

# À la bayonet

OR

## “hot blood and cold steel”

The officers will take all proper opportunities to inculcate in the mens' minds a reliance on the bayonet; men of their bodily strength and even a coward may be their match in firing. But the bayonet in the hands of the valiant is irresistible. – Lieutenant-General Burgoyne, General Orders, 20 June 1777<sup>i</sup>

Writers of military subjects have a fascination with the bayonet. With regularity, in various infantry corps journals, a case is made for its obsolescence, others defend its continued role in infantry close combat, and still others focus on its psychological significance. Few attempt to argue strongly for the value and recognition of either the "war-fighting mindset" itself or the practical skills of bayonet fighting. Perhaps it's just all too bloody for simple neo-military bureaucrats to ponder, let alone pen. Perhaps what we've lost is the actual capability of understanding the bayonet and whatever role it may have prior to and now during the ongoing revolution in military affairs through the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Despite this underlying controversy, the bayonet has developed almost mystic prominence over the centuries. The charge of troops intent on carrying a defended post by bayonet is considered a heroic, undeniable act of courage which, once begun, must prevail. It connects the subconscious mind of the modern soldier with that of his earliest forbears. The fixing of bayonets converts his technically advanced weapon (whether it be the New Land Service Musket of 1812, the Martini-Henry of 1879, or the Lee-Enfield of 1950<sup>ii</sup>) into the most rudimentary of weapons, a combination of short stabbing spear and bludgeon. How appropriate for that shift from the discipline and order of “load” and “fire” to the brawling bloodlust of a pell-mell rush to ill-considered single combat en masse.

Beyond its much-debated utility as a weapon, what has been the actual role of the bayonet in history?

The bayonet does not rate highly as a cause of wounds and death in comparison to other battlefield weapons. Napoleon's own surgeon-general claimed that “for every bayonet-wound he treated there were a hundred caused by small arms or artillery fire.”<sup>iii</sup> One source gives sabre *and* bayonet wound statistics as 15-20 per cent before 1850 and only 4-6 per cent after 1860.<sup>iv</sup> Similarly Puysegur is recorded as stating that one should “just go to the hospital and ... see how few men have been wounded by cold steel as opposed to firearms.”<sup>v</sup> And Duffy quotes Corvisier as giving bayonet wound statistics as only 2.4 per cent.<sup>vi</sup>

Byron Farwell, in his work on the pre World War I British Army, Mr Kipling's Army, presents the following:

“The halberd was carried by sergeants until 1830, but the weapon most favoured was the pike, or rather its less efficient modern equivalent, the bayonet, which replaced it about 1700. When, during the First Sikh War, at the battle of Sobraon (10 February 1846), it was reported to General Sir Hugh Gough that the artillery was running short of ammunition, he

exclaimed, 'Thank God! The I'll be at them with the bayonet!' This faith in the most primitive and least efficacious of available weapons persisted into the First World War and beyond. The bayonet is more intimidating than lethal; comparatively few have ever been killed by it."<sup>vii</sup>

Statistics from the American Civil War state that over three months of action near Richmond, characterized by above average rates of hand-to-hand combat, casualty ratios for the Union Army were significantly in favour of projectile wounds. While over 32,000 men received treatment for bullet wounds, only thirty-seven were treated for bayonet thrusts. An observer from the same period confirmed that the wounds evident on the dead were in similar proportion. The damage inflicted during "bayonet assault" was most often executed by bullets.<sup>viii</sup>

Even the claim of bayonet enthusiasts that it is a psychological weapon of singular importance is doubtful. The charge of infantry, *à la bayonet*, was usually delivered at the point where the defeat of an enemy was turning to rout. The bayonet charge was not, as it is often immortalized, the singular defining act of victory, it was, however, the act ordered by a victorious general at the turning point of that victory. The bayonet charge, therefore, became so firmly entrenched in the minds of soldiers and observers as the defining act, rather than a dictated result of victory, that to "get in" with the bayonet was seen as a means to victory. Even in 1950, an article in the US Army Infantry School Quarterly encouraged: "Let us reinstate cold steel as the symbol of final assault, even though bullets rightly do most of the killing."<sup>ix</sup>

