

# Swiss national defence, to-day and to-morrow [continued]

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## SWISS NATIONAL DEFENCE, TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW.

A series of twelve talks given by the Swiss Short Wave Service — Berne.

By PETER DÜRRENMATT.

(Continuation.)

### X. *The Swiss Air Force and Anti-Aircraft Defence.*

The question of how to build up an efficient Air Force in the Militia Army of a small country, belongs to one of the most difficult military problems. And this for two reasons: in the first place, because an Air Force costs a very great deal and, in the second place, because the lengthy period of training which is necessary in order to obtain efficient pilots, would not appear to be compatible with the short period of military service which prevails in a Militia Army. As regards this second problem, it is solved in this country as follows: from the moment when the pilots have completed their training in the Officers' School and the Pilots' School, they are obliged to carry out a number of training flights each year, for which they receive compensation on a very generous scale. Thus, the Officer Pilot has to devote a few days every month to his aviation training, after which he returns to his civilian job. In addition to this there are the obligatory refresher courses and instruction services which are necessary for his promotion. In no other branch of the Forces does there exist such a close connection between civilian life and the military profession, as in the case of the Air Force. Moreover, it is the airmen who show the greatest interest in their service. Each year there are more candidates for training as pilots, than there are vacancies.

What is more troublesome, is the question of expense. Aviation is in a continual state of development and progress. No Army can count on being able to use any certain type of aircraft for more than ten years, at the most. Its aircraft strength must be renewed constantly, and this requires a great deal of money.

The question which faces a small Army is the following: should its Air Force be used for strategical purposes in considerable strength or should it be employed only for tactical purpose and as a help in reconnaissance. Discussions regarding this particular problem are now in full swing in Switzerland and, so far, no decision has been reached.

From the standpoint of organisation, the Air Force and Anti-Aircraft Defence Troops are a special branch of arms, the Commander of which has the rank of a Divisionary Colonel. The Air Force is composed of four Aviation Regiments, the Permanent Wing, the Night-Flying Wing, the Signals Group and various special units, Observer Corps, etc. In addition to these flying personnel, which are specifically trained for fighting, there are the ground personnel for the airfields. An aviation Regiment consists of from four to six Squadrons and is, as a rule, commanded by a Colonel. The Squadrons are partly fighting units and partly for reconnaissance purposes, and their officers and Non-Commissioned Officers are composed of pilots and observers. The Permanent Wing is composed entirely of regular personnel and is always in readiness. The Swiss Air Force is equipped with light and with medium aircraft, but it does not possess any heavy

Bombers. The latter would prove too expensive an item, both as regards their purchase and maintenance; moreover, they would not be in keeping with the fighting possibilities of the Swiss Army, which is organised solely for purposes of defence. Just now, our aircraft strength has been considerably increased through the purchase of a large number of jet-propelled aircraft of the "Vampire" type. The Swiss Aircraft Factories which were established during the Second World War make it possible for Swiss military aircraft requirements to be covered to a certain extent by home production. There is no disguising the fact, however, that this is a very costly experiment, in view of the fact that most of the raw materials have to be imported from abroad. Switzerland's economic basis is too narrow for the possibility of creating an aircraft industry for the export trade.

When viewing the Swiss Air Force problem as a whole there is one important psychological factor which must not be missed, and that is that there is a keen interest in flying to be found among Swiss youth and, furthermore, that Swiss pilots possess excellent abilities for their job. And thus, there will be found in this firm determination for Switzerland to maintain an Air Force of her own, even if its fighting operation may prove limited in view of modern developments, this determination is an expression of the spirit of resistance characteristic of this little country.

As regards the organisation of the anti-aircraft defence within the Swiss Army, we will only say that special Anti-Aircraft Detachments are at the disposal of the various Corps Troops, Army Units and Army Corps. These are manned by the Military Anti-Air-

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craft personnel, who are incorporated in the same Arm as the flying personnel. They consist of seven Regiments, divided up into several companies, which in their turn comprise from four to six batteries and the special troops attached to them.

