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Encounter at Bertrix

For both the French and the Germans, World War I began as a monstrous exercise in military administration. The monumental task of outfitting the hundreds of thousands of reservists called back to the colors, of forming them into units, of packing those units into trains, of getting those trains to the right place at the right time, and of getting the units off the trains and on to their assigned road placed a premium on an army's capability for "scientific management." For the first few days, at least, World War I was a conflict where the staff officer dominated the field commander, and the supply sergeant lorded over the squad leader.

When, however, the giant armies met - a process that, depending on location, took place a few days or a few weeks after the opening of hostilities - a very different spirit would be required. Once the bullets started flying, there would be no place for the staff officer's railroad timetable or the supply sergeant's painfully correct ledger. The spirit of improvisation would reign supreme. The thoroughly tested plan would give way to the quick decision, the carefully weighed alternatives to the educated guess. And success would come to the side that realized this first.

This phenomenon is well illustrated by the meeting of two divisions - one French, the other German - near the Belgian town of Bertrix on the 22nd of August, 1914. In many respects, the divisions were remarkably similar organizations. Both were active formations, composed of well-trained conscripts in their early twenties led by

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Two versions of this article have been published. The original version, with lots of organizational detail and maps, was published in *Tactical Notebook* in October of 1993. A second version, with a slightly greater "drums and trumpets" flavor, came out in the Autumn 2000 issue of *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*. This version, which has not been published, contains a lot more commentary about the role that the French and German philosophies of command and styles of leadership played in the battle.

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professional officers. Both divisions were organized according to the same general scheme, with each being subdivided into two infantry brigades of two regiments of three battalions apiece. Each division thus tipped the scale at 12,000 rifles plus supporting units of cavalry, field artillery, and supply troops and, given a half-decent metalled highway to march on, took up about eight kilometers on the road.

The chief difference between the two divisions - the German 21st Infantry Division and the French 33rd Infantry Division - lay in their philosophies of command. The French formation was an artificial organism, made up of men drawn from all over France. Strangers until they met on the barracks square, these men were held together by a mixture of fear, force of habit, patriotism, and whatever social bonds had formed during their training. While these same forces also contributed to the cohesion of German units, the 21st Infantry Division had one significant advantage. Its regiments were recruited on a regional basis. Thus, the infantry was made up of Hessians who, more often than not, knew each other before joining the colors. The same can be said for the Thuringians who provided the division with its cavalry regiment.

The place where these two divisions met had no particular strategic value. It's true that Bertrix was located at a crossroads, where the east-west roads coming out of Luxembourg met the north-south roads coming up from France. It's also true that Bertix was a mere 18 kilometers north of Sedan, French city just south of the Franco-Belgian frontier that sits astride a traditional German invasion route. In August of 1914, however, there were many crossroads in Belgium and, among the pine-covered hills of the Ardennes, there were many places within 18 kilometers of Sedan.

The misfortune of Bertrix was thus less the product of strategy but of operations - that often ill-defined art of maneuvering armies before they reach the battlefield. Each division at Bertrix was part of a larger force - a corps that was part of an army and an army of many corps and an army that, in turn, was one of the four or five chess pieces available to German and French high commands.

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On the 22nd of August the Germans were still following the broad outlines of the Schlieffen Plan. The German Fourth Army - to which the Hessians and Thuringians of 21st Infantry Division belonged - formed, with the Fifth Army, the hub of the great five army wheel upon which the German leadership pinned its hopes for victory.ⁱ The role of the Fourth Army was thus to move westward at the comparatively leisurely pace of about 15 kilometers and push before it any and all French resistance. If it ran into a significant portion of the French field army, the job of the Fourth Army was to hold the French while the armies of the "decisive right wing" of the German five army wheel swung around to encircle (or at least outflank) them.

Joffre, the commanding general of the French field armies, had a somewhat more modest plan for his Fourth Army. Along with the Third Army, the French Fourth Army was attacking towards the north. Sweeping up any minor German opposition, these two armies were to strike the flank of that portion of the German armies that was to have been pinned by the French Fifth Army and the British Expeditionary Force attacking from the east.ⁱⁱ

At dawn on the 22nd of August, the French Fifth Army and the British had been in contact with the German right wing for quite a few days. The armies at the "hub", however, had yet to meet. On a day where cloudy weather inhibited aerial reconnaissance and encounters with enemy cavalry yielded little but reports of encounters with enemy cavalry, both the French and the German Fourth Armies were marching blindly into a rapidly shrinking "no man's land." Late in the morning of the 22nd of August, the divisions started bumping into each other.

Just before noon, the main body of the French 33rd Infantry Division - two regiments (six battalions) of infantry and a regiment (three battalions) of 36 light field guns - entered the Forêt de Luchy, a large wood north

ⁱF.W. Deiß, Die Hessen im Weltkrieg, 1914-1918, (Charlottenburg, Dr. Wilhelm Glaß & Co., 1939), pp. 9-11. For the most complete description of this movement, see the first volume of the German Official History of World War I, Der Weltkrieg, 1914-1918.

ⁱⁱJoffre, Mémoires du Maréchal Joffre (1910-1917), (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1932), Vol. I, p. 283.

