From the Archives

The Journal
OF THE
United Service Institution of India.
VOL. XXVIII 1898. NO. 131.

NOTES ON HILL WARFARE

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL J A H POLLOCK, 1st SIKH INFANTRY.

There is a want in the Service of some work on Hill Warfare. The Infantry Drill Book scarcely mentions it, and I know of no work which has yet been written on the subject with reference to fighting with frontier tribes, who, most of them, are accustomed to fighting from their youth upwards; who are surrounded with enemies, and who are excellent shots and the finest material for light infantry in the world; whose knowledge of hill tactics is excellent, who see faults and know how to take advantage of them, and from whom we have much to learn.

Having spent over twenty years on the frontier, more or less in contact with these tribes, I think the following rough notes may be of interest to some readers, as showing the lines on which most of the frontier regiments are trained to meet these tribes.

Advance-guards. —This is probably the simplest part of frontier warfare. As a rule, attacks are not made on advance-guards, except when a very strong position is held in force, but on the baggage or rear-guard; still, with an enterprising hill enemy, it never does to be careless, and all work should be thoroughly and carefully done.

An advance-guard may be told off as on a plain, except that groups are better than an extended line, as they are more under control, and single men, in jungle or rough ground, are liable to be lost if wounded.

Flanking parties are always necessary, but in the hills cannot move along with the column, so have to remain where they are placed, fresh parties being sent up as the column advances.

With a brigade or larger force, the advance-guard and flankers might be given from different regiments, and I think should move off about an hour before the main body marches. This allows of the troops moving quicker, as the road is already piquetted for them, and also probably saves loss of lives; as, with careful piquetting, the line of march should be fairly out of range of the enemy. In enclosed country it is necessary to increase the number of connecting files; no party or file should lose touch of that behind it. It should continually look round and see if it is there, and, if not, halt till it appears again.

On arriving in camp, the advance-guard should at once place the day piquets, which should be far enough out to prevent the camp being fired into.

Flank piquets. —These, in the hills, are a most important detail, and are not, as a rule, thoroughly understood.

With an enterprising enemy the piquets must be strong, and also be in such positions that an enemy cannot approach the line of march without coming under their fire.

The ground beyond the piquets should be in view, so that the enemy can collect in numbers without their knowledge.

It is better, with a strong enemy, to leave supports along the line of march, especially at places like the mouths of nullahs; where they are likely to try and rush the convoy or rear-guard.

Piquet sentries should not stand up or walk about. Their object is to see the enemy, not to be seen by him.

On moving up hill to their places, piquets must not straggle; they should keep together and fix bayonets, or they may move up in extended order and close as they get near the top. It is better than to send one or two men forward to spy out the country. Don't march on to the skyline; it only gives the enemy a magnificent target just when the men are to out of breath too shoot straight. On the way up make a note

of the quickest and easiest way down, and, if possible, select one which will be under cover.

Piquets must be especially careful after the main body has passed. Frontier tribes don't want to fight a big force which they know can beat them, but they want rifles and loot, and these can be obtained from the baggage or rear guard.

The piquets must, on no account, come down till the rear of the rear-guard is level with them.

When they retire, they should leave a few active men to cover their retirement till they are well down the hill, when the party left should follow rapidly.

It is a common thing for the whole piquet to stand up and turn about in retiring, which at once shows the enemy what is happening, with the result that the position is occupied at once, and a heavy fire brought to bear on the rear or baggage.

Piquets should always withdraw as quickly as possible, when once they commence to do so.

The position of the companies who are to furnish the flank piquet should, on the line of march, be as near the head of the advance guard as possible.

The piquet should always leave one man facing the line of march, as, in case of anything happening in that direction, he can warn the piquet.

Always give piquets orders when to come down. Rear guards are frequently delayed by them. I recollect on one occasion when the piquets were asked why they had not joined, the answer given was that they had received no orders to come down.

The flank piquets and rear guard are generally given by different regiments, and it is often useful to send a non-commissioned officer or officer (especially in wooded country), who knows where they are posted, with the rear-guard.

Convoys. —May be sent in one of two ways, either with a strong escort which marches the whole way with the convoy, or else each post sends out half-way escorts, piquetting the hills half way, and giving also an escort to keep the convoy from straggling.

One thing is absolutely necessary, and that is, that the flanks of a long convoy must be protected by carefully placed piquets.

Hence, in starting, the advance-guard must be much stronger than the rear-guard, as the rear is gradually strengthened by the flank piquets joining it.

