

Lacy Holleman

ENGL 3373

Professor Drouin

April 4, 2013

Military Pamphlets and the Great War

Questions A Platoon Commander Should Ask Himself Before An Attack contains a list of 25 general rules meant to apply to all situations experienced by a British Platoon operating in the trenches. It was first published with *British Tactical Notes*, a larger document that also provides information on assault training, nighttime operations, the protection of convoys, and a number of other events. This document embodies the experience of Great Britain's soldiers in World War One. It reflects all the changes that had arisen since the conflict began in 1914—in military organization, warfare, and technology; it also displays some of the features of the war that seriously impacted the soldiers who experienced it.

The Great War was a time of rapid change within the military, most memorably in the development of the trenches. By the publication of this pamphlet in 1918 the British military had adapted to these new conditions. The rise of trench warfare created an environment that was completely foreign even to experienced soldiers. For the British, it involved row upon row of open-air trenches crisscrossed by smaller communication trenches. Many of the points in this document concern operating within the trenches—a defining characteristic of the First World War.

Great Britain's platoons generally consisted of around 24 soldiers, and were one of the smallest operating units within the army. Platoons were led by a platoon commander, who would have been assisted by an N.C.O. (non-commissioned officer), his second in command. The war—its sprawling, trenches and sporadic struggles for small amounts of land-- had forced several alterations in the way that platoons operated, which are reflected in the points of this pamphlet. In the early months of the war, armies attempted to stick to standard, straight lines of units; but as trenches became fixed and the war of attrition began, the straight rows turned into twisted lines. This lack of neat organization often resulted in increased independence amongst the platoons. Throughout the document, the platoon commander is given a fairly large amount of autonomy from the rest of their company. For example, the third point—"Do my N.C.Os and men understand exactly what formation the platoon is adopting for this attack"—shows the necessity for platoons to operate competently without any higher supervision. Number ten—"Have I told my Platoon Sergeant and N.C.Os everything I can to enable them to carry on if I get knocked out?"—indicates how regular separation between units was, and the autonomy that was necessary to continue operating them.

Trenches also affected the way soldiers conducted themselves. The document's twelfth point asks "Do I know who have (a) wire-cutters, (b) Very pistols and lights?" Almost all platoon advancements were undertaken at night, since it was the only time that the constant shelling of the wasteland lightened. Wire cutters would have been absolutely necessary in order for soldiers to make their way across no man's land, which was covered in barbed wire—both their own and the Germans'. Soldiers would have needed to keep track of their electric light and Very pistol (a type of flare-gun) to navigate the heavily-pitted landscape

Despite all of the new technologies that were introduced during World War One, in some ways the life at the front had not transitioned into the 20th century. The pamphlet notes the importance of knowing “which are UP and which are DOWN communication trenches.” The communication situation in the trenches was less advanced than on the war’s other fronts. Radio, still a relatively new development, didn’t lend itself to the open and rough environment of battle, and they were far too heavy to be transported around the trenches. So in order to stay linked, smaller communication trenches were used extensively.

As far as new developments in weaponry during the war, there is one that deserves special attention. The document’s third point directs the platoon commander to know “How [he] is using [his] Lewis gun.” It is the only mention the weapon gets within the entire list. This isn’t to say that the Lewis gun was a minor part of an attack operation; rather, it shows just how ubiquitous the firearm had become within the British infantry. The platoon officers didn’t *need* any further instructions beyond a simple reminder to use their Lewis gun as the situation required.

For Great Britain’s soldiers in the trenches, the Lewis gun was a symbol both of their nation and of the war itself. Though the weapon was first created in the U.S. in 1911, it was the British who adopted and perfected it. It was a light machine gun, portable and better for use in the trenches than earlier models. In 1915 it began to appear amongst the British ranks, and by 1918 every platoon was equipped with a Lewis gun. The guns were not often used by any other country’s forces, and certainly not to the same extent. British soldiers began to associate the gun with both the war, the first conflict the gun had ever been used in, and themselves, the only forces using it.

Many or most trench soldiers were left psychologically scarred by their experiences. Britain's young men were exposed to violence and horror on a scale that had never been seen in modern history. But trauma amongst the men resulted from more than just bayoneting enemy soldiers, suffering from diseases brought about by the trenches, and living amongst the corpses of their comrades. This pamphlet shows certain attitudes that surely exacerbated or even created some of the psychological issues that plagued soldiers in the years following 1918, particularly in the way it expects men to treat their fellow soldiers and its approach to carrying out the war.

Point fifteen states that soldiers should "shoot or bayonet anyone giving the order to 'retire'". So in addition to feeling nothing towards their German enemies, men were expected to treat their own comrades with a similar amount of callousness if said comrade failed in his patriotic duty. The very next point declares that "men must on no account weaken the line by taking back wounded". The war removed the only method that soldiers might see as redeeming—loyalty and self-sacrifice for one's brothers-in-arms. The dehumanization and brutality that are shown here came to characterize the war and how many who were involved viewed it.

Point twenty-one expects the platoon commander to "understand that to consolidate a well-defined target exposes [his] men to heavy shelling afterwards." While this seems to be a fairly innocuous statement in the context of war, in this particular case it expresses the senseless loss of soldiers for minor advances. The capture of "well-defined target" was almost always completely irrelevant to the conflict as a whole. A British company might take or lose ground on any given day, but it never really resulted in a turning point. Nevertheless, these sorts of commands—risking maximum casualties for minimum gains—were standard and commanders were expected to sacrifice themselves and their men for these trivial gains. Most soldiers

recognized the futility of the war as it dragged on, and came to see the entire conflict as completely pointless.

The essence of the Great War is evident throughout this pamphlet. *Questions A Platoon Commander Should Ask Himself Before An Attack* covered the details that British soldiers fighting in the trenches would have recognized as defining their experiences. On the most basic level, it illustrated the modernization of the army and the adaptations to trench warfare; the list covers the necessities of operating in the trenches and the independence of the platoons. But it also embodies the attitudes held by the commanding powers, about the low worth of men's lives, which soldiers came to see as defining a dehumanizing and futile war.

Works Consulted

"Isaac Newton Lewis (United States Army Officer and Inventor)." *Encyclopedia Britannica*

Online. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 03 Apr. 2013.

"Small Arm (military Technology) : Blowback." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia

Britannica, n.d. Web. 03 Apr. 2013.

"The Trenches: Symbol of the Stalemate." *PBS*. PBS, n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2013.