

A Matter of Geometry

Capt Ared White

It used to be," said Sergeant Brinton rather bitterly, "that soldierin' was a red-blooded man's business. Now it's got to be a mere matter of cold-blooded calculation where the biggest man in the end is the one with the longest nose and the biggest pair of specs hung on the end of 'em."

The square-jawed, muscular old sergeant paused abruptly and leaped to attention as a brisk young lieutenant, studious of mien but bristling with activity and authority, came up the desolate troop street.

"Sergeant," ordered the officer sharply. "You will remain in charge of the camp while the troop is deployed on the border, as there is another racket blowing up among the choice over the way."

Yes, sir," replied Brinton, saluting smartly, while his face dutifully traced no hint of the disappointment he must felt.

"There's just one thing," muttered the sergeant, as his superior strode off, "that stands between my issuing orders to that chap. I can't get higher mathematics through my head—though when it comes to push and dash and tactics, why—"

Brinton lit a commissary weed and shifted himself nearer his shelter tent to escape the encroachment of the hot border sun. He sat there in reflective silence, his gaze lost in the baked, bar swales and gullies of the trouble lands across, the sluggish Rio Grande. Presently the troop, in light inarching order, went trotting animatedly from the camp, sabres, and equipment along- clanking a tantalizing refrain under which blanched. At the head, proudly astride a lug roan, was the lieutenant, who was in the command while the captain was with a foreign embassy.

"Say!" Sergeant Brinton turned on me sharply. 'Prove that the square upon the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares erected upon the other two sides.'

"What's that gotta do with guarding the camp", I asked him.

"Everything," he asserted. "Everything in the world. That's the reason I am here instead of at the head of F troop. I couldn't prove it. The best thing that I can prove is that one American regular is worth ordinary fighting men or twenty greasers. The best thing I ever proved was that a brisk frontal attack under fire is sometimes better than beatin' around the bamboos for a week tryin' out a newfangled enveloping maneuver. That's the reason I am barred from a commission".

He pressed a fresh match to his stale cigar and puffed away an overwhelming pressure of pent-up emotion.

"But I guess there is no use kicking", he said, his mood had burned itself to a tranquil ember. "I suppose that's the changed order of things".

The second platoon in command of a bandy-legged top sergeant was now swinging by in a column of squads brought a fresh glow of thought to Brinton's poisoned mind.

“There’s your modern soldier”, said he. “If I hadn’t passed the age limit he’d get a commission sure. As it is, they’ve got him as far as he can go, for he’s had his nose in every book in the military course and snores mathematics in his sleep”.

“This is the day of science and specialist”, I consoled him.

“So I’ve found”, Brinton replied quietly. “Fit in the hard, harsh din of battle they’ll find that man with dash and savvy and natural cunning is worth as much as ever, even if he does think trig is a shortcut for trigonometry. They’ll find that red corpuscles will generate more corpses among the enemy than a whole corps of corpulent bookworms. Why, the time I made that frontal attack on the Googoos, in the islands, and won, a young shavetail had been trying higher tactics on the problem for a week.”

I left Brinton in his unhappy reflections and rode anon to the border, some 2 miles away, where there was a promise of military diversion. Already there was a sharp rat-a-tat of musketry across the border, where rebels were attacking the final fortified stand of Huerta’s hard drive Federals. It was the third attack in a week, which is something of a record for Mexican fighting men, and as a usual outposts were banging away at random.

Lyving on the New Mexican side of a little knoll, I observed the little military drama through binoculars. The firing grew, with the morning, into a subdued roar. Billowing clouds of greyish smoke from unmilitary rifles blurred the duller grey of the undulating Mexican terrain. Dots and masses of dots no larger than the minute under a microscope manoeuvred back and forth in a haphazard fashion, now trying a flanking movement, now seek an enveloping attack: backing and filling tactically but getting nowhere.

Owing to the great range which the Combatants discreetly maintained, the casualties must have been very light. Plainly, one side was afraid and the other dared not’. Theirs was a fancy for the smoke and din and picturesqueness of battle, with no taste for the dangers. Indecision and caution were the prevailing features.

