1.4: Small-Unit Tactics

Alex Montgomery
Defence of Duffer’s Drift

- E.D. Swinton (1868-1951)
- Credited for inventing the tank
- Fought in the Boer War (1899-1902)
  - Dutch settlers v. British
  - Guerrilla warfare
  - Ended Treaty of Vereeniging, May 1902
Defence of Duffer’s Drift

(1) SILLIAASVOGEL RIVER
(2) DRIFT
(3) REGRET TABLE MOUNTAIN
(4) WASCHOUT HILL
(5) INCIDENTAMBIA
(6) KRAAL
First Dream

Assumptions

- Picks, shovels unnecessary
- Rising ground good
- Guard target closely
- Natural obstacle
- Enemy far away
- Information from locals valid
- Locals not hostile
- Fires a good idea
First Dream

Results:
• Assault before dawn
• Locals aid Boers in intelligence
• Brits: 10 killed, 21 wounded
• Boers: 1 killed, 2 wounded
• Boer convoy crosses drift

Lessons:
1. Do not put off defense
2. Do not trust locals
3. Do not advertise position
4. Do not be in tents
Second Dream

Assumptions:
- Keeping posts further out gives more time
- Square Trenches sufficient
- Soldiers only diggers
- Keep locals out, fires out sufficient
Second Dream

Results:

• Brits: 24 killed, 6 wounded
• Boers able to fire from cover of bushes
• Brit position known
• Brits unable to fire from cover
• Square trenches increase casualties

Lessons:

5. With modern weapons:
   a) Don’t sit on top of drift
   b) Make positions away from concealed ground
   c) Make defences concealed and bullet-proof
   d) Square trenches not effective

6. Spread disinformation

7. Force labor
Third Dream

Assumptions:

- Position outside horseshoe better cover
- Straight trench w/single break sufficient
- Sufficient to guard male population
- Enemy has same arms as you
Third Dream

Results:
- Shelled from a distance
- Trenches useless (a target) against indirect fire
- Location given away by other locals

Lessons:
8. Gather all possible locals
9. Against shelling, scatter troops; against direct fire, gather.
10. Narrow, steep, trapezoidal trenches necessary
Fourth Dream

Assumptions:

• Dead animals won’t be noticed
• Solid parapet sufficient for return fire
• Obvious front: North
• No cover for trench necessary
Fourth Dream

Results:
- Position detected
- Trench enfiladed
- Position surrounded
- Brits incapable of returning effective fire
- Brits: 25 killed, 17 wounded

Lessons:
11. The front is everywhere
12. Watch your rear
13. Beware of being enfiladed
   a) Rifle fire
   b) Long-range guns
14. Do not put your trench behind rising ground
15. Do not huddle your men
16. Cover from sight worth more than from bullets
17. Surprise a great advantage
18. Conceal your position
19. Look from the enemy’s view
Trench Design

- Trenches built in zig-zag to avoid enfilading
- Support/Communications/Reserve trenches connected
- Allow for reinforcement under cover
- Cover under parapet against shelling
- Back and front covered against shelling/fire
- Cut-outs for firing
Fifth Dream

Assumptions:

• High ground is sufficient
• Guarding ground is a solely defensive operation
• Cover is the main criterion when choosing positions
Fifth Dream

Results:

• Deception useful
  – Boer scouts caught off-guard
  – Sandbags provided false target
• Ground made up for numbers
• “Dead ground” made road safe for Boers to pass under covering fire

Lessons:

20. Beware dead ground
21. Hill not the best (only) place to hold
22. Bluffs are good
Force Deployment

• Good ground:
  – Highest points
  – Close to objectives
  – Be aware of dead ground
  – Can direct fire to multiple areas

• Internal lines:
  – Capable of quick reinforcement
  – Troops don’t waste energy
Sixth Dream

Strategy:
• Trenches to cover dead ground
• Decentralized command
• Use of natural cover
• Extensive deception

Results:
• Brits: 11 killed, 15 wounded
• Boers: 25+ killed
• Drift held
Commentary...