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Hand-to-hand Combat in World War I as the Royal Hungarian Defence Forces' Soldiers saw it



ABSTRACT

World War I. showed so much bloodshed that had never been seen before. On the contrary of the high effectiveness of firepower, combatants had to fight face-to-face many times. Frequently, they could not use their firearms efficiently for various reasons. In many situations, this led to hand-to-hand combat that resembled the struggling of long gone ages.

In the era of our topic opinions on hand-to-hand combat were controversial. On one hand, Hand-to-hand combat was emphasized by the training methods of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. On the other hand, armed forces of other countries did not find it so vital.

In my opinion, the strife of the Royal Hungarian Defence Forces in World War I. has its own value nowadays as well. Firepower has been increasing and the other factors that forced soldiers to fight in close combat have not disappeared either.

KEYWORDS

(Royal) Hungarian Defence Forces, World War I., trench warfare, hand-to-hand combat, close quarter combat

DOI 10.14232/belv.2023.2.6

<https://doi.org/10.14232/belv.2023.2.6>

Cikkre való hivatkozás / How to cite this article:

Varga Imre (2023): Hand-to-hand Combat in World War I as the Royal Hungarian Defence Forces' Soldiers saw it. *Belvedere Meridionale* vol. 35. no. 2. pp 86–99.

ISSN 1419-0222 (print)

ISSN 2064-5929 (online, pdf)

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most decisive aspects of World War I is the sight of trenches. After the moving combat of the first few months of the war frontlines stiffened. Soldiers first started digging in order to find shelter from enemy bullets. Later these bullets did not allow them to leave their trenches and the period of trench warfare began. The reality was very far from the previous plans and the ideas of military thinkers. Generals of the era thought that increasing firepower would destroy the enemy and the war would be won quickly. There were signs that suggested the opposite, though. The great losses of American Civil War¹ between 1861 and 1865,² the Prussian-Austrian War in 1866³, the Prussian-French War 1871 and the Russian–Japanese War 1904–05 all had events that suggested defence had an advantage over attack. The minority of military thinkers that accepted this idea could not influence the way of thinking of their fellows. In the trenches soldiers had to fight face to face with their enemies. These fights sometimes remind us of the ferocity of long gone ages. On the contrary of firepower combatants had to improvise and fight hand-to-hand many times. It was the complete opposite of the generals' expectations. Soldiers of the Royal Hungarian Defence Forces – part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's military structure – were forced many times to fight in close combat. The aim of my study is to show their struggle in and outside of the trenches. On the other hand, I present the concepts of hand-to-hand combat through field manuals and memoirs of the combatants focusing on the Royal Hungarian Defence Forces' members. Were these concepts valid? Did they match the requirements of the era? How effective was the training? How was it even possible that members of the armed forces had to struggle with their enemies face to face when they could kill them from hundreds of meters away? Can we learn anything useful from World War I's trench warfare? My study answers all these questions.

CLOSE COMBAT OR HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT?

I need to determine what close combat and hand-to-hand combat are. Close combat is a wilder term used by many areas of military science. Close combat has different meanings for a rifleman and a fighter pilot. In the era of World War I., close combat meant military engagement within one hundred meters according to field manuals. Hand-to-hand combat is a narrower term.

¹ PATTEN 1861. 12–61.

² KEEGAN 2012.

³ PERJÉS 2014. 156–188.

It means fighting man versus man using melee weapons and/or improvised weapons or lack of these using bare hands.

*“hand-to-hand combat: is a special area of military close combat which prepares combatants to fight with melee weapons or their bare hands in order to overcome their foes and survive in a changing, extreme environment.”*⁴

Hand-to-hand combat and close combat are often used as each other’s synonyms. Hand-to-hand combat has been losing its importance compared to previous eras though it is still part of military training programs.

HAND-TO-HAND TRAINING METHODS OF ROYAL HUNGARIAN DEFENCE FORCES UNTIL WORLD WAR I.

Infantry

The Royal Hungarian Defence Forces was born in 1868 by article XLI. Although twenty years earlier – in 1848 – troops under the same name fought in the war for independence. The war was lost and the first units of Royal Hungarian Defence Forces were forced to join the Habsburg Empire’s armed forces. The birth of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy provided an occasion for the Royal Hungarian Defence Forces’ rebirth.