As the day grew on, one or two sorties were attempted. Federal cavalry went forth in extended order at a gallop and stampeded a flanking battalion that had worked into position to drive an enfilading fire on a line of Federal trenches. The infantrymen gave ground to the yelling horsemen and ran confusedly before the troopers were within two hundred yards of them. Whereat the horsemen, fully satisfied, wheeled and rose back to shelter.

“Oh, to be in command o’ that infantry!”

A disgusted exclamation right in my ear nearly precipitated me over the protecting sand dune on which I was lying at the summit of the rise. I turned to see the stolid features of Sergeant Brinton glued the field glasses right behind me. The distant sound of combat had proved too strong a lure and he had come forward.

“Greasers sighted on this side beyond the camp, and I came out on reconnaissance” he hastened to explain, in justification of his presence. “Left the corporal in charge of the camp detail while I looked the matter Quite justifiable.”

“The Idea of that infantry retreating”, he muttered. “Cavalry ain’t dangerous to infantry if the men’ll only keep cool and hold their ground. But the idea o’ that cavalry was drawn’ off when they got the doughboys on the run! That’s like gettin’ your boxin’ adversary groggy and the goin’ back to your corner to wait until he recovers. It worsens watchful waiting in wartime.

“That’s the first real action all morning,” I suggested.

“I’ve been here for the last hour, and I’ve seen everything tried that’s in the book. Bet they’ve got a whole class out there in command than you’d find in a State university; and as much red blood as you’d find in a frog.”

“What they need”, he proceeded critically, “is less tactics and more sand. Bet they’ve got too many military experts when that they need is a man or two like that bandit Villa that’s been things up o’ late over below Juarez and Chihuahua. Tactics is a fine thing, and you can’t get along without ‘em, but you need sand, too, and a taste for just plain fightin’.”

He turned and started back on hands and knees.

The reckless waste of ammunition kept up all day, with no advantage to either side. As night came on, the musketry lulled; then, after a sudden burst of life at dusk, died out. Only the occasional drumming of an outpost exchange of greetings disturbed the night. As many of the American troops as could be spared were marched back to camp to sleep on their arms while the patrol moved along the boundary through the night. For the better part of a week these hopeless activities continued with no prospect that the thing would ever come to anything. It became no longer necessary to keep the military command on duty during the day. With the exception of a squad or two the men were allowed to remain ready for emergencies, but on duty.

It was on the morning of the fifth day thereafter that the thing broke out again in earnest. Long before reveille, on that morning we were routed out by a fearful commotion across the international boundary. The troopers tumbled out with the alacrity of firemen responding to an alarm, and whisked off double time, to the line; empty of stomach but full of hope.

Day was just breaking, a deathly pale glow into which there was torn a thousand flitting jets of fire. Overhead a starry note from the song of conflict zipped our way every once in a while.

“It looks like we’ve stirred up a little of the real thing this time” exclaimed the first lieutenant, addressing the captain.

“Nothing more than the usual burning up of ammunition, with the principal danger over here to us innocent bystanders,” snapped the captain in a cynical ante-breakfast voice.

But as light seeped in it was plain the captain had misjudged the matter, and the first lieutenant was correct in his surmises. There was a desperate struggle on, and the rebels had taken the offensive, with an obvious determination to do or die.

Now the Federals were entrenched on a rise in a broad semicircle, with the American border on one flank and a line of rifle pits on the other. In front of the rifle pits, on the flank, was a level strip a full thousand yards across. The improbability of Mexican troops braving that open stretch doubtless accounted for the indifferent strength of that flank. The Federal tacticians knew their countrymen well.

But now there was a movement against the flank which in accordance with the grim principles of real warfare. The enemy was using rare courage along with his tactics.

A battalion, deployed at intervals of one yard, was halfway across the level danger zone. Behind it, at intervals of fifty yards, were second and third lines. The first line would rush forward a few rods and

fall flat, the men scooping with all their might at the hard grey ground until they had burrowed a shallow pit. Then they would move forward, firing, and the second line would move into the vacated pits and dig deeper, while the first line, alternately digging and firing to keep down the enemy's fire, started a new set of holes. The third line was thus able to move forward and perfect the rifle pits in comparative safety.