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of Bertrix.ⁱⁱⁱ Basing his opinion on information provided by his corps commander, the general in command of the 33rd Infantry Division believed that the Germans were still far away. Consequently, he took the risk of having his main body march along a single one-lane road running south to north through the forest. The bulk of the infantry - four infantry battalions - were at the head of the column. The remaining two battalions of infantry traveled with the three artillery battalions that brought up the rear.^{iv}

The general in command of the main body, *Général de Brigade Fraisse*, had better information than the temporarily absent division commander. About an hour before his force entered the Forêt de Luchy, he had received word that Ochamps, the village 1,400 meters north of the woods, was controlled by German troops and that German cavalry had been seen in the area.^v Although General Fraisse certainly acknowledged this as a possibility - two hours later (at 1:10 PM) his orders to his artillery regiment began with the phrase "in case Ochamps is occupied" - he saw no need to provide close artillery support to the head of his column.

Rather, General Fraisse's main concern seems to have been to provide his artillery with adequate fields of fire. He ordered the lieutenant colonel in charge of the artillery (the regimental commander was also absent) to reconnoiter Hill 471, a point four kilometers north-west of Bertrix, four kilometers south-west of Ochamps, and just

ⁱⁱⁱThese six battalions (two regiments - the 20th and 11th Infantry Regiments -of three battalions each) comprised half of the infantry of the division. The other two regiments, forming a stationary flank guard for the corps, remained south-west of the Forêt de Luchy near the village of Assenois. The three artillery battalions - all of the artillery of the 33rd Infantry Division - were from the 18th Field Artillery Regiment.

^{iv}Fraisse was the commanding general of the 66th Infantry Brigade, one of the two infantry brigades of the French 33rd Infantry Division. Bernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," *La Revue d'Infanterie*, (Sept., 1935), p. 425. At this time, both German and French infantry divisions had two infantry brigades of two regiments each

^vBernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," *La Revue d'Infanterie*, (Sept., 1935), p. 428.

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clear of the western edge of the Forêt de Luchy.^{vi} The lieutenant colonel was further ordered not to move his battalions into the forest until the reconnaissance was complete.^{vii}

According to General Fraisse's map, placing the artillery on Hill 471 would provide him with maximum flexibility. Hill 471 overlooked not only the open area west of the Forêt de Luchy, but also the bare ridges north of the woods. A good twenty meters higher than the ridge that separated Ochamps from the north edge of the Forêt de Luchy, Hill 471 was also an good position from which to shell that ridge. The final virtue of the position consisted in the almost total absence of masking terrain. Only at the extreme ranges of the "75" (over 7,000 meters) would shells fired from Hill 471 towards any point of the compass face any danger of hitting an intervening hill or ridge before reaching their target. In other words, Fraisse seems to have been convinced that Hill 471 would allow his three artillery battalions to support the rest of the 33rd Infantry Division with direct fire.

The soundness of this plan was never tested. By the time Fraisse's orders reached the lieutenant colonel in charge of the artillery, it was too late to carry them out. In accordance with previous orders from Fraisse, the artillery commander had already limbered up his guns and placed them on the highway to Ochamps. Obeying General Fraisse would have required the artillerymen to turn their six horse teams 180 degrees on the narrow forest road, return to the open area south of the forest, and then proceed to Hill 471. The real impediment to obedience, however, was the fighting already in progress at the north edge of the woods. At 1:30 PM - twenty minutes after General Fraisse had written his order to the lieutenant colonel in charge of the artillery - two companies of the

^{vi}This officer, unnamed in Bernis' article, was not the commanding officer of the divisional artillery regiment (*18ième Régiment d'Artillerie de Campagne* - the 18th Field Artillery Regiment.) Rather, he was the second-in-command ("executive officer") of the regiment. According to French practice of the time, the normal post of this lieutenant colonel was with the guns. The colonel who was simultaneously the commander of the divisional artillery regiment and the senior artillery advisor to the division commander, was generally expected to travel with the division command post. Frédéric Georges Hérr, *L'Artillerie, Ce Qu'elle a Été, Ce Qu'elle Est, Ce Qu'elle Doit Etre*. (Paris: Berger Levrault, eds., 1924), p. 6

^{vii}Bernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," *La Revue d'Infanterie*, (Sept., 1935),p. 433.

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lead battalion of the French 33rd Infantry Division debouched from the north edge of the Forêt de Luchy and marched into open ground.^{viii}

The great majority of the French infantrymen were still in the woods when the firing started. Shrapnel shells were exploding above the forest, sending balls and shell fragments into the trees and men scrambling for cover. To French observers at the edge of the woods, the origin of this cannonade was clear; the muzzle flashes of German field guns could be seen just east of the church tower of Ochamps. The source of the rifle fire that accompanied the artillery fire was also readily apparent; the riflemen were firing from the ridge that hid Ochamps from its would-be liberators.^{ix}

Unknown to the French infantrymen, who had been so sure of their safety that they had entered the open ground in march formation with officers mounted, Ochamps was occupied by a large force of Germans. The field guns whose fire took the leading French battalion by surprise belonged to a single German battery. This battery, however, was not alone. There were, in addition, two more batteries of field guns, three battalions of infantry, and a squadron of cavalry.^x This detachment - one fourth of the combat units of the 21st Infantry Division - had been posted in Ochamps to maintain contact with a neighboring division.^{xi}

The effect of a battery's worth German field gun fire on the exposed French infantry was devastating. When the

^{viii}The geographical description is the result of cross-referencing a number of sources, that include, a current topographical map (scale 1:50,000), the map accompanying the article by General Petzel, "Im Ginster am Waldrand", in Albert Benary, ed., Das Ehrenbuch der Deutschen Feldartillerie (Berlin: Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk, 1933), p. 183, and the photographs accompanying A. H. Burne, "The French Guns at Bertrix, 1914", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIII, No. 3 (October, 1936).