Recruits of RHDF were taught how to use bayonets from the beginning of basic training that lasted eight weeks.⁵ Bayonet was the main melee weapon of infantry in the era. It was effective against even cavalry when it was attached to a rifle. Every recruit had to go through basic training before they were sent advanced infantry training or to be chosen to join the ranks of cavalry. Artillery had not been part of RHDF until 1912.

Melee weapon training was enhanced by wrestling exercises. According to Tornautasítás 1903. Bayonet fencing’s main goal was to enhance the effectiveness of RHDF troops in hand-to-hand combat.⁶ Recruits learnt the basics of bayonet fighting practicing the moves alone. Then they practiced with blunt weapons in pairs as the next step of training. Trainers picked soldiers with similar skill levels and had them work in pairs in order to avoid soldiers with lesser skills getting frustrated by their own lack of success. When soldiers got efficient enough at pair exercises with blunt weapons the time of free fencing arrived. In this phase of training emphasis moved from learning the moves to using them against a live and resisting opponent. The last step was free fencing with sharp weapons.⁷ During the training program trainers tried to simulate battlefield conditions in order to prepare the recruits for the challenges they would face. Simpler exercises were followed by more complex exercises. Emphasis was on the simplicity of moves were taught. Simpler moves can be learnt and performed easier. Moreover, they are easier to remember in stress situations like combat on the battlefield.

⁴ KRAJNC 2019. 595.

⁵ m. Kir. Honvédelmi Minisztérium 1875. 50–53.

⁶ M. Kir. Honvédelmi Minisztérium 1903. 84–90.

⁷ M. Kir. Honvédelmi Minisztérium 1917.

*“Only simple moves can be used in combat fought by masses so sophisticated fencing moves must be avoided.”*⁸

Proper use of the moves were more important than raw strength. After single training recruits learnt how to fight as a part of a squad, platoon, and company.

The other goal of hand-to-hand combat training was to enhance the recruits’ mental abilities.

*“Quick and energetic actions are more important than performing the moves perfectly.”*⁹ Fast and proper reactions could mean the difference between life and death on the battlefield. Soldiers who had been taught by these principles had bigger chances to survive.

Bayonet training was part of almost every country’s armed forces training regime. It was true for the British troops as well. On the other hand, British officers were issued swords, though sword fencing was not part of their training. General Bernard Law Montgomery’s memoirs tells the following.¹⁰

As a young officer he was efficient at using a bayonet and he was among the better ones during bayonet training. He even won trophies in wrestling. However, he did not know how to use a sword due to a lack of training. Therefore, when he was deployed to the front he had to kick in the groin a German soldier who had wanted to shoot him and capture him.

Later the British bayonet training program became the basic of US bayonet training program.¹¹ Later the American armed forces developed the training program further based¹² on the experiences of trench warfare¹³. Both British and American training program had many similarities with Austro-Hungarian hand-to-hand combat methods.

German allies of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy also emphasized bayonet training. General Erwin Rommel remembers his time in World War I. *“I was a very enthusiastic bayonet fencer and I was quite good at it.”*¹⁴

Bayonet use was not Rommel’s hobby. German troops underwent intensive training as well. *“... we are learning every aspect of battlefield service, especially the use of an entrenching shovel.”*¹⁵

The author did not detail if the entrenching shovel was used as a tool or an improvised weapon. On the other hand, he gave us an example for the latter. Engineers repelled the enemy using entrenching shovels and pickaxes.¹⁶ This example shows that soldiers did not hesitate to use anything useful when they had to fight. Using an entrenching shovel became a common practice in many armies during World War I. Though it never became part of the official training regime of RHDF.

⁸ M. Kir. Honvédelmi Minisztérium 1917. 7.

⁹ M. Kir. Honvédelmi Minisztérium 1915. 66.

¹⁰ MONTGOMERY 1981. 23-24.

¹¹ U. S. Infantry Association 1917.

¹² Army War College 1918.

¹³ WALDRON 1917. 175–235.

¹⁴ ROMMEL 71.

¹⁵ ROMMEL 13.

¹⁶ ROMMEL 27.

