

SOLDIERS AND STRATEGIES

Renaissance Warfare

♣ Military History/Mr. Smith

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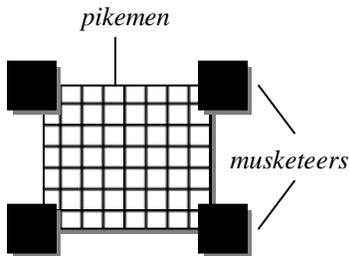
Introduction

The period in history in Europe following the Middle Ages is often referred to as “The Renaissance”. This was an era of cultural awakening, new ideas and influential inventions. Each realm of societal rebirth had its architects: Leonardo Da Vinci and Rembrandt in art, Copernicus and Galileo in science, and Adolphus and Cromwell in military matters. The era of the Renaissance culminated in the 17th century, which served as a link between “old Europe” and “Modern Europe”. As for armies and arms, this century also served as a bridge: between the age of the spear and the age of the rifle. It was in the

1600’s that militias were composed of an unusually odd assortment of pikemen, musketeers and cavalry. It was not uncommon to see a soldier with a firearm, not too different from the firearm-carrying soldiers who would dominate the future centuries, next to a soldier equipped with a long pike, reminiscent of the classical days of Alexander the Great. This hodge-podge of equipment required visionary leaders to fuse the menagerie of arms into efficient cooperation: such men would exist.

I. The 17th Century Army

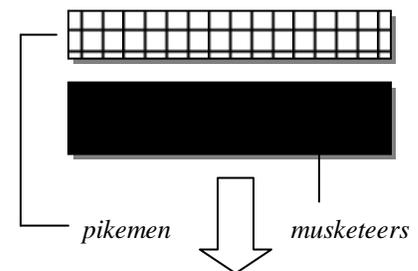
The army of the 1600’s looked quite unlike those of the Medieval period. Gone were the soldiers clad heavy in body armor. Gone were the bowmen and the catapults. Instead, armies consisted of new world weapons like the arquebus, or early musket, to the traditional but more lightly armored cavalry and pikemen. The combination of arms were constantly shifted,



The Spanish Square

examined and reworked, until finally a standard emerged. The standard army in the 1600’s was made up mainly of pikemen who, much like the phalanxes of old, were concentrated into large boxes known as “**Spanish Squares**”(also known as **tercios**), named for the nation that pioneered them. On the corners of their square were placed groups of musket-armed soldiers, who were meant to protect the core of pikemen. As time went on, the arquebusiers, or gun-equipped men, became the main strike force while the pikemen served as backup. Given the gradual recognition of the gun’s lethality, it was in the

17th century that melee weapons became the minority of arms while the musket became more numerous; the transition forced changes in formation. The old Spanish Square gave way to the **line** of soldiers with minimal depth. The first line was made up of musketeers(arquebusiers) and the second of pikemen, deployed in more shallow order rather than in deep phalanxes. The concept was that once the gun-toting soldiers softened up the enemy, they would withdraw though the pikemen who would then push forward as a mass of spears to drive back the enemy. While all this was going on an important role was being played by cavalry units. Soldiers on horseback typically made up one-third of an army in the era. The cavalry had a very flexible role, galloping about to support the infantry, flank or encircle the enemy, or to sack enemy communications and supplies. They often delivered the “knock-out punch” as an enemy began to disintegrate under the pressure of



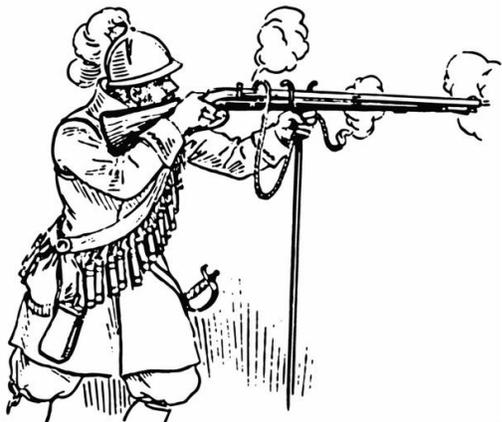
Line Formation

gun and musket. Though at the dawn of the Renaissance this combination of pikes, muskets and cavalry made little sense, by the dawn of the Early Modern period, armies such as those of the Spanish, Austrians, Swedes and English were using the previously mentioned tactics with great lethality. Religious and international rivalries would provide many-a-battleground for the field-testing of such strategies.