^{ix}Bernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," La Revue d'Infanterie, (Sept., 1935), pp. 433-5.

^xThese were the 87th Infantry Regiment, the 1st Battalion of the 27th Field Artillery Regiment, and a squadron of the 6th Uhlans. This "mini-division" was commanded by Major-General von der Esch, the commanding general of the 42nd Infantry Brigade of the 21st Infantry Division. A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 253-4

^{xi}This was the 25th Infantry Division located six kilometers northwest of Ochamps along the road between Libin and Anloy. The 21st and 25th Infantry Divisions together made up the XVIII. Army Corps.

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second and third German batteries joined in, the impact was even greater. The lead elements of the forward battalion were annihilated - so effected by casualties and psychological shock of the sudden bombardment that they were no longer able to participate in battle.^{xii} This unexpected disaster, however, did nothing to hinder the offensive spirit of the following French battalions - units full of young soldiers who, as yet ignorant of the horrors of war, were eager to fight their first battle.^{xiii}

The remnants of the first French battalion and the as yet unbloodied second battalion formed their skirmish lines and began to move forward.^{xiv} On the right, they made little progress. The fire of the German infantry - which seems to have consisted of little more than a few piquets - could be suppressed without much trouble. The French even succeeded in driving some of these piquets back to the other side of the ridge. The German batteries, however, were some 1,400 meters away - well beyond the reach of the French rifles. To make matters worse, the fields over which the Frenchmen were attempting to attack were crisscrossed by a number of barbed wire fences. These had not been laid by the defenders of Ochamps - the systematic use of barbed wire in war was still a few months away - but were nonetheless a big help to them, slowing down the French advance until the Germans could organize a proper counter-attack.^{xv}

For the French, things went a little better on their left. There, a slight indentation of the ground protected them from the German artillery fire. Advancing through this dead ground for more than a kilometer, the French battalion on the left soon reached the south-western

^{xii}A German source uses the word *vernichtet* ("annihilated") to describe the state of the leading French regiment of the column, the 20th. I cannot, however, accept the claim of "A.G.M." (p. 254) that two companies marched into the open in march formation after the two lead companies had been fired upon. The first salvo of, at most, six shells might have caught the lead companies moving in their column of fours (four men abreast and fifty or so men deep for a company of two hundred). Subsequent salvos, however, would have found the survivors well dispersed and their comrades to the rear quite unwilling to move forward "administratively."

^{xiii}The spirit of the men of the 33rd Infantry Division is discussed at length by Bernis (pp. 419-22).

^{xiv}These were the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 20th Infantry Regiment, commanded by Majors Fiamma and Dizot.

^{xv} Bernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," La Revue d'Infanterie, (Sept., 1935), p. 435.

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outskirts of Ochamps. There, it ran into the main body of the German 87th Infantry Regiment moving south through the streets of Ochamps. Aided by the six-machine guns of their regimental machine gun company, the three battalions of the 87th were able to stop the French advance. However, as two more French battalions^{xvi} poured out of the woods to join their comrades south of Ochamps, the German regimental commander felt sufficiently hard pressed to call for help.^{xvii}

The commander of the German artillery battalion responded, not by shifting his fire, but by ordering two of his three batteries to limber up. This done, the two German batteries galloped down the back of the hill that they had been hiding behind and through the streets of Ochamps. Reaching the forward edge of the 87th Infantry Regiment, the gunners unlimbered their field pieces, turned them around, and, despite heavy French small arms fire, fired point blank into the French skirmish lines. This, for the French, decided the issue. They stopped their attack and began to melt back into the forest.^{xviii}

While four French infantry battalions were being decimated in the open terrain south of Ochamps, the three artillery battalions following them were still in the forest, stretched out along the Ochamps Road. No more than four kilometers away - and in some cases less than 1,000 meters away - the bulk of the German 21st Infantry Division - nine battalions of infantry, nine batteries of field artillery, and four batteries of 150mm howitzers - was also marching through the Forêt de Luchy. This force was using the second major road that ran through the woods, the road from Recogne that intersected the Ochamps Road at the southern entrance to the forest. Between 2:00 and 3:00 P.M., just as the advance guard of this German force arrived within sight of that intersection, the last few

^{xvi}These were the 3rd Battalion of the 20th Infantry Regiment and the 1st Battalion of the 11th Infantry Regiment.

^{xvii}Bernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," La Revue d'Infanterie, (Sept., 1935), pp. 435-6 and A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 254

^{xviii}A.H. Burne, "The French Guns at Bertrix, 1914", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIII, No. 3 (October, 1936), pp. 354.

