

THE PORTUGUESE EXPEDITIONARY FORCE¹

INTRODUCTION

The Portuguese Expeditionary Force (PEF) is possibly the most striking image of the effort Portugal made during the Great War. Although immediately in 1914 expeditions were sent to Africa, some of them confronting German forces or forces supported by the Germans – even before the formal declaration of war between the two nations – it was by readying for combat ('aprontamento' - the term now employed in the current Portuguese military lexicon) an army division between April and July 1916 in the Tancos region that Portuguese participation in the European theatre of operations acquired effective form.

Whilst the military effort in Africa involved the survival of Portuguese sovereignty in those colonial territories, the participation on the Western Front was a political choice. Whilst the departure for Africa could be classified as a *war of necessity*² - the colonies had to be defended and as Portugal was aware of the secret negotiations between Great Britain and Germany in 1912 it feared the consequences of the inevitable peace negotiations following a war that initially everyone hoped would be short-lived – the participation in the war in Europe was a *war of choice*³, an isolated political choice of the republican government of the Democratic Party, against almost all Portuguese society, with the aim of legitimating the young republican regime but also as an act of affirmation towards Great Britain.

Of the immense effort Portugal made in that period to create expeditionary forces for Africa, Europe and the Atlantic islands, comprising almost 105.542 men, it was the European Theatre of Operations, precisely the war of choice, that not only mobilised more human resources, about 55.165, but also (as expected) the one that caused the most casualties, about 21.825 from a total of 38.012 (Fraga, n.d.).

Whilst it was strictly the national government's choice, achieving it depended 100% on others, namely Great Britain. The decision to choose the Western Front implied returning to a dimension of war from which Portugal had been absent for almost one hundred years: its last military operations dated from 1814, although on French soil, when Portugal had been fully integrated in an allied army commanded by the British, fighting a European nation whose army in technical and tactical terms was

¹ The text reflects the author's personal opinion.

² By definition *wars of necessity* are wars involving vital interests of the State related with its independence or sovereignty and for which there is no alternative other than the use of force, once all other options have been exhausted (Haass, 2009).

³ *Wars of choice*, on the other hand, involve non-vital interests, in other words, those not directly related with the sovereignty or independence of the State for which there are solutions other than the effective use of force (Haass, 2009).

on the same level as the one in which Portugal now fought. In 1917, the return to arms in Europe meant once again fighting in a high-intensity environment against an enemy who was technologically and tactically superior, and under foreign orders. This return was troubled and painful at all stages: preparation on national territory, projection to the Theatre of Operations in France, preparation and support prior to combat, the fighting itself, the attempted regeneration following the military defeat, repatriation and, finally, on national territory, the cathartic process of all the political, military and social traumas of this great adventure.

For this reason the PEF was more than just a simple military unit obeying, as was its duty, the directives issuing from political power. As a reflection of Portuguese society, the PEF served also as the setting for the entire political and party scheme that characterised it during the troubled period of the I Republic. Any study, in particular as regards its military performance, must perforce be anchored in this contextualisation, or else risk drawing conclusions that do not correspond to the reality experienced in all its dimensions. Extracting a divisional unit which grew into an army corps from an army corroded by internal wars and permanent mobilisations to the African theatres was an extraordinary feat. What makes this feat even more interesting is that it was not merely a question of altering the paradigm of an army skilled in colonial experiences under the form of modest-sized units or expeditions in peace-keeping (or, in more modern usage, counter-insurgency) operations, to create a large unit in a classic war



Fonte: Ilustração Portuguesa 07AGO1916

TOMO — Exercícios de grandes destacamentos no campo, efectuados em 1916, no âmbito da preparação para a guerra

operation. This war, into which the Portuguese government was plunging by political choice, had the particularity of being the first war (following a foray in the Russo-Japanese War) of the industrial age, and so filled with technical, technological and tactical innovations expressed in a capacity for destruction and death without precedents in the history of mankind. The war on open fields in which the Portuguese claimed to be comfortable (Freiria, 1918) gave way to trench warfare complete with destructive innovations such as aviation, gases, machine guns, mortars, heavy artillery, motorisation, and communications,

whilst fully dependent on the British.

PREPARATION ON NATIONAL SOIL

We could say that making a force combat ready for France began when a Portuguese Military Mission travelled to Great Britain and France in October 1914. Consisting of Iven Ferraz, Fernando Freiria and Eduardo Martins, the purpose of this delegation from the Portuguese government was *to study with the British Staff the organisation of an expeditionary force that might have to be sent to the theatre of war* (AHM, Div1/Sec35/Cx1276/Nº1). In November of that year the so-called Portuguese Auxiliary Division was created, but with no practical consequence. In fact, governments fell and war against Germany was formally declared – on 9 March 1916 – before there was any effective commitment in the preparation of the Auxiliary Division. In other words, it was decided in 1915 to concentrate one Instruction Division in the Tancos polygon, but its realisation on the terrain only occurred between May and July of the following year. It was extremely hard work basically due to the passive and sometimes even active resistance of the officers to intervening in the European war. In view of the condition of the army as it then was, what was accomplished in Tancos in that brief space of time can only be classified as a miracle. Portugal now had, in theory and by miracle, an expeditionary force that was ready to embark.

