

BRITAIN'S MILITARY GENIUS

DONALD COWIE

OUR detractors have again begun to say—and we have even taken up the shabby refrain ourselves—that as a race we British are not conspicuous for military genius. Perhaps it is difficult for the Englishman to answer such an accusation without descending to a kind of unseemly historical debate. To most of us, the facts are obscure and hard of access. This is a pity, for the facts are also preeminently in our favour. Moreover, they point to a very interesting tendency, by which we have always seemed to excel in those warlike arts concerned with *self-defence*, allied to a concern for freedom of nationalities and commerce.

To begin with, we brought gunpowder to Europe. Seven hundred years ago Roger Bacon displayed his formula of sulphur, charcoal and saltpetre, which, detonated, would make "a horrid noise like thunder". The new weapon brought down the donjon walls of the feudal order, and enabled a central government to overcome baronial anarchy. Then we developed the art of fighting with long-bow, finally to emasculate the tyrannous knight in armour. The centuries passed, and we had temporarily done enough, until Cromwell's "New Model Army" became the military model of the world. Its methods of drill and its institutions were widely copied, and are still the foundation of army structures everywhere.

Armour vanished; the firearm became more important; we concentrated increasingly on the method of fighting *in line*. Napoleon, like Hitler to-day, gained initial successes by fast, thrusting columns, until these broke at last on the Wellingtonian line of sturdy defenders, who always reserved their fire until the dashing French were upon them. Our essentially defensive method of fighting was responsible for the famous von Moltke dictum that the British rarely won a battle save the last one.

The invention of the machine-gun, with the improvement of artillery, reduced still further the power of the offensive. The inventor of the machine-gun as we know it to-day was an American, Hiram Maxim, but he worked in London and acquired British nationality. This weapon, however, became increasingly lethal, and some protection against it, some *defence*, was essential. The idea of the tank was hatched in the mind

of an Englishman, Ernest Swinton (now Major-General Sir Ernest Swinton), primarily as an antidote to the increased fire-power of modern weapons. It is interesting to read the historian's account of the first tank:

This Tank Mark I, to give it the official title, adopted originally for purposes of concealment, and since become general, was a curious affair, with a contour rather like that of an ill-shaped diamond. Two all-round tracks enabled it to cross over rough country and trenches; its great weight served to crush wire, guns, machine-guns and men, and smash down trees and buildings and obstacles; its speed, slow as it was, was as fast as that of the infantryman it was designed to accompany and help; and the light guns and machine-guns which formed its armament rendered it formidable to any foe, as its armour made it impenetrable to ordinary bullets. Elementary, clumsy, defective in many a respect, it was yet a novel, terrifying and potent engine of war.

The first big success of the British tanks was at Cambrai in November, 1917. Three hundred and seventy-eight of the vehicles had been secretly assembled. They started at dawn, and by noon a complete and shattering victory had been won. Losses in men and machines were trifling. The expert historian must be quoted again: "Tanks had enabled us to conquer in twelve hours, at the price of a mere 5,000 casualties, an area of ground equal to that which at Ypres had cost us three months and a quarter of a million men."

Just before the end of that war, the Allied High Command had drawn up a plan for the use of some 5,000 tanks in a grand attack on the German lines. This was known as the "1919 Plan", and would have been put into effect but for the early victory won by other means. It is a tribute to the British Tank Corps, responsible for the formulation of that plan, that it was followed out in all its details by the Germans in their 1940 offensive against France. And it is ironical that the British invention of the tank itself restored the Napoleonic tactic of the attacking column that only British endurance had broken in the past.

There are two kinds of military aircraft, fighter and bomber. The first is a defensive weapon, not devised for purposes of aggression. Its purpose is to defeat the bomber, a weapon designed to terrorize and destroy land-dwellers. The first direct long-distance flight of military aircraft took place in Britain. The first types of military aircraft were built here five years before 1914. The first big work accomplished by aircraft in the war of 1914-1918 was that of the British observation

machines which prepared the way for the victory of the Marne. But the British first built fighters, and to this day the genius of the race has found most satisfaction in these essentially defensive aerial weapons. It is not too much to say that the best fighters of to-day are our own. And it is worth mentioning that one of the most remarkable inventions of the present war, the power-driven aerial gun-turret, is British.

Our aircraft entered the war with a glass that would resist a point-blank bullet, the first of its kind. Our armoured cars have bullet-proof tyres, yet another British invention and monopoly. The British soldier, in the last war, had the only steel helmet which offered reasonable resistance to shrapnel (itself invented by a Colonel Shrapnel of the British Army) and to-day our "tin hats" of manganese steel (the alloy first discovered by an Englishman) are still the best, as many B.E.F. men have testified. The first gas-mask was invented during the 1914-1918 war by a Canadian, Colonel G. C. Nasmith, as an antidote to the first poison-gas, a German invention (and may they be proud of it).