Within the Napoleonic armies, the combination of cold steel combined with Gallic courage, or at least iron discipline, was considered undefeatable.<sup>x</sup> The *pas de charge*, brigades and divisions in close ranks, company or battalion wide and as deep as the available manpower permitted, were launched at opponents arrayed in more conventional linear formations. When the column met the line and retained sufficient momentum, the line could collapse, and sufficient men were released behind the line to destroy its integrity. The shock action and momentum delivered by the column could, and for the French Revolutionary Army did, turn the tide of battle and achieve victory. The French believed in the perception of the bayonet's natural supremacy over powder to the extent of ordering that the bayonet charge was to be delivered in all battles.<sup>xi</sup>

But when the discipline and fire control of the linear formation was sufficient, as it was for Wellington, then the columnar tactic could and did fail. The column would collapse in a horrific pile of shattered bodies as the leading ranks were destroyed by rifle fire and the rear ranks continued to press into the danger area. Its final demise guaranteed by the effect of artillery on the close ranks of the attacking column. But this would seldom be considered a failure of the bayonet, only a lack of discipline and courage of the attacking formation.

### The Usefulness of Battle Drills

Soldiers for centuries have been taught to "fix" bayonets and to handle the weapon according to the prevailing manual of arms. Parries, thrusts, points and butt-strokes provided a structured awareness of the possible movements. Originally, all bayonet movements were developed to account for the soldier's place in close packed ranks. The threat was directly to his front and was usually expected to be a single opponent, either an enemy infantryman, similarly armed, or perhaps a mounted cavalryman.

The fixing of bayonets before a battle was a precaution to ensure preparedness, not necessarily indicative of a conscious plan for their employment. And for a brief moment during the apprehensive wait while the

enemy closed to engagement range, it occupied and steadied the voices and hands of officer, sergeant and soldier. There was comfort in the familiarity of the drill. Anyway, once engaged, infantrymen would not have time to fix bayonets in the heat of battle.

One's own forces, perhaps, gained a measure of psychological advantage merely from the act of fixing bayonets. In the sight of each soldier the forming of the long rows of polished steel bayonets served to give the battalion's frontage a more menacing aspect, and offering a greater measure of protection to himself. The infantry square became one of unbroken bristling spines, offering death on every approach. To the soldier it was the danger of impalement that deterred cavalry, rather than the simple appearance to the horse of a mass blocking its path.

The act of fixing bayonets became, increasingly over time, the physical manifestation to initiate the offensive mindset. This step of preparation before meeting the enemy survives today in the infantry section battle drills. Soldiers learning to "put on their killing face"<sup>xii</sup> and preparing to meet their enemy in manly, gladiatorial combat. Bayonet training has become the last training event that actually encourages personal physical violence toward one's fellow man. It allowed the sanitizing of other soldierly duties. In training you learn to "fire" a machine gun, "use" mines or "throw" grenades, all sterile description of employment, not focussing on purpose. But there can be no softening of the task requirement to "kill a sentry with a bayonet,"<sup>xiii</sup> there is no gentle way to describe the employment or the purpose of a weapon designed to be thrust into another soldier's entrails. But this trend has demonstrated a tendency toward making the skills of an infantry soldier more clinical and detached from the Corps' role of closing with and destroying the enemy. Only through the execution of bayonet training for basic infantrymen is that need still acknowledged. And yet the training itself remains strangely detached from the concept of death.

Bayonet training never evolved with the changing tactics of infantry throughout the early decades of the 1900s. In particular, the highly ritualized bayonet fighting movements were increasingly inappropriate for the radically changed level of dispersion of infantry soldiers. This has been one of the principal reasons for the ongoing debate over their usefulness and viability in a modern infantry. Even bayonet fighting test courses deal more with structured sequences of movement than challenges to reaction and innovation which are more properly the realm of a desperate face-to-face fight for survival. Bayonet training lessons, while martial in context, can be as structured as any drill lesson and as fitness oriented and aerobically repetitive as an aerobics class. This argument has been put forth as an additional justification for maintaining the current system, but it does not support the bayonet as soldiers are still trained in its use as suitable for the modern battlefield.

"Charge!"