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guns of the last French battery could be seen moving north into the woods.^{xix}

The lead German company promptly deployed into two separate skirmish lines, one on each side of the road.^{xx} In the excitement of the moment some Germans fired off a few rifle shots. (The men of the 21st Infantry Division, having previously fought nothing more than a running skirmish, were still rather green.) The reply was swift. The infantry battalion that formed the rear guard of the French column peppered the forest with rifle and machine gun fire, driving the Germans to ground.^{xxi} The rest of the German vanguard - three more companies - soon arrived on the scene. The French, however, maintained control of the situation, and it looked like the German vanguard might have to pull back.^{xxii}

Marching to the sound of the guns, the German division commander, *General-Leutnant* von Oven, left his post at the head of the main body of his column and began to ride forward. On the road, he ran into a messenger from the vanguard. From the content of the message - scribbled, no doubt, by an officer more concerned with his immediate situation than with the task of accurately reporting what he saw - it seemed that a large French force was attacking through the woods. Von Oven responded immediately. He ordered the German infantry in his immediate vicinity - the remaining two battalions of the forwardmost German infantry regiment - to attack at once.^{xxiii}

This rapid counter-attack through the southernmost quarter of the Forêt de Luchy managed to stop the attack of the French infantry battalion. However, despite the

^{xix}A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 249.

^{xx}This company was from the 1st Battalion of the 88th Infantry Regiment.

^{xxi}This was the 2rd Battalion of the 11th Infantry Regiment, commanded by Major Frère.

^{xxii}A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 250.

^{xxiii}A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), p. 250.

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employment of a second German infantry regiment,^{xxiv} further progress was prevented by the combinations of rifle fire and the fire of the French corps artillery located four or five kilometers to the northeast on heights near the village of Jehonville. The 75mm shells fired by this overstrength regiment combined with the small arms fire of the French infantry to inhibit the forwardmost German artillery battery from leaving the comparative safety of the forest road.^{xxv}

General-Major Scherbening, commander of the artillery brigade of the 21st Infantry Division, Major Petzel, commander of the forwardmost German artillery battalion, and Major Petzel's three battery commanders were at the southern exit of the woods when Petzel received General von Oven's order to move his battalion forward in support of the attack of the German vanguard. General Scherbening, seeing the move into the open as suicidal, countermanded the order and sent an orderly to General von Oven to request infantry support for the deployment of the battery. When this request was refused - all three of the German infantry regiments that had been along the road were already engaged - Scherbening gave the order to move forward.^{xxvi}

As the sole French machine gun company south of the woods attempted to move into a position from which it could enfilade the German skirmish lines,^{xxvii} Major Petzel's battalion left the woods at a gallop and took up positions

^{xxiv}This was the 81st Infantry Regiment, of the 42nd Infantry Brigade.

^{xxv}A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 250-4 and Petzel, "Im Ginster am Waldrand", in Albert Benary, ed., Das Ehrenbuch der Deutschen Feldartillerie (Berlin: Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk,), p. 184. By table of organization, a French corps artillery regiment had forty-eight 75mm guns (four battalions of three batteries of four guns each.)

^{xxvi}Petzel, "Im Ginster am Waldrand", in Albert Benary, ed., Das Ehrenbuch der Deutschen Feldartillerie (Berlin: Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk,), p. 184.

^{xxvii}This was the machine gun company of the 11th Infantry Regiment which, at the beginning of the fighting at the south edge of the Forêt de Luchy, had been marching with the last infantry battalion of General Fraisse's column. In 1914, both German and French regiments had a single machine gun company of six guns.

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on both sides of the Recogne road.^{xxviii} The French answered this bold move with heavy fire from rifles and field guns. Although the Germans lost some men and horses, all eighteen of the German guns were able to make it to their assigned places, unlimber, and fire. Both the French infantry and artillery, it seems, were firing too high. The latter's efforts also suffered from a high percentage of "dud" shells.^{xxix} One of Petzel's batteries directed its attention on the guns of the French corps artillery more than five kilometers away. The other two fired over open sights in support of the infantry. Their main target was a handful of French guns from the column on the road to Ochamps that had turned around and taken up positions just west of the point where that road entered the Forêt de Luchy.^{xxx}

The result of the counter-battery fire against the distant guns of the French corps artillery was uncertain. Whether they were silenced by the fire of one German battery is unlikely. That they were distracted by another task is undocumented. The outcome of the counter-battery fire against the closer French guns, however, was immediately apparent. Subjected to almost (400 meter range) point blank fire from twelve German field pieces, the three or four French guns just west of the Ochamps road were quickly silenced. The French drivers who bravely rode out of the shelter of the woods to recover the now crewless "75s" received similar treatment.^{xxxi}

The almost instantaneous destruction of this French battery decided the engagement. Deprived the material support and moral comfort of their own artillery fire, the

^{xxviii}A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 251, Bernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," La Revue d'Infanterie, (Sept., 1935), pp. 439-40, and Petzel, "Im Ginster am Waldrand", in Albert Benary, ed., Das Ehrenbuch der Deutschen Feldartillerie (Berlin: Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk,), p. 185.

^{xxix}Petzel, "Im Ginster am Waldrand", in Albert Benary, ed., Das Ehrenbuch der Deutschen Feldartillerie (Berlin: Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk,), pp. 184-5.

