

LEADING ARTICLES IN THE REVIEWS.

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THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR:

SEVERE CRITICISMS.

MR. H. J. WHIGHAM, writing to *Scribner's* from the seat of operations, under date February 6th, on "The Intermediate Stage of the Boer War," engages in the severest criticism. First of all, three guns per thousand infantry are, he says, reckoned by the best authorities to be the minimum equipment. Every British division in South Africa was six guns short to begin with. He does not, however, think that the Boers gained much by their guns. They must have thrown over one thousand shells into the British lines, but they only wounded several men and a few horses. He is loud in his praise of the Royal Artillery in its advance on Kimberley; "it is impossible to conceive of any artillery in the world doing better work than they did at Modder River and Magersfontein." He thinks the Boer is none so mobile as he has been depicted; only "we are extraordinarily slow."

BRITISH STRATEGY.

As to the strategy of our generals, the writer holds that "the initial mistake was the endeavour to hold Ladysmith and Dundee, instead of being content with defending the line of the Tugela." On the earlier attempts to relieve Ladysmith, the writer says "General Buller had not grasped the elementary rule of warfare that, where two armies are equally well equipped, the attacking party must have an immense superiority of numbers." General French "did exactly the right thing. He hovered on the Boers' flanks until the Boer general got nervous and retired." Yet the writer remembers that "General Buller has done the dirty work of the campaign."

TACTICS APPALLING.

But the severest indictment is laid against the tactics of the British generals:—

The advance toward Kimberley was a series of triumphs for the bravery of the British soldier; but it discovered an appalling lack of military knowledge and tactical resource on the part of the British general.

The writer is not too hard on the rough-and-ready methods of our attack at Belmont and Graspan, for they "came off." But "the first real problem" Methuen had to deal with was Modder River, and "there he went to pieces." The writer adds "an important fact":—

There is an officer in the Ninth Lancers who made a great name for himself by reconnoitring, who not only located the Boer trenches along the south bank of the Riet, but learned their extent and the numbers of the enemy—in both cases coming close to the truth—and he made his report to Lord Methuen the night before the battle. Lord Methuen, for reasons of his own, preferred to believe that the Boers would not hold the river, and acted accordingly.

"AMUSED CONTEMPT" FOR OUR GENERALS.

The paper closes with this scathing paragraph:—

And we have no lack of intelligent men in the army. The officers of the younger school love their profession and study it as they would any other profession in which they hoped to succeed. . . . On the whole, the younger men are not only inordinately brave soldiers, but they are as intelligent and as zealous in the study of their profession as any officers, German or otherwise, can be. For that reason they had been driven to regard their generals in South Africa, until Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener arrived, with an air of amused contempt. Such a glaring want of resource or knowledge or common-sense as was displayed at Modder River, Magersfontein, Stormberg, and Colenso, cannot be passed over in silence. Discipline will carry a man a long way, and close his eyes to many things which the ordinary civilian is bound to notice, but you cannot close your eyes forever. At Colenso General Buller made a direct frontal attack against a tremendously strong position, without the

slightest attempt to turn it. He further chose two re-entrant angles for the exact places to be assaulted; and this, in spite of the fact that the enemy's left extended across the Tugela, and was, therefore, vulnerable to a flank attack. It does not seem as if lack of common-sense, to use no harsher term, could possibly go farther.

"ANTIQUATED DRILL AND TACTICS."

Lieut.-General Sir E. Newdegate contributes to the *Fortnightly Review* an article written some fifteen years ago on the "Antiquated Drill and Tactics" employed then, and still employed in the British army. The article is a rather technical one; but General Newdegate's essential point is that the drill of the present day is, omitting changes in detail, identical with that set out in the first drill book of 1792. Even as far back as the Crimean War, the obsolescence of the old tactics had been shown on more than one occasion, with serious risk of disaster to the British army. All other European armies have since reformed their tactics, and there is one universal system of manœuvring in small columns. But passages in the British drill book—

appear to have been introduced with the object of proving that these small columns are unsuitable for modern tactics. We read as follows:—

"Formation such as a strong company in column of sections are very vulnerable objects. The vulnerability of a company in column of sections at 'long' distances is on an average twice that of a company in line."

In theory this may be correct, but in practice it is not so. The writer must have overlooked one of the great advantages of small columns, which is that you can form line very quickly when necessary, or advance over dangerous ground in lines of extended sections, and close again as soon as cover is obtained by the next fold of ground. It is extraordinary what a small rise of ground will cover a small column.