For the experienced soldier of the 1800s, the receipt of the order to charge was, to him, a notification that the battle was won, or nearly so. Regardless of how hard-pressed his own company might be at the moment the order was given he then knew that the tide of battle was firmly in the favour of his commander. This knowledge, perhaps along with the sense of relief at knowing that the battle would soon be over, was rejuvenating and, with a will to win, he went in to chase the foe from the field.

The bayonet charge signalled defeat to the recipient as surely as it did victory to the charging side. The 'enemy,' once facing the bayonet were usually already beaten, broken and fleeing the battlefield. To him the receipt of a bayonet assault was a terrifying finale to a long, hot day of combat. To the soldiers of the losing side the final alternatives were few, stand facing the victorious infantry, fired by blood-lust and thoughts of revenge, or flee, often to be ridden down by hussars and lancers out to claim their part of the victory.

Notably, in Understanding Defeat,<sup>xiv</sup> a detailed analysis of the causes and characteristics of loss in battle, Trevor Dupuy makes no mention of the launching of infantry in a bayonet charge as a cause of defeat. S.L.A. Marshall, in Men Against Fire,<sup>xv</sup> describes the aggressive will as disciplined initiative relying on judgement but makes no mention of any associated desire of men to kill with the bayonet. The concept of a final bayonet charge to deliver a coup de grace to an enemy teetering on the verge of collapse and rout is a strong and repeated historical image -- of the 17th and 18th centuries. Neither its theory, nor its practice rings true, or is well recorded as a tactical option since the American Civil War.<sup>xvi</sup> Since the Napoleonic era, most bayonet actions have been last stands, either by groups such as at Rorke's Drift or even individual actions once a soldier's ammunition and support ran out. The romanticism of such events still captures the hearts of soldiers, but they make no case for the bayonet as a significant weapon of war.

The infantry soldier with fixed bayonet is a stock figure in historical literature and art. A casual observer might think that the weapon was never carried in its scabbard on active duty. Its reputed use, however, nearly always seems to be limited to certain, specific types of actions. The bayonet charge at the point of victory, the "last stand," and the forlorn hope were all prominent examples of bayonet work. Intense emotion, either the release of pent-up tensions or the desperation of success or death characterizes each of these situations. They are not the reasoned tactics of disciplined troops operating within the scope of carefully developed tactical plans; they are acts of desperation either in defence or attack.

The bayonet and its use came to be held synonymous with the offensive spirit. This was not because the weapon possessed any special qualities, but because the *image* of the soldier advancing with it did! To both sides the bayonet charge was a significant emotional event, but it was not, as many would believe, the engine of victory.

#### The moral plane

The psychological power of the bayonet grew in the retelling – becoming a synonymous act with victory. The event that originally signalled a battle won now became that which could create victory if ordered. The romance of war has oft tread on the toes of its truth.

Consider also that the bayonet's appeal (to the Nowlanesque<sup>xvii</sup> romantics in peacetime, and to those purveyors of Victorian prose describing bloodless battles) has left a body of popular fiction and pseudo-factual reporting that unduly illuminated the bayonet's use in all recorded wars. The popular fascination with the bayonet is similar to that of the upholding of Rorke's Drift as a feat of arms. Alone it would barely be worthy of a footnote, in a public affairs contrast to Isandhlwana; it became heroic beyond proportions. As with the use of the bayonet, the harder it is to imagine oneself there from the comfort of a leather wing chair in a gentleman's club, the more ready one is to assign it a mystical and worshipful air. Perhaps it is not just "any sufficiently advanced science" that is seen by the common man as magic.

Nor is the bayonet a particularly efficient weapon. It began as pike-imitation in the days of close-packed infantry. Stringent bayonet fighting drills were developed to allow its use in the confined space available, and even the bayonet fighting movements of the 1990s are reminiscent of those used at the turn of the last century. These drills still focus on attack and defence within a narrow frontal arc. For the overall size of the weapon and bayonet, the actual striking point and edge (of the bayonet) and the surface of the butt are extremely small, and its aspect to the target must be within relatively tight tolerances to be effective.

The average soldiers does not relish close quarter combat, that is why the classic charge a la bayonet is delivered by troops flushed with victory against an already defeated foe, thus assuring a decisive

denouement. Consider the wars of this century, actions which included the intentional use of close quarter work were seldom defined by bayonet assault. The trench raids of WWI and patrols and commando actions of WWII saw troops avoid, if anything, taking standard service rifles and bayonets for such work. Knives, clubs and sharpened shovels held greater popularity among the trench raiders; the commandos expressed preference for sub-machine guns to supplement their more exotic weapons.