^{xxx}A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 251

^{xxxi}A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 251

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French riflemen hiding in the tall gorse that covered the open ground between Bertrix and the forest lost heart. At the same moment, the German infantrymen trying to advance against an unseen enemy took courage from the fact that only their guns were firing effectively. The Germans, who by now numbered six infantry battalions, advanced. The French infantry retreated south, to Bertrix.^{xxxii}

While battles raged to the north and south, General Fraisse, still stuck on the forest road to Ochamps, had come to a decision. On the advice of the lieutenant colonel in charge of the artillery (who had just returned from a reconnaissance), Fraisse ordered one of the artillery battalions to go into action north of the woods in support of the hard-pressed infantry. This order, however, had just been received when it was countermanded by the recently arrived commanding general of the 33rd Infantry Division. Furious that his artillery should have been allowed in the woods in the first place, the *général de division* commanded the three artillery battalions to return to the open area near Bertrix. Thus, the first order of business for the thirty or so French gun sections in the woods was to get their fifteen meter long limbered guns to "about face" on a road that was rarely more than ten meters wide.^{xxxiii}

The advantage was now clearly with the Germans. In the north, the bulk of General Fraisse's infantry was stuck at the edge of the woods, unwilling to retreat but unable to move forward. In the south, a French battery had been annihilated and the French infantry driven off. In the center, along the forest road between Bertrix and Ochamps, the three French artillery battalions (minus the tail end battery lost in the south) were in a state of self-imposed confusion.

The Germans, however, do not seem to have recognized the fact that they had gained the upper hand. Rather, the major concern of General von Oven at this time was to protect his own artillery - ten batteries of which were strung out along the Recogne-Bertrix road. Reports from

^{xxxii}A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 251-2.

^{xxxiii}Bernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," La Revue d'Infanterie, (Sept., 1935), pp. 436-8.

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the vanguard fighting to the south-west had caused von Oven to believe that French infantry was moving through the woods towards his position. Similar tales told by the "walking wounded" and drivers of the vanguard's field kitchens as they moved toward the rear of the column spread tales of disaster among troops moving forward along the road.^{xxxiv} The final contributor to this atmosphere of disarray was the explosion of a handful of stray French artillery shells. Fired, it seems, by French guns defending themselves against the German vanguard, these 75mm shells fell on the piece of road occupied by the 80th Fusilier Regiment, killing the one officer and turning the confusion into panic.^{xxxv}

Too weak to defend, General von Oven decided to attack. Hoping, perhaps, to meet the Frenchmen he presumed were attacking on even terms, he ordered his one remaining infantry regiment to counter-attack through the woods.^{xxxvi} This simple maneuver - three thousand German infantrymen turned half-right and moved forward, converting the march column into an instant skirmish line - never made contact with the supposed French attack. Instead, the six companies on the right of the German line that ran into the French positions south of Ochamps and joined with the German occupants of that village in fierce forest fighting. The other six companies found themselves slammed against a line of limbered French field guns stretched out along a narrow forest road.^{xxxvii}

In the hand-to-hand combat that followed, the French gunners fought no less bravely than their comrades of the infantry. Some made use of their carbines. Others found the Germans so close that they had to resort to their fists. A few managed to bring their guns into action - one

^{xxxiv}A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), p. 252.

^{xxxv}Bernhard von Fumetti, Das Königlich Preußische Füsilier-Regiment von Gersdorff (Kurhessisches) Nr. 80 im Weltkrieg 1914-1918, (Berlin: Verlag Gerhard Stalling, 1925), p. 30 and Bernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," La Revue d'Infanterie, (Sept., 1935), p. 453.

^{xxxvi}These were from the 80th Fusilier Regiment, 42nd Infantry Brigade.

^{xxxvii}Bernhard von Fumetti, Das Königlich Preußische Füsilier-Regiment von Gersdorff (Kurhessisches) Nr. 80 im Weltkrieg 1914-1918, (Berlin: Verlag Gerhard Stalling, 1925), pp. 30-31.

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gun accounting for a number of German riflemen when it fired point-blank into the ammunition limber of its neighbor. In such an uneven contest, however, the artillerymen were bound to lose. Within minutes, the rearwardmost of the three French artillery battalions - the unit which had already lost a battery at the southern entrance of the Forêt de Luchy - was no longer capable of effective resistance.^{xxxviii}

The two surviving French artillery battalions were now caught in a cruel dilemma. To stay where they were meant annihilation by the German infantry moving through the forest. (The further north the Germans were, the further they had to move through the woods and, consequently, the later they were to hit the Bertrix-Ochamps road. That they would arrive eventually, however, was obvious to all who cared to ponder the situation.) To move south or east brought the same result. To move north would put them under the fire of the German field pieces at Ochamps. The only way out, it seemed, lay to the west.

Some time before the crisis in the woods, when the lieutenant-colonel in direct command of the three French artillery battalions was still looking for a firing position from which he could support the four infantry battalions attacking Ochamps, a French artillery officer had discovered an unmetalled road running from the Bertrix-Ochamps road to the western edge of the Forêt de Luchy. Reporting this fact to the division commander, he got the permission to lead the two surviving artillery battalions down that road and out of the forest.

The safety offered by this maneuver was, however, more apparent than real. About a thousand meters west of the west edge of the forest the retreating Frenchmen of the Second Battalion of the divisional artillery of the 33rd Divisions found themselves on top of a low hill - the same Hill 471 that General Fraisse had wanted for his batteries. To men who had just escaped with their lives, the hill did not seem that significant. The increase in elevation, however, was just enough to expose the moving column to the fire of the German batteries that had been hastily set up just south of the Forêt de Luchy.