Foraging parties. —As a rule, these parties do not go out more than four or five miles from camp. The road should first of all be strongly piquetted, and these piquets should remain out till the rear-guard returns. They should when possible, be far enough out to stop the convoy being fired.

The animals should have a special escort and be told off to certain fields or villages. The remainder of the force be so placed that an attack on the convoy cannot take place without serious loss to the enemy. The advance-guard should throw out piquets well to the front, and connect on both sides with the flanking piquets. As a rule, the advance-guard returning to camp is not attacked, but the rear or flanks are the points chosen. It is, therefore, necessary to see that these are strong enough to resist an attack.

In retiring, successive positions should be taken up, and the rear-guard allowed to pass through and take up a fresh position, if necessary. All nullahs must be carefully watched, as it is down these an enemy generally creeps before he makes his sudden rush.

Forces searching or destroying the defences of villages work on the same principle.

Keep these out till everything has been finished, and the troops formed up to march home.

Any good position on the road home should be held by fresh troops and the rear-guard allowed to pass through.

Nothing disconcerts hill tribes so much as to find a body of men in an unexpected position.

A sudden surprise, or an ambuscade, makes them very wary of following up troops.

Never lose touch of your rear-guard; halt the main body when it halts, and always be ready to move quickly to its assistance: in fact, consider your whole force as one large rear-guard.

Attack—Before I commence this, I wish one point to be remembered, as it is a very important one, and that is, that men carrying seventy rounds, a day's rations, and a full water-bottle tire quickly if over-marched. It is distinctly the pace that kills with them, and many officers forget that they themselves are not so heavily weighted, and should therefore accommodate their pace to that of their men. Never force the pace unless there is some good reason for it. Officers riding seldom realise that horses walk faster than soldiers. If men are pressed beyond their ordinary pace, they straggle, and it was to the fact that the commanding officer led the leading regiment too fast at the Barara Tangi in the first Waziristan Expedition, and so made them straggle out that the successful attack of the swordsmen was due.

Another reason for not pressing the men is that the extra weight makes them perspire freely, with the result that they catch chills and become quickly unfit for service. The more you look after your men's comfort, the more men you will have fit for duty. When they get warm clothing, see they wear it. It is curious how careless they are about this themselves.

In hill warfare the supports and reserves can be brought up much closer to the firing line than in the plains, and the less distance they have to go to reinforce the less breath they lose. In a large number of steep hills there are positions from which men advancing can be, to a certain extent, saved from the fire of the enemy by the supports and reserves firing over their heads. As each position is taken, the support should move up to the firing line and the reserve to the position of the support. The firing line again moves on under cover of the fire of the support. If three or four spurs are worked like this, with a cross fire kept up on

sangars to right and left, and artillery helping at the same time, an enemy can be turned out of a very strong position; but one thing should be recollected, that whereas in a plain supports and reserves cannot fire over the heads of the firing line, in the hills they can frequently do so with impunity. The author only give the above as a specimen of a hill fight.

Tribesmen are wonderful shots and shoot very straight; but the author has often noticed that as firing becomes more accurate, theirs becomes less so, and then gradually ceases. Always, when possible, outflank your enemy; he will often leave a formidable position with little loss there, as he fears he will lose heavily in retiring if he holds on to it.

Rear-guards. —This, as in civilised warfare, is the most difficult task troops can be given to perform, and requires troops carefully trained to do it successfully in the face of an enterprising enemy.

But in order that a rear-guard may perform its duties properly, its flanks must be protected as it retires, as it will have quite enough to do to look after its front.

Whenever possible, successive positions should be taken up, and the rear-guard should move through and re-form to the rear.

No straggling must be allowed, as this is certain to lead to men being cut up.

All baggage guards and followers must remain with their own baggage; the latter are the worst offenders in straggling, and nothing but the fear of the cane will stop them doing so.

The rear-guard must always be alert; they have sharp eyes watching them for a chance of attack, and the slightest carelessness will be noted and made use of.

In retiring after a reconnaissance, never let the main body get out of touch with the rear-guard. It always wants a position to fall back on if hard pressed, and frequently may want to be reinforced; hence the main body should remain within recall. Touch should be kept up by connecting files or small parties, who can quickly pass on information.

Most officers, when retiring, expect the rear-guard to keep up connection with and regulate its pace by the main body; on the contrary, the main body should move in accordance with its rear-guard, which may frequently be delayed by piquets not coming down quickly, or other circumstances under which it is not at all uncommon for the main body to march clean away from its rear-guard.

