

The Face of Battle

by John Keegan

The machinegun was to be described by Major-General J. F. C. Fuller, one of the great *enrages* of military theory produced by the war, as 'concentrated essence of infantry', by which he meant his readers to grasp that its invention put into the hands of one man the fire-power formerly wielded by forty.

Given that a *good* rifleman could fire only fifteen shots a minute, to a machine-gunner's 600, the point is well made. But, as Fuller would no doubt have conceded if taxed, a machine-gun team did not simply represent the equivalent of so many infantrymen compressed into a small compass. Infantrymen, however well trained and well armed, however resolute, however ready to kill, remain erratic agents of death. Unless centrally directed they will choose, perhaps badly, their own targets, will open and cease fire individually, will be put off their aim by the enemy's return of fire, will be distracted by the wounding of those near them, will yield to fear or excitement, will fire high, low or wide. It was to overcome influences and tendencies of this sort - as well as to avert the danger of accident in closely packed ranks - that seventeenth and eighteenth-century armies had put such effort into perfecting volley from square line and column. The result was to make an early-nineteenth-century - Waterloo - infantry regiment arguably more dangerous to approach than a late-nineteenth-century -Boer War -one. For though the latter had better weapons than the former, and ones which fired to a much greater range, these technical advantages were, if not cancelled out, certainly much offset by the dispersion of the soldiers which the very improvement of firearms itself enjoined - dispersion meaning lack of control, which in its turn results in poor musketry. Hence the wonder with which the machine-gun was viewed when Maxim first made it a practicable weapon of war. For it appeared to have put back into the hands of the regimental commander the means to inflict multiple and simultaneous wounding by the giving of a single word of command. But the appearance of the machine-gun was, of course, very much more than a reversion to a former order of things. For the most important thing about a machine-gun is that it is a *machine*, and one of quite an advanced type, similar in some respects to a high-precision lathe, in others to an automatic press. Like a lathe, it requires to be set up, so that it will operate within desired and predetermined limits. This was done on the Maxim gun, common to all armies of 1914-18 by adjusting the angle of the barrel relative to its fixed firing platform, and tightening or loosening its traversing screw. Then, like an automatic press, it would, when actuated by a simple trigger, begin and continue to perform its functions with the minimum of human attention, supplying its own power and only requiring a steady supply of raw material and a little routine maintenance

to operate efficiently throughout a working shift. The machine-gunner is best thought of, in short, as a sort of machine-minder, whose principal task was to feed ammunition belts into the breech, something which could be done while the gun was in full operation, top up the fluid in the cooling jacket, and traverse the gun from left to right and back again within the limits set by its firing platform. Traversing was achieved by a technique known, in the British Army, as the 'two inch tap': by constant practice, the machine-gunner learned to hit the side of the breech with the palm of his hand just hard enough to move the muzzle exactly two inches against the resistance of the traversing screw. A succession of 'two inch taps' first on one side of the breech until the stop was reached, then on the other, would keep in the air a stream of bullets so dense that no one could walk upright across the front of the machine-gunner's position without being hit - given, of course, that the gunner had set his machine to fire low and that the ground was devoid of cover. The appearance of the machine-gun, therefore, had not so much *disciplined* the act of killing - which was what seventeenth-century drill had done - as *mechanized* or *industrialized* it.

It was this automatic and inhuman lethality of the machine-gun which determined that the posts from which it would operate must be the principal targets of the heavy artillery...

When advancing against enemy trenches three things were necessary: One, the barbed wire in front of the trenches had to be cut. This was usually accomplished by artillery firing fragmentation shells that tended to cut the wire. This prevented the men from being trapped in no-man's land at the mercy of the enemy. Two, artillery was to try to hit the enemy machine gunners in their nests and put them out of action. Third the artillery had to keep the enemy down in his bunkers and out of the trenches where he could fire. In fact, the main race was who could get to the parapet (top) of the trench first. If the attackers got their first, the defenders would be shot coming out of the bunkers. If the defenders got their first, then the attackers were caught in the open and subject to rifle and machine gun fire. One can only imagine if the wire were uncut and the defenders were first to the parapet. At the battle of the Somme, the British had yet to learn the lesson of getting to the parapet first. In the first twenty minutes of the assault 20,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded.

