



BY FIELDING LEWIS GREAVES

10

11

12

13

14

15

In the end it all comes down to one man.

Nations mobilize, entire trainloads of supplies crisscross the continent, great convoys put to sea. General staffs pore over their maps, absorb intelligence reports, make their decisions for the commitment of divisions and armies, and produce elaborate deception plans in support of their operations. Corps and divisions are pointed at their objectives and unleashed. Battalions and companies move forward, meet opposition. Patrols are sent ahead, to probe and discover the enemy, to test him. Squads and platoons are moved up, to apply pressure, to punch a hole for a breakthrough, so that the advance may resume.

Do you want your armies and divisions to advance, to move toward the enemy heartland? Their movement is plotted on maps in command posts far from the scene of the battle, marked on acetate overlays in colorful symbols. Blue arrows advance across the acetate, are erased, and new ones move on. The arrows advance, but the rate of movement is slow and labored, and the unit of measure is small. The army moves forward at the pace of its squads and patrols. The pair of dividers by which its movement is measured wears combat boots. In the end it all comes down to one man.

It is he who buys the advance, who pays the cost in toil and suffering and sacrifice and high courage. It is he who makes the blue arrows move forward — by placing one combat boot in front of the other, endlessly. He is the winner of battles, the bringer of victories, and he bears the proudest title on the battlefield: Rifleman.

DOMINANT FIGURE

If the armies of the world should ever get together to select an international "Day of the Rifleman," surely a leading contender for the honor would be the 28th of April. It was on that date, over four and a half centuries ago, that the man with the gun, the foot soldier equipped with the shoulder firearm, became the dominant figure on the battlefield, a preeminence he would hold for the next half thousand years.

This early infantryman with a gun was not then technically a "rifleman," for his weapon was the smoothbore arquebus. Although rifling in firearms had been invented earlier, it would not be generally used in military weapons until much later. But the arquebus that won the field at Cerignola on 28 April 1503 was the direct ancestor of the Ferguson and Pennsylvania rifles of 1777, of the Prussian needle gun, of the 1873 Springfield and the 1898 Mauser, of the 1903 Springfield and the M1 Garand, and of the AK47 and the M16 of today.

The rifleman of every modern army or partisan band of the 20th century is a direct military descendant of the Spanish arquebusier of over four centuries ago. In the passage of time the weapon evolved: arquebus, musket, rifle; muzzle loader, breech loader; single shot, repeater, semi-automatic, full automatic. But the man endured, unchanged. The term "rifleman" as used today applies no less to the men of

Cerignola than it does to the rifleman of Saratoga, New Orleans, or Beecher's Island; of Plevna, Spion Kop, or Belleau Wood; of Bastogne, the Pusan Perimeter, or the Delta of South Vietnam.

Before turning for a closer look at the Cerignola birth of the rifleman, let us go back for a momentary glance at the status of the foot soldier before 1503.

At Pydna in 168 B.C., the famous Macedonian phalanx fought its last battle, going down to defeat before the more flexible and maneuverable Roman legion. For the next five centuries the battlefield was ruled by the legions of Rome, the finest infantry in the world. If on occasion the legion suffered reverses, it was due not so much to any fault of its own as to the mistakes of its commanders.

The end of legionary supremacy came at Adrianople in 378 A.D. In that year, on that sad field, perished the Emperor Valens and 40,000 legionary soldiers, cut to pieces by Fritigern and his Visigothic horse-archers. Infantry went into a long eclipse. Cavalry was to be the dominant arm for the next thousand years.

This victory of cavalry over infantry at Adrianople brought a marked change in the practice of warfare, and had the further effect of determining not only the military but also the political and social development of Europe in the Middle Ages. It ushered in a grand parade of mounted warriors through ten centuries: Gothic light cavalry, Byzantine horse-archers and heavy cavalry, crusading knights in shining armor, the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan — a thousand-year tapestry of charging horsemen — and, with the introduction of Spanish horses into the western hemisphere, spilled over even into the New World and a later time, when Comanche, Cheyenne, and other Plains Indians quickly adapted themselves to a new life on horseback to become the finest light cavalry in the world.

