

FORUM

POSTSCRIPT ON SOUTH AFRICA'S FIRST ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS

Lt Cdr W. M. Bisset

One of the most fascinating things about South Africa's military history is the often surprising nature of some of its sources. In a short article on South Africa's first anti-aircraft guns which appeared in *Militaria* 8/1, 1978 pages 22-23 the present writer mentioned that he was unable to explain why the fact that two 15-pounder BLC's had been converted to anti-aircraft guns had been given wide publicity or why it had been necessary to undertake their conversion when the Cape Peninsula seemed beyond the range of enemy aircraft.

By sheer good luck I have discovered an explanation for both events. Although this explanation may seem ridiculous to us today, this was not the view of two regimental historians Major General Sir Lothian Nicholson, KCB, DSO and Major H. T. MacMullen, MC and until any further evidence is produced it is hoped that the following paragraph from *The History of the East Lancashire Regiment in the Great War 1914-1918* will prove useful:

From time to time rumours that aeroplanes from German South West Africa had been seen over

the Peninsula caused a certain amount of alarm and despondency among the civilian population; search parties who were sent out all over the Peninsula came to the conclusion that the so-called aeroplanes, generally reported over the Lion Battery were large scavenger hawks; and one plane which appeared at night only, carrying a large searchlight was identified as the headlight of a train.¹¹

The similarity of these reports to the UFO reports of our own times is striking. But it is suggested that this piece of the jigsaw puzzle does fit. It certainly would explain why it was necessary to develop the anti-aircraft guns and to demonstrate one of them in public in the presence of such distinguished guests in September 1914.

(1) Major-General Sir Lothian Nicholson, KCB, CMG, and Major H. T. MacMullen, MC. *History of the East Lancashire Regiment in the Great War 1914-1918*. Littlebury Bros., Ltd, Liverpool, 1936. p 114.

TACTICS – A HISTORIC SURVEY

Lt Col A. G. Johnson MBE ED

The study of military tactics down the ages reveals a surprising lack of innovations and an even more surprising reluctance to follow up those that have been made.

The first recorded unit to be used in a novel way was the *Phalanx*, created by the Greeks in the first millenium B.C., and utilised by Alexander The Great to conquer the then known world. The *Phalanx* in its fully developed form was a body of some 8 000 men, hand picked, trained, disciplined and dedicated, made into a formidable fighting machine such as had never before been known. Tactically it fought as a dense mass, with ranks 16 men deep armed with

spears and long shields and so trained that in action the shield of each man overlapped that of his neighbour. Advancing at a slow ponderous pace it was as irresistible as an armoured brigade, crushing and defeating every enemy it faced.

The *Roman Legion* was formed on the style of the *Phalanx*, but was a more self-contained unit, containing cavalry and other supporting arms, and was a more flexible body. A Legion upon formation was given a number, and men of that legion lived and died within it; married and had sons who in their turn became members of that legion. Even as did the *Phalanx* but with more

permanence, the *Roman Legions* conquered the world.

This use of massed and disciplined units was the basis of tactics for centuries to come and one has but to contrast the destruction of the *Scythian horsemen* against the impenetrable shields of the *Phalanx* with Napoleon's heavy cavalry, the finest mounted troops in the world, crashing to destruction against the unbreakable squares of British infantry at the battle of Waterloo 2 000 years later to see how little had been learnt by the leaders of men in all the intervening millenia.

Possibly the next tactical development was that of the *Tartars* or *Mongol hordes*, also known as the *Huns*, who swept out of Central Asia in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. Superb horsemen, riding small hardy ponies without saddle or stirrups; armed with a short curved bow from which they flighted their arrows with deadly accuracy even at full gallop, they literally lived on and off their horses, mare's milk their liquor, horseflesh their meat, horse hide their tents and clothing. They devastated Asia and Europe, until under their leader, Attila, they were held and defeated on the borders of France in the middle of the fifth century. Thereafter their empire disintegrated by internecine squabbles.

