupy camps or on the flanks or behind those of the enemy, leaving them with only the alternative of either evacuating their positions without fighting and taking others from behind or coming out to attack you. »Hubert CAMON, The Napoleonic War, 1910.

Combat in mountainous areas in the extreme cold is now a new issue with NATO's commitment in Central Europe as part of the reassurance measures, in a context of a return of high intensity in potentially "extreme cold" areas. Mastery of mountain combat can only be acquired at the cost of a long apprenticeship which must include all the constraints of the environment, its consequences on man, equipment and modes of action.

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