Cavalry

Cavalrymen's training followed the methodology of infantrymen. They also were taught how to handle bayonets. RHDF's cavalry – hussars and uhlans – had to learn how to use cavalry swords effectively.¹⁷ Uhlans even had to handle spears from horseback. Besides sword and spear every cavalryman was efficient at using carbines and pistols. Because the learning process took too long, uhlan units were disbanded during the 1870's. Hussars practiced individually on foot, then in groups on horseback, and finally in groups riding at a gallop.

Attack was the main combat method of Austro-Hungarian cavalry so RHDF's cavalry focused on it as well. According to field manuals, cavalry fought mainly from horseback. Attack was the only way of fighting known by RHDF's troops so they were not equipped with weapons nor tools – such as rifles with bayonets, trench tools, and camouflage uniforms – which would have made them effective in infantry combat until the beginning of World War I.

*“Our cavalry was trained to attack. Main focus was on cavalry charge. Everything else supported this mentality. Firepower and personal equipment was determined to help cavalrymen in hand-to-hand combat. Troops wore colourful uniforms in order to make it easy to recognize each other. Furthermore, troops were not equipped with enough artillery nor machine guns. And they completely lacked bayonets and trenching tools. Attacks from horseback soon gave the name ‘red devils’ to Hungarian cavalry. On the other hand, these attacks were paid in blood thanks to the different fighting methods of Russian cavalry. They avoid fighting on horseback. Austro-Hungarian generals had to realize that cavalry was equipped wrong.”*¹⁸

Russian cavalry, thanks to the lessons of the Russian–Japanese war 1904–05 avoided fighting from horseback. When they were attacked they dismounted and used their firepower to repel attackers. We can see the differences between the cavalry fighting methods between Russian and Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's military thinkers.

Russian cavalry was the main enemy of Austro-Hungarian cavalry in World War I. Therefore, it could be useful to look at the training of the Russian cavalry. Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov the great general of World War II. was a member of the Russian imperial cavalry during World War I. as a dragoon. Furthermore, he was a trainer as well.

Russian cavalrymen learnt how to use infantry weapons, ride and fence just like their Hungarian counterparts.

*“We learnt to ride a horse and fence besides common exercises... The most difficult exercises were to ride a horse, gymnastics on horseback and the handle of sword and spear.”*¹⁹ One of the differences between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian cavalry training methods was that the Russian troops were trained in using spears. Hussars were not trained how to use them but they were trained how to fight against it.

After the eruption of WWI. Hungarian hussars tended to change their weapons in order to become more effective in combat.

*“A model Werndl rifle was better than a carbine because it had a longer bayonet.”*²⁰

¹⁷ M. Kir. Honvédelmi Minisztérium 1876. 49–64; 64–69; 255–257.

¹⁸ MAKÓ 2004. 32.

¹⁹ ZSUKOV 1976. 40.

²⁰ DERNYEV 1941. 90.

I must correct the quotation above. Model Werndl carbines did not have bayonets. Bayonets belonged to model Mannlicher rifles and they were introduced later.²¹

The lack of bayonets was one of the reasons why Hussars were less effective on foot. Another reason was that their swords were optimized to be used from a horseback.

We can say that RHDF's hand-to-hand combat training was efficient in the era. It simultaneously enhanced the physical and psychological abilities of the soldiers. The structure of the training helped these efforts. However, the cavalry tactics differed from the Russian cavalry tactics and the personal training of the soldiers were similar. In the next part of the study we look at the events when hand-to-hand combat skills were useful on the battlefield.

IN WHAT SCENARIOS WAS HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT USEFUL?

By the end of 1914, western front stiffened. Soldiers dug deep in the mud building more and more complex trench systems in order to avoid enemy fire. On the eastern front mobile warfare was fought a bit longer by Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Russia but by the beginning of 1915 this front stiffened as well. Digging trenches was not new on the battlefield. And there had been attempts to break through well-fortified enemy trench lines as well. Firearms became greatly more accurate and rate of fire also increased during the American Civil War – 1861–65. These factors led to very bloody battles. Combatants started using natural covers and when such things were not provided they dug to avoid enemy fire. Soldiers of the American Civil War weren't equipped with trenching tools so they had to use improvised tools to dig. Breaking through such trench lines was only possible if the attackers were willing to pay a high price in blood. By 1864 Union troops were experimenting with a new tactical method. On 10 May 1864 General Grant's soldiers tried to break through General Lee's defence.

