

The New REPUBLIC

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Modern Trench Fighting

THERE is an illusion, held with uncommon tenacity by the general public, that the range and effectiveness of modern arms tend to keep armies far apart. On the contrary, there is more hand-to-hand fighting to-day than at any time since gunpowder was invented. The reason is simple; no attacking force dares to show itself until it is "right on top of" the enemy. Therefore the opposing lines move and fight, so far as possible, at night, and when in contact with each other they approach by digging series of crisscross trenches known as parallels. The average distance between two permanently occupied positions—such as the present line of battle from Switzerland to the English Channel—is certainly no more than two hundred yards, and probably less than one hundred and fifty, while at certain points it is not at all unusual to find opposing trenches within twenty-five yards of each other. I have myself been in such a position, where I could hear the enemy moving and talking, and where the earth wall of his trench, seen through a peep-hole, seemed close enough to touch with a long pole. Positions as close as this are most of the time occupied only by small detachments, frequently relieved. Sentinels keep watch through peep-holes, their coats thrown over their heads, for the peep-hole must be kept constantly dark, as otherwise the enemy's sharpshooters will locate it and kill the sentinels. Once I saw a Japanese sergeant at Port Arthur thus killed, the bullet passing through his glasses and through his head. When I myself looked through the peep-holes, the Japanese always invited me to take a rifle and shoot. Of course to raise one's head above the trench wall is practically certain death.

Except when an attack upon the enemy is planned or expected, the soldiers live in the second, third and fourth lines of trenches. Here they live in comfort, far more of comfort than when they are on the march, for these trenches are roofed and furnished, and are in no danger whatever except from the larger howitzer shells. On the other hand, an attack upon the enemy, even at night, is attended by a fearful percentage of casualties.

I have several times seen these attacks take place by day, once from a position as close as two hundred yards to the actual fighting; for it is possible, in a permanent supporting trench, to be quite safe. The signal for the engagement is always a concerted artillery fire upon the position to be taken, and also upon all positions which can by rifle fire in *enfilade* oppose the advance. At a moment previously determined the attacking party rushes out, and the artillery ceases so as not to kill men of its own side, although I am sorry to say I have seen the last shells burst at times among the attacking

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force. The attackers run as fast as they can, unevenly, because some naturally run faster than others, but close together. It is exactly like the charge of a football team after the kick-off, except that there would be one hundred men in the space which in a football game holds eleven. Upon reaching the crest of the enemy's trench the attackers usually throw hand grenades—bombs with fuses—and after that the fighting is all hand-to-hand. The Japanese at Port Arthur used the bayonet, but I always noticed that the Russians, taking advantage of their greater reach, swung their rifles like clubs. Usually the Russians won, and in that case not more than five out of one hundred Japanese got back to their trenches in safety. Those in the Russian trenches the Russians killed or captured, and those lying between the trenches the Russians picked off, at their leisure, with rifles. Once I saw a successful charge when the Russians, about fifty of them, were driven out. They were carrying heavy blanket rolls, and had to run up hill, which they could not do. Finally they sat down and waited to be killed, every single one. Only one man, an officer, escaped; he was lame, and while the green side of the hill spurted with dirt from bullets as a pond does in the rain, he walked unscathed.

Many weapons long since thought obsolete have come into use again. First among these are grenades, of which there are all kinds, from manufactured bombs with fuses to soda-water bottles or tin cans filled with old iron—a variety which is practically as effective. Some of them are carried in the hand, some on long poles. There are also the canister, which is nothing but a shell filled with very small shot, and the trench-mortar, meant to throw a shell a short distance straight up into the air and down into the enemy's trench. For this last purpose I have seen wooden guns used, but I was never able to find out whether they worked on the principle of a sling, a spring, or an airgun.

Advances are made also by tunnels and mines, but the main difficulty of the whole procedure is to hold a position once gained, or, as the French reports have it, to "consolidate" one's position; for a trench cannot be held unless it has points of support. In other words, it must be connected with the other trenches, and supported by *enfilade* in at least two directions.

All this is slow work; at this rate the French will not drive out the Germans in months, but on the other hand a frontal attack—and every attack must now be frontal—even if successful would cost several hundred thousand men. Undoubtedly new weapons will be forged for this kind of work, and I am personally of the opinion that an improved type of trench-mortar would turn the scale in the attackers' favor.

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