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THE WAR IN THE CHACO

1932 -- 1935

A Study of Maneuver and Supply

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Journal of the Royal
United Service In-
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An article by G.H.N. Larden entitled "The Chaco War". The author makes many interesting comparisons between the two belligerents and comments briefly on the problems peculiar to jungle warfare.

Review of Military
Literature.

Page 79, December 1935.

An article by Major G.J. Braun, Infantry, abstracted from MILITAR-WOCHENBLATT, March 18, 1935, "Die wichtigsten Lehren des Chacokrieges", by Wim Brandt. The author comments briefly on the weapons and tactics used and draws therefrom certain lessons regarding war in a jungle. The analyses and discussions seem sound.

Army Ordnance.

Page 142, Nov-Dec 1934.

An article by Robert J. Icks, 1st Lieutenant, Infantry-Reserve, entitled "Tanks in the Gran Chaco". The author discusses briefly the background of the war and its supply problems, and relates the part played by tanks. Easily readable and sound in its comments and conclusions.

Infantry Journal

Page 195, May-June 1935.

An article by E.E. Farnsworth, Jr, 1st Lieutenant, Coast Artillery, entitled "The War in the Chaco". A very interesting account of the military operations of the war. The author's sources of material were Paraguayan and Bolivian war communiques, official dispatches and the press.

War Department In-
telligence Summary,
Number 575.

Entire issue, Oct 19, 1934.

Written by the Intelligence Section of the War Department General Staff, it discusses thoroughly the origin of the conflict, the terrain, the armed forces, the belligerents' financial status, and the military operations of the first years.

War Department In-
telligence Summary,
Number 595.

Page 15310, July 26, 1935.

A very complete and instructive official account of the military operations of the closing years and the truce. Contains several very instructive maps.

Review of Military
Literature, No.63,
December, 1936.

Page 84, December, 1936.

An article by W.Faupel entitled "The Cause, Progress and Lessons of the Chaco War, 1932-1935", abstracted from WISSEN UND WEHR, January, 1936, by Major G.J.Braum, Infantry. The author covers the entire subject in a brief, but very interesting and instructive manner.

FOOTNOTE ABBREVIATIONS USED

- JRUSI Journal of the Royal United Service Institution, February, 1934.
- RML Review of Military Literature, Command and General Staff School, No. 59, December, 1935.
- RML-36 Review of Military Literature, Command and General Staff School, No. 63, December, 1936.
- AO Army Ordnance, No.87, Vol.XV, November - December, 1934.
- IJ Infantry Journal, No.3, Vol.XLII, May - June, 1935.
- WDIS-575 War Department Intelligence Summary, No.575, October 19, 1934.
- WDIS-595 War Department Intelligence Summary, No.595, July 25, 1935.

THE WAR IN THE CHACO

1. INTRODUCTION. -- (Map No. 1) In 1932 Bolivia and Paraguay began fighting for possession of the Grand Chaco. This monograph describes briefly the more important events of that war and draws from it certain lessons on logistics and on the Napoleonic concept of maneuver.

Originally all of the South American nations agreed to accept boundaries as defined by a Spanish law of 1810; this agreement would make the Chaco region a part of Bolivia. However, by 1932 the territory had been explored, claimed, sparsely settled, and to a limited extent developed by individual Paraguayans. Bolivia had objected a few times, beginning in 1907, but the conferences appointed to settle the matter could never agree upon a solution. Bolivia's interest developed greatly when it became apparent that the Tacna-Arica settlement would award her only seaport to either Chile or Peru. As an alternative she wanted to gain possession of the Chaco and thus have a waterway via the Paraguay River to the Atlantic Ocean.(1) It has been thought by many that rich oil deposits exist in the Chaco but this is not known to be true. The important oil areas in this vicinity are wholly in undisputed Bolivian territory.(2)

Thus, in 1932 Bolivia decided to press her claim for the Chaco. During negotiations both nations sent troops to occupy it; ill-feeling brought on "incidenta" and in a short time open hostilities commenced.(3)

(1) WDIS-575 p 14937; AO pp 142,143. (2) WDIS-595 p 15312.
(3) IJ p 197; RML-36 p 85.