"They'll get the Federals sure with that trick but why didn't they think of it a week ago?" exclaimed the captain.

"It's a cinch that commander o' the firing line is a new one on the scene," replied the first lieutenant, without lowering his binoculars.

Even through the distance the new commander of the advance element, was a warrior of distinct personality. He was a tall, wiry individual, uniformed in what looked like khaki infantry breeches and an old-issue blue shirt. There was about him the cunning of a Japanese held officer and the grit of a seasoned Yankee. For it was plain the Latin-American firing line didn't particularly relish the music, and it was only his iron hand and his mastery of the situation that was taking them across.

"Give 'em the point of it!" yelled an enthusiastic enlisted man, quite unmindful of the fact that his voice was entirely lost to the object of his remarks. His outburst was inspired by the action of the lead in beating several of his warriors out of the shallow pits with the flat of his sabre when they showed an inclination to lie close. Getting the line started, he would lead the advance, bounding forward in big, clumsy bounds, swinging his sabre and yelling orders which came to use like the distant squeaking of a phonograph.

"Bet my clothing allowance against ten cents Mex that it's a Yank doin' that trick," Shouted the first sergeant.

"An American adventurer taking treatment for envy, no doubt," responded the captain.

Wagers, at odds. that the manoeuvre would succeed within an hour were suddenly interrupted by a spectacle that made the troopers gasp in astonishment. It was almost too much to believe even when spread out right before the eyes.

Within three hundred yards of victory, with the Federal troops already breaking and sprinting for the rear, running low, the commander of the advance suddenly threw down his sabre and coolly walked back and away by the right flank. It was not panic, not blue flunk, for the fellow paused in a leisurely way to fill and light his pipe.

The border patrol stood speechless, watching the fellow. It had staggered them—this spectacle of a leader taking his men to the front door of victory and then turning off without entering, quite if he suddenly had lost interest in the game. Stranger still, he did not once look back. The din of battle and the fate of his troops did not appear to hold further interest for him.

"Hi, there!" Look at your pesky army, now!" the trumpeter with the bellows like lungs screamed.

But if this strangely behaved enigma heard he did not heed.

There followed a truly remarkable demonstration of the one-man power in battle—the mysterious capacity to drive scores of men into the face of death. For the very minute that he dropped the reins

his line began to break. Before he was out of pistol range they had launched a record-breaking sprint back to the roar. Even the second and third lines broke from their rifle pits and retreated pell-mell.

Straight for the international boundary line apparition that had led them was now headed. Presently he appeared to note the presence of the American troops, halted, leveled his field glasses, and then, turning in a direction parallel with the boundary, disappeared into a brushy swale, and was gone.

"Lieutenant, that man's going to try to cross into the United States at some point," announced the captain. "Put out patrols and bring him in, if he tries it. Be careful," the captain added, "that he doesn't outwit you, for, judging from what we've seen, he ought to be clever at reconnaissance and avoiding patrols."

E Company had an interest in nothing else, as the men, late in the day, swung into the mess tent. Sergeant Brinton turned out to guard as the troops marched into camp, standing like a statue labeled

"Soldier Attention," as the column went by. At mess, the whole wondrous take of that charge told and told again.

But whatever got into him to quit!" exclaimed first one man and then the other, without any satisfactory theory being offered.

"Maybe he never had any intention o' carrying the thing through - maybe he was just experimenting," suggested Sergeant Brinton, in his turn, "and didn't really want to take sides too strong in the fracas.

Several glances of contempt at such shallow judgment were cast upon Brinton. Otherwise, his remark was ignored.

"Or maybe" the sergeant added in a caustic drawl, "maybe he was tryin' to prove that the square upon the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares erected upon the other two sides".

Later, in the waning light of tattoo, sergeant Briton came to my tent, tied the flap carefully behind him, stripped off his blouse, and handed me a broken first-aid packet.

"You bein' the only y civilian in camp, I'm asking you to do it up for me. I'm taking no chances on any of the others." He bared a big block-red splotch on his shoulder- an ugly flesh wound, that- was in sad need of attention.