#### *XI. The Importance of our high Mountain chains.*

When the British Field Marshall Montgomery paid a visit to Switzerland after the war had ended, he was shown, among other things, the so-called National Redoubt, those fortified places in the Alps which during and since the Second World War have formed the nucleus of Swiss defence preparedness. The great Commander-in-Chief of the mobile war in the desert, did not appear to view these plans of ours for defence in the Alpine heights with any particular favour. They were unfamiliar to him. As a matter of fact, it is only possible to really understand the defence idea of the National Redoubt, when it is viewed from the standpoint of specific Swiss conditions. The Swiss mountains offer excellent possibilities of successful defensive operations on the part of a small Army, consisting of troops which are thoroughly acquainted with the terrain, in a struggle with an enemy who is not only numerically superior but also better equipped from the technical point of view.

For big foreign armies, mountain warfare represents something quite special. It is in the nature of an episode. For the Swiss Army, it would form the main support of their defence. Already in the early ages of the Confederation, the conduct of the wars against the Mediaeval dynasties, was always based on the idea of the defence of the passes, and of making the most of the difficult terrain against the armies of knights, who found it very difficult to fight under such conditions, which were most unusual for them. When the Swiss resisted the French Revolutionary Army which invaded this country 150 years ago, it was in the mountain Cantons of Inner Switzerland, in Schwyz and in Nidwalden, that the resistance offered was the most resolute. This is important from the psychological point of view, as it affects the people's spirit of resistance even to-day, for in the broad masses of the population, the recollection of this resistance has remained very much alive. And just as it was true then, so it is to-day that the difficulties of the terrain in the mountains and the unstable meteorological conditions which prevail there, are valuable allies for the defence troops, when warding off attacks from mechanised armour or the superior strength of an enemy Air Force. The strengthening of this terrain by means of fortifications, can be achieved in the mountains at a cost which is relatively small in comparison with the effects obtained.

After France's collapse in the Summer of 1940, when Switzerland was surrounded and encompassed practically without a break by the Armies of Hitler and of Mussolini, work was begun immediately on fortifying the National Redoubt. Years of work have produced a fortification wherein all the natural means of defence were exploited and improved by artificial means. At the same time, the responsible military authorities have always realised quite clearly that with the establishment of the Redoubt, only an outer frame had been created. They were careful not to fall into the mistake of the "Maginot line spirit", and place all their confidence in the fortification alone, thus neglecting the fighting spirit of the troops. Particular

attention is paid to this factor in both the general and the special training which the mountain troops have to undergo.

The mountain training of the Swiss Militia, in which all branches of the Army have to participate is, in its broad lines, divided into two principal aims. In the first place it is intended for the establishment of special troops and "cadres" which will be thoroughly acquainted with all the particularities of fighting in the mountains, both in Summer and in Winter. These special troops have to attend courses where they are taught how to overcome difficulties connected with supplies, billeting, communications, liaison and, of course, the handling of weapons . . . In the case of Infantry troops, members of the Field Battalions also take part in these courses. The special "flash" with the insignia of the Alpine Troops, which those who have gone through these special courses are entitled to wear, may be found in all branches of the Army.

The second object which it is desired to attain by means of the mountain training of the troops, is to get them accustomed to the very hard living conditions which exist on the heights, between 1,500 and 3,000 metres above sea level. The high mountains are the last refuge offered by unspoilt Nature. There the soldier can gain experience under hard camping conditions, can learn to conduct a reconnaissance under difficulties and how to surmount obstacles resulting from both terrain and weather. Military Service in the mountains offers numerous natural possibilities for the developmens of a spirit of initiative and of determination among individual combattants and small combat

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groups, teaching them to be both tough and resourceful. And thus we recognise that mountain warfare is not only a last resource in the Defence planning of a small Army, but is also the best field of exercise to keep us in readiness for the hardships of war.

*XII. A Company mobilises for Refresher Courses.*

Let us, just for once, follow in the steps of an Infantry Company of the Swiss Militia which has been called up for a Refresher Course. We find ourselves transplanted to one of the many small towns or large villages situated in Central Switzerland, which serve, in peacetime, as assembly stations for the troops. One thing must first be made clear, however, and that is that in case of war a good many things would be different to the mobilisation exercise which we are about to describe. But of those things one does not speak.