*"General Emory Upton commanded his troops to act differently than before. ... don't shoot your rifles until you have reached the enemy's trench then use your bayonets."*²²

The first wave of the attackers was followed by another wave. The second wave went through the conquered trenches and increased the effect of the attack. But the second wave arrived slowly and when it finally attacked it was shot by focused artillery fire. Anyways, the attack was successful. This tactic was new because it did not want to destroy the enemy with firepower. Its intention was to go through the enemy firing zone as fast as possible then break the enemy in hand-to-hand combat.

Of course, breaking through is not the only option to destroy the enemy. It could be flanked. However, flanking was not an option in World War I. after a while because the flanking attempts led to trench lines from the shores of Belgium to the borders of Switzerland. This gigantic trench system was impossible to flank.

There were attempts in Europe to answer the challenges of increasing firepower. It led to the so-called 'Stosstaktik' – storm tactics in English. The aim of this tactic was to go through the troops enemy's firing zone as fast as possible. The changes in military technology helped this tactical method. Early rifled firearms were less effective from 150 to 225 meters distance than

²¹ BALLA 2000. 105–108.

²² KEEGAN 2012. 359.

from further. Soldiers equipped with weapons like them were only able to shoot the enemy from this distance if they constantly changed the weapons' sight. It took time and soldiers had less time to aim and shoot.²³ Of course, military technology was constantly evolving so aiming and firing became way easier by the beginning of World War I²⁴. And going through enemy firing lines lost much of its former effectiveness.²⁵

Nevertheless, soldiers trained in hand-to-hand combat had important roles on patrol, vanguard and security missions.²⁶

Riflemen's main melee weapon was a bayonet. Bayonet charges have been portrayed as glorious actions that look spectacular on canvas. In reality, bayonet charges were much rarer than on canvas. Defenders usually fled before chargers reached their lines.

"If chargers have moral strength – besides enough manpower – and defenders firepower can't repel the charge, the latter would often avoid fighting and flee. Some of them even surrender. So, real hand-to-hand combat or bayonet fighting is rare. If both sides have enough manpower and moral willpower then man fights man. They would fence, hit, thrust, and cut until reinforcements arrived and tipped the balance. If one of the fighting parties loses its moral willingness to fight – death of their leaders, etc. – that also can tip the scale. And soldiers give up fighting, flee or surrender. However, such actions are rare. Usually they occur around especially important places on the frontlines. Fights like these are not known by units not involved many times. Not to mention further parts of the frontlines."²⁷

As we can see even if hand-to-hand combat erupted the news of such actions did not reach higher command frequently. This is why it's so interesting that Hungarian newspapers reported many times about close combat during WWI.

"One of the main characteristics of the personal fight aspect of trench warfare in WWI was the enemy troops usually did not even see each other. They usually used grenades besides quick bayonet duels in the trenches."²⁸

In the battle of Somme, less than 1% of wounds were caused by bayonets.²⁹ On the other hand, bayonet use rarely inflicted only wounds. Penetration into soft human tissue by a sharp object can be easily fatal.

Cavalry charges were more frequent at the beginning of the war thanks to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's tactics. These charges were quick and violent but did not last long. Officers could easily lose control in the heat of battle. Troops mixed with the enemy. Therefore soldiers usually were called to gather after a couple of minutes of fencing. Then lines were reorganized and another charge followed.

Breaking the enemy's willpower was/is the primary key of a successful charge. Soldiers were trained to use their weapons. Their training prepared them – both physically and mentally –

²³ PERJÉS 2014. 167–168.

²⁴ BENCZE 2009. 140.

²⁵ BENCZE 2009. 126.

²⁶ BENCZE 2009. 143.

²⁷ DOROMBY – REÉ 1939. 175–176.

²⁸ KEEGAN 2013. 283.

²⁹ BREGMAN 2020. 189.

to endure the stress of charging. Moreover, how to stay alive. At least, it was the intention of the field manuals' creators. Hand-to-hand combat was rather an option than a goal.³⁰

Hand-to-hand combat could occur when troops ran out of ammunition or enemy lines got mixed.³¹

HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT IN PRACTICE

From the beginning of 1914 mobile warfare became rarer and rarer and turned into trench warfare. Just like cavalry attacks hand-to-hand combat did not last long either but it was vicious as well.