Early rumblings of the returning ascendancy of foot soldiers had been heard in the 12th century. At Legnano (1176) the pikemen of the Lombard League overcame Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I ("Barbarossa") and his cavalry, Frederick himself barely escaping with his life. This first major defeat of feudal cavalry by infantry foreshadowed by more than a century the later "Battle of the Spurs" at Courtrai (1302) where French cavalymen, bogged in mud, were knocked from their saddles and clubbed to death by Flemish burghers, and the great longbow victories of Crecy (1346), Poitiers (1356) and Agincourt (1415) where superior forces of the finest French cavalry went down to crushing defeat at the heads of the English yeomen and their famous "cloth yard shaft."

In spite, however, of these impressive victories of dismounted archers over mounted knights, it was to be another century before the infantryman came fully onto center stage again, and when he arrived, it would be a Spanish commander and his arquebusiers who placed him there.

In the late 1400's the earliest precursor of the rifle was already in existence. Hand cannon and arquebus had been used by soldiers for some years, but in small numbers and usually with more noise than effect. It was left for the "Great Captain" Gonzalo Fernandez de Cordoba of Spain to develop the full potential of the arquebusier.

This article is a modification of one by the same title that appeared in the April 1970 issue of Guns, p. 32.



After suffering a defeat at the hands of the French at Seminara, deep in the toe of Italy, this Spanish commander set about to reorganize his army. Breaking with tradition, Gonzalo equipped one-sixth of his infantry with the latest firearm, creating mixed companies of arquebusiers and pikemen. He reasoned that a defensive action by a strongly entrenched force of combined arquebusiers and pikemen should be able to withstand any attacker, cavalry or infantry. He was soon to prove his new concept conclusively.

In the spring of 1503 Gonzalo was more or less bottled up in the Adriatic coastal town of Barletta by French forces that were then striving to take southern Italy. Receiving a small band of reinforcements from Taranto, Gonzalo was able to slip out of Barletta with his little army. In unseasonable heat and choking dust on 28 April he marched westward, crossing the Ofanto River not far from the site of the ancient battlefield of Cannae, and at last took up a defensive position on a small vine-covered hill 16 miles from Barletta near the little town of Cerignola. A ditch at the base of the hill was quickly enlarged, the loose earth being thrown up as a defensive parapet

behind the ditch, and the bottom of the ditch was lined with sharpened stakes. Behind these works Gonzalo placed his artillery, 13 guns, and his Spanish arquebusiers and German mercenary pikemen, keeping in reserve a small mounted sally force for use as the battle might develop. As it happened, the artillery was to play little part in the fight: Early in the battle a random spark ignited and exploded the powder magazine, effectively putting the artillery out of action.

Meanwhile, the French, under command of the Duc de Nemours, noting the Spanish departure from Barletta, followed in pursuit. On reaching Cerignola they halted for a council of war before finally attacking near sunset. They moved forward to the attack in three units, echeloned to left rear. First, on the right and led by de Nemours himself, was the heavy cavalry, appraised by Gonzalo as the finest body of cavalry in Italy. Next came the Swiss and Gascon infantry commanded by Chandieu, and last the light cavalry under d'Alegre.

The headlong charge of the French right was checked at the ditch, of which they had been unaware in the gathering dusk. As the French cavalry wheeled left across the Spanish front

to seek an opening in the defenses, the Spanish arquebusiers raked them with a deadly and continuing fire. Many fell, including de Nemours, who was mortally wounded by an arquebus ball. Into this swirling scene of confusion now came up the Swiss and Gascon pikemen. They tried to storm the ditch and parapet, but the loose earth and the bristling array of pikes made headway impossible, while the arquebusiers continued to fire into the crowded ranks of the attackers.

French horse and foot now a confused mass before the Spanish position, Gonzalo ordered his sally force to counterattack. The French were routed, the battle quickly over, with D'Alegre's unit hardly getting into the action at all. The whole battle had taken little more than an hour. The following dawn revealed a grim picture: over 3,000 dead and wounded French, half the French force, lay scattered about the field. Their passing marked a larger passing, the end of French efforts to take southern Italy.