2. TERRAIN OF THE CHACO.-- The Chaco lies between the Pilcomayo River and the Paraguay River. It is extremely flat and densely jungled, a characteristic which precludes the establishment of normal observation facilities. The Pilcomayo and Paraguay Rivers under normal conditions are navigable for boats having a draft of nine feet or less. When troops began occupying the Chaco its more important jungle trails were speedily improved to the extent of being fairly adaptable to wheeled traffic.(4)

Food and water are not available in any appreciable quantities. Paraguay's commercial and industrial center is at its capital, Asuncion, and the proximity of that city greatly facilitated the Paraguayan Army's supply problem. During the early part of the hostilities Bolivia purchased most of her supplies in nearby Argentine. However, when Paraguay made a formal declaration of war the Argentine Republic proclaimed her neutrality and restricted her sales; then Bolivia's supply problem became extremely difficult.(5)

Bolivia's capital and its center of industry and commerce is the city of La Paz, far in the north. From La Paz the supply route consisted first of five hundred miles of narrow gauge railroad running due south over mountains whose average elevation is 11,000 feet; thence for another five hundred miles by single track railroad it led down 9,000 feet to the Pilcomayo River valley on the east and into the Chaco by motor truck in the dry season, or often in the wet season by ox cart. It is doubtful that the Bolivian General Staff had previously considered the possibility that they might have to use this long route.(6)

(4) WDIS-575 p 14938; AO p 143; IJ p 195. (5) WDIS-575 p14949; JRUSI p 140. (6) WDIS-575 p 14948; RML-36 p 85.

3. OPPOSING FORCES-- Bolivia is far more wealthy and populous than Paraguay. However, the Paraguayans are individually better fighters and they are far more accustomed to the jungle than the mountain-dwelling Bolivians are.(7)

The most interesting Paraguayan leader was General Jose Felix Estigarribia. He was graduated from the Asuncion Military College and commissioned in the Paraguayan Army in 1910 at the age of twenty two. He also attended the Chile Military College and in 1927 completed a three year course at the French Ecole Superieure de Guerre. He devoted much of his early service to an exhaustive study of the Chaco region. At the outbreak of the war he was a lieutenant-colonel but when Paraguay completed mobilizing, Estigarribia was placed in command of the field forces. He retained this position to the end of the war with unquestioned ability.

Bolivia's General Hans Kundt was a native of Germany and held a commission in the German Army during the World War. He was employed to train the Bolivian Army from 1922 until 1930, at which time a successful revolution occurred. During the lull of the Chaco War's first rainy season General Kundt was recalled by Bolivia and placed in command of her field forces. He was relieved the following year, after his opponent severely defeated him in a brilliant manoeuvre.(8)

Both armies were originally officered by whites, but later many illiterate indians with natural ability were

(7) JHUSI p 143. (8) IJ pp 198, 199; RML-36 p 86.

commissioned. The Bolivian general staff had been trained by Germans; their supply system failed them on several occasions. On the other hand, many Paraguayan officers had been trained by the French and their application of logistical knowledge was excellent.(9)

Both sides were well equipped with modern automatic weapons. Bolivia had tanks and an air force. Neither side resorted to the use of gas, not because of any kindly feeling toward one another but probably because each realized that wearing gas masks under jungle conditions would be feindish torture.(10)

4. FIRST PHASE OF THE WAR.-- (Map No. 2a) Troops sent by both nations to occupy the Chaco established themselves in stockades extending from Santa Cruz on the north to Delgado on the south. The usual "incidents" occurred to increase ill-feeling and finally Bolivia attacked and took Fort Lopez. Paraguay retaliated by taking Santa Cruz and then both belligerents completed mobilizing.(11)

When their mobilization was complete it was apparent that Bolivia would first concentrate on taking the Paraguayan supply ports of Consada and Conception on the Paraguay River. However, the rainy season began at this juncture and the Bolivian Army commenced having trouble with its own supply.