*"... Close combat can be very desperate. When soldiers' rifles break they start choking and tearing the enemy with their bare hands..."*³²

Hand-to-hand combat training could be very useful in situations like this. Even if combatants did not have the proper weaponry their training prepared them to endure battlefield stress and they know how to inflict damage to their enemies or protect themselves.

Different kinds of melee weapons started to be produced in order to avoid using the rifle's butt. Some of them were issued officially – some types of trench mauls – and some of them were improvised by combatants from their supplies. A typically Hungarian weapon 'fokos' spontoon hawk was reborn too.

*"By the command of General Pál Nagy a suggestion was made to introduce a new melee weapon, the spontoon hawk. It was needed because a spontoon hawk is easier to handle in trenches than a rifle-attached bayonet. It was obvious that members of the RHDF are more likely to use the butts of their rifles and this breaks many rifle butts."*³³

We can see there were attempts to provide soldiers with more effective weaponry in hand-to-hand combat. These attempts prove that generals were willing to adjust to new battlefield challenges.

As I have mentioned there were occasions when RHDF troops had to fight their enemies. One of the occasions was the struggle of the RHDF 22nd infantry regiment's II. battalion at Ruda-Kameral on 20 December 1914. They repelled the attack of Russian imperial soldiers.

*"... during hand-to-hand combat were only hands utilized literally. Lines turned into groups of soldiers choking and hitting each other on the ground"*³⁴

It happened in the dark. Just like the following event. The engineer squad of the 62nd infantry regiment was tasked to stop the advancing Russian imperial troops on the night of 26 of May 1915.

"... they used their axes, shovels and pickaxes very effectively. Soldiers were joyful and encouraged each other. When privates found themselves alone surrounded by enemy they turned into beasts and fought through enemy ranks to reach their comrades. It occurred that Székelys

³⁰ PAULOVITS 1939. 61, 70, 106, 134, 141, 279. The author mentions many occasions when enemy fled instead of risking their lives in hand-to-hand combat.

³¹ HIDÁN 2015. 38.

³² DEREÁNÓ 1939. 57.

³³ LÉGRÁDY 1938. 212.

³⁴ DESEŐ 1941. 113.

cut Russians' heads by axes and shovels and the headless Russians remained still for a few seconds with bayonets in their hands before they fell."³⁵

Both events showed that during nighttime actions soldiers could easily get involved in hand-to-hand combat. The limited sight during the night meant not only a bigger chance for hand-to-hand combat it made the officers work even harder. They could easily lose control over their soldiers.

*"The lack of control is complete. Vicious hand-to-hand combat is being fought in the lights of burning houses."*³⁶

Limited sight during nights could be an advantage as well. The 11th Hussar Regiment suffered heavy losses at Balamutowka on the night of 17 of June in 1915.

*"A Circassian division was in front of us. They killed many hussars in the night before. Most of them were killed while they were sleeping."*³⁷

Not only the production of melee weaponry revived long gone solutions. Digging trenches was one soldier's option to protect themselves from enemy fire. Different types of helmets were introduced as well. Some countries went even further. Soldiers added extra metal plates to their helmets for extra protection. Chest plates were used too, especially in the ranks of shock troops.³⁸ However, these tools affected their wearers' movement negatively so they were not used widely. On the other hand, Italians dressed some of their units into armour resembling medieval knights. These units were the so-called Arditi.³⁹

Though Austro-Hungarian cavalry were trained to attack, whenever it was possible they could adapt to the changes in military technology. Firepower forced them to fight like infantry. In the battle of Limanowa hussars fought in hand-to-hand combat against Russian imperial soldiers.

Russian cavalry was issued with lances. Many nations served in the ranks of Russian imperial cavalry. The members of these nations had learnt how to use lance even before their military service for cultural reasons. Therefore, they were effective lance users.⁴⁰ This weapon was not part of the Hussars' weaponry but they knew how to fight it.⁴¹

*"... hussars learnt how to use their swords and deflect the lances upwards then close the distance and submit the unlucky Russian cavalrymen."*⁴²

When hussars had to fight on foot they did it like their comrades of infantry.

*"A charge was followed by another. Hussars fight with rifle butts, shovels and pickaxes."*⁴³

Hussars were not picky either when they had to fight in hand-to-hand combat.