^{xxxviii}Only eight or nine guns of the original thirty-six remained in French hands. A.H. Burne, "The French Guns at Bertrix, 1914", *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, Vol. LXIII, No. 3 (October, 1936), pp. 351-2.

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In the short time (less than an hour) that passed between the German seizure of the southern exit of the Forêt de Luchy and the attempted escape of the French artillery, the bulk of the German artillery assembled just east of the intersection of the Bertrix-Ochamps and the Recogne-Bertrix roads. North of the road to Recogne, four batteries of field artillery hid behind a low hill that protected them towards the north. South of the road, four more batteries of field artillery and four batteries of 150mm heavy field howitzers sheltered in a shallow draw.^{xxxix}

As the first French teams pulled their guns into the open, the shells from the German "grand battery" started to fall. Although the accuracy of first few volleys must have left something to be desired, enough shells hit the ridge to wreck havoc among the limbered guns, stopping seven out of twelve gun teams of the lead French artillery battalion from joining in the mad gallop to safety. The second French battalion, seeing what had happened to the first, wisely avoided what later generations of soldiers would call the "skyline." In moving through the dead ground north of the hill, however, many of the second battalion's guns got caught in a mixture of bog and barbed wire. Of the thirty-six French field guns that entered the Forêt de Luchy earlier that day, only nine remained in French hands at the end of the day.^{xl}

As the German infantry in the woods pushed west of the Bertrix to Ochamps road, collecting prisoners and driving groups of stragglers before them, the remaining five battalions of the French 33rd Infantry Division arrived on the scene.^{xli} This understrength brigade (the 65th Infantry Brigade), designated as corps reserve, had spent most of the day in the small forests to the west of Bertrix. When, in the course of the afternoon, it became to clear to the

^{xxxix}A.G.M. (Pseudonym), "Bertrix, 1914, Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 251-3; and Petzel, "Im Ginster am Waldrand", in Albert Benary, ed., Das Ehrenbuch der Deutschen Feldartillerie (Berlin: Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk,), p. 185-6.

^{xl}Only eight or nine guns of the original thirty-six remained in French hands. A.H. Burne, "The French Guns at Bertrix, 1914", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIII, No. 3 (October, 1936), pp. 351-2.

^{xli}A.H. Burne, "The French Guns at Bertrix, 1914", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIII, No. 3 (October, 1936), pp. 354-5

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commanding general of the XVII Corps (parent formation to the 33rd Infantry Division) that things were going badly north of Bertrix, he decided to use his reserve to defend the town.

The route that the 65th Brigade took to get to Bertrix, however, placed it in harms way. The five French battalions thus found themselves spending the early evening of the 22nd of August battling seven and a half German infantry battalions, six batteries of field guns, two batteries of light field howitzers, and four batteries of heavy field howitzers. For the Germans, the battle provided them with an opportunity for a "textbook" attack, with the field guns firing from the firing line, the light field howitzers a few hundred meters behind them, and the heavy field howitzers a thousand meters behind the light field howitzers. For the French, it was the last disaster of a disastrous day.

Hindered by confused orders and required to push through the remnants of the artillery regiment destroyed earlier that afternoon, the French infantry arrived on the battlefield in pieces. In pieces it faced the overwhelming fire of more than half of a German division. And in pieces it fell back to the south and west.^{xliii}

By sunset, the German victory was complete in all its elements except one. The German leadership - the division commander and the brigade commanders - had no idea what they had accomplished. The general in charge of the Ochamps detachment was happy to have beaten off what he thought was an attack by two French infantry brigades. General von Scherbening, the commander of the artillery brigade, had no way of knowing the destruction his guns and howitzers had visited upon the two French artillery battalions on Hill 471. General von Oven, the division commander, had yet to receive the reports of his far flung units. From his command post on the road to Recogne, all he could see were the long lines of wounded walking back to the regimental aid stations.

The French, of course, realized what had happened. Roll call the next morning would establish that thousands of men were dead, missing, or captured. The 20th Infantry

^{xliii}Bernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," La Revue d'Infanterie, (Sept., 1935), pp. 459-71.

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Regiment, which had attacked Ochamps from the woods, was missing 1,300 men - close to half of its effectives. Its partner, the 11th Infantry Regiment, lost so many that it could muster only 600. The 7th Infantry Regiment, whose three battalions had been in the corps reserve, lost more than 700. Worse still, from the point of view of soldiers who could accept casualties more easily than dishonor, twenty-seven guns and the colors of at least one regiment were left to the enemy.^{xliii}

The only German who immediately understood the enormity of what happened, however, was a young lieutenant of the 6th Uhlans, the divisional cavalry regiment of the 21st Infantry Division. During a patrol made late in the afternoon of the 22nd, he rode through the wreckage of the French batteries on Hill 471. Then, mounting the heights, he saw the survivors of a defeated division retreating to the west. His only regret was that rest of his regiment was too far away to pounce upon the vulnerable columns.^{xliiv}