Infantry forces use bayonet training to develop and coach the expression of offensive spirit. But offensive spirit does not dwell within the bayonet, it is an overt (or latent) tendency of those personality types that are typically drawn to the infantry and survive its (historically) rigorous training and lifestyle. Consider that football players and fighter pilots are also inculcated and trained in expressive offensive spirit for their respective roles. Both of these occupations are successful in imbuing their personnel with the sense of duty and willingness to get amongst the enemy when the situation allows or demands such. Neither group has ever depended on ritualistic training with a club or spear to achieve this.

But there remains a perception of romanticism in the duel between equals. Two heroic defenders of nationalistic ideals standing toe-to-toe, each wielding their rifle and bayonet in accordance with highly structured rules of use and mastered thrusts, parries and strokes. This imagery is more akin to Olympic fencing than the reality of single life or death combat. The reality of the bayonet duel has no comparison in the mind of modern man. The picture two hundred years of popular media has developed is no more accurate than the gentlemanly jousting of knights seen in the cinematography of the 1930s.

Close combat between soldiers with rifles and bayonets is a desperate, horrific act of survival. Firstly, it assumes that both proponents are out of ammunition and too hard pressed to reload (or even change magazines). A safe assumption when muzzle-loaders fired 2-3 rounds per minute under ideal conditions, but not as likely with modern assault rifles. On the modern battlefield, stepping forward to meet the foe bayonet to bayonet is more likely to be suicidal; literally "bringing a knife to a gunfight." And the end result of a bayonet duel is the injury or death of one or both opponents. This is not a clean, politically correct stage demise, it is a wrenching, painful death likely characterized by sucking chest wounds, fractures of limbs, crania or ribs, the splashing loss of blood and, in the final moments, the olfactory-assaulting loss of bladder and bowel control. And if the victor in this small tragedy maintains the vigour to move on, to his next combat or just away from the scene, he can perhaps distance himself, both physically and, at least for a short time, emotionally, from the horrible result. Otherwise, increasing exhaustion or his own wounds may leave him to face or wallow in his enemy's and/or his own blood and excreta, facing the grisly evidence of his actions.

Training the Offensive Spirit - "Am I offensive enough?"<sup>xviii</sup>

Before 1900, bayonet actions were secondary in nature to their parent battles. Winning was dependent on the disciplined application of fire. During the First World War, close quarter combat came into its own with trench raids.<sup>xix</sup> This was the first time in the gunpowder age that soldiers intentionally and regularly went forward to engage an enemy in hand-to-hand combat.

It now became necessary to inculcate troops with an offensive spirit that encouraged them to close with the enemy and capture or kill him while remaining in a rational state of mind. No longer was hand-to-hand combat primarily an act of hot blood or desperation; it was now also to be a planned and calculated act of delivering destruction. And despite the strength of its support leading up to this phase of the stalemate on the Western Front, the rifle and bayonet were not particularly popular as raiders weapons.

While most soldiers will agree with the concept of an offensive spirit, it is almost impossible to find any serious works that deal with such an aspect of training soldiers. In the 1800s soldiers were held in formation by discipline and the knowledge that the close support of others was the strength of the battalion. As infantry dispersed, and responsibility fell to individual soldiers to advance, fire their weapons and close with the enemy, it became apparent that great numbers will not naturally do so.<sup>xx</sup>

With the training of individual infantrymen becoming more technical and concerned with the operation of systems rather than the killing of men, armies have looked for the vehicle by which the offensive spirit may be imparted. And that requirement led to an unrealistic focus on bayonet training as that mechanism. But that training itself is a bloodless repetition of practised movements, soldiers do not acquire a blood lust in thrusting at training dummies, but they do learn to “put on their killing face” and scream gutturally so that the instructor may believe he has achieved his aim.