"Lieutenant Ottó Bauer was fighting with an entrenching tool in his hands when he got shot. He was waiting for death to calm. Sergeant Oswald was grabbed three times by Russians

³⁵ DESEŐ 1941. 202.

³⁶ PETRIK 1919. Budapest. 38.

³⁷ ALBERTI 1920. 257.

³⁸ HIDÁN 2015. 37.

³⁹ BACZONI et. al. 2006. 39.

⁴⁰ B. SZABÓ 2017. 73–75.

⁴¹ BALLA 2000. 106.

⁴² PÁVAI 1941. 678.

⁴³ BENKÓCZY 1921. 1–2.

but fought them back every time and continued to fight. Corporal Kovács killed a Russian officer with a rifle butt and captured eleven enemy soldiers.”⁴⁴

Thanks to their training, hussars were able to continue fighting after damaging their weapons too.

“Corporal Suly and hussar Lujber had broken their rifle butts in hand-to-hand combat therefore they fought with Russian rifles later. Hussar Fülöp’s carbine was broken by a hit then he started wrestling with the Russians and he overcame more enemy soldiers.”

Members of RHDF were trained in hand-to-hand combat. Their training made them able to endure battlefield stress and fight effectively even if their weaponry was not ideal. They stood their ground no matter the cost. Nevertheless, losses were too high so military thinkers had to find a solution to overcome the enemy. Some options were connected to extensive use of hand-to-hand combat. We are looking at these options in the next chapter.

CHANGING TACTICS: THE BIRTH OF HUNGARIAN STORM TROOPERS

The Russian imperial army started training special light infantry units specialized for taking captives. These units were employed first in the Russian–Japanese War between 1904–1905. By 1916, every Russian infantry regiment had a 200-hundred-men contingent of these special troops.

In 1915, the French tried to combine artillery fire with their special infiltrating infantry units.

*“French infantry tactics were based upon small units’ rapid movement. One unit covered the other with fire while it was in motion. Then the moving unit stopped and started covering the other unit.”⁴⁵*This tactic later became commonly used and now it is known as the fire and movement method.

Germans were experimenting with similar methods from the autumn of 1914. Their troops used hand grenades extensively. These experiments resulted in the establishment of storm troops. Storm troopers were special light infantry that had limited engineering abilities combined with rapid movement and significant firepower. Their goal was to break through the first line of enemy trenches at a few highlighted points and suffer the least casualties during the process.⁴⁶

The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy started organizing similar special infantry units to the Russian light infantry after they experienced the effectiveness of the latter in the winter of 1914 and 1915. These units were specialized in reconnaissance.⁴⁷ Colonel Theodor Brosch of the Austro-Hungarian Army visited the German storm troopers training facility in Beuville in September 1916. The Monarchy started to organize storm trooper units based on the colonel’s experiences. By the spring of 1917 first of the new units were ready to fight.⁴⁸ The Hungarian storm trooper training regime mixed the German training methods and the experiences based on the fighting against Russians. Bayonet fencing was part of the training but the main focus was on using hand grenades.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ HENRIQUEZ 1930. 38.

⁴⁵ KEEGAN 2013. 265.

⁴⁶ BACZONI et. al, 2006. 10

⁴⁷ BACZONI et. al, 2006. 19.

⁴⁸ BACZONI et. al, 2006. 7.

⁴⁹ BACZONI et. al, 2006. 12

The idea was to organize a storm trooper platoon – 4 officers and 28 privates and NCOs strong – in every infantry company. These storm trooper platoons' main objectives were to open passages through enemy lines during attacks, support infantry and train. Their training focused on using hand grenades, shooting and enhancing physical condition. Basic storm trooper training took 14 days that were followed by 2-4 weeks of advanced training.⁵⁰

Many references suggest that members of the storm troopers expected hand-to-hand combat and used many melee weapons like bayonet, combat knife, boxer, spontoon hawk, and entrenching tool. The last one became part of the basic equipment of infantry thanks to its usefulness shown in WWI. However, field manuals do not show higher importance of hand-to-hand combat in training. Yet, we can read memoirs that suggest the opposite.