Twenty years after the engagement at Bertrix, a British artilleryman wrote an article about the battle for the Journal of the Royal Artillery. Trying to explain how, in a "fair fight" between two almost identical forces, one side so rapidly gained the upper hand and so decisively defeated its opponent, he ascribed the German victory to their "sporting spirit." The French gunners were scientists, the author reminded his readers. Given enough time, they could chose the best position from which to fire and work out ways to get optimum performance from their guns. When, however, time was at a premium, the German gunners proved better able to seize the moment.^{xlv}

Such an analysis was, of course, music to the ears of that officer's comrades in the "horsey" Royal Field Artillery or even "horsier" Royal Horse Artillery. The

^{xliii}Bernis, "La 33e Division, le 22 Août 1914," La Revue d'Infanterie, (Sept., 1935), pp. 456 and 471; Hertzburg, "Vormarschlacht bei Neufchateau", in Paul Heinrici, ed., Das Ehrenbuch der Deutschen Pioniere, (Berlin: Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk, 1932.)

^{xliiv}Hermann Freiherr Hiller von Gaertringen, Geschichte des Thüringischen Ulanen-Regiments Nr. 6. (Berlin: Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk, 1934, pp. 48-9.

^{xlv}A.G.M. (pseudonym) "Bertrix, 1914. Seen From the German Side", Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LXIV, No. 2 (July, 1937), pp. 258-9

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latter were certainly glad of reassurance that, as a means of preparing for war, polo was superior to trigonometry and knowledge of horseflesh more important than close study of firing tables. Older British gunners might even have recalled the joke told about the pre-war German field artillery officer who, after lavishing much attention on the training and grooming of his teams, lamented that such fine creatures should have to be encumbered with artillery pieces.^{xlvi}

Time spent in the saddle and the stables, however, was only part of the advantage enjoyed by the Germans at Bertrix. To be sure, the rapidity with which the German batteries, working in unfamiliar terrain, executed the decisions of their officers was a function of the confidence that unit and leader, horse and rider, and team and driver had in one another. Such skill, however, would have been for naught if the leaders had lacked the power of decision. This latter factor, in turn, can be ascribed to three aspects of the pre-war training of the Kaiser's artillery - the cult of decisiveness, the *coup d'oeil*, and the habit of leading from the front.

"Resolute action," admonished the German Field Service Regulations of 1908, "is consequently of first importance in war. Every individual, from the highest commander to the lowest soldier, must always remember that supine inaction and neglect of opportunities will entail severer censure than an error in conception of the choice of means."^{xlvii} The German Field Artillery Regulations of 1907 gave voice to similar sentiments. "All leaders must be imbued with the idea that absence or delay in making a decision is to be considered worse than decisive action, even one erroneous in the choice of means."^{xlviii} These sentences, echoed in other manuals, were but the most explicit expression of a widespread and traditional German

^{xlvi}A number of pre-war German officers were unhappy about the lack of interest in gunnery in German field artillery units. See, for example, Landauer, "Feldartillerie", in Max Schwarte, ed., Militärischen Lehren des Großen Kriegs, p. 89.

^{xlvii}Prussia. General Staff. (Great Britain, General Staff, War Office translators), Field Service Regulations (Felddienst Ordnung) of the German Army, 1908, (London: Harrison and Sons, 1908), p. 9.

^{xlviii}P. Van Berchen, "Le Combat de l'Artillerie d'après le Règlement allemand de l'artillerie de Campagne de 1907", Revue Militaire Suisse, Vol. 52, No. 8 (August, 1907), p. 593.

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belief that imperfect action at the right moment was far better than more deliberate activity after the opportunity had been lost.^{xlix}

Making bold decisions, however, is not the same as making good decisions. The outcome of the decisions made by the German leaders can be partially ascribed to luck. We can be fairly certain, for example, that neither General Scherbening nor General von der Esch intended to trap over half of the French 33rd Division on the forest road from Bertrix to Ochamps. Although the result of their actions was a division-size "hasty ambush," it's clear that both were responding to local opportunities. Nevertheless, the German decisions showed a degree of tactical judgement that was not present in the French leadership. Credit for this must be placed squarely at the feet of the pre-war training, of German officers. In particular, the soundness of the decisions made by German officers at Bertrix must be considered the result of the use of what the Germans called the "applicatory method."

Generally associated with the late 19th century Prussian general Julius von Verdy du Vernois, the applicatory method sought to teach tactics by means of problems. Some of the problems were simple - the tactical decision game (*Planspiel* or *Planübung*) was based on a sketch map and a one or two page scenario. Others were more complicated - the "rigid wargame" contained enough charts and tables to gladden the heart of any present day board wargamer and the staff ride could last for days.¹ Whatever particular techniques were used - in most cases there was a mixture of many - the applicatory method was

^{xlix}This attitude, which seems to have its origins in the reforms that followed the catastrophic Prussian defeat at Jena-Auerstadt in 1806, also fit in nicely with other aspects of German military culture. The federal nature of the German Empire, the vestiges of *Landskecht* attitudes about the prerogatives of company and regimental commanders, and, ironically, the Kaiser's unwillingness to delegate control of the Army to the War Ministry or other constitutional body, all conspired to make the German officer relatively autonomous in the training and administration of his command. Likewise, the Kaiser's insistence on granting commissions only to those whose personal loyalty to the House of Hohenzollern was indisputable freed German officers from the atmosphere of suspicion that led officers of less stable regimes to go to war with one eye on the battlefield and the other on the possibility of a board of inquiry. In other words, discretion on the battlefield was a natural complement to a culture where loyalty, subordination, and dedication to duty, as well as discretion in administrative matters, was presumed.

