

Mountain Warfare

a Tactical Renewal

(Editions Economica. Collection Strategy and Doctrine)

preface by (French) General Henri BENTÉGEAT,

Interview of co-authors, lieutenants colonels Hervé de Courrèges,
Pierre-Joseph Givre (EMAT) and Nicolas Le Nen (27^e BCA),

Doctrine: The three of you have just written a tactics book called “Mountain Warfare, a tactical renewal”. Could you tell us what is it all about?

You'll find in that book the six tactical principles adapted to fighting in a compartmented environment: preparation to the engagement conditions, ubiquity, opportunism, control of the battlefield, complementary action of the fire support assets, besieging of the enemy. These have been developed in accordance and consistency with Maréchal Foch's general principles, they constitute in fact an adaptation of these three fundamental principles of the war to the requirement of an environment where freedom of action, economy of forces and concentration of the efforts may seem to be less understandable and applicable. In that respect, the six principles of the combat in a mountainous environment must be regarded as being employment principles derived from the principles of the war and adapted to the mountainous environment's specific requirements¹.

Doctrine: Isn't that description of the tactical principles a little hard to read?

To avoid that which could have been a real problem, we illustrated our publication with many very concrete historical examples that emphasize the immutable

constraints that mountainous environment puts on the maneuver. In addition, while we were revisiting the battles of the last two centuries and analyzing them thanks to a logical method, number of constraints and guiding principles for action appeared, whose right or wrong implementation allowed to better understand victories and defeats. Last and to demonstrate these principles relevance, we present in a pedagogical way, six emblematic and recent battles that allow a better perception of these engagements' nature. The reader can thus go through the Dobropolié battle in 1918, Suomussalmi in 1939, Appenines in 1944, the Panjshir V operation in 1982, Mount Harriet battle in 1982, and Anaconda operation in 2002. That diversity of example allows to scan all type of modern era conflicts on different continents and to draw practical lessons out of them.

Doctrine: Do you believe that this type of conflict is really modern?

During the intervention in Afghanistan that began in the winter 2001-2002, the western forces have rediscovered that mountain could become an area for high intensity engagements, not in a marginal way but in a more permanent one. However, since the Former Yugoslavia conflict, with the strategic role that Mount Igman took during the Sarajevo siege, mountain is not anymore a mere training field but rather once again an unavoidable engagement area.

Doctrine: What are the recent engagements which could be studied in order to identify what western forces would have to do in such an environment?

Since the 11 September's terrorist attacks, western forces have bluntly entered into the asymmetric conflict era where their armament and equipment's quality, their technological advance and their forces' training level make them be the "strong". It would however be hazardous to describe the enemy as being the "weak", seeing the way it has been able to neutralize the best equipped and trained forces in mountainous areas; yes they were the best equipped and trained forces, but only for conventional type of combat and on a flat terrain. The spring 2002 combats at Tora-Bora and in the Shah-i-Kot² valley demonstrate that fact very well.

Both of these operations as well as those that were conducted by the Soviet forces in the 80s in Afghanistan, and more recently by the coalition in that country's eastern part or by the Russian in the Caucasus, allow to better understand the nature of the combats that army units could be led to engage in mountainous terrain.

Doctrine: What type of enemy can be met in these areas and how is it organized?

On the Afghan theater of operations as well as on many mountainous theaters where more or less known asymmetric operations are taking place³, the mountains constitute sanctuaries where insurrection movements get equipped, train, are refurbished and that they use for relocating their fighters and to organize their logistical flows.

In those sanctuaries, these forces implement classical guerilla techniques that are now well known: mingling with the local population, splitting apart the weapons manufacturing or collection areas from the storing areas, avoiding fighters concentration, limiting as much as possible the use of communication means and deploying discreet but efficient intelligence and warning organization.

Although mountainous terrain constitutes a definite plus for the enemy's concealment ability, it makes it however very much dependant on the few inhabited areas for its resupply, for feeling less isolated and for getting intelligence. In addition mountain populations are, by nature, very independent and proud. These populations constitute a reservoir of tough fighters, whose endurance and terrain knowledge can be feared. As Jomini wrote it: *"Mountainous areas are particularly well fitted for defensive operations when wars are national [...]. All territorial gains will thus have to be paid a high price"*⁴.

