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# Marshal Petain Understood It All

## Firepower Kills

BURTON WRIGHT, III

In 1870 the French Army was decisively defeated by the Prussian Army. The reasons for the defeat were many—technology, in that the Prussians had better rifles than the French; staff work, in that Helmuth Karl von Moltke’s development of a new type of staff officer helped to coordinate the movement of the now vast armies Europe could field;

and superior leadership among the Prussian field commanders.

After the Treaty of Paris, France burned for revenge, and the French Army felt the heat but could not initially make the changes required to overcome the fundamental weaknesses inherent in its training and doctrine. Internal bickering was one major problem; religious

attitudes and many officers’ hatred of the Third Republic; the Dreyfus Affair that divided not only the Army but also France; and the rise to power of Colonel Louis Loizeau de Grandmaison.

As head of the Staff College, Grandmaison believed that the only way to win was to develop the idea of the “perpetual offensive”—French infantry

closing with the enemy and routing them. Philippe Petain was then a relatively junior major. Instead of focusing on the overwhelming offensive, Petain spent his time studying two conflicts more recent than the Franco-Prussian War—the Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War.

Unlike many soldiers of his time, he understood the significant lessons of both wars, which were similar. In the Boer War, the Boers were crack shots with rifles. They were armed universally with the German Mauser magazine rifle, while the British Army was armed with a lesser weapon. In battle after battle, the magnificent marksmanship of the Boers stifled British tactics and piled up a significant number of casualties.

At Colenso and Spion Kop, the Boers used steady and accurate rifle fire to win the day. The British plan was thwarted when fog prevented the British troops from occupying the top part of Spion Kop, which, once the fog cleared, was instead occupied by the Boers.

From their superior perch, the Boers delivered such accurate rifle fire that British soldiers could not rise above the shallow trenches they had dug without fear of a bullet in the head. Hundreds of British bodies littered the top of Spion Kop at the end of the battle. At Magersfontein, the Highland Brigade attempt to use a massed infantry attack against Boers dug in with rifle pits and spent the entire day under the blazing sun because they were too exposed to accurate rifle fire.

The British drew some of the correct lessons. After the end of the Boer War, they began rigorously training their infantry in accurate and sustained rifle fire. This was so successful that when the Germans collided with the British Army near Le Cateau, they believed the British had hundreds of machineguns in their line. They didn't. It was the British infantry firing just as the Boers had done before the turn of the century.

The Russo-Japanese war was an even more important one because it was the first modern war that used a significant number of machineguns. In terms of numbers, the two sides were about evenly matched, but the Russians had

almost inexhaustible manpower reserves. The Japanese did not, but the Russians used the machinegun to inflict severe casualties on the Japanese infantry. At several battles before Port Arthur, the Russians used machineguns combined with fortifications and barbed wire to mow down hundreds of Japanese infantry.

Petaun saw the fatal flaw in Grandmaison's theories of offense. Courage and the offensive spirit would be rendered useless by firepower long before the attacking force came to grips with the enemy. He also saw that these two conflicts validated the idea that a good defense is not all that bad. Where Grandmaison decided any defense was silly and a waste of time, Petaun saw it as a means of wearing down the enemy before going over to the offense. In the French Army of his time, Petaun was one of the few who understood the concept of the active defense.

Petaun would have retired an obscure colonel with a less than spectacular record if World War I had not given him his chance. Within a span of only 18 months, he was promoted from command of a regiment to Supreme Army Command. With his personal rise, so rose his tactical proficiency.

As a corps commander, Petaun used artillery instead of massed infantry. He was not a commander to keep throwing fresh infantry into the maelstrom that was the Western Front. Glory at the cost of high casualties was not his plan; victory was.

In fact, according to Alistair Horne in his epic *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916*, Petaun made popular some interesting phrases: "The offensive is the fire that advanced; the defensive the fire which stops," and "Cannon conquers, infantry occupies."

His German counterparts appeared ignorant of this theory. In fact, the battle at Verdun, which made Petaun's name a household word in France, illustrated the German disregard for the effectiveness of massed French artillery.

Today's United States Army is far closer to Petaun than to Grandmaison. The average infantry platoon of today has nearly as much firepower as a company of 1918 infantry. The ability of

the infantry—both individually and in small units—to marshal its own firepower and meld it with artillery and air support has proved the validity of Petaun's views—except that today it will not be only artillery but a combined arms team that is decisive.

Compared with World War I, the Infantry now has the ability to use many types of weapons to dominate either offensive or defensive operations. As time passes, technological improvements will continue and refine our means of bringing firepower to bear.

Petaun did not intend to imply rigidity or inflexibility in the employment of firepower. The U.S. Army is moving to make its firepower agile, powerful, and flexible. Military history clearly shows that flexibility in war—the ability to change tactics to fit the weather, the terrain, and the enemy—is a key to victory.

In a discussion I once had with Lieutenant General Harry W.O. Kinnard, former commander of the 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam, I asked him about the abilities of the enemy—the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong. He praised them as worthy opponents, and he pointed out that they changed after the battle in the Ia Drang Valley to be better able to react to the 1st Cavalry Division's extraordinary ability to move. He also added that he changed the division's way of fighting, and said that he hoped he was always one step ahead of the NVA and the VC.

This superb leader of troops understood the value of flexibility and firepower. Follow his lead. Marshal Petaun would have been proud to command those sky soldiers in South Vietnam. Their common understanding of firepower transcends more than half a century.

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**Dr. Burton Wright, III**, served on active duty in the 7th Infantry Division; in the Weapons Department of the Infantry School; and as an assistant professor of military science, Missouri Western State College. As a civilian historian, he has served at the U.S. Army Center of Military History and the U.S. Army Aviation Center. He is now Command Historian of the U.S. Army Chemical School at Fort Leonard Wood. He is a 1966 ROTC graduate of Creighton University, and also holds a master's degree and a doctorate from Florida State University.

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