We cannot declare “offensive spirit” to have been taught to young soldiers simply because they have completed a Performance Objective for bayonet fighting. The Infantry’s tendency to do so is, sadly, indicative of a deeper malaise. Norman Dixon describes the inability to sacrifice cherished traditions as a significant indicator of incompetence within authoritarian personalities and organizations.<sup>xxi</sup>

Western armies have lost the concept of the offensive spirit through an overwhelming acceptance of managerial bureaucracy, both within and outside of our armed forces. The armies of NATO nations *defend* democracy and freedoms. In our societies we allow the possession of firearms for person *defence*. We limit the development, deployment and use of certain weapons because they are seen to be *offensive* in nature. The citizen as a rule, is expected to remain passive, allowing the police and the military to *protect* him or her.

Offensive spirit, warrior spirit, aggressive will<sup>xxii</sup> – it matters not which label we apply. We can search Western and other societies for evidence of this trait in the 1900s and remain with a feeling of dissatisfaction. It does not combine nicely with our own image of our western civilization, which is why it has only seemed to appear in the cauldron of combat as duty, discipline and emotion combine in acts of desperate survival or homicidal release. We perceive real or imaginary societies as foreign, unnatural and almost incapable of being understood by the Western mind. Fundamentalist Muslim sects, Shaka’s Zulu Empire, American survivalists and the Klingon Empire all fall within this category. These societies were formed, in fact or common belief, around aggressive male dominance. Preparing for and, when opportunities exist, the conquering of others is a national way of existence. Adult males must prove their courage in combat with a worthy foe, their individual spirit conquering the enemy and, in doing so, growing from it.

Perhaps this delineation indicates that a pervasive “warrior (or offensive) spirit” are societal rather than trained. We use our perceptions of such societies as yardsticks to prove the validity of our own conception of “civilized” democratic evolution. It may only be self-deception and denial, but it lets us pretend that killing is not a natural reflex, therefore, the offensive spirit must be “taught” since we do not understand how to create and control the conditions through which it appears as an individual characteristic.

Open encouragement of a self-determined aggressiveness is not productive. Actions that might be tacitly accepted as the enthusiastic manifestations of warrior spirit are all too often disclosed as a lack of discipline. This misunderstood approach to developing aggressiveness led to the disbandment of the Canadian Airborne Regiment because various offences were accepted as merely being poorly controlled expressions of the desired state of offensive spirit in soldiers confined by peacetime training regimens. This state of acceptance created the environment in which soldiers committed murder.

History has handed to us a rationalization that the blood lust of a bayonet charge is the manifestation of the offensive spirit in the soldiers of a civilized society. Careful consideration of the conditions and nature of bayonet actions disproves this. And we are left with the bare realization that man, even trained, well-disciplined soldiery, might be reduced to a level of barbarism we wish to deny possible. Our more recent wars show that the occasions of bayonet actions have changed to events of desperation rather than venting of emotion upon a vanquished foe. A Second World War handbook on soldiering offers:

"The use of bayonet and butt go hand in hand. Lest any crevice be allowed for a sense of inferiority to creep in you must become expert in handling both--*just for emergency*."<sup>xxiii</sup>  
(emphasis added)

A more Freudian analysis of the bayonet's continued appeal would likely perceive the bayonet as a phallic and manly symbol,<sup>xxiv</sup> boldly thrust into its victim to achieve dominance. This conception is not out of line with Dixon's discussions of those personalities that are attracted to the military and dedicate themselves to maintaining traditions unchanged. As a symbol of masculinity in a predominantly male society, the bayonet was assured of longevity beyond rationale.

### Close Quarter Weapons

The New Land Service Musket, the Martini-Henry, and the Lee-Enfield had certain common attributes, they were well balanced for drill and had the mass and solidity necessary for use with their bayonets. The Martini-Henry, for example, massed four kilograms (9 lbs) and was 126 cm (4' 1 1/2") long, this weapon mounted a 56 cm (22-inch) triangular or sword bayonet, bringing its full mass to almost 4.5 kilograms (10 lbs).<sup>xxv</sup> This weapon would be wielded by a British soldier averaging 163 cm (5'4"),<sup>xxvi</sup> making bayonet fighting a heavy and tiring task for a man with a shoulder bruised by recoil, hands burned by the hot barrel and a parched throat at the close of a hot day's action.