But the principal British contribution in methods of warfare has been on a different element. As long ago as 1295, the herring fishermen of Holland and Zealand asked British ships of war to protect them. In the fourteenth century our kings were often described as "the guardians of the seas". James I sent his navy to the Mediterranean three hundred years later to operate against the pirates of Algiers, who had terrorized the shipping of all nations. Admiral Blake operated against the same Moorish sea-pests during the Commonwealth, and they were finally exterminated by Admiral Lord Exmouth in 1616. The Dey of Algiers was forced to surrender, and twelve hundred Christians were released from a terrible slavery.

The naval victories of Nelson strangled Napoleon, who would otherwise have been master of the world. Admiral Lord Hood gave his opinion that Nelson's battle of the Nile alone "preserved from anarchy, distress and misery the greatest part of Europe".

It is not generally realised that when the Spanish possessions in South America struggled for and obtained their independence, they were helped greatly by British sea-power and by officers of the Royal Navy. The British Foreign Minister, Canning, declared at the time of the South American emancipation that no European power should be allowed to help Spain against the rising colonies. Britain then formally recognised the inde-

pendence of the South American states, and her ships patrolled the Atlantic carefully. A large number of Englishmen fought by the side of Bolivar the Liberator. Many British naval officers, whose active employment had ceased with the European wars, joined the new republics as expert advisers. They helped to build up the various South American navies.

Pirates of Borneo, China and the Persian Gulf were swept away by the Royal Navy. The slave dhows of East Africa were captured and transformed into peaceful traders. Slavery itself could never have been abolished without the patrolling vigilance of Britain's great, but essentially defensive and protective, weapon. Greece, in 1827, wished to be rid of the Turkish yoke; she appealed to, and was helped by, the Royal Navy, which destroyed the Turkish fleet. Later the same British weapon was put at the disposal of Turkey herself, as a protection against Russian invasion.

The American discoverer of the North Pole, Commander Peary, once remarked that Britain had done more for Polar discovery than any other nation. Many of our explorers were naval men, and all had naval aid. Then British naval men developed the sport of yachting, and taught it to the United States, to France, to Germany and to many other countries. German yachting, until recently, was conducted in British hulls, often manned by our seamen. The Japanese learnt how to build ships in British yards, and soon they were able to replace the naval vessels they had bought with hulls of their own good construction. British officers taught them the usages and methods of a modern navy. The success of the Japanese against the Russians in 1904-1905 was largely due to this tuition.

In actual naval construction Britain has not always been an originator. Spanish and French built better warships in early days. French, Germans and Americans have sometimes equalled her designs in modern times. But it is worth recording that we first dispensed with the old method of mounting guns in portholes, and introduced the system of firing by broadside. Gunnery experts consistently improved armament. Robert Whitehead, a native of Bolton, invented the torpedo. The Royal Navy was the first to adopt the screw propeller, in 1843. (Indeed we had invented the steam-engine and the steamship themselves, as well as the turbine.) A great many improvements in design followed the original research of British naval technicians during the nineteenth century. The work of Scott Russell, Froude and other members of the Institution of Naval Archi-

teets, founded in 1860, resulted at last in the famed *Dreadnought*, a battleship that made all others obsolete. To discuss recent technical improvements would be to tread on dangerous ground, but the British original contributions have nearly all been aimed at the destruction of "sea-bandits". We invented the hydrophone and the depth-charge.

It is in the *organisation* of sea-power, however, that we have been most original. To this day no other power has developed such a powerful and efficient naval machine. The first navy, in the modern sense of the term, was and is the British Navy. And the employment of that weapon, primarily to preserve the freedom of the seas for all who wish to travel and trade peaceably, is a peculiarly British conception. Our wars have been fought by sea and not by land, cleanly on a clean element. They have rarely devastated large tracts of inhabited country. Their object has usually been defensive; indeed, they have rarely been conducted with popular approval under any other terms. It is probably because of her *method* of warfare that Britain can claim to be the only great power that has never injured the vital interest of another European people by annexation. Our whole conception of warfare, no less than our methods, has been to avoid warfare, that is, to preserve a balance of power and peace.

But, as has been shown, when we have fought, our weapons have not been derivative. Perhaps a space of time has always elapsed before our military genius has found its full expression. We like to work slowly and thoroughly. It is an ignorant slander that we are not conspicuous as originators in this field. When thoroughly stirred, we have always led the van.