THE ARMY UNDER CHANGE

'RECKLESS CAUTION'

II.—A FORCE WITHOUT A FIELD

In the second of two articles, the first of which appeared last Friday, our Military Correspondent reaches the conclusion that British military intervention on the Continent, if ever required, must be carried out by air and not by land forces.

By Our Military Correspondent

If we contemplate providing a field force for use on the Continent it should, as the problem is at present visualized, possess the power of attack. For, by the time it can arrive, even at the earliest reckoning, there is not likely to be much scope for a purely strategic offensive, while the time will have passed when the capacity for mere defence might be enough. It should be capable of undertaking the tactical offensive, with a fair prospect of success, if it is to justify the cost of its provision and the risks of its dispatch—risks that are increased to an incalculable extent in face of hostile air power. We have only to take account of the present state of the Army and its deficiencies of equipment—some of them enumerated in the previous article—to realize that at the moment we have no field force adequate to the purpose. The question remains, whether it would be adequate when the present programme of re-equipment is complete. Before attempting an answer it is worth while examining the basic elements of the tactical problem that the force would have to solve—if it gets to grips with the enemy without its strategic advance being interrupted by air attack.

The predominant condition of the last War, on land, was the superiority of the defensive. During four years this superiority amounted to supremacy. The main cause was the machine-gun. In the spring of 1918 the Germans were able temporarily to overcome the Allied defence, partly through the aid of a new technique, but even more through the unforeseen help of fog, which blanketed the opposing machine-guns at the outset of their first three offensives. Later, when there was no fog, their offensives failed. And even their successful offensives petered out in face of slender opposition when this was reinforced by their own difficulties in maintaining momentum. In the late summer and autumn of 1918 the German defence in turn was overcome by the combination of tanks with natural and artificial fog. Even so, the Allies never succeeded in solving the problem of exploiting initial success—not even as far as the Germans had done. The cause of their greater, and conclusive, success lay in the moral and physical bankruptcy of the foe, whose military ruin could be traced to the expense of his own spectacular offensives earlier, and was completed by the sickness, physical and mental, of his troops under economic pressure. The coming of the Germans' collapse found the Allied armies baffled, at least for the time, by the problem of keeping up armed pressure.

Analysis of these conditions provides no warrant for the belief that the offensive, save locally, had succeeded in reducing the superiority of the defensive. They rule out the idea that infantry who have to attack over the open can be expected, even locally, to overcome infantry whose machine-guns are ensconced behind cover, so long as the defending side is morally unshaken. The new light machine-guns are certainly an improvement on the Lewis gun, for use by advancing troops, but there is no reason to suppose that they would make a decisive difference against an enemy below ground with more machine-guns, light and heavy, than the defence ever had in 1914-18. High-angle fire, since it drops the projectiles over the cover, is more promising; but we cannot expect a decisive difference to be made by a battalion's handful of four mortars against 50 or 60 machine-guns on an opposing battalion front. There were mortars in the War.

We have increased the artillery support slightly by converting light artillery—the former "pack" artillery—into field, thus providing a scale of 20 field batteries to a division instead of 16; we have increased it still more indirectly because eight of these batteries are in "army" brigades and can be concentrated on any divisional front where they are most needed. There are also the equivalent of four medium batteries to a division. Even so, the possible scale of artillery support is a trifle compared with what it was in the offensives of the last War; and we know how little it achieved then. By contrast, any defending force in Western Europe to-day will have far more machine-guns to check the attack than it had then. Moreover, if motorization has quickened the application of fire-power in the attack, it promises to help the defence even more by enabling the defender to rush machine-guns to any threatened spot and counteract any surprise the attacker achieves. The defending machine-guns will be able to fire from behind cover, whereas the attackers, at any rate in the immediate future, will have to be brought forward in unshielded vehicles. They might make more difference if they were mounted in armoured vehicles and could bring their fire forward to close ranges.

FOG AS AN ALLY

What further possibilities are there of overcoming the established superiority of the defence? Leaving gas out of reckoning, we have to pin our hopes of a solution to obscurity, armour, and art. Attacking infantry have at present a good chance of overcoming the machine-gun in the dark, although art and high training are required to profit by the opportunity and avoid the risks of confusion. Even so, they cannot safely press the attack more than a short distance; to exploit the effect there must be enough armoured vehicles available, or some form of flood-lighting the battlefield must be invented. Also, it would be unwise to bank too heavily on the attack in darkness, for the defence may find means of keeping their front continuously lighted, and sooner.

The attack in fog has perhaps greater possibilities, on the basis of experience; but we cannot count on enjoying a natural fog when we need it. Smoke-screens are a useful substitute, but those of the past were too local. More hope lies in the development of artificial fog, capable of being projected in larger volume than is possible with artillery smoke-shell. Even so, the defence may not be long in finding means of dispersing it.