Through World Wars One and Two, the British Lee Enfield was a standard infantry small arm, it also massed about four kilograms. In its various models the Lee-Enfield sported a 17-inch sword bayonet (1902-1914), an 8-inch cruciform spike (1940) and the 8-inch round spike or sword style bayonets (1946).<sup>xxvii</sup> The Lee-Enfield No. 4 was 3'5½" (113 cm) in length, with its shorter bayonets the soldier of 1940 had lost 22 inches (56 cm) in reach enjoyed by his counter part of 1879. IN 1954, the FN gave up another eight centimetres in reach.<sup>xxviii</sup>

But the infantry's fascination with the bayonet never faded, Even the Sterling submachine-gun had bayonet mounting lugs. With its mass of 2.7 Kilograms (6 lbs), an extended length of 71 cm (28 in) inches<sup>xxix</sup> and the bayonet handle being along the barrel jacket/forestock, it actually gave the soldier no real advantage of reach or mass.

The bayonet, throughout its history, has been designed for stabbing with its point. Triangular and round cross-sectional bayonets had no cutting edge at all. Blade bayonets, whether sword- or knife-like, seldom had sharpened edges. These design elements restricted the bayonets use for other purposes. They also ensured that it would only be effective with a clean, straight thrust delivered with the weight and force of the rifle and the man behind and in line. Failure to deliver such a blow "by the numbers" might allow one's opponent to parry and counter the thrust, could bend or break an untempered iron or brittle steel blade. A soldier was forced to use his bayonet, if at all, exactly as it was intended, for it was ineffective in any other case.

Other writers have described how the evolution of small arms departed from classic characteristics with the development of assault weapons. The SA-80, the C7 and the AK-74 are all lighter and smaller in construction than earlier infantry rifles. Protruding magazines change the space the weapon needs in close quarters; they have more moving parts, less robust overall construction and optics that their antecedents never had. They were not designed for, nor are they well applied to, bayonet fighting.

Remaining in use today for ritualized training of the offensive spirit, the bayonet is more likely to be used as a blunt utility knife or can-opener<sup>xxx</sup> than for its designed purpose. Bayonets are more likely to figure in parades and inspections than any realistic training for combat. Realization that the awkwardness of stylized bayonet fighting movements is outdated is far from new. In the 1890s, General Evelyn Wood, VC, remarked that the bayonet training of the day was “more suitable for a Music Hall than for training men to fight.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

There is no perfect close quarter weapon for attack and defence mechanisms are very individualistic. Formulaic application of a weapon one is unused to or uncomfortable with only offers the opponent openings for attack. The bayonet has to be one of least efficient close quarter weapons, especially when troops are inculcated in employing a stock range of motion for it. This particular limitation is further exaggerated by training on dummies that are purpose-designed to be struck “by the book” thus giving a false sense of confidence in its use.

We should look closely at the weapons and tactics of those who have been given a free hand to investigate and develop new close quarter tactics: the trench raiders of World War One and counter-terrorist forces of the 1990s. The trench raiders tended to develop their own suite of selected and improvised weapons: bombs, knives with brass-knuckled handles, clubs, sharpened shovels and handguns all figure prominently in the literature describing raiding parties. For true hand-to-hand contact, it would seem, the delivery of blunt trauma was generally more effective than trying to deliver a precisely controlled bayonet thrust against a man likely to be heavily clothed and accoutred. Counter-terrorist forces prefer an arsenal including stun grenades and highly accurate sub-machineguns. Close is, however, a relative term, and grappling with one’s foe is very inefficient. Given freedom to test and select weapons to deal with their intended enemies in close quarters, neither of these types of forces, encouraged and led by original thinkers and proponents of innovation, chose to rely on the rifle and bayonet.

Historically, the bayonet charge signified not so much the application of offensive spirit as it did the release of intense emotion by soldiers freed of the rigid discipline of the tactics used to win the battle. It was not a controlled state but the running amok of blood lust, to harry and kill a defeated enemy, taking revenge for the death of friends and a pursuit of the spoils. Alternatively, desperate defence and the forlorn hope were characterized by absence of optional courses of action, one thrust and parried when no other course remained. In the heat of battle, these were not the activities of rational men; they were the reflexive actions of over-wrought men fighting to survive one more day.