Infantry versus machine-gun fire as they entered the German position-

Several survivors have left accounts of the first moments of the attack. Queen Victoria's Rifles, a lead Battalion had about 500 yards of no-man's-land to cross; Royal Engineer

companies laid smoke from dischargers to cover their advance... Sometime in the afternoon near the crossroads at Waterloo, the Germans ' began spraying our parapets with machine-gun bullets, but sharp to the minute of zero' (7.25 a.m. for this division) 'we erected our ladders and climbed out into the open. Shells were bursting everywhere and through the drifting smoke in front of us we could see the enemy's first line from which grey figures emerged . . . We moved forward in long lines, stumbling through the mass of shellholes, wire and wreckage, and behind us a few narrow gaps.' Their commanding officer, Ricardo, stood on the parapet between the two centre exits to wish them luck ... They got going without delay, no fuss, no rug, no shouting, everything solid and thorough - just like the men themselves.'

From the 28th Division on the Ulstermen's left, several battalions would 'wave to me as I shouted good luck through my megaphone. And all had a cheery face. Most were carrying loads. Fancy advancing against heavy fire with a big roll of barbed wire on your shoulder.'

Describing a second wave attack, in an account which holds good for the first, Gilbert Hall of the 1st Barnsley Pals 13th York and Lancasters, 31st Division, the officers ordered the untouched companies to stay for the whistle 'and C Company climbed over the parapet and moved forward to be confronted with... a long grassy slope rising gently to a series of low crests about six hundred yards in front. The German trenches were clearly visible, three lines of fortifications with sand-bagged parapets, enabled by the slope of the ground to fire over each other into the advancing British infantry. In front of the enemy lines lay thick belts of uncut wire...' In the set off, up and down the line at zero-hour did 60,000 other infantrymen. In some battalions, the men were able to walk upright as they had been expecting. In others they were soon bent forward, like into strong wind and rain, their bayonets fixed and their rifles horizontal. 'Troops always, in my experience,' wrote Lord Chandos, whose observation this is, 'unconsciously assume this crouching position when advancing against heavy fire.'

Most soldiers were encountering heavy fire within seconds of leaving their trenches. The 10th West Yorks, attacking towards the ruined village of Fricourt in the little valley of the River Ancre, had its two follow-up companies caught in the open by German machine-gunners who emerged from the front trench after the leading waves had passed over the top and onward. They were 'practically annihilated and lay shot down in their waves'. In the neighbouring 34th Division, two Edinburgh Pals Battalions, 'many were burnt to death by flame throwers. An artillery officer who walked across later came on ' line after line of dead men lying where they had fallen'. Behind the Edinburghs, a sergeant of the 3rd Tyneside Irish describes how it was: 'I could see, away to my left and right, long lines of men. Then I heard machine gun fire. After I'd gone another ten yards there seemed to be only a few men left around me; by the time I had gone twenty yards, I

seemed to be on my own. Then I was hit myself.' Not all went down so soon. A few heroic souls pressed on to the British front line, crossed no-man's-land and entered the German trenches. But the brigade was destroyed; one of its battalions had lost over 600 men killed or wounded, another, 500; the brigadier and two battalion commanders had been hit, a third lay dead. Militarily, the advance had achieved nothing. Most of the bodies lay on territory British before the battle had begun.

In the neighbouring 32nd Division, the 16th Northumberland Fusiliers and the 15th Lancashire Fusiliers were also hit by machine-gun fire from Thiepval as they got out of their trenches, the Fusiliers following a football kicked by a well-known north country player. Several waves were cut down at once and they suffered the worst of First World War experiences: to advance across no-man's-land under heavy fire only to find the enemy's wire uncut (it was uncut at many places elsewhere also) 568 became casualties in a few minutes, of whom 246 died.