The passage quoted above would lead any one to believe that it would be better for a battalion to advance, when nearly a mile from the enemy, in a single line than in four small columns. The line formation of a battalion (eight hundred strong), especially when there are several of them in the same line, is the most difficult and most harassing mode of advancing possible, even for a comparatively short distance over open ground. What, then, must it be over broken and uneven ground, disturbed all the time by the enemy's fire? No one, we think, could seriously recommend such an evolution in preference to that above described.

Perhaps the opponents of these small columns will say that if the line is objectionable, then let the companies advance in "fours from the right" or in "columns of sections." To this we reply that they would be equally as liable to suffer from the enemy's fire as columns formed of two companies.

Modern firearms demand the reform of modern tactics; and in dealing with a European foe—

We shall meet armies trained to a skirmishing order of fighting. The rapidity and elasticity of their movements will give us no time for the deployment of our divisions from mass of columns on the field of battle. Must we not therefore change our system of manœuvring for one that is more elastic? Modern firearms had doomed close battalion formations. With the loss of these we lose the control they gave us over the men. Ought we not therefore to endeavour to recover the control by prudent delegation of command, and by enforcing more strongly than ever the chain of responsibility from the Lieutenant-Colonel down to the Commander of the smallest section or even group? To carry this out, no change in our battalion organisation is absolutely necessary. Where the change appears to be necessary is in our drill system; and even here one point only has to be decided, and that is *the tactical unit which is to form the basis of it.*

"THE WORST SHOTS IN THE WORLD."

"Marksmanship Old and New" is the title of a paper by Mr. W. A. Baillie-Grohman in the *Nineteenth Century*

for May. Mr. Grohman begins his article by contrasting the encouragement which shooting received in the days of the Tudors with the present state of things when the British, armed with the worst rifle and with the least practice, are, he thinks, the worst shots in the world. Mr. Grohman's proposals for bettering this are as follows:—

The main things to strive for are the same that Henry the Eighth had made his aim nigh four hundred years ago: arms that will shoot straight; ammunition that will do its work efficiently; easily available butts for the citizen to practice at (Sundays included); enforced rifle practice at all schools for youths of fifteen upwards; for the poorer classes of the population free use of arms and ammunition under proper superintendence at ranges which can be reached without expense or loss of time; and finally, a law that shall compel every youth of eighteen years of age who has received benefits at the hands of the State—such as Board School education or free bringing up—to acquit himself of his debt to the taxpayer by serving for one or two years in the Army.

At the present day the British soldier expends but three days out of the three hundred and sixty-five on individual fire practice, while the whole drill he receives in the use of the chief arm of warfare is restricted to nine days a year. The quality of the training is as deficient as the quantity, for while our recruit receives a few lessons in judging distances, he does not fire a shot to show that he has understood their bearing. The Musketry Regulations state that it is only in the exceptional case of men acting independently that they will be required to estimate distances by themselves, hence they are not taught to do so. But in the present war by far the greater part of the firing has been uncontrolled and individual. As a consequence the firing against the Boers was ineffective. In very few cases was a Boer hit more than once, while many of our men had several Mauser bullets through them. The doctors in the Boer hospitals declared that most of their patients' injuries came from artillery fire.

Not only is the service rifle bad and armed with defective sights, but Mr. Grohman, as an instance of War Office inefficiency, says that the British armoured trains gave no protection whatever against the Mauser bullets at short range. As another instance of War Office unreadiness, he says that:—

When the reverses of the first two and a half months had demonstrated the hollowness of our boast of being able to meet all the world in arms, and various emergency measures were hastily pushed forward, the War Office promptly called in for use in South Africa all reserve ammunition in the Home Districts, leaving, it is said, not a single cartridge in the possession of those responsible for the training of some of the corps of Volunteers. As a consequence, many of these men were shipped off to the front with hardly any training in musketry. Can incompetence reach lower depth?

Mr. Grohman ends his paper by pleading for the abolition of the gun license as far as rifle clubs are concerned.

LORD ROBERTS' STRATEGY.