Piquets Day.—The comfort and safety of the troops in camp depends on the position of the piquets. It is far better that a small portion of the troops should be disturbed than that the whole camp should be worried.

As arms of precision get into the hands of the frontier tribes, who are good judges of distance and excellent marksmen, it becomes necessary to place piquets further out from camp and in such positions that the men shall not be continually disturbed by sniping.

This point is not sufficiently recognised, and yet it is a very important one.

The further the piquets are out, the stronger they must be; but in a good sangar, with a ditch and abatis, a piquet of from twenty to fifty rifles can hold its own for a long time.

Night. —It is better, when possible, to hold the same piquets by night as by day. If this cannot be done, the night piquets should mount before the day ones come in, so that they can cover their retirement into camp.

All nullahs by which an enemy can approach should be watched. This is often done best by sending a strong party out after dark in order to surprise them coming down. This, if successful, has more effect than ordinary piquets have, as they are afraid other parties may be out watching for them, and one or two carefully worked "chapaos" often practically stop sniping at night.

Piquets must never pile arms, but men should keep their rifles by their side day and night; they are then ready for any attack.

In fact, except in camp, or when absolutely necessary, as at road-making, etc, I do not think rifles should ever be piled. When men fall out, they should keep their rifles in their hands.

Miscellaneous.

Never allow any strangers to sit down or mix with guards, escorts or piquets, or come near them on the march.

I have known cases when this has been done, and the whole guard killed, and the rifles, etc, made off with. All escorts should always send a point in front; it may save their lives.

In the Gomal, a few years ago, a whole escort was shot from a side nullah; this could not have happened if one or two men had been a hundred yards in front.

In advancing uphill in extended order against an enemy, who is given to charge downhill, it is generally best to close in to the centre nearing the crest, as the men are then in a better position to stand a charge.

Always go at a steady pace uphill, and stop now and then to reform the line: some men walk slower than others, and it is better to wait for these to come up than to attack in a straggling loose formation.

The action at the Barara Tangi in Waziristan is an instance of the harm done by the latter formation.

In 1881, after clearing some low hills at Shah Alam Kaghza, the 1st Sikhs advanced up a spur covered with oak jungle, so thick that it was difficult to see more than ten yards off. About half-way up they halted, and the two front companies were ordered to lie down, fix bayonets, and load. Suddenly a charge was made on them, the enemy appearing about ten yards off. The fire they received sent them back, but the officer, instead of allowing his men to get out of hand, pursued them steadily up the hill, halting to re-form every now and then. This was a wise precaution, as, if the men had got out of hand and rushed up the hill, a rush of Waziris might have swept through them. As it was at each halt the Waziris tried to rush the companies, but did not succeed. I was

then the junior subaltern in the regiment. After the charge we heard the General's bugler sounding our regimental call and the retire.

Colonel Rice, who was a very able officer and quite understood the situation, refused to obey the order, as he was aware that if we retired through that thick scrub before the Waziris were beaten, the result would have been a heavy loss in men, so, instead, he drove them over the range, and we halted for some time and then retired without a shot being fired at us. That was the last stand the Waziris made.

They had made up their minds to attack us that night, and they certainly had an excellent position to rush; but a piquet of thirty men, placed well to the front after dark, fired into them heavily, and this, taken with the beating they received during the day, had the effect of stopping the rush.

When retiring over unknown ground, especially in the hills, always send intelligent men back to find out the paths leading to the rear.

Some years ago, in retiring from the crest of the Kohat Pass, a body of men, not knowing the way, moved straight down the hill. The Afridis saw their mistake at once and pressed them back onto the precipice below them, and I think about forty men were shot or fell over it, I remember General McQueen telling us how the recollection of this had once helped him in a similar position.

It was in the Jowaki Expedition, in 1877, he was commanding the 5th Punjab Infantry, and was acting as rear-guard to the force as it retired off the heights above Ghariba. The hills were very precipitous, so he sent some intelligent men back and found out the different roads down. He then gradually moved the regiment down, and kept a few active men above till the bad ground was passed; he then took up another position, and the last men ran quickly down the hill under cover of the fire of the men posted below.

As far as possible, leave a position quietly, and, if possible, unobserved, take up a fresh position in rear, then at the last let the few men left clear out quickly. General Hammond's defence at the Asmai Heights in the last Afghan War, when left as rear-guard with I think only

a company of the Guides, is an excellent instance of how this should be done. He gradually sent all his men down till he had about twelve left, and they held the hill till the enemy were nearly on them, and then quickly retired. It was on this occasion that he gained his V.C. Always outflank your enemy, even if it is only with a few men. I recollect once an enemy, in a very strong position, stopping a frontal attack entirely, but leaving the position suddenly, because a naik and six sepoys managed to crawl up a steep place and from the top enfiladed them.