Offensive spirit cannot be taught or trained. Soldiers can only be taught skills, reflexes and given knowledge of weapons and fighting techniques. The formulaic thrust and parry with rifle and bayonet may well be outdated, for only if matched with a similarly trained and dedicated opponent will the army-issue drills even be applicable to the combat. Certainly these actions are not natural responses, that is why pugil<sup>xxxiii</sup> training most often turns into a brawl between two men with Nerf® bats.

Seeking the 21st Century



An inappropriate affection for cold steel has seen the bayonet remain hung on every infantryman's web belt long after it should have been hung up beside the pioneer's leather apron. Warfare today is the cool application of disciplined initiative and knowledge, rather than the brutal mutual punishment of massed soldiery until one side was released at the moment of victory to avenge its losses against a fleeing foe. No sensible business case based on the frequency of bayonet injuries and deaths over the past century would ever justify their purchase and issue today. Yet we persist in maintaining it "because we've always done it that way."

Should bayonet training be dropped from Army syllabi? No, not necessarily. While it remains an available weapon, soldier should be aware of its employment, but also of its limitations. Alternatively, the training of close quarter combat, including bayonet training, should be expanded and given broader scope. The intent is not to infuse a warrior spirit, for this cannot be done artificially, but to broaden the skill set and responses available to the average soldier.

First, let's update the bayonet. We continue to issue every soldier a bayonet that does not justify its own weight. Replace it with a sturdy, well-honed utility knife with a high-quality steel blade. Leave the bayonet mounting hardware on the hilt for the rare cases in which it becomes necessary. Teach the soldier how to handle a rifle and bayonet, but let's bring in a professional in improvised fighting techniques to help develop a useful combat system for it. Parade square parries and thrusts are only appropriate if the enemy has had similar instruction and is willing to fight by mutually understood rules.

One possible approach is to incorporate in Army physical fitness training a structured martial arts program. A discipline can be selected to develop confidence, balance, reflexes, and attack and defence tactics unarmed and with a variety of weapons within a progressive format. This program could lead to every field soldier having recognized skill levels in a close quarter combat system that supports rather than confines reflexive responses in hand-to-hand combat. It should also provide advanced training and continuous skill maintenance throughout a soldier's career.

We must continue to train our soldier in close quarter combat techniques, but it must be based on a rational analysis of the purpose and components of that training untainted by the romanticism of tradition..

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<sup>i</sup> Duffy, Christopher, The Military Experience in the Age of Reason, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1987

<sup>ii</sup> Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research, Vol. XLV, No. 184, Winter 1967; "*The Principal Small Arms Carried by British Regular Infantry*," compiled by Major G. Tylden, E.D.

<sup>iii</sup> Van Creveld, Martin, Technology and War: From 2000 B.C. to the Present, Don Mills, Maxwell MacMillan, 1991

<sup>iv</sup> Dupuy, Trevor N., Understanding War: History and Theory of Combat, New York, Paragon House, 1987

<sup>v</sup> Duffy, Christopher, The Military Experience in the Age of Reason, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1987

<sup>vi</sup> Duffy, Christopher, The Military Experience in the Age of Reason, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1987

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- vii Farwell, Byron, Mr, Kipling's Army, New York, Norton, 1981
- viii *Bullet v. Bayonet – American Civil War*, Canadian Army Journal, Volume 16, Number 1, Winter 1962
- ix Major Schiller F. Shore, *The Bayonet – Spirit Weapon*, from the Infantry School Quarterly, Fort Benning, Georgia, Oct 1950
- x Lynn, John A., The Bayonets of the Republic; Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1996
- xi Lynn, John A., The Bayonets of the Republic; Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1996

xii “But the star turn in the schoolroom was a massive sandy-haired Highland Major whose subject was “The Spirit of the Bayonet”. Though at that time undecorated, he was afterwards awarded the D.S.O. for lecturing. He took as his text a few leading points from the Manual of Bayonet Training.

To attack with the bayonet effectively requires Good Direction, Strength and Quickness, during a state of wild excitement and probably physical exhaustion. The bayonet is essentially an offensive weapon. In a bayonet assault all ranks go forward to kill or be killed, and only those who have developed skill and strength by constant training will be able to kill. The spirit of the bayonet must be inculcated into all ranks, so that they go forward with that aggressive determination and confidence of superiority born of continual practice, without which a bayonet assault will not be effective.