II. 17th Century Weapons, Tactics and Soldiers

The weapons of the 1600's could be described as both crude and refined. The leftovers of the earlier centuries, such as the pike and sword, were old but purified weapon systems. The ever-improving musket was still crude, and nearly as likely to blow up in the face of its user as to project a bullet at the foe. However, what the refined pike and crude gun had in common is that they both had vanquished the knight. Men on horseback would still play a role, but could no longer be the shock troops and spearheads that they had once been, the end of that romantic notion had first unraveled on the plains near Crécy centuries earlier.

The **musket**, also known as the "**matchlock**" or **arquebus**, was a most primitive firearm. The weapon weighed up to thirty pounds, and relied on a primitive firing mechanism. Given the weight of the gun, it was leveled on a 4 foot-high "fork" which was staked into the ground when firing. Ammunition consisted of stone and then later lead balls, and gunpowder was typically



carried in a series of tiny pouches affixed to a belt that ran diagonally(over the shoulder) around the torso of the soldier. The musket resembled guns of the later ages, but was much bulkier with a large wooden stock. In the rear of the weapon lay a recess into which the charge(gunpowder) and was placed, and the this explosive was ignited by a long match(many feet long) that burned throughout the battle.

The match was threaded through a hammer that was

released into the powder to fire the weapon. Additional gunpowder and the lead ball ammunition was loaded into the barrel of the gun. Many-a-soldier lost his life when the dangerously dangling match made premature contact with the gunpowder. **Arquebusiers** typically carried a long sword on their hip in case the battle was brought directly to them, but more likely than not they receded behind the pikemen when threatened. The arquebusiers were arrayed in ranks 12 deep, and as one line fired, the next group stepped up to take their place. In a system of rotation, troops were able to reload while their comrades at the front of the unit kept up the fire.

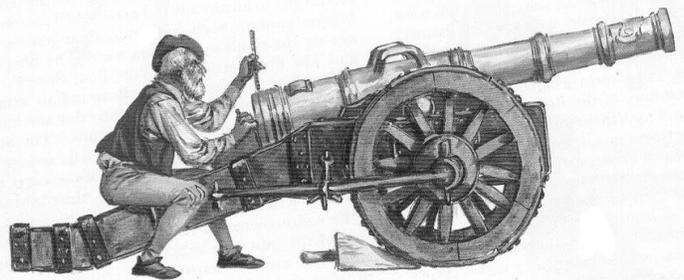
The **pike** and **halberd** were carried by the infantry not equipped with firearms. The pike units were not unlike those of previous eras. The role of pikemen was to serve as the anvil of the army. When the enemy was weakened by gunfire or cavalry harassment, it was the six-man deep mass of pike-toting troops who were sent forward to deliver the final punch. On the defensive, pikemen were taught to lodge the base of their weapon against their right foot as it was held by the left arm. Therefore, if attacked in a melee, the right arm was still free to wield a sword.

Cavalry continued to be an important battlefield contingent. However, mobs of unorganized knights were abandoned in favor of neatly ordered columns of cavalymen. Trained to keep in step with one another, to turn as a group and to coordinate attacks, the