Never allow men or followers to straggle. When a man falls out for any purpose, always leave a comrade to look after him. At every halt put out small piquets. On one occasion the non-observance of this led to three men being knocked over from a nullah quite close to the force in the Jowaki Expedition in 1877.

An enterprising enemy is always on the look-out, and takes full advantage of any carelessness or mistake on your part.

Always fortify your camp and piquet posts, and have alarm posts told off. Even a wall two feet high is useful, as it shows men where to fall in, and gives a certain amount of cover, though it may not stop a rush. Always warn the men to fire low at night. If an attack on camp is expected, it is, I think, a good plan to strike tents at the first shot. There is then less mark for the enemy to fire at, and more room for the men to move about in. If you can afford tents for night piquets, and have those with dark lining, turn them inside out; they then are difficult to see at night.

Sir P. Palmer once gave me the following advice, the result, I believe, of a bad half hour in a fort in Burma: — "Allow no man to leave his alarm post without orders, even if other parts of your position are hard pressed, as the enemy can then enter at the place left unguarded. If the enemy get into the position, don't fire on them; you do more damage to your own men, besides demoralising them; turn them out with the bayonet."

An instance of how patient hillmen are when raiding once came under my notice at Kujari Kach in the Gumal. It was told by one of the party of Mahsud Waziris engaged in the attempt to steal the rifles of the

cavalry grass-cut piquet there. The cavalry grass-cuts used to go out daily under escort to cut grass. The escort used to furnish a piquet on some convenient spot, and it was the intention of the Waziris to rush this piquet if they could manage it.

They watched for three weeks, and at last saw what appeared to be their chance; the sentry was sitting down with his carbine across his knees, and apparently asleep. They got ready for their rush from a nullah they were in about eighty yards away, when the sentry raised his head. Then, in disgust, they gave it up and went back to their country: but men who have such patience are dangerous enemies, as they seldom attack rashly.

It is better, when possible, when you have to return to camp, not to go so far as to be obliged to return after dark. Your knowledge of the country is small compared with that of your enemies, and they know all the best places to ambuscade you at. If hardly pressed, it is often better to halt for the night in some strong position, and return to camp the next morning.

Learn, if you can, every path and road round your camp; they lead somewhere and may be useful to you later on. Never despise your enemy, and always be ready to learn something from him.

Take every opportunity of exercising your men in firing at unknown distances: nothing trains men for war so much as that practice in peace. Shooting on the range is excellent in its way; but a hillman is not a white target with a black bull's-eye, nor does he even at 800 yards show even a mark as large as a third class target.

I think the following two quotations should be borne in mind and acted on: —

"There is a general principle which I have laid down for" the regulation of the officers' conduct under my command, "which is, never to break the neutrality of any place, but never" to consider as neutral any place from whence an attack is "made, it is certainly justifiable to attack any vessel in a place from whence she makes an attack."— *Mahan's Life of Nelson.* (For "vessel" read "man" or "tribe".)

"My system is to strike hard and keep on hitting till" resistance is completely over; then at once to form ranks, cease slaughter, and be kind and humane to the "prostrate enemy."—*Skobeleff*.

One important point is to learn the signs which show the presence or absence of an enemy.

For instance, if the women and children are in the villages, the men will not fight. If the villages are empty, then they are ready for war.

A few snipers generally mean only a few enemies about. One of the well known signs of trouble with the Afridis in Kohat is the sudden stoppage of the salt trade between Bahadur Khel and the Kohat Pass.

Marching at night requires very careful training: no officer who has not actually marched on foot with infantry realises the difficulty that the rear of the column has in keeping up, especially over bad ground or in single file. Two and a half miles an hour seems slow when you are marching at the head, but go to the rear of the column, and you will probably find them doubling. The best plan is to make the head of each company go its own pace and halt frequently; the men then come up by companies without unnecessary doubling.

Train your men in peace to the manoeuvres they will have to perform in war. Forms of attack are very good in their way, but they won't do against hill enemies, who are off directly you mean business; and as they are the enemies we usually have to meet, it is worthwhile learning hill tactics beforehand. Don't let a man approach you with his face swathed in his *pagri*. It is frequently a sign that the man means to kill someone.