

Book Review

The First Campaign Victory of the Great War: South Africa, Manoeuvre Warfare, the Afrikaner Rebellion and the German South West African Campaign, 1914-1915

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Warwick, Warwickshire: Helion and Company

2019, 208 pages

ISBN-13: 978-1911628941

The First Campaign Victory of the Great War: South Africa, Manoeuvre Warfare, the Afrikaner Rebellion and the German South West African Campaign, 1914-1915 covers the first foray of the Union of South Africa into battle during the First World War. While this campaign forms the backdrop to the story, it is by no means the only story being told. The author, an ex-senior officer who served in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) weaves his historical narrative through both the Union of South Africa and the German colony of South West Africa (Namibia) over a period of two years (1914–1915).

While numerous narratives have been penned describing this campaign, Garcia approached this subject from a unique perspective, namely examining the events of the campaign through the lens of manoeuvre warfare. The modern concept of manoeuvre warfare is not usually associated with the First World War and its popular impression of static warfare epitomised by kilometres of trenches. Garcia, however, successfully argues that, while manoeuvre theory as a theoretical subject only entered into mainstream military education after the conclusion of the First World War, the tenets of the theory have been around since the early days of the Chinese military theorist Sun Tzu in roughly the fifth century BC. Garcia expertly deconstructs the various elements of this complex military theory in such a manner that it becomes accessible to the general reader. Once the reader is sufficiently educated in the intricacies involved in the manoeuvre theory of warfare, he then superimposes the theory over the events of 1914–1915.

The outbreak of war in 1914 caught the fledgling Union of South Africa Defence Force (UDF) unprepared for the rigours of modern warfare. Barely two years since

its establishment in 1912, the UDF displayed both the strengths and weaknesses of the Union. The UDF, being the brainchild of Jan Smuts, was an attempt (much as the Union was) of merging two conflicting military organisations into a single military organisation. On the one hand was the British regimental system as practised in the ex-British colonies of the Cape and Natal, while on the other hand, the commando system as employed by the two Boer Republics of the Orange Free State and the South African (Transvaal) Republic.

This underlying British versus Boer antagonism provides a second layer to this narrative, with Garcia delving into the latent hostility that remained between Brit and Boer, twelve years after the conclusion of the Second Anglo Boer War (1899–1902). This underlying hostility would burst into open rebellion in 1914, with Afrikaner elements openly siding with the Germans, with whom they felt they shared a historical and cultural association. Garcia continues to elucidate the utilisation by both rebel and soldier of the tenets of manoeuvre warfare throughout the dark days of the Afrikaner Rebellion.

This system is then teased out in the subsequent chapters, where the entire South West Africa campaign is examined via this lens. From the initial disaster at Sandfontein, which saw the German *Schutztruppen* inflict a smarting defeat on the over-confident UDF, to the successful seaborne landings by the UDF at the German ports of Lüderitzbucht (Lüderitz Bay) and Walfischbucht (Walvis Bay), Garcia continues to highlight how commanders on both sides of the conflict – consciously or sub-consciously – utilised the manoeuvre approach to warfare. The final ground offensive by the UDF in the north of South West Africa is also detailed in terms of this approach.

It is not only the use of manoeuvre theory on the ground that is examined. The author concludes the book with an examination of the utilisation of aerial assets, then in its infancy, and how both sides made use of their embryotic air forces in order to achieve freedom of action – a prerequisite for applying the manoeuvre theory of warfare.

While this book is based on Garcia's studies at the South African Military Academy in Saldanha – and by its very nature is academically inclined – it is by no means one of those dry facts upon facts tomes of yesteryear. This book will be found to be informative by both the modern military officer student at the Academy as well as the civilian layperson just interested in an excellent account of the German South West Africa Campaign of 1914–1915.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jean-Pierre Scherman joined the South African Defence Force in January 1993 and completed the Junior Leaders Program at the School of Armour. In 1995 he was commissioned as an officer in the South African Armoured Corps (SAAC). He was mentioned in dispatches for his actions during Operation Boleas in 1998, completed a deployment to Burundi in 2002, and has been a senior officer instructor at the School of Armour for 18 years (2003-2020). He holds a Master's Degree in Contemporary History (UFS), and is currently busy with his PhD in Military History at the Faculty of Military Science at Stellenbosch University.
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