cavalry of the 17th century was a prestigious arm of service, not due merely to the chivalrous history of the man on horseback, but because of the competence of the cavalry soldier. Cavalry was utilized in a variety of roles. Either interspersed between infantry squares and lines or placed on the flanks, cavalry units had the job of creating turning points or exploiting them. One fashion in which cavalry could alter the course of a battle is through **wheeling fire**. In this tactic, the front row of cavalymen would unleash three **pistols** against infantry and then wheel(turn) around the flank of their column and proceed to the back. A volley of fire was kept up as this constant rotation took place. The effect could be devastating: front ranks of pikemen wounded or dead creating gaps in the squares of pikes(much as the Romans did to the Macedonians with javelins). More often than not, cavalry played the role of harassing or turning the flank of the enemy, attacked the exposed sides of enemy phalanxes. Therefore, it was important that one possess enough cavalry to deter that very assault. As a result, the cavalymen mainly found himself engaged with opposing cavalry throughout most of a battle. It was only in this equestrian versus equestrian battle that swords, rather than pistols, were the main weapon. The cavalry **sabre** was a lighter model than those used by knights in Medieval times, though possessing a large hilt to keep it firmly in the soldier's hand. As with the Roman gladius, the sword once again returned to being both a slashing and poking weapon. The blade was thin enough to be wielded with great speed while flexible enough to survive an impact at its point.

The final arm of service in the 1600's was the **artillery**. Cannons played an ever-more-prominent role on the battlefield as the century evolved. It was the 30 Years War that field cannons came to be fully utilized in open field battles, rather than merely in sieges. Gradually, military regulars were trained in the use of cannon fire. Cannons were extraordinarily heavy and barely mobile for the most part, weighing over 1,000 pounds in some cases. Four to eight draft horses were required to transport cannons, and merely at a crawl. Therefore, throughout most of the 17th century, once cannons were fixed into a position on a battlefield, they



remained there throughout the engagement. Swedish innovations reduced the weight and thus increased the mobility of the cannon, allowing for realistic flexibility in battles that involved changing circumstances. Aside from limited movement, the cannon was a lethal weapon, firing a steel ball through enemy ranks at great distance. Ripping gashes in enemy cavalry and infantry columns as well as great panic, artillery finally made a place for itself on the battlefield, not just in siege warfare. Though the number of cannons available to armies were small(a maximum of 40 in a battle), their impact was great.

III. Gustavus the Reformer

Almost all of the previous mentioned reforms in warfare were the product of one man's military genius. Gustavus Adolphus, King of Sweden, was more than a monarch; he was perhaps the most revolutionary figure in military tactics before and up to his time in history(and some say thereafter). It was he who made field artillery lighter and easy to transport and had regular army soldiers trained as artillerists. It was he who abandoned the unwieldy Spanish Square for the more lethal battle line. He also created the wheeling fire tactic of cavalry. Who was it that reduced the size and weight of the musket such that it required no fork to emplace and rest upon, thereby creating the first free-standing, stable handheld rifle?: it was Adolphus. The Swedish king's vast array of innovations created a new look of battle: one of vast arrayed lines, constantly jockeying artillery and cavalry armed with guns. This would be



the look of battle for two more centuries from the Seven Years War to the American Civil War. He also instituted a system of ranks in the army, distinguishing leaders from the led and establishing a clear chain of command. Needless to say, every modern army today is still the benefactor of this concept. As for the dividends paid to his own fortunes, such tactics granted Adolphus great victories at the Battles of Breitenfeld and Lützen, ones that altered the course of one of Europe's most destructive and desperate conflicts: the Thirty Years War. His tactics were also mimicked by both factions involved in the contemporary English Civil War.



Tercio Pikemen versus Cavalry Using Wheeling Fire



European Soldiers of the Early 1600's



Arquebusier

Soldiers & Strategies: Renaissance Warfare

1. The Spanish Square was also known as a _____ and was made up of a core of _____ in the middle with _____ on each corner.

2. What was the philosophy or plan behind the later "Line Formation"?

3. What were two other names for the early musket?
_____ and the _____

4. What were two difficulties/liabilities of the early musket
 - a.

 - b.

5. What new weapons did cavalymen take into battle in the 1600's?
_____ and _____

6. The sabre sword was used wither to _____ at or _____ at the enemy.

7. How did "wheeling fire" work?

8. Why were early cannons difficult to use in battle?

9. What made cannons valuable on the battlefield?

10. Describe four military reforms instituted by Gustavus Adolphus...
 - a.

 - b.

 - c.

 - d.