Armour is another well-proved aid. The armour may be carried, as in the War, by relatively slow tanks accompanying the infantry. It may be carried by fast tanks acting like cavalry in earlier wars and relying on the speed of the charge or on rapidity of manoeuvre. It may be carried, also, by little low-built machines manned by infantry, relying partly on their slight visibility, and giving the infantryman more protection at least than he would have when advancing on foot: the possibilities of such true "mechanized infantry" have not yet been fully explored. The value of armour can

also be increased by combining it with the use of obscurity. Armoured troops, if equipped with direction-finders, may be more suited to profit by natural or artificial fog than are men on their feet. In darkness, too, they are more formidable, if adequately trained for such tactics. And the progress that may be made in dispersing obscurity on behalf of the defence should affect tanks less because of their speed, so long as some obscurity remains.

Nevertheless, the development of anti-tank weapons is an increasing threat to the tank, especially when coupled with the new technique of obstruction. How serious it is not easy to gauge. We can at least be clear that the chances of the tanks increase with their quantity, and decrease disproportionately when they are few. At present we seem to contemplate no more than our one existing tank brigade re-equipped with modern machines—which would form part of a mobile division otherwise possessing small power of attack—and four battalions of infantry tanks still to be built. With so few tanks the chances of successful attack might well be zero. Against the multiplying anti-tank weapons of to-day it is certain that hope lies only in swarms—to swamp the defence.

For the rest of the Army, the ordinary infantry divisions, there is just a possibility that the development of a new technique in combination with the new equipment might give them some prospect of successful attack, up to a point. This possibility depends on progress in the art of war rather than on the material side. Here, unfortunately, we have to face the fact that the Army's present lack of modern equipment is not the sum of its qualitative deficiencies. Because of their small size, our forces need to excel in technical and tactical skill. At present they do not.

HANDICAPS

Hampered by the poor type of recruits, by depressingly slow promotion among the officers, by the peace-time tendency to give staff work preference over leadership, by lack of men and new means with which to develop the art of command, and by years of an atmosphere in which boldness of thought and freedom of expression were discouraged, the Army as a whole is not up to the standard of skill demanded by the more exacting conditions of modern warfare. It may be no worse than other armies, but it does not stand out like the Army of 1914.

It will be easier to make good the material deficiencies than to remedy these failings. The energy now being exerted may complete the re-equipment of the Army within two or three years. Even under the best guidance, and a better sense of how to promote activity of intelligence, it would take many years to outgrow the legacy of the post-War period and raise the general level of tactical aptitude. There are a number of officers who are real tacticians, whose natural aptitude has survived an unfavourable climate, but the proportion to the total is too small. They are like currants in a pudding.

There was an unpalatable abundance of suet in the exercises seen this year. "Safety first" seems to have largely superseded the theory *de l'audace, encore de l'audace, toujours de l'audace* of Danton, which also was Napoleon's. Conformity to the manuals, confusion due to constant changes of detail, and excessive emphasis on meticulous order-writing have produced a slow-motion habit which is inimical to the exploitation of opportunities. Instead of building tactical art on a basis of battle-drill, thus quickening its application, we have turned tactics into a drill in slow time. The effect is seen in an attitude of what can only be described as "reckless caution." It is the opposite of real security, while it stultifies the possibility of achieving surprise. To-day we are slaves of the obvious instead of being masters of surprise. Without a far more highly developed battle-craft there can be but a dim prospect of shaking the sovereignty of the defence.

CONCLUSIONS

When all the conditions are carefully weighed, the balance seems to swing heavily against the hope that a British field force on the Continent might have a military effect commensurate with the expense and the risk. I cannot see an adequate prospect, even when the present programme is complete, of its possessing the power of attack necessary to wrest from an invader any ground he may have gained before it could arrive. To fit the picture into the actual frame, formed by the zone between the Meuse and the Channel, serves to deepen this impression. And I do not see that a larger force would have a better effect, nor that subsequent reinforcement might make a great difference; for the limiting conditions have little to do with numbers of men. They are essentially qualitative and technical. Moreover, beyond all the difficulties which face the attacker on land lies the danger of his approach being dislocated by hostile attack from the air. And the larger the force the greater the danger.

It may still be considered that the force is worth while on political grounds. That may be a just opinion. But we ought to be sure that those who decide do so with their eyes opened to the fundamental military limitations.

The latest turn of Belgian policy may well give pause to those who are inclined to assume the need of a field force for the Continent without being clear as to the way it will act and the end it will serve. It has been argued that the action of our field force should be to prevent an enemy establishing air bases close to our coast and to cover the bases which our own Air Force might establish abroad in order to lengthen its range. But the increasing range of aircraft promises to diminish the value of such cover. If, now, there is a doubt of the Belgian attitude, the difficulties of using a field force effectively may be augmented, and its risks also.

If, on the other hand, we should decide to give up the idea of intervention by land forces our military problems would be greatly simplified. We could concentrate on making the Army at home an adequate Imperial reserve to the overseas garrisons. We could adjust its scale, organization, and training to this role, thus avoiding the wide and increasing divergence between what is required for Continental warfare and what is best suited to colonial warfare and Imperial policing. The forces we have would need far less adaptation and development. The very qualities in the average officer which raise doubts of his "offensive" capacity under modern conditions are admirably suited for the safe performance of his duties as an Imperial policeman. This applies to the men also. Since Marlborough the British Army has rarely shone in the offensive. It has been superb in defence and unmatched as an agent in maintaining order.

Concluded

The first article appeared last Friday.

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