For nearly a thousand years thereafter, horsemen dominated the battlefield, although it was a far cry from the swift lightly armed *Hun* to the *mediaeval knight* clad from head to foot (*Cap a Pié*) in steel armour and mounted on great huge-boned war horses, forerunners of the modern Clydesdale, whose fastest charge was a quick trot. Their weapons a fifteen foot lance; a two-handed sword; a mace or — the favourite weapon of the fighting Bishop — a steel spike-studded ball on a short length of chain. Once unhorsed and thrown down, the knight was helpless, the sheer weight of his armour making it impossible for him to regain his feet. Nevertheless, in mass, as they were almost invariably used in battle, a formidable adversary.

It would have been expected that the next major tactical invention was gunpowder and the use of firearms but in fact the *long-bow*, with its yard-long arrow, determined the shape of things to come. It was Edward, Prince of Wales, known as the *Black Prince*, a genius in the art of war, who devised the tactic that made the armoured man-at-arms obsolescent within the space of a few hours. Invading France, he found himself confronted by the King of France and a mighty

army of many thousands of armoured men. Selecting a position that protected his flanks by natural features, he dismounted his men-at-arms and drew them up in a long line, interspersed at intervals with bodies of his bowmen slightly in advance of the main line. His whole force was much less, in numbers, than one fifth of the French and their allies. But that day at *Poitiers*, the long-bow devastated the armoured men. Capable of piercing steel armour at 100 yards; accurately aimed by highly trained bowmen who could release five or more arrows within a minute, they slaughtered the French army. At the end of a few hours fighting, twenty thousand armoured men lay dead or dying on the field, whilst there were less than one hundred casualties in the Prince's army. Firearms could do no better — or worse — than that.

Yet it was some five hundred years before the same tactic was again used, this time by the *Duke of Wellington*, equally as great a genius in war as was the *Black Prince*. Almost without exception in all the battles he fought against his greatest adversary, Napoleon, the force under his command was inferior in numbers, and the French had conquered Europe by the use of massed regiments manoeuvred in masterly fashion. Wellington's counter was almost identical to that of the *Black Prince* in similar circumstances. He deployed his troops — usually and where possible just below the crest on the reverse slope of a hill — in a long line interspersed with field guns. As the French moved over the crest they were met by a withering blast of fire from troops trained to fire alternatively, front row, back row, that not only swept away the leading ranks of the enemy but so disorganised the succeeding rows that the attack faded away in disarray, an easy target not only for the artillery but also for the cavalry that charged in from the flanks.

The other innovation at that time was the development of the *Light Infantry*, units more lightly equipped than the normal line regiments; fully mobile using a shorter quicker step, and trained to think and act independently. These units were used as scouts but mainly as skirmishers ahead of the main body, thus harassing any advancing enemy. It is probable that General Crauford, mainly responsible for raising and training these light units, derived the idea from the tactics used by the American forces in the Revolutionary wars.