But this small battle, as important as it was politically for Italy, Spain, and France, was still more significant for another reason. Its outcome clearly validated Gonzalo's concept for the tactical use of that new type warrior, the arquebusier. Fabrizio Colonna, one of the captains with the sally force at Cerignola, afterward remarked: "Neither the courage of the troops nor the steadfastness of the general won the day; but a little ditch — and a parapet of earth — and the arquebus."

The true significance of Cerignola was best expressed by Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery in his book *History of Warfare*: "Gonzalo de Cordoba had raised the infantry soldier armed with a handgun to the status of the most important fighting man on the battlefield — a status he was to retain for over 400 years."

VOLLEYS

If any doubted the validity of the conclusions at Cerignola, those results were soon confirmed by later battles at La Motta, Biccoca, and Pavia. Unlike the others, Pavia (1525) was no defensive action. Here the Spanish arquebusiers and pikemen under the Marchese of Pescara attacked the French on open ground. Volleys of arquebus fire wrought havoc among both horse and foot of the French, and the French king, Francis I, was himself taken prisoner.

Gonzalo had made his point. The armies of Europe were not long in following his example. At Cerignola only one-sixth of the Spanish infantry had consisted of arquebusiers. As time went on, the proportion of firearms to pikes steadily increased. A century after Pavia, in 1626, a British military writer recorded that "According to our present discipline, a company of 200 men would contain 100 pikemen and 100 musketeers" — the musket by then having replaced the arquebus. By 1642 and the outbreak of the Civil War in England, Cromwell's New Model Army had two musketeers for every pikeman. Ultimately, with the invention of the plug bayonet, the need for pikemen disappeared.

In the early 1500s, while these first "riflemen" were becoming ever more important components of European military forces, they were not so popular with those whom they were

rendering obsolete, the mounted knights. The famed Chevalier Bayard, for example, the French knight *sans peur et sans reproche* (without fear and without reproach), lived in those early days of the firearm. This intrepid knight so detested (or feared?) the thought of being vulnerable to death from a distance, and at the hands of a social inferior, that he was guilty of most unknighly conduct: He made a practice of summarily hanging any Spanish arquebusier who had the misfortune to fall into his hands. Bayard must have had a premonition, for in his last combat, a valiant rearguard action at the crossing of the Sesia River in northern Italy in April 1524, he was slain by an arquebus ball.

The Age of Chivalry and knighthood had ended. The work that was started by English archers was completed by the Spanish arquebusiers of Gonzalo de Cordoba.

The Day of the Rifleman dawned over four and a half centuries ago, and the rifleman's sun is still high in the sky. Armored carriers and helicopters have increased, not diminished, his role on the battlefield. "We must never forget," remarked General Lyman L. Lemnitzer, former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (1960-62), "that the military purpose of war is to achieve control over land and the people who live on it. The ultimate measure of the control which has been attained is the area dominated by the infantryman with the fire of his individual weapon. In the final analysis, the success with which that domination is established, maintained and extended depends in large part on the soldier's mastery of his rifle."

General Bruce Clarke said in his *Training Guidelines for the Commander* that "The fighting man on the ground is the 'ultimate weapon' — the fundamental factor of decision...The soldier who can and will shoot is essential to victory in battle." In the words of General Matthew Ridgway, "There is still one absolute weapon...the only weapon capable of operating with complete effectiveness — of dominating every inch of terrain where human beings live and fight, and of doing it under all conditions of light and darkness, heat and cold, desert and forest, mountain and plain. That weapon is man himself."

In 1503 Gonzalo de Cordoba made the infantryman with a gun the most important man on the battlefield. In 1962, four and a half centuries later, the then U.S. Secretary of the Army, Elvis Stahr, remarked that "Despite all the powerful weapons systems available for our defense today, the rifleman still bears a major responsibility for the security of the land on which we live, from which we draw our sustenance, and to which we must return after every flight into space or fancy. Indeed, it is still the thin line of uniformed riflemen who form the true cutting edge of our national power."

Fielding Lewis Greaves is a retired Military Intelligence officer. A former China area specialist and former Field Artillery officer, his assignments have included two attache tours, two Army Language School courses, two tours on the Army's top G-2 staff at the Pentagon, and three years as a Command and General Staff College instructor. His articles on a wide variety of subjects have appeared in various publications.