¹For examples of the techniques of the applicatory method, see Wilhelm Balck, *Kriegspiel und Übungsritt als Vorschule für die Truppenführung*, (Berlin: R. Eisenschmidt, 1913).

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based on a solid consensus about the teaching of tactics. Tactics was not a science to be taught by means of theory, or a simple task to be explained by lists of rule or acronyms. Rather, it was an art to be learned by doing.^{li}

The highest attainment of those taught by the applicatory method was what Frederick the Great called the *coup d'oeil* - the ability to size up a tactical situation at a glance and, within seconds, begin to give the necessary orders.^{lii} At Bertrix, this talent was displayed by General Scherbening in the rapid placement of the bulk of the divisional artillery in the open ground just south of the Forêt de Luchy. Despite the French shells bursting around him and the fact that he had to maintain his seat in the saddle during what must have been a very bumpy ride over broken ground, Scherbening was able, in the blinking of an eye, to determine the general tactical situation, the location of the French fire, and the relative merits of various possible fire positions.

Of course, none of this would have been possible if Scherbening had not been at the head of his brigade. The same can be said for General von Oven, Major Petzel, or Captain von Alven, the officer whose battery was the first to fire on the French infantry companies exiting the Forêt de Luchy just south of Ochamps. Being able to take responsibility, make tactical decisions, or even exploit the *coup d'oeil* would have meant nothing if the commanders had not been in a position to see what was going on in those parts of the battlefield where important events were taking place. In other words, the Germans at Bertrix benefited from their long established custom of expecting officers to command from the front.

If the fighting at Bertrix had been a unique event - what historians like to call an "episode" - then the virtues displayed by the Germans in that battle could be dismissed as anomalies. They might be peculiar to the 21st

^{li}For German field artillery officers, the most complete opportunity for "learning by doing" was offered by the School of Field Artillery Fire at Juterborg. Unfortunately, in an army that planned to have 1,069 field artillery batteries on mobilization, only about 200 second lieutenants and 160 first lieutenants and captains could attend the course each year. For a detailed description, see H. Eager, "Field Artillery Schools of Fire in Other Countries", The Field Artillery Journal, Vol. VI, No. 4 (October-December, 1916), pp. 501-13.

^{lii}Pronounced so as to rhyme with "new boy", *coup d'oeil* is French for "strike of the eye."

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Infantry Division or even to Hessians, but they could not be attributed to the majority of German commanders. An examination of the other battles that took place on the 22nd of August indicates, however, that bold, skilled, and decisive leadership was not the exception but the rule.

Just northwest of Bertrix, the 25th Infantry Division was on the point of being overwhelmed by superior French forces when it was rescued by the arrival of the advance elements of the VIII. Reserve Corps. This formation, which had begun the day in the second echelon of the 4th Army, 45 kilometers of winding, undulating roads east of the battlefield, had received no orders to take part in the battle. Rather, as its columns were reaching their designated march objectives, the corps commander, General von und zu Egolffstein, received a message describing the plight of the two widely separated brigades of the 25th Infantry Division. Acting without hesitation and entirely on his own authority, Egolffstein ordered his two divisions to continue their march for fifteen to twenty additional kilometers.

Southeast of Bertrix, near Neufchâteau, the German 25th Reserve Division rescued a hard-pressed division belonging to the neighboring Fifth Army by striking the right flank of the attacking French forces. Although this attack crossed both corps and army boundaries, the division commander did not wait to clear his attack "through channels." He made his estimate of the situation, considered the impact of his planned actions on the larger battle, and attacked.^{liii}

The result for the French was a large scale retreat. Denied victory where they had been making progress, and decisively defeated at Bertrix, the French pulled back four whole army corps, effectively reversing the forward movement of the French 4th Army. This loss of one half of the available forces, in turn, caused the collapse of the French offensive into Belgium and the beginning of a

^{liii}F.W. Deiß, Die Hessen im Weltkrieg, 1914-1918, (Charlottenburg, Dr. Wilhelm Glaß & Co., 1939), pp. 18-21.

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general withdrawal that would end only with the "Miracle of the Marne" three weeks later.^{liv}

Interestingly enough, it was this miracle that prevented the French from evaluating just what had gone wrong in the encounters that made up what was later christened the Battle of the Frontiers. Reveling in their improbable victory and soon consumed by the new problems posed by trench warfare that followed close on its heels, they took complete stock of the defeats of August. Although they recognized that they needed heavier field artillery, it never occurred to them that their command system was as much at fault as their field pieces.

As a result, after four years of trench warfare and twenty-two years of peace had made their approach to giving orders and taking responsibility even more rigid, the French would have to endure a second defeat in the Ardennes. In 1940 as in 1914, the French would not be defeated by better weapons or greater courage. Rather, the biggest single contributor to French defeat would once again be the superiority of the German approach to tactical decision making. This time, however, there would be no last minute reprieve on the Marne, and the mistakes of the generals would cost them their nation.

^{liv}Joffre, *Mémoires du Maréchal Joffre (1910-1917)*, (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1932), Vol. I, pp. 294-5.