

# The defence of duffer's drift essay



The Defence of Duffer's Drift is a concise, allegorical book that would be a valuable asset to young, inexperienced military service members. The author, Sir Ernest D. Swinton, was a former British Army officer that rose to the rank of Major General. He served in the Anglo-Boer War as a Lieutenant and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his actions against the enemy.

Swinton wrote The Defence of Duffer's Drift to educate the military minded on small unit tactics. Swinton postulates that unconventional tactics must sometimes be adopted to suit a specific battlefield. The author supports his thesis by relating a series of progressive lessons he learned while serving as a lieutenant in the Anglo-Boer War. The main character in the story is Lieutenant Backsight Forethought, a young, inexperienced British Army officer that has a succession of six dreams in which he is given the same task. He has been left with fifty men and charged with defending a river crossing, until a larger force can arrive in the next few days. In his first dream, young Forethought makes little preparation to ensure the defense of the crossing and even allows some of the local populace a look inside his camp.

His grossly inadequate defenses result in the loss of over half of his detachment to the wounded or dead. The Boers barely suffer any casualties, capture the British, and now control the crossing. As Forethought is nursing his wounds, he recounts the four lessons he has learned from the battle. Through Forethought's pondering, Swinton gives the reader the first four lessons he learned through his own experiences: " Do not put off taking your measures of defence till the morrow... Do not in war-time show stray men of

the enemy's breed all over your camp... Do not let your sentries advertise their position to the whole world... Do not, if avoidable, be in tents when bullets are ripping through them; at such times a hole in the ground is worth many tents". 1 After passing out, Forethought finds himself in another dream with no memory of the first, save that of the lessons he learned. He applies those lessons, but adheres to strict military doctrine as much as possible.

His actions result in fewer casualties but he is still forced to surrender. In this dream Swinton teaches: " With modern rifles, to guard a drift or locality does not necessitate sitting on top of it... It is not enough to keep strange men of the enemy's breed away from your actual defences, letting them go free to warn their friends of your existence and whereabouts... It is not business to allow lazy locals...to sit and pick their teeth...It is more the duty of the soldier to teach the lazy local the dignity of labour...". 2 Forethought continues to fail three more times. In each failure he learns valuable lessons that are applied to the next attempt.

As the dreams progress, Forethought suffers fewer casualties and gains insight into his enemy. After analyzing every aspect of his defense and incorporating what he has learned, Forethought finally dreams of mission success only to be awakened with no battle having been fought. Swinton understands warfare in general and adapts the lessons in this book to be applicable in any battlefield environment. He includes a glossary in the text to prevent the reader confusion at his use of some local dialect and presents maps throughout the story to illustrate the predicament that the main character faces. This book is short in terms of words written but long in knowledge conveyed.

Swinton allegorical style and unique organization into a dream sequence captures and maintains the reader's interest while delivering memorable insight into small unit tactics. Although written over a hundred years ago, this book's basic principals remain applicable to today's military strategy. During the Boer War, militaries had strict protocols that governed warfare. Swinton demonstrated in writing *The Defence of Duffer's Drift* that it is okay to break protocol and occasionally must be broken in order to gain victory in combat. The Marine Corps agreed with Swinton's views on small unit tactics and adopted this book in its entirety into Marine Corps Doctrine as a reference publication on April 13, 1989.

3 In *The Defense of Hill 718: An Allegory of Modern Mechanized Combat*, James McDonough praises Swinton's book by writing: "it [*The Defence of Duffer's Drift*] imparted a number of tactical messages in a readable and unforgettable format, which stood me in good stead as I set upon my own combat missions in Southeast Asia". McDonough modeled his own book after that of Swinton, but adapted it to modern warfare for those of a senior rank.

5 *The Defence of Duffer's Drift* is a worthwhile read for people who appreciate military history. The writer recommends that all entry level service members read this book because it is written in a simple, entertaining style and instills the reader with a basic foundation in the art of small unit warfare.