

The following is the War Commentary by Captain Cyril Falls to be broadcast at 9.25 p.m. tonight:-

Most of the war commentaries are about strategy. This time I'm going to talk about tactics, which are very much in our minds since the recent events in Libya. Tactics are, roughly speaking, fighting on the actual battlefield, whereas strategy is, again roughly speaking, planning the approach to the battle, and the exploitation of the battle. Strategy changes slowly and its main principles hardly change at all. In tactics some principles remain like a hard core, but all the rest is fluid, a flowing river of incidents and ideas and inventions like history itself

One thing that history shows is that no weapon or method is allowed to dominate the battlefield completely without having to meet challenge after challenge. I'm going to talk chiefly about armoured tactics, which are subject to this rule like any others. We've seen that in Russia and under totally different circumstances in Libya. But we shouldn't have needed the proof. Just as a guarantee of good faith, to show this isn't all wisdom after the event, may I read you a sentence I wrote about armoured tactics in the year 1940?

"Each new invention, each new tactic, takes its place in the armoury of warfare, meets new currents of opposition, fails here, triumphs there, adds to itself in this direction, lets a part of itself drop in that, and finally becomes so changed as to be almost unrecognisable."

Well, the most powerful factors which are now influencing defence against armoured attack are the increase in quantity and weight of anti-tank artillery, and the enormously extended use of minefields.

The older forms of defence, such as watercourses, cuttings, embankments, broken ground, artificial tank ditches, concrete bosses or spikes, short-range weapons of various sorts, still exist and can be combined with the newer ones. But whereas at the beginning of this war it would have taken weeks, perhaps months, to prepare a strong anti-tank position in open country, now a great deal can be done in a night, and a very great deal in two or three.

But this only means that a formation such as a brigade can hold up an armoured equivalent, a tank brigade, if it can get adequate air support and adequate supplies. The best defended "box" won't hold out very long against greatly superior armoured strength backed by superior strength in the air. The "box" is indeed only meant as a pivot for the armoured forces operating round it and counter-attacking the hostile forces which are trying to reduce it. It can't possibly maintain itself for long if it is cut off and left unsupported.

One might say that Tobruk was a very strong "box" on a very big scale, but the armoured and air forces which were brought against it were overwhelming in strength and it could be given no outside support. And this time Rommel advanced against it and assaulted it straight from the battlefield, whereas last time he was already at the end of his tether and had only a handful of tanks when he reached it.

The fate of Tobruk can't be taken as illustrating the prospects of defence against an armoured assault. Two other episodes in the recent fighting are much more significant: first, the way we held the Knightsbridge "box" and pivoted on it, and second, the tank battle on June 13, when our armoured forces ran into a concentration of anti-tank artillery and suffered losses which decided the fate of the whole battle.

/The armoured

The armoured division runs its greatest risks from surprise - that is obvious. But it's a tribute to the amount of thought that has been put into defensive measures that the most dangerous form of surprise may now come from defence rather than counter-attack. In other words, the risk may now come rather from "butting into something" unexpectedly than from being attacked by something unexpectedly. This process may continue. For instance, the effect of a minefield is limited nowadays by the fact that a mine acts only once. When it has been touched off, however much damage it has done, the area in which it lies becomes safe. The work of sowing mines has already been speeded up, but there are likely to be new methods in the future which will enable an exploded mine to be replaced even more quickly than now.

All this has put a certain brake on the absolute predominance of the tank. As I said just now, we have seen this in Libya and also in quite different conditions in Russia. The method of the Germans at the beginning of the Russian campaign, armoured divisions followed by motorised divisions bursting straight through and sweeping away to distant objectives, supported only by the air arm, may have to be modified in future. There may have to be a much closer co-ordination of all arms and somewhat less ambitious programmes. And in close country, like that of most of western Europe, where tanks will as a rule get off the roads only to fight and get back to them as quickly as possible, these influences will be even more important.

But armoured forces have come to stay. They will not be driven from the battlefield by any of these methods, old or new, or both in combination. They will meet the challenge, and in fact they are meeting it. Tank tactics are developing. How are they likely to go on developing?

The armoured division is still very well able to take care of itself in almost any kind of country, so long as it is not surprised. It may have more difficulties in rough country, but it actually welcomes rough country from some points of view as providing good laagers in which it can rest for the night and which it can use to make its running repairs and carry out its general maintenance. And because it is so well able to take care of itself its broad movements are likely to be as bold as ever. But it must avoid unexpected bumps. That points to even more insistence than before on good intelligence about the enemy, on air and ground reconnaissance, on protection.

The moving screen of reconnaissance aircraft and light, fast ground forces must constantly cover the heavy armour and save it from traps. And when information can't be got without fighting it must be fought for. That is to say, the reconnaissance aircraft must be protected with fighters, and the light, fast ground forces - which themselves include light armour in the shape of armoured cars - must be strong enough to brush aside the enemy's screen, with which he tried to hide his strength, his dispositions, and his intentions. If necessary they must be supported by artillery and perhaps even sometimes with a certain amount of heavy armour.

And then, when the opposition is found to be strong, the armoured division must never attempt to "bullock through". It must call for the aid of every gun that can be brought to bear, its own and those of other forces. It must manoeuvre and try to find a soft spot. It must not, except in emergency, assault without air support. In many cases its best course may be to leave defensive "boxes" to be dealt with by other troops, and itself go through the gaps between them. These "boxes", unless there has been a long time to prepare them, will be found very vulnerable to concentrated artillery fire and especially mortar fire. They can be surrounded by infantry and mopped up, perhaps at night.

/Another

Another serious danger for the commander of armoured forces to guard against is dispersion. They can't play their true part if they're split up into small parcels and given too many jobs at once. That doesn't mean to say that they should be kept concentrated in a single block. Modern tactics are not linear, like those of the last war, but columnar, and single gigantic columns involve waste of space and of time. But if an armoured division advances, let's say, in three columns, the space between them should if possible be so calculated that the whole force can very quickly close on the centre and fairly quickly concentrate on either of the two wings.

Everybody has been talking and thinking lately about the problems of supply and maintenance of tanks, about the mobile workshops which give them service right up to the battlefield itself, about the echelons of fuel-carrying vehicles. I haven't time to go into that now, and perhaps there's no need to. But I should like to bring out one important point, which is always likely to be the chief anxiety, perhaps the nightmare, of the commander of an armoured division. That is the protection of all this paraphernalia of supply and maintenance, all what may be called the "soft-skinned stuff" from air attack, and in a lesser degree from attack by ground raiders. That is first of all a matter for his anti-aircraft weapons, which are pretty strong; but at the same time the junior officers who command these units must be thoroughly trained and must develop a tactical sense, especially in the use of ground, such as we never thought of requiring from auxiliary services in the old days.

There's immense responsibility and immense interest in the command of every armoured unit, right down, one may say, to the command of a single tank. Speed is so important that orders must be instantly absorbed, and within the frame of those orders there must be a great deal of personal initiative. Except in the case of what I may call a set-piece attack, long prepared, I don't see why any staff below that of the division should ever issue a written order. Word of mouth and wireless telephony should take its place.

And all this theory that I've laid down, though I hope it's not useless, is only background. Everything depends upon execution, not doing what you learn in a book or a lecture, but adapting the ideas which you get out of them to the circumstances in which you find yourself. The aim - and it's not an easy one - is to get the right combination of boldness and prudence and to get a force trained so that quick decisions will be taken in every emergency.