*“The so-called ‘close combat course’ is very new and important. It trains soldiers to use hand grenades, new methods of charging the enemy and maybe how to handle spontoon hawks, so the ways of the more and more important close combat.”*⁵¹

How did they fight? First they scouted enemy lines and processed the information in order to organize the attack. Storm troopers broke through the first enemy line where it was the weakest, they neutralized machine gun nests and technical barriers. It was followed by the first line of chargers. They left combatants to secure positions and to break further. The second line supported the first one as its reinforcements. The third line supported the first two and connected storm troopers to basic infantry units. The first line of storm troopers consisted of the best hand grenade throwers; the second line had the best shooters, bayonet fencers, machine gunners and troops equipped with flamethrowers. The third line was even equipped with extra trench tools as well. Storm troopers could reach their objective effectively and suffered minimal losses.⁵²

Gergely Molnár was the eldest man in Hungary in 2004. He also was a former storm trooper. *“How did storm troopers attack? First came the short-range throwers followed by mid-range throwers and long-range throwers at the end. Hand grenades were followed by melee combat which required combat knives.”*⁵³

Storm troopers could not turn the stalemate of WWI into a win though they did everything. The efforts show that Austro Hungarian Monarchy's military thinkers were trying to answer the challenges on the battlefield of their era. These efforts were based on battlefield experiences. The Central Powers resources were not enough to win the war no matter how well trained and heroic their soldiers were.

SUMMARY

In the era focused on the study hand-to-hand combat was primarily important to cavalry. The successful Ottoman cavalry charge against Bulgarians – at Lüle-Burgasz on first of November in 1912 – convinced everybody that cavalry charges were important on the battlefield.⁵⁴ Austro-Hungarian

⁵⁰ BACZONI et. al, 2006. 22–24.

⁵¹ SZÉKELY 1917. 150.

⁵² BACZONI et. al, 2006. 24–25.

⁵³ HORVÁTH 2004.

⁵⁴ BALLA 2000. 129.

cavalry – RHDF’s cavalry as well – was not equipped the best by the standards of the era it was among the better ones though. Thanks to their training RHDF’s hussars always stood their ground no matter the costs. They fight effectively from horseback and on foot in hand-to-hand combat.

Infantry troops most likely found themselves in hand-to-hand combat when attacked or defended key points of the battlefield, ran out of ammunition, raided the enemy, fought limited sight – night time combats, fog⁵⁵ – or enemy and friendly units were mixed. These actions all were high stress situations. But members of the RHDF were trained to endure battlefield stress thanks to their hand-to-hand combat training that enhanced their physical and mental abilities both.

Not only the high command tried to adapt to new battlefield challenges. Servicemen of RHDF improvised new melee weapons – trench mauls – or used their issued equipment in new ways – entrenching tools as close quarter weapons – in order to overcome their foes. Their dedication is best portrayed by their actions when they continued to fight even with their bare hands.⁵⁶

What can we learn from the struggles of RHDF in WWI regarding hand-to-hand combat? Why are we supposed to study hand-to-hand combat?

The servicemen and servicewomen of our era still have to face high stress situations. A well-structured military hand-to-hand combat training can prepare them to overcome these situations. Most of the actions of WWI when hand-to-hand combat was involved easily can occur on modern battlefields as well. Attacking or defending high value targets, running out of ammunition, night warfare, mixing of friendly and enemy troops have still been on the battlefields.

Current members of the armed forces frequently fight in densely populated areas.⁵⁷ It makes it very difficult to distinguish friendly units from foes or civilians from foes. Using the proper amount of force in situations like this can be crucial. Civilian casualties can easily turn people against the members of armed forces. And bad press could cause bigger losses than enemy bullets.

During the Covid-19 pandemic. Members of HDF frequently patrol the streets of Hungary in order to maintain the feel of security. It is important for them to use only a minimal level of force if they find themselves in situations requiring their actions. Hand-to-hand combat training can teach soldiers to use armed and unarmed techniques to protect themselves and civilians as well. On the other hand, they can neutralize suspects and kill their foes if necessary. Moreover, hand-to-hand combat training enhances characteristics crucial to military service like self-confidence, calculated aggression, enduring stress and quick reactions in face of stress.

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⁵⁵ DOROMBY - REÉ 1939. 263.

⁵⁶ LÁNDOR 1915–18 167.; LÁNDOR 1926. 82, 143.

⁵⁷ MCCRYSTAL 2016. 102.

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