

## William T. Sherman on Tactics and Entrenching

(*Memoirs of Gen. W. T. Sherman*, 1891, vol 2, 394-397)

Transcribed and annotated by David W. Lowe

Very few of the battles in which I have participated were fought as described in European text-books, viz., in great masses, in perfect order, manoeuvring by corps, divisions, and brigades. We were generally in a wooded country, and, though our lines were deployed according to tactics, the men generally fought in strong skirmish-lines, taking advantage of the shape of ground, and of every cover. We were generally the assailants, and in wooded and broken countries the "defensive" had a positive advantage over us, for they were always ready, had cover, and always knew the ground to their immediate front; whereas, we, their assailants, had to grope our way over unknown ground, and generally found a cleared field or prepared entanglements that held us for a time under a close and withering fire.



"Uncle Billy" Sherman,  
commanding general of the army  
c. 1883

### Contact of battle lines rare

Rarely did the opposing lines in compact order come into actual contact, but when, as at Peach-Tree Creek and Atlanta, the lines did become commingled, the men fought individually in every possible style, more frequently with the musket clubbed than with the bayonet, and in some instances the men clinched like wrestlers, and went to the ground together. Europeans frequently criticized our war, because we did not always take full advantage of victory; the true reason was, that habitually the woods served as a screen, and we often did not realize the fact that our enemy had retreated till he was already miles away and was again intrenched, having left a mere skirmish-line to cover the movement, in turn to fall back to the new position.

### Breech-loaders

Our war was fought with the muzzle-loading rifle. Toward the close I had one brigade (Walcutt's) armed with breech-loading "Spencer's;" the cavalry generally had breech-loading carbines, "Spencer's" and Sharp's," both of which were good arms.<sup>1</sup> The only change that breech-loading arms will probably make in the art and practice of war will be to increase the amount of ammunition to be expended, and necessarily to be carried along; to still further "thin out" the lines of attack, and to reduce battles to short, quick, decisive conflicts. It does not in the least affect the grand strategy, or the necessity for perfect organization, drill, and discipline. The companies and battalions will be more dispersed, and the men will be less under the immediate eye of their officers, and therefore a higher

order of intelligence and courage on the part of the individual soldier will be an element of strength.

### **Advance by rushes**

When a regiment is deployed as skirmishers, and crosses an open field or woods, under heavy fire, if each man runs forward from tree to tree, or stump to stump, and yet preserves a good general alignment, it gives great confidence to the men themselves, for they always keep their eyes well to the right and left, and watch their comrades; but when some few hold back, stick too close or too long to a comfortable log, it often stops the line and defeats the whole object. Therefore, the more we improved the fire-arm the more will be the necessity for good organization, good discipline, and intelligence on the part of the individual soldier and officer.

### **Courage**

There is, of course, such a thing as individual courage, which has a value in war, but familiarity with danger, experience in war and its common attendants, and personal habit, are equally valuable traits, and these are the qualities with which we usually have to deal in war. ...

### **Decline of cavalry**

Modern wars have not materially changed the relative values or proportions of the several arms of service: infantry, artillery, cavalry, and engineers. If any thing, the infantry has been increased in value. The danger of the cavalry attempting to charge infantry armed with breech-loading rifles was fully illustrated at Sedan, and with us very frequently.<sup>2</sup> So improbable has such a thing become that we have omitted the infantry-square from our recent tactics. Still, cavalry against cavalry, and as auxiliary to infantry, will always be valuable, while all great wars will, as heretofore, depend chiefly on the infantry. Artillery is more valuable with new and inexperienced troops than with veterans.

### **Fieldworks gain time**

In the early stages of the war the field-guns often bore the proportion of six to a thousand men; but toward the close of the war one gun, or at most two, to a thousand men, was deemed enough. Sieges, such as characterized the wars of the last century, are too slow for this period of the world, and the Prussians recently almost ignored them altogether, penetrated France between the forts, and left a superior force "in observation," to watch the garrison and accept its surrender when the greater events of the war ahead made further resistance useless; but earth-forts, and especially field-works, will hereafter play an important part in wars, because they enable a minor force to hold a superior one in check for a *time*, and time is a most valuable element in all wars.

### **Spade, musket, and axe**

It was one of Prof. Mahan's maxims that the spade was as useful in war as the musket, and to this I will add the axe. The habit of intrenching certainly does have the effect of making new troops timid. When a line of battle is once covered by a good parapet, made by the

engineers or by the labor of the men themselves, it does require an effort to make them leave it in the face of danger; but when the enemy is intrenched, it becomes absolutely necessary to permit each brigade and division of the troops immediately opposed to throw up a corresponding trench for their own protection in case of a sudden sally. We invariably did this in all our recent campaigns, and it had no ill effect, though sometimes our troops were a little too slow in leaving their well-covered lines to assail the enemy in position or on retreat. Even our skirmishers were in the habit of rolling logs together, or making a lunettes of rails, with dirt in front, to cover their bodies; and, though it revealed their position, I cannot say that it worked a bad effect; so that, as a rule, it may safely be left to the men themselves. On the "defensive," there is no doubt of the propriety of fortifying; but in the assailing army the general must watch closely to see that his men do not neglect an opportunity to drop his precautionary defenses, and act promptly on the "offensive" at every chance.

### **Intelligence of the common soldier**

I have many a time crept forward to the skirmish-line to avail myself of the cover of the pickets' "little fort," to observe more closely some expected result; and always talked familiarly with the men, and was astonished to see how well they comprehended the general object, and how accurately they were informed of the state of facts existing miles away from their particular corps. Soldiers are very quick to catch the general drift and purpose of a campaign, and are always sensible when they are well commanded or well cared for. Once impressed with this fact, and that they are making progress, they bear cheerfully any amount of labor and privation.

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<sup>1</sup> Sherman does not differentiate here between single-shot and repeating breech-loaders. As general-in-chief of the army, Sherman oversaw adoption of a single shot carbine (Springfield "Trapdoor" Model 1873) for use by the U.S. Cavalry, primarily because he (and many others) thought it would be difficult to keep repeating rifles supplied with ammunition in the field.

<sup>2</sup> American military observer, Gen. Philip Sheridan, witnessed the destruction of the French cavalry by the Prussians at the battle of Sedan on the Meuse, September 2, 1870. Sheridan was accompanied by a *New York Tribune* reporter who recorded the event: "'Good Heavens! The French cuirassiers are going to charge them,'" cried General Sheridan; and sure enough, the regiment of cuirassiers, their helmets and breast-plates flashing in the September sun, formed in sections of squadrons and dashed down on the scattered Prussian skirmishers, without deigning to form a line. Squares are never used by the Prussians, and the infantry received the cuirassiers with a crushing "quick-fire"- *schnellfeuer*- at about a hundred yards` distance, loading and firing with extreme rapidity, and shooting with unflinching precision into the dense French squadrons. The effect was startling. Over went horses and men in numbers, in masses, in hundreds; and the regiment of proud French cuirassiers went hurriedly back in disorder; went back faster than it came; went back scarcely a regiment in strength, and not at all a regiment in form. Its comely array was suddenly changed into shapeless and helpless crowds of fleeing men. The moment the cuirassiers turned back the brave Prussians actually dashed forward in hot pursuit at double-quick, infantry evidently pursuing flying cavalry. Such a thing has not often been recorded in the annals of war."