In September, 1933, Paraguay attacked Fort Boqueron. Three attacks were made in three successive days without success. Then, following the Napoleonic concept of maneuver,

(9) WDIS-575 p 14949. (10) WDIS-575 p 14939. (11) IJ p 197.

the Paraguayan General Estigarribia changed his tactics to a system of penetration and isolation. With its supply route cut, Boqueron was captured at the end of two weeks. During October the Paraguayans used similar tactics to take Toledo, Corrales and Arce, but they were unable to advance farther because the Bolivians were now strengthening the lines which connected their stockades. (12)

Again General Estigarribia followed the Napoleonic concept of maneuver, this time on a larger scale. In December, 1933, he secretly concentrated a large Paraguayan force on the south of his line, at Delgado; moving through the extremely difficult swamp along the Pilcomayo River this force continued past the south flank of the Bolivians (at Chanar), and captured Munoz, sixty miles to the rear. Two Bolivian infantry divisions with supply trains and artillery were forced to surrender. But for the quick initiative of the Bolivian reserve commander, Colonel Penaranda, the rout would have been much worse. The Bolivians retreated to a position in front of Ballivian, relieved General Hans Kundt from command, and negotiated an 18 day armistice for the discussion of peace terms. While terms were being discussed the new Bolivian commander, Colonel (now General) Penaranda was very busy reorganizing his force and entrenching it. (13)

5. SECOND PHASE.-- By the end of the 18 day armistice the Bolivians had completed a very elaborate trench system with dug-outs, cleared fields of fire, wire entanglements, and carefully sited machine guns. (Map No. 2b) Their lines

(12) WDIS-575 pl4941; IJ p 198. (13) WDIS-575 pp 14943, 14944; IJ pp 198, 199.

attack from Comacho toward El Carmen. The attack was a huge success; two Bolivian divisions were annihilated and an entire division staff at Independencia were captured at their desks.

At this point General Estigarribia executed a maneuver of the first order. Instead of turning north toward the rear of the action still taking place near Senator Long, the Paraguayans pushed due west toward Villa Montes. However, their south flank was purposely slow in advancing so as not to drive the Fort Ballivian garrison from the trap which was thus being laid for them. The maneuver was a complete success. The Bolivian forces thus surrounded and captured near Fort Ballivian included two division commanders, 500 other officers, 8,000 men (besides 7,000 killed), and about three million dollars worth of supplies. At this point another armistice was proposed, but not accepted. (15)

6. THIRD PHASE.-- (map No. 2c) The remaining Bolivian forces now held a strip of land about 150 miles long with general headquarters at Villa Montes. The Paraguayans outnumbered the Bolivians by about 35,000 to 15,000 but the latter nation had just drafted another 125,000 men; thus it was necessary for Paraguay to act quickly before these recruits could be trained and transported to the zone of action. General Estigarribia drove forward against the Bolivian line and severed it. Part of the Bolivian Army entrenched itself from Villa Montes to D'Orbigni and successfully repelled all assaults. The other part retreated by way of Carandaiti to San Francisco. (16)

(15) WDIS-595 pp 15313, 15314; IJ pp 200, 201, 202. (16) WDIS-595 p 15316; IJ p 202.

The remainder of the war was quite indecisive. When the Bolivians retreated into the mountains they invariably defeated the Paraguayans and down in the jungle the latter were the stronger.(17) Shortly after Paraguay declined the last proffered armistice (December, 1934), the League of Nations imposed upon her an "arms sanction". In June, 1935, with the line of battle extending over a very thin strip of Chaco territory from D'Orbigni to Villa Montes and thence to San Francisco, Paraguay finally agreed to cease fighting and arbitrate. One of the points agreed upon in the basis of arbitration was that "territorial conquest by arms confers no sovereignty".(18)

The arbitration has now extended over one and a half years without decision. Meanwhile, the rumor has spread in Paraguay among the discharged soldiers that the spoils of war will include an allotment to them of Bolivian oil fields.(19)

7. ANALYSIS OF THE VICTORY.-- The Paraguayan General Estigarribia's use of the Napoleonic concept of maneuver marks him as a military genius. Nevertheless, even if the balance of such genius had been on the Bolivian side it is doubtful whether the Bolivians could have won.

