



Tactics and Training - Arras 1917

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There had been much tactical experimentation undertaken by the British Army during the Somme battles in the latter half of 1916. In addition, contemporary Divisional, Corps and Army files held at the National Archives, Kew reveal the extent of GHQ's urgency to learn 'lessons' at that time. As a result, the winter of 1916-17 saw the production of new military manuals that would change tactical level warfare in the BEF.

One of them - *SSI43, Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action 1917*, laid the foundations for the way the infantry would fight until the end of the war. Emphasis was placed upon infantry being able to fight its way forward independently of artillery support as a battle developed. At its heart was the belief that the advantages of different weapon types could be brought to bear on the enemy as and when needed.

Consequently, the formations, preparation and training practised for the Battle of Arras were to be different to those used during attacks the previous year.

In the place of a single line of riflemen, *SSI43* promoted the self contained platoon comprising a small HQ and four sections of specialists. In simple terms, the attack was to be led forward by bomb and rifle sections, with the rifle grenade and Lewis gun sections following close behind. Upon contact with the enemy, the rifles and the bombers were to seek out the enemy flank and attack with fire, bayonet and bomb. The rifle grenadiers and Lewis gun team were to attempt to suppress the enemy, allowing the other sections to press home their attack.

This flexible use of arms also passed a degree of initiative to the junior officers down the chain of command. In order to encourage these developments, training regimes were to be based upon the following requirements:

(a) *The Offensive Spirit. All ranks must be taught that their aim and object is to come to close quarters with the enemy as quickly as possible so as to be able to use the bayonet. This must become a second nature.*

(b) *Initiative. The matter of control by even Company leaders on the battlefield is now so difficult that the smaller formations i.e. platoon and section commanders must be trained to take the initiative, without waiting for orders.*

(c) *Confidence in Weapons, necessitating a high standard of skill at arms.*

(d) *Co-operation of Weapons is essential on the battlefield and the corollary of (c).*

(e) Discipline is most necessary at all times, and particularly on the battlefield.

(f) Moral(sic) must be heightened by every possible means; confidence in leaders and weapons goes a long way towards it.

(g) Esprit de Corps. True soldierly spirit must be built up in sections and platoons. Each section should consider itself the best section in the platoon, and each platoon the best in the battalion.

One of the ways of fostering esprit de corps was through competition and during training schedules 'Efficiency Competitions' were organised. Such contests were geared towards the development of weapon skills outlined in *SS143*, but also inter unit rivalry and a higher level of general fitness. Here are the activities in a competition organised by 112 Brigade in March 1917:

112 Brigade Efficiency Competition – March 1917														
	Transport	Shooting	Bombing	Bayonet Fighting	Musketry	Lewis Gun	Boxing	Relay Race	Road Race	Stretcher Bearers	Tug of war	Inter-Company	Inter- Battalion	Points Total
6 th Bedfords	3	3		2	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	34
11 th Warwicks	2	2	1	3	1	3			3	2		2		19
10 th Loyals	1		2		2		6						2	13
8 th East Lancs			3	1			2							6
Trench Mortar Battery							1							1

Although the battles of Arras, Third Ypres and Cambrai failed to produce the desired breakthrough on the Western Front in 1917, the basic principles enshrined in *SS143* were sound. In conjunction with effective preparations, efficient staff work, and overwhelming artillery support, *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action 1917* provided a simple tactical blueprint that would play a part in the BEF's victories in 1918.

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