"Do you mean to say that you-" I gasped?

"I admit nothin'," he replied coolly. But if I was goin' to bet on it I'd bet that the chap who led that line couldn't prove that the square upon the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares erected upon the other two sides."

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(By CAPTAIN ARED WHITE.)

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"Say!" Sergeant Brinton turned on me sharply. "Prove that the square

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"I've been here for the last hour, and I've seen everything tried that's in the book. Bet they've got a whole class o' Mexican military grads on each side. Bet there's more trigonometry experts out there in command than you'd find in a State university; and as much red blood as you'd find in a frog.

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"NOTHING" will come of it until one side runs out o' ammunition, or gets bought off," he protested. "I'm goin' back to camp. But if they had a fightin' man to handle 'em, either side could win hands down."

The reckless waste of ammunition kept up all day, with no advantage to either side. As night came on, the musketry lulled; then, after a sudden burst of life at dusk, died out. Only the occasional drumming of an outpost exchange of greetings disturbed the night. As many of the American troops as could be spared were marched back to camp to sleep on their arms, while patrols moved along the boundary through the night. For the better part of a week these hopeless activities continued, with no prospect that the thing would ever come to anything. It became no longer necessary to keep the full command on duty during the day. With the exception of a squad or two, the men were allowed to remain ready for emergencies, but on duty.

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Straight for the international boundary the apparition that had led them was now headed. Presently he appeared to note the presence of the American troops, halted, levelled his field glasses, and then, turning in a direction parallel with the boundary, disappeared into a brushy swale, and was gone.

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The second platoon in command of a bandy-legged top sergeant was now swinging by in column of squads which brought a fresh glow of thought to Brinton's poisoned mind.

"There's your modern soldier," said he. "If he hadn't passed the age limit he'd get a commission sure. As it is, they've got him as far as he can

go. for he's had his nose inside every book in the military courses and snores mathematics in his sleep."

"This is the day of science and the specialist," I consoled him.

"So I've found," Brinton replied quietly. "But in the hard, harsh din of battle they'll find that a man with dash and savvy and natural cunning is worth as much as ever, even if he does think trig is a short cut for trigger instead of trigonometry. They'll find that red corpuscles will generate more corpses among the enemy than a whole corps of corpulent bookworms. Why, the time I made that frontal attack on the Googooos, in the islands, and won, a young shavetail had been trying higher tactics on the problem for a week."

I left Brinton in his unhappy reflections and rode anon to the border, some two miles away, where there was promise of military diversion. Already there was a sharp rat-a-tat of musketry across the border, where rebels were attacking a final fortified stand of Huerta's hard-driven Federals. It was the third attack in a week, which is something of a record for Mexican fighting men, and as usual outposts were banging away at random.

Living on the New Mexican side of a little knoll, I observed the little military drama through binoculars. The firing grew, with the morning, into a subdued roar. Billowing clouds of greyish smoke from unimilitary rifles blurred the daller grey of the undulating Mexican terrain. Dots and masses of dots no larger than the minutiae under a microscope manoeuvred back and forth in haphazard fashion, now trying a flanking movement, now seeking an enveloping attack; backing and filling tactically but getting nowhere.

Owing to the great range which the combatants discreetly maintained, the casualties must have been very light. Plainly, one side was afraid and the other dared not. There's was a fancy for the smoke and din and picturesqueness of battle, with no taste for the dangers. Indecision and caution were the prevailing features.

As the day grew on, one or two sorties were attempted. Federal cavalry went forth in extended order at a gallop and stampeded a flanking battalion that had worked into position to drive in an enflading fire on a line of Federal trenches. The infantrymen gave ground to the yelling horsemen, and ran confusedly before the troopers were within two hundred yards of them. Whereat the horsemen, fully satisfied, wheeled and rode back to shelter.

"Oh, to be in command o' that infantry!"

A disgusted exclamation right in my ear nearly precipitated me over the protecting sand dune on which I was lying at the summit of the rise. I turned to see the stolid features of

Sergeant Brinton glued to field glasses right behind me. The distant sound of combat had proved too strong a lure, and he had come forward.