In the first place, Bolivia should not have attempted a war so far from home without perfecting her supply facilities. It is evident that the Bolivian general staff had not considered the possibility that a mere formal declaration of war might deny them their Argentine supply base. Bringing supplies from La Paz was clearly a problem

(17) WDIS-595 p 15318. (18) WDIS-595 pp 15311, 15312.
(19) WDIS-595 p 15320.

in logistics which they had not previously studied.(20)

Secondly, Bolivia is more of a democracy than Paraguay is, and hence had more interference in her military operations from her political government. An example of this was the Bolivian president's insistence that the precarious position before Fort Ballivian be held at all cost. The attempt to hold this long battle line, backed against neutral Argentina with practically no depth, was very expensive.(21) A study of the Union Army's embarrassment from political sources during our War of Secession could have taught Bolivia's president and cabinet not to meddle in military operations.

The Bolivian soldier's lack of jungle instinct was another very important factor contributing to that nation's defeat. Only the Paraguayans had the omniscient ability to cut their way through virgin jungle swamps and emerge at a desired point behind the enemy line, all without benefit of maps or natural landmarks. A striking example of Paraguayan superiority in knowledge of the jungle occurred in the Picuiba district, where a Bolivian division was forced to surrender after its water supply route had been cut. Within ten days the Paraguayans had sunk wells which supplied 6,600 gallons of water per hour.(22)

A very interesting feature disclosed was the relative unimportance of airplanes. Bolivia maintained air superiority; however, air raids toward Asuncion were invariably stopped by anti-aircraft weapons along the Paraguay River. Attacks on troops in the jungle were useless due to the impossibility of locating them from the air. Defensive works were easily

(20) WDIS-575 p 14984. (21) WDIS-595 pp 15314, 15315.

(22) WDIS-595 p 15315.

camouflaged. During the dry season supply columns could be located by the dust they raised, but due to the thick foliage aerial machine guns were not very effective. On the other hand, Paraguayan machine guns mounted on sandbags up in trees often played an important part in the defense. Nevertheless, Bolivia found her planes very useful in making maps and sketches, and larger planes made regular trips transporting casualties and supplies.(23)

Tanks were used by the Bolivians on a few occasions, but since there was very little provision for maintenance and supply near the front lines it can not be said their jungle usefulness received a fair test. A six ton, three man tank was found best. Five of them were used in an attack near Arce but shortly after they were committed upsets or mechanical trouble incapacitated all. Two were repaired in time to go into action again and the entire crews of both were wounded. The attack failed, but it can not be said that the tanks affected the outcome of the battle one way or the other. In another attack the Bolivians used one tank alone; it cut a path through the jungle along each side of which the riflemen followed at a short distance. Heat caused the crew to collapse but the tank drew the enemy fire away from the advancing riflemen and the attack succeeded. During the latter part of the war tanks were used quite effectively as defensive strong points along Bolivia's thinly held line.(24)

The sub-machine gun and the Infantry mortar furnished most of the fire power. The mechanical simplicity of these

(23) JRUSI p 142.

(24) AO pp 144, 145.

two weapons greatly facilitated the problem of training the very numerous illiterate recruits. Artillery was ineffective because fire observation was so difficult. Counter-battery fire, when attempted, was directed by ear. Heavy machine guns were valuable defensive weapons but they were practically useless in attacks. Their awkwardness was responsible for many of them being left behind in withdrawals.(25)

Light 1½-ton trucks, purchased in the United States, proved very useful both for supply purposes and for the tactical mobility of troops. In a defensive position two trucks per battalion were found sufficient for supplying rations and ammunition. They often towed as many as three trailers. Fifteen men could be carried in each of these trucks. They could be transported from eighty to one hundred and twenty five miles in a day, and with the passengers frequently pushing, even the worst mud or sand roads were not impassible.(26)

Field telephones were found to be of small value, due to the great distances involved and to the frequent destruction of wire by jungle fires. Radio communication was used to a great extent and it proved itself very dependable.(27)

8. CONCLUSION.-- The important lessons to be derived from the Chaco War might well be summed up as follows:

(a). The invention of modern war machinery has not altered the importance of the individual soldier; his morale, intelligence, physique and fighting instinct are still paramount factors.

(25) RML pp 80, 81; JRUSI p 142.
(27) IJ p 197; JURSI p 142.

(26) RML p 81.

(b). Proper training in logistics and adequate means for supply are essential to success in military operations.

(c). A maneuver against an enemy's flank or rear has far more chance of success than a frontal attack.

MAP NO 1 GENERAL MAP WAR IN THE CHACO