He spoke with homicidal eloquence, keeping the game alive with genial and well-judged jokes. He had a Sergeant to assist him. The Sergeant, a tall sinewy machine, had been trained to such a pitch of frightfulness that at a moment's warning he could divest himself of all semblance of humanity. With rifle and bayonet he illustrated the Major's ferocious aphorisms, including facial expression. When told to “put on the killing face”, he did so, combining it with an ultra-vindictive attitude. “To instil fear into the opponent” was one of the Major's main maxims. Man, it seemed, had been created to jab the life out of Germans.” - Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 1930

xiii A-P9-031-L03/PH-B01 Total Force training Plan Basic Infantryman 031/R031 OSQ Code 031.3 (AABS) April 1997

xiv Dupuy, Trevor N., Understanding Defeat; How to Recover from Loss in Battle to Gain Victory in War, New York, Paragon House, 1990

xv S.L.A. Marshal, Men Against Fire, 1947

xvi A notable example from this conflict is Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. One more example of a glorious, though failed, attempt of cold steel and courage.

xvii Nowlanesque; see INFANTRY NEWSLETTER, No 5, Summer 1976 – “IN THE OFFICERS' MESS” by Alden Nowlan:

“The cellophane-wrapped young technocrats, most of then graduates in engineering, have had one beer each, have applauded the old general with the fingertips of one hand have smiled and said goodbye in the tone of voice used by barbers and dentists when working on small children and by almost everybody when addressing a drunk.

“The romantics too have gone in their scarves and berets and with six or eight ounces of good scotch in their veins, but they'll be back after they've jogged their four miles.

“The general has shaken hands with all of us, a man possessed of that humility that sometimes truly beautifies near-senility.

“So right now this place belongs to the third component of the Canadian officers 'corps: the roaring boys from Places like Burnt Coat, Economy, Widower's Mountain, Virgin's Cover Sally's Tickle and Desolation Creek, who

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express love by emptying their tankards over one another's heads, do Parachute rolls off the tables, dance on broken glass and do imitations of Harry Hibbs singing Newfoundland songs about Belfast.

“Later the romantics will come back, wearing sweatshirts, to down three or four more doubles and refight with bottles, tumblers, matchboxes , cigarette lighters and swizzle sticks the battles named on the regimental flag.

“and those of us who haven 't flaked out will watch and listen to them with that rapt expression that comes to the faces of drunken men in the presence of something they can't fully grasp but know to be of vast importance.”

xviii January 27, 1918 (Sunday), Ronssoy - "Am I Offensive Enough?" is one of the questions laid down in a pamphlet that reaches us from an Army school some 30 miles behind the line. It is for the subaltern to ask himself each morning as he rises from his bed. - Rowland Feilding, War Letters to a Wife, France and Flanders, 1915-1919, 1930

xix Raids consisted of a brief attack with some special object on a section of the opposing trench, and were usually carried out by a small party of men under an officer. The character of these operations, the preparation of a passage through our own and the enemy's wire, the crossing of the open ground unseen, the penetration of the enemy's line, the hand-to-hand fighting in the darkness, and the uncertainty as to the strength of the opposing forces--gave peculiar scope to gallantry, dash, and quickness of decision by the troops engaged.

The objects of these expeditions can be described as fourfold: ... IV. To blood all ranks into the offensive spirit and quicken their wits after months of stagnant trench warfare.

Such enterprises became a characteristic of trench routine. - Captain F.C. Hitchcock, M.C., F.R.Hist.S., "Stand To" A Diary of the Trenches, 1915-18, 1937

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xxvi Best, Brian, Campaign Life In The British Army During The Zulu War, <http://www.web-marketing.co.uk/anglozuluwar/sol-life.htm>, 1999

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xxviii Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research, Vol. XLV, No. 184, Winter 1967; “*The Principal Small Arms Carried by British Regular Infantry*,” compiled by Major G. Tylden, E.D.

xxix Jane's Infantry Weapons 1975, New York, Franklin Watts, 1975

xxx Van Creveld, Martin, Technology and War; From 2000 B.C. to the Present, Don Mills, Maxwell MacMillan, 1991

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xxxii Pugil sticks are padded wooden staffs used to simulate rifles and bayonets for bouts between soldiers.