The *Fortnightly* also contains the usual anonymous review of the month's fighting, illustrated with a map. The most interesting point in the article is that in which, speaking of Lord Roberts' march to Bloemfontein, the writer says:—

Theoretically, the march to Bloemfontein was not in accordance with strategical teaching, seeing that Lord Roberts turned off at right angles to his line of communications—the Cape-Kimberley railway—and whenever his army engaged the enemy it was compelled to “form line to a flank” facing East—its line of retreat being South—so that he incurred the risk, if defeated, of being driven off his communications with his base. Such

situations have oftentimes been created in war—notably when Wellington defeated Marmont at Salamanca, pushing him off his line of retreat on Valladolid; and during the campaign of 1849, when Radetzki forced Chzarnowsky northward from his communications with Turin. Whenever possible a commander seeks to fight with his line of battle perpendicular to his line of communications, so as to be able to fall back on his base if defeated. Lord Methuen was in this position when repulsed at Magersfontein, and so was Sir Redvers Buller after the unsuccessful battle of Colenso—the tactical defeats in neither instance carrying with them any strategical disadvantage. The Boers instinctively avoid all risky situations, and rarely fight except with their line of retreat directly secured behind their line of battle. The position of Cronje's lines at Magersfontein was exceptional in this respect, inasmuch as it was parallel to his line of retreat on Bloemfontein through Petrusburg; but directly he found his communications threatened, he lost no time in endeavouring to secure them. His inability to do so affords an instinctive lesson in the risk attending such dispositions as the Boer Commanders made to cover the siege of Kimberley. It is, perhaps, fortunate that Lord Roberts never graduated at the Staff College, or he might have hesitated to follow the course which he took with such striking success. Having at his disposal for advancing into the Free State an army greatly superior in strength to the Boer forces in that portion of the theatre of war, and well knowing the habitual dislike on the part of the Boers to take the offensive, the Field-Marshal accepted a risk which was theoretical rather than practical, and possessed an insignificant importance, when weighed in the balance with the corresponding results which might be expected to follow the bold strategy adopted.

“THE MOST DECISIVE ACT OF A GOVERNMENT.”

The *Quarterly Review* thus concludes its retrospect of the war:—

Something will have been gained from the experience of the past six months if the nation should be induced by it to take to heart once more the great lesson of all military history, that in war the first requisite is a leader; and that, in regard both to the preparations made during peace and to the conduct of operations, the most responsible, the most important, and the most decisive act of a Government is the selection of its Commander-in-Chief.

IN PRAISE OF THE INTELLIGENCE DEPARTMENT.

Major-General F. S. Russell, M.P., contributes to *Blackwood* a paper on “The Intelligence Department,” in which he shows that, so far from breaking down exceptionally in the present case, the department has never, in any war we have been engaged in, justified its existence. In the war with Russia, so little was known of the Crimea, that, as Kinglake points out, the invasion was an enterprise with the “character of adventure belonging to earlier ages.” In the Abyssinian war six millions of the cost might have been saved by a little knowledge of the country, while the successful Ashantee war of 1873 and the abortive Suakim expedition were both undertaken in entire ignorance. One of the causes of this breakdown is that officers who have collected information by personal enterprise have never been able to get their expenses paid, and General Russell relates that in 1877, though actually despatched to Southern Russia and Turkey to get information, he never received a penny of his expenses.

FROM A BOER'S DIARY.

Blackwood's Magazine, among its other papers relating to the war, publishes a rather colourless, but obviously genuine, “Diary of a Boer before Ladysmith.” The diary confirms the reports as to the Boer farmers receiving periodical leave to visit their homes. The effect of the lyddite shells is ridiculed. The diarist says:—

The confident boast of the English as to the death-dealing

qualities of this missile is exaggerated. One burst within three yards of one man and nine yards from six, but did no harm.

A still more interesting piece of information is, that in the great assault on Ladysmith on January 6th, the assailants lost no more than fifty-five killed and one hundred and five wounded, a statement which may apparently be trusted, as the diary was obviously never intended for publicity. It illustrates the extraordinary capacity of the Boers for taking cover, that in an assault they lost but a third of the British, who were acting on the defensive.

BOER MISTAKES.

Blackwood's Magazine contains the usual survey of "The War Operations in South Africa," the article being a condemnation of the manner in which the whole of these operations have been carried out. The last two reverses at Koornspruit and Reddersburg are the special objects of the writer's criticism. The Boers also have made mistakes, but the writer evidently does not think they possessed anything like the numerical strength they have been credited with. He says :—

At their own peculiar methods of war they are unsurpassed. Their genius for taking and for making cover, their marvellous mobility, their stolid patience, have been the wonder of the Natal Field Force. But their commanders have missed many opportunities, and their artillery especially has been woefully mismanaged. Over and over again huge masses of transport have been well within range of their guns, while these have maintained a wholly ineffective fire on our scattered infantry. They have spared our pontoon bridges, as if these flew the Red Cross over them. For three months they have never even threatened our communications. They have never followed up even nominally our retirements after failure.