PROJECTION TO THE THEATRE OF OPERATIONS IN FRANCE



The force's readiness was merely the preface to a long list of adversities and difficulties. The absence of a credible military apparatus, the lack of elements of logistic support and of an industrial and technical base capable of creating modern expeditionary forces meant that Portugal was totally dependent on Great Britain in logistic, technical, financial and industrial terms (Telo, 2004, 385). The main dependence began right at the start with the projection of the force, as Portugal depended totally on Britain's naval support to transport its soldiers and respective material to the port of Brest on the French coast.

Embarkation began in January 1917 and many accounts relate the difficulties in getting units from all over the country to embark on the ships at the port of Lisbon, including the disorganisation, the insufficient means, and even the officers' and the soldiers' refusal to board. All this under the watchful eye of the British mission in Lisbon, which lost no time in sending its superiors and the competent national authorities demolishing reports about how the boarding was being organised, but mainly about the behaviour of the military once on board and the attitude of the officers who showed total dereliction of their duties of command and control of the troops during the three-day voyage.

PREPARATION AND SUPPORT FOR COMBAT

As in the Peninsular War the Portuguese army forces that fought in France were trained, equipped and armed by the British. However, the PEF chain of command was entirely Portuguese although subject to British supervision during the military training and when it arrived at the sector. Once installed on the front, it came under the orders of the I British Army.

War in the trenches and its inherent novelties required a huge effort, first to train a team of selected instructors and then the entire contingent. As the military units arrived in France they were sent to mustering areas at the rear of the British sector, where they attended British schools such as the Central Training School, the Firing Range, the School of Observers, the Snipers School and the Physical Education and Bayonet School. Following this initial training in the British schools the PEF created its own schools in its own mustering area where the units received instruction and training. In the meantime, following a British suggestion that was accepted by Portugal, the PEF underwent various reorganisations aimed at raising its level to that of its allied counterparts and even increased one level (army corps) which meant mobilising more battalions.



Nas trincheiras portuguesas.—1. Exercícios de metralhadoras.—2. Exercícios de ataque à baloneta
Fonte: Ilustração Portuguesa 10SET1917

Instruction was only considered at an end after the units had spent time training in the front trenches. This began to take place from April onwards. The time spent at the front was decided according to a tried and tested methodology of the British and began at company level. Once a company was declared ready after receiving training at the practical schools, it received orders to move to the front lines and was instructed to join another British company, with whom it would remain for about a week, learning about life in the trenches. The trainee company was under the tactical command of the British battalion in which it was inserted. During this training period the unit already participated in the operational activity of the instructing unit. Once all the companies in a battalion had undergone that training period with the British troops the full battalion advanced to join a unit of the same battalion in the front lines. When all the battalions of a brigade had undergone front-line training, the brigade was put in charge of defending a sector of its unit, and the commandant and the general staff received training from the command of the British brigade which had been replaced. Once this training period ended, the Portuguese brigade came under the command of the British division to which it belonged. When the process was concluded with all the division's brigades, the divisional commandant and general staff received training and took over the defence of the division sector, being subject to the command of the army corps and its general staff, who trained and took over full responsibilities (Fraga, n.d.).

Being responsible for the sector, therefore, was a slow, systematic and time-consuming process. From the first training periods of the company, in early April, until the PEF, as an Army Corps, fully assumed its sector in late November, about seven months had elapsed. In the meantime, the support effort related with staff rotation, which included sea transport for about 5.000 men per month, was no longer guaranteed for Great Britain ceased to provide support for sea transport, the official reason being that it needed to provide the necessary support for the American expeditionary forces. So, all military transported until November 1917 were those who, in the absence of a rotating system, would materialise until the very end the political option to engage in the European theatre of the Great War.

From the very first training periods the Portuguese units were part of the operational dynamic of the sectors where they belonged. Artillery duels, patrol combats and raids became the day-to-day experience of the units at the front, the bill being paid in the number of dead, wounded, missing and prisoners.