"Greasers sighted on this side beyond the camp, and I came out on reconnaissance," he hastened to explain, in justification of his presence. "Left the corporal in charge of the camp detail while I looked into the matter. Quite justifiable.

"The idea of that infantry retreating," he muttered. "Cavalry ain't dangerous to infantry if the men'll only keep cool and hold their ground. But the idea o' that cavalry drawn' off when they got the doughboys on the run! That's like gettin' your boxin' adversary groggy and then goin' back to your corner to wait till he recovers. It's worse'n watchful waitin' in war time."

"That's the first real action all morning," I suggested.

"I've been here for the last hour, and I've seen everything tried that's in the book. Bet they've got a whole class o' Mexican military grads on each side. Bet there's more trigonometry experts out there in command than you'd find in a State university; and as much red blood as you'd find in a frog.

"What they need," he proceeded critically, "is less tactics and more sand. Bet they've got too many military experts, when what they need is a man or two like that bandit Villa that's been whoopin' things up o' late over below Juarez and Chihuahua. Tactics is a fine thing, and you can't get along without 'em, but you need sand, too, and a taste for just plain fightin'."

He turned and started back on hands and knees.

"Nothin' will come of it until one side runs out o' ammunition, or gets bought off," he protested. "I'm goin' back to camp. But if they had a fightin' man to handle 'em, either side could win hands down."

The reckless waste of ammunition kept up all day, with no advantage to either side. As night came on, the musketry lulled; then, after a sudden burst of life at dusk, died out. Only the occasional drumming of an outpost exchange of greetings disturbed the night. As many of the American troops as could be spared were marched back to camp to sleep on their arms, while patrols moved along the boundary through the night. For the better part of a week these hopeless activities continued, with no prospect that the thing would ever come to anything. It became no longer necessary to keep the full command on duty during the day. With the exception of a squad or two, the men were allowed to remain ready for emergencies, but on duty.

It was on the morning of the fifth day thereafter that the thing broke out again in earnest. Long before reveille on that morning we were routed out by

a fearful commotion across the international boundary. The troopers tumbled out with the alacrity of firemen responding to an alarm, and whisked off, double time, to the line; empty of stomach but full of hope.

Day was just breaking, a deathly pale glow into which there was torn a thousand biting jets of fire. Overhead a starry note from the song of conflict zee-zipped our way every once in a while.

"It looks like they've stirred up a little of the real thing this time," exclaimed the first lieutenant, addressing the captain.

"Nothing more than the usual burning up of ammunition, with the principal danger over here to us innocent bystanders," enquired the captain in a cynical ante-breakfast voice.

But as light seeped in it was plain the captain had misjudged the matter, and the first lieutenant was correct in his surmises. There was a desperate struggle on, and the rebels had taken the offensive, with an obvious determination to do or die.

Now the Federals were entrenched on a rise in a broad semi-circle, with the American border on one flank and a line of rifle pits on the other. In front of the rifle pits, on the flank, was a set level strip a full thousand yards across. The improbability of Mexican troops braving that open stretch doubtless accounted for the indifferent strength of that flank. The Federal tacticians knew their countrymen well.

But now there was a movement against this flank which was in accordance with the grim principles of real warfare. The enemy was using rare courage along with his tactics.

A battalion, deployed at intervals of one yard, was half-way across the level danger zone. Behind it, at intervals of fifty yards, were second and third lines. The first line would rush forward a few rods and fall flat, the men scooping with all their might at the hard grey ground until they had burrowed a shallow pit. Then they would move forward, bring, and the second line would move into the vacated pits and dig deeper, while the first line, alternately digging and firing to keep down the enemy's fire, started a new set of holes. The third line was thus able to move forward and perfect the rifle pits in comparative safety.

"They'll get the Federals sure with that trick, but why didn't they think of it a week ago?" exclaimed the captain.

"It's a cinch that commander o' the firing line is a new one on the scene," replied the first lieutenant, without lowering his binoculars.