Land forces that will be engaged in mountainous areas will thus be confronted to an enemy that is particularly reactive, mobile, stealthy and who knows perfectly how to use human and natural environment to its own benefit.

Doctrine: Does mountainous environment give a specific style to the maneuver?

Yes, as a matter of fact, mountain operations are not fully part of the "Three block war" concept, which implies that some sort of simultaneousness between the three types of actions (interposition, humanitarian support and coercion) should be achieved. Those operations switch from long terrain patrolling, to assistance to valleys' populations to collect intelligence, to very violent combat phases to destroy enemy field organization when it has been unveiled⁵.

Between these two very distinct types of warfare, there is no or very little place for low intensity combat since the enemy has no interest in attracting and fixing forces in areas where it needs to have as much freedom of action as possible.

An engagement in a mountainous area constitutes thus a type of warfare that has two main tempos which include long phases with rare direct contacts with the enemy and high intensity combat phases.

Lieutenant-colonel Hervé de COURRÈGES
Lieutenant-colonel Pierre-Joseph GIVRE
Lieutenant-colonel Nicolas LE NEN

GUERRE EN MONTAGNE

Renouveau tactique

Préface du Général d'armée Henri BENTÉGEAT

Stratégies & Doctrines



ECONOMICA



relies mostly on the Army National Training Center consisting of the CP Battle Command Training Center, the Force on Force Training Center and the Military operations in urban terrain training center.

Since the Army is confronted to a multiplication of operations in mountainous terrain, it is now required to complete the training organization with a fourth pillar, a training center for operations in difficult terrains.

Doctrine: Could that type of engagement prefigure other types of engagements in other environments that would be as complex as the mountainous one?

Yes, mountain warfare is not anymore an utopia for a small number of soldiers who are either idealistic or who have the nostalgia of WW2 or colonial warfare in difficult terrains. The end of the Cold War and the beginning of the one against terrorism have put mountain warfare at the very heart of today's engagements.

The types of combat that land forces will have to conduct in that environment, within the framework of counter rebellion operations, in such a difficult terrain will be violent, protracted and recurrent. They'll require full combined arms and joint cooperation down to the lowest command levels. They'll also require a combination of much diversified tactical and technical know-how ranging from motorized warfare techniques in the valleys to dismounted infantry actions in high terrain, to covert operations intended to collect intelligence, as well as brutal and violent destruction actions.

Within that framework, all combat units that could be engaged in mountain warfare, whatever might be their echelon and size, have to be powerful, flexible, responsive and polyvalent.

Doctrine: Has our Army all what's required to get efficiently ready for that type of engagement today as well as for those of tomorrow?

Training to mountain warfare must aim at developing and improving all these tactical and technical know-how. In order to prepare its operational engagements, the Army has today at its disposal an efficient organization that

The army organization for operational engagement preparation would thus be fully coherent and would allow land forces to get efficiently ready for current operations.

Doctrine: What would be your conclusion?

Our publication is consistent with the efforts that CDEF and CoFAT⁶, each one in its own domain, have undertaken to revitalize the tactical thinking and to improve army's officers and NCOs' military culture. We chose a theme that can be supported by an important historical background in order to illustrate current and future engagements. We do hope that readers will find in it substance for debates and studies that will be useful for getting ready for engagement as well as for conducting a maneuver. We hope they'll enjoy participating in these tactical debates which can be a source of personal enrichment and above all a source of efficiency when time for implementation has come within an operational environment that is ever more complex and uncertain.

¹ See the article written by the same authors "are the Foch's principle immutable?" published in the Heracles magazine # 19 of January-February, pp. 52-53.

² The Anaconda operation.

³ Chechnya, Sin - Kiang, Kashmir, Khurdistan or Columbia, to quote only the major ones.

⁴ Clausewitz's Principle of war, Jomini's Art of war in Roots of strategy Book 2, Stackpole books, 1987, p 488.

⁵ Should conventional forces deliberately keep most of their forces at the limit of the mountainous areas and go into it only to collect intelligence and to fight. Conversely, continuous series of harassment actions by the asymmetric enemy could occur.

⁶ CDEF: Forces Employment Doctrine Center.
CoFAT: Army Training Command.