COMBAT



There is a PEF before and a PEF after the German offensive of 9 April 1918. For the Portuguese that day became known for the Battle of La Lys. It would have been impossible for anything else to be expected of

the PEF that took shape (or rather became misshapen by force of circumstance) before La Lys. Lacking reinforcements from Portugal and under the command of increasingly weaker superior officers, the physical and moral condition of the PEF in 1918 was not to be trusted. For that reason, when General Gomes da Costa was appointed on 3 April 1918 and took command three days later of the 2nd Division charged with defending the Portuguese sector, he could do nothing but decline all responsibility for the outcome of defending such an extensive front with so few men (Costa, 1920). For this man, with his vast experience in Africa and who had already been responsible in Europe for a sector since 16 June 1917, it was not a question of evading responsibilities but rather of making the situation quite abundantly clear, the situation about which everyone knew but which needed to be talked about.

The same was also clearly transmitted on 7 April to the recently arrived commandant of the 9th British Corps, under which the Portuguese division was placed in tactical terms after 6 April. Since February the British command had been proposing that the Portuguese troops withdraw from the front, whilst Lisbon resisted until mid-March, at which time it accepted. Nevertheless, this only occurred, after various postponements – now imposed by the British – on 9 April. The Germans deliberately chose the Portuguese sector knowing that it was the weakest point. The Germans attacked precisely on the day the Portuguese troops were preparing to be replaced. There were tremendous acts of bravery and sacrifice but the nearly six hundred dead and more than six thousand taken prisoner left behind the image of a collective force in disarray and lacking cohesion. At noon the last efforts of resistance ceased and with them the Portuguese Division no longer counted as a military unit. Those who had not been killed or taken prisoner retreated in disarray to the rear.

ATTEMPT AT REGENERATION AFTER THE MILITARY DEFEAT



Immediately after the German offensive of 9 April what was left of the PEF brigades was allocated to two British divisions, but by the end of that month British command dispensed with any operational commitment on the part of the Portuguese. In

practice, the Portuguese troops were sent to carry out terrain organisation work, acting as literal “worker battalions”, a situation that was unacceptable to Lisbon and humiliating to all in the PEF. This other PEF experienced a “painful Calvary” (Telo, 2010) and under another commandant endeavoured to rise again as a combatant expeditionary force.

What to do with what remained of the PEF was the subject of great debate between the British and the Portuguese, the former continuing to discount the possibility of the remainder of the PEF joining the front (unless commanded by British officers) whilst the Portuguese attempted to recover their image as a credible ally of a sovereign and independent nation. Even while insisting on the idea of reinforcements ready and waiting in Lisbon to embark for France, the British maintained an intransigent position. This other PEF had now been abandoned by Portugal and was totally indifferent to the British, which translated into an absolute lack of practical usefulness for war, and as fertile ground for insubordination.

In this desolate context, the unequal state of the remnants of the PEF meant that by October 1918 it was possible to consider the existence of two battalions ready to return to the front on combat missions and as many cases of serious insubordination, one of which was resolved by machine gun fire from companion units.

REPATRIATION AND CATHARSIS OF ALL THE TRAUMAS

On 11 November 1918 the Armistice was signed between the Allies and Germany, putting a full stop to what had so far been the longest and deadliest war of mankind. The industrialisation of the war and the consequent total war magnified the power of devastation which the contenders were able to impose on each other, not only through the physical destruction of houses and landscapes but mainly through the

loss of humans, soldiers or civilians, men and women, old and young. The balance of this Great War, after about fifty months of conflict, was the death of nearly nine million soldiers and five million civilians and a colossal number of persons who were physically and psychologically mutilated.

As far as Lisbon and the Portuguese commandants on the terrain were concerned, the war of the PEF did not end with the Armistice, for it was vital to travel the same road of the victorious allies, and so ensuring the PEF's participation in the victory parade in Paris was yet another battle.

Portuguese society in general and the Armed Forces in particular were unable



to remain indifferent to the return, between April and June 1919, of a contingent numbering more than 55.000 men, almost 7.000 of whom were repatriated from German prisoner of war camps. The

League of Combatants and the Great War Monuments Commission, to mention only two of the best known and most enduring organisations, were formed to attenuate the sensation of deception regarding Portugal's participation and to perpetuate the effort and the real sacrifices made by the soldiers.

As it proved impossible to identify individually all the soldiers who fell and the entire human effort of the war, all nations, such as France for instance, began erecting monuments to the "unknown soldier". In Portugal, on 18 March 1921, the government authorised the transfer of two unknown soldiers, one from France (Flanders) and the other from Africa (Mozambique) to Batalha Pantheon. It was also decided that the entombment ceremony of the unknown soldier at Batalha Monastery would take place on 9 April 1921 which was declared a national holiday. The ceremony was a high moment in a collective effort then undertaken to rehabilitate Portugal's participation in the Great War. However, it occurred three years after the end of hostilities but at the start of a long process of catharsis that was necessary for the traumas that had been acquired.

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