Even through the distance the new commander of the advance element was a warrior of distinct personality. He was a tall, wiry individual, uniformed in what looked like khaki infantry

breeches and an old-issue blue shirt. There was about him the cunning of a Japanese field officer and the grit of a seasoned Yankee. For it was plain that the Latin-American firing line didn't particularly relish the music, and it was only his iron hand and mastery of the situation that was taking them across.

"Give 'em the point of it!" yelled an enthusiastic enlisted man, quite unmindful of the fact that his voice was entirely lost to the object of his remarks.

His outburst was ignored by the co-

His outburst was inspired by the action of the leader in beating several of his warriors out of the shallow pits with the flat of his sabre when they showed an inclination to lie close. Getting the line started, he would lead the advance, bounding forward in big, clumsy bounds, swinging his sabre and yelling orders which came to us like the distant squeaking of a phonograph.

"Bet my clothing allowance against ten cents Mex that it's a Yank doin' that trick," shouted the first sergeant.

"An American adventurer taking treatment for ennuï, no doubt," responded the captain.

Wagers, at odds, that the manoeuvre would succeed within an hour were suddenly interrupted by a spectacle that made the troopers gasp in astonishment. It was almost too much to believe even when spread out right before the eyes.

Within three hundred yards of us

Within three hundred yards of victory, with the Federal troops already breaking and sprinting for the rear, running low, the commander of the advance suddenly threw down his sabre and coolly walked back and away by the right flank. It was not panic, not blue flunk, for the fellow paused in a leisurely way to fill and light his pipe.

The border patrol stood speechless, watching the fellow. It had staggered them—this spectacle of a leader taking his men to the front door of victory and then turning off without entering, quite as if he suddenly had lost interest in the game. Stranger still, he did not once look back. The din of battle and the fate of his troops did not appear to hold further interest for him.

"Hi, there!" Look at your pesky army, now!" the trumpeter with the bellowslike lungs screamed.

But if this strangely behaved enigma heard he did not heed.

There followed a truly remarkable

heard he and not dead.

There followed a truly remarkable demonstration of the one-man power in battle—the mysterious capacity to drive scores of men into the face of death. For the very minute that he dropped the reins his line began to break. Before he was out of pistol range they had launched a record-breaking sprint back to the rear. Even the second and third lines broke from their rifle pits and retreated pell-mell.

Straight for the international boundary the apparition that had led them was now headed. Presently he appeared to note the presence of the American troops, halted, levelled his field glasses, and then, turning in a direction parallel with the boundary, disappeared into a brushy swale, and was gone.

“Lieutenant, that man’s going to try to cross into the United States at some point,” announced the captain. “Put out patrols and bring him in, if he tries it. Be careful,” the captain added, “that he doesn’t outwit you, for, judging from what we’ve seen, he ought to be clever at reconnoissance and avoiding patrols.”

The Germans had interest in this

E Company had interest in nothing else, as the men, late in the day, swung into the mess tent. Sergeant Brinton turned out the guard as the troops marched into camp, standing like a statue labelled "Soldier at Attention," as the column went by. At mess the whole wondrous tale of that charge was told and told again.

"But whatever got into him to quit!" exclaimed first one man and then the other, without any satisfactory theory being offered.

"Maybe he never had any intention o' carrying the thing through—maybe he was just experimenting," suggested Sergeant Brinton, in his turn, "and didn't want to really take sides too strong in the fracas."

Several glances of contempt at such shallow judgment were cast upon Brinton. Otherwise his remark was ignored.

"Or maybe," the sergeant added in a caustic drawl, "maybe he was tryin' to prove that the square upon the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares erected upon the other two sides."

Later, in the waning light of tattoo, Sergeant Brinton came to my tent, tied the flap carefully behind him, stripped off his blouse, and handed me a broken first aid packet.

"You bein' the only civilian in camp, I'm askin' you to do it up for me. I'm takin' no chances on any of the others." He bared a big black-red splotch on his shoulder—an ugly flesh wound, that was in sad need of attention.

"Do you mean to say that you——" I gasped.

"I admit nothin'," he replied coolly. "But if I was goin' to bet on it I'd bet that the chap who led that line couldn't prove that the square upon the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares erected upon the other two sides."