We like to flatter ourselves that we have really had 30,000 or 40,000 fighting men in front of us; but we have never seen them in any force at any point. If somebody through his binoculars spies twenty mounted men, there is as much excitement as if a hostile division of all arms was on the move. Have they ever really existed, these thousands upon thousands? Or have we simply been bluffed throughout by a very cunning foe? Probably we shall never know; for the Boer has a horror of statistics, and we do not want to learn that we have been confronted merely by a skeleton of great vitality.

THE FORTS AT PRETORIA.

Harmsworth's for April has a paper on the forts of Pretoria and how they were built, by one who has been over them. This is his description :—

There are in all seven forts around Pretoria. Of these, five are complete, or practically so; the other two are mere shells, and are not to be reckoned with as defences, unless, in an emergency, they were heavily sandbagged and otherwise temporarily fitted up. The general scheme of the forts is alike in each case. The outer walls are of solid masonry, many feet thick, flanked by earthworks on the outer faces. The original armament consisted of fifteen cm. guns, but a good many of them were taken to the front, and most, if not all, of the forts are now dismantled. The interior of the fort is a large quadrangle, containing a house, or rather a few rooms, for the gunners, an office, a telegraph shed, and an armoury. There is also a bomb-proof magazine partly underground.

How these facts were obtained the writer does not scruple to inform his readers :—

Being fluent in German, I succeeded in passing myself off as a German officer, and, unmolested, made my way right into the Daspoort fort. I succeeded in finding out the password from an inebriated artilleryman the night before (the word was "Fackelzug"), and had leisure to examine everything carefully. I verified the fact that there was a telephone to Pretoria, a powerful searchlight, and a very large stock of mealies (maize).

In another instance, it is related on very good authority that two officers of the Royal Engineers disguised themselves as

labourers and were employed in the actual building of the forts. They continued at this work for some weeks, and were enabled to gather a very good idea of the building and plan of defence, which they duly reported to the authorities in Pall Mall.

MR. MAXIM v. M. BLOCH.

"The Warfare of the Future" is the title of an article by Mr. Hudson S. Maxim (described as "the well-known inventor and high explosives expert," but who must not be confounded with Mr. Hiram Maxim), in the *Home Magazine* for April. Mr. Maxim's object is primarily to put forth certain of his own views of war, and incidentally to make against M. Bloch an attack which shows that he has never taken the trouble to read M. Bloch's book at all. After speaking of my interview, which prefaces M. Bloch's book, he says :—

So convincing is M. Bloch in his arguments that, in order to show him just courtesy, we ought to believe that there is no war being waged at the present time in South Africa, and that the bellicose reports from there are only wild, groundless rumours, because he has clearly shown that it is absolutely impossible for war now to be.

Considering that the very first page of my "prefatory conversation" with M. Bloch sets out his conviction that wars between Powers greatly unequal in strength are not only possible, but will be carried on just as often as before, the quotation I give makes a considerable reflection upon either Mr. Maxim's intelligence or honesty.

Mr. Maxim's inconsistency is even more amusing than his inaccuracy. He says :—

M. Bloch, like many others, often pronounces unknowable that which lies beyond the frontiers of his own knowledge, and as unattainable that which is foreign to his own comprehension. He tells us that in future there will be a zone of death between contending armies, across which it will be impossible for either of the combatants to pass. He points out that, due to the absence of smoke in battle, this condition of things is a natural result.

But having quoted the "death-zone" theory as a specimen of M. Bloch's want of knowledge and comprehension, Mr. Maxim proceeds in the next column to say that :—

The deadly character of machine guns and magazine rifles, with the absence of smoke on the field of battle, renders it out of the question to attack, as formerly, through the open, rush an enemy's position, and dislodge him at the bayonet's point. Under such conditions there must necessarily be, as M. Bloch has pointed out, a death zone between contending armies, which it will be impossible to cross, and battles must be long-range duels between artillerists and riflemen.

It would be interesting to hear Mr. Maxim's explanation of this. As another specimen of Mr. Maxim's ignorance of M. Bloch's opinions, it may be mentioned that he corrects M. Bloch's predictions as to the deadliness of modern arms, by the amazing discovery that in a future battle all natural cover will be utilised for defence, "and rifle-pits and trenches dug when no natural protection is offered." If Mr. Maxim had read M. Bloch's book he would have known that on every page M. Bloch insists that no commander will fight without protecting every man and gun with earthworks, and that even the attackers can only attack by taking all natural cover and improving it. Finally Mr. Maxim tries to convict M. Bloch of exaggerating the deadliness of modern artillery fire. But M. Bloch never made any statements on the subject at all; but merely quoted the views of Continental tacticians, some of whom said that nothing could resist modern artillery fire, while, as M. Bloch pointed out, others declared that bombardment, as in the case of Plevna, was wholly ineffective.