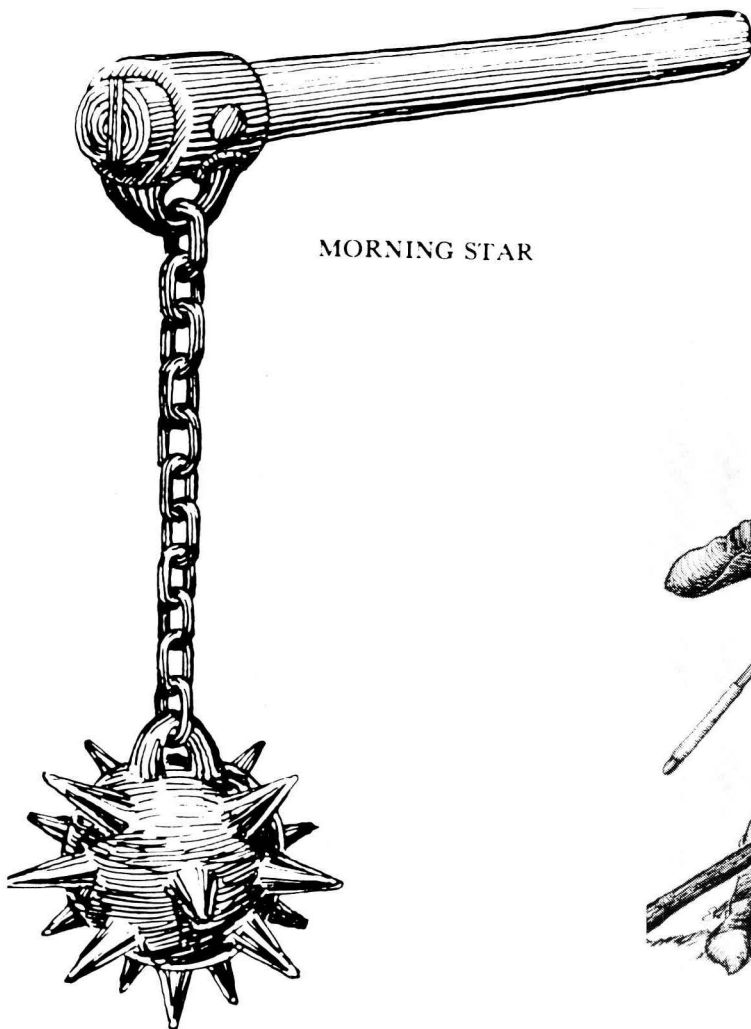
From then until modern times there have been few if any major changes in tactics, unless one

counts the greater use of *Commandos* who are, in essence, merely an improvement upon the old light infantry; whilst air power does not seem, as yet, to have affected military thinking other than to speed up operations.

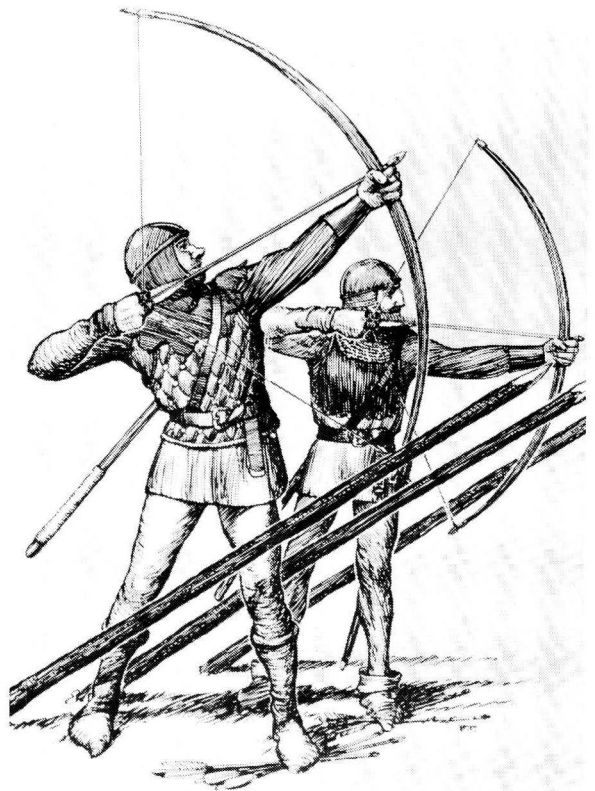
In these days of laser-guided missiles; nuclear warheads, chemical warfare and suchlike devastating weaponry, armies are an anachronism; battles as of yore unimaginable; modern science and technology taking over warfare; tactics superceded by strategy, but fighting will still go on. *Are we not even now at war?* Have we not been so since anarchy became rampant throughout the world and ideology confronted

ideology? And it will continue, although tactically it would seem that fighting must revert to what it was millenia ago, that is, man versus man and not army versus army, for the terrorist has to a large extent imposed his will upon his adversary, forcing them to fight the way he wishes.

An ironic footnote: Is the Defence Force not now in a very similar position to that of the British forces eighty years ago? With vastly superior forces in both numbers and equipment attempting to subdue an opponent that can disperse and fade into the background, to re-assemble and fight again elsewhere even as did the Boers?



1: Morning star — The favourite weapon of the fighting Bishop.



2. The troops of Edward, Prince of Wales, a genius at the art of war made use of the long-bow, with its yard-long arrow.