In the garrison town in which we now find ourselves it is, naturally, not one Company alone which is assembled. There will be at least one Battalion which will assemble there and, in addition, there will be a number of special troops belonging to the various branches which will mobilise there for the purpose of being attached to this Battalion. Already several months earlier, notice of the exact dates for the refresher courses for the various Corps Troops, had been published in the newspapers by the Federal Military Department. For our particular Company the time set for them to report to their Regimental Commander is 9 a.m. Thus, almost since before dawn a stream of soldiers is continuously pouring into the little town. They come on foot, on push-cycles, on horse-drawn vehicles and by car; moreover, the railways run special trains in order that those who live a long way off, may arrive in time. Every man is fully equipped and ready to march off. His heavy haversack — it weighs over forty pounds — is on his back and his rifle slung over his shoulder. The square in front of the arsenal presents a busy scene. The Corps material, that is to say the material which the soldier does not keep in his own home, such as machine-guns, tents, entrenching tools, etc., is being distributed to the assembled Company. The men stand at ease in small groups, talking and renewing old friendships. Most of them have already attended Refresher Courses with their unit, or learnt to know each other during the long years of active military service which the war imposed upon them. The prevailing atmosphere is unconstrained, cheery and friendly. As the clock strikes nine, the order to "Assemble" is heard from

various directions. The Company Commanders have taken over. Immediately all talking and singing ceases. The men fall in — from one moment to another they have changed from civilians into soldiers. The Company Commanders orders "Attention", then he musters the troops and says a few words of welcome to his men. This done, the Sergeant-Major proceeds with the roll-call. The exercises which follow and which partake of the nature of drill show that the men have not forgotten their old training; everything proceeds smoothly according to plan. The men have all to report to the Medical Officer for examination, they are provided with the requisite Corps material and their arms and kit are inspected. Then the recruits, who are serving for the first time in their Company are attributed to their respective platoons. The Platoon Commanders organise the battle formation of their platoons, distribute the various duties among the Non-Commissioned Officers and see to their men. The Field Kitchens are already in full swing, in preparation for the mid-day meal, which, in all probability consists of the traditional piece of beef and a portion of bread. The trucks and mechanised vehicles of the Company are being loaded with blankets, ammunition and part of the men's kit. Time passes rapidly. In the early afternoon the Company Commanders report that the Battalion is ready to march. Thereupon the entire Battalion marches to the big square in front of the Arsenal in order to take over its Colours. This is a very solemn moment: only a few hours ago there was disorder and muddle on that self-same square. Now the entire Battalion stands in perfect formation and in complete readiness to march. The Battalion Commander gives the order to "Stand to attention". The Senior Sergeant Major then parades the Colours before the Battalion to the sound of the Regimental March, he then stops before the Commander and lowers the Colours, whilst the Commander salutes them. The Colours are then carried along the rest of the Front and the Sergeant rejoins the ranks. *The Refresher Course has begun!* The Battalion promptly marches off. Perhaps it may be necessary for the troops to travel by truck or even by rail in order to attain their destinations. In any case, there will be an exercise to be carried out on the very first night, for three weeks are a very short time and the Militia soldier must learn to be able to transform himself within a few hours from a civilian to a soldier, should war need him for the defence of his country.

THE END.

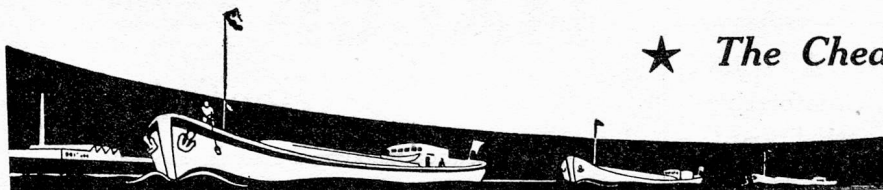
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