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# The Science of Arms in the Cavalry: Sabre Exercises

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## The Science of Arms in the Cavalry: Sabre Exercises

(continued)

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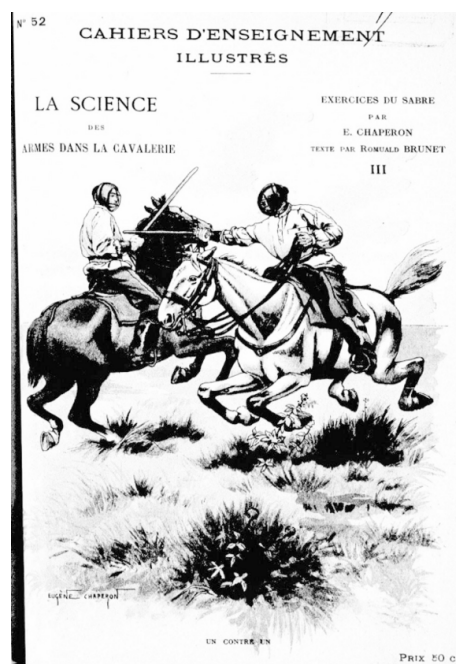


Figure 1: Cover

## Weapon Work — Sidearms

*Sabre Handling. — Foreword.* — The exercise of the sabre develops strength and skill at the same time as reflection and intelligence.

The sabre, when wielded skilfully by a vigorous and determined hand, is a terrible weapon.

Sabre fencing is performed in a linear and circular plane with point and thrust blows, exceptionally with cutting blows in *the German way*.

These blows consist of attacks and parries, free blows and feints, ripostes and counter-ripostes. They constitute in the language of fencing: the *phrases*.

From this definition, we can immediately conclude that *the art of fencing with the point* consists of the composure<sup>1</sup> and touch that the trooper brings to the execution of simple strikes and compound strikes.

Today, all French cavalry is armed with a sabre (called *latte*, model 1885),<sup>2</sup> the length of which varies depending on the category of the weapon.<sup>3</sup>

Its straight shape indicates that, in most cases, the *point* prevails over the *edge*: *point strikes* kill, *edge strikes* wound.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore very important to practice the teaching of fencing, especially advanced fencing, according to a rational method and in accordance with the principles necessary for *preparing the cavalry for battle*.

The first principles of sabre fencing are given man to man. The instructor never moves on to an attack without having indicated the use of the new movement.

The commands are given in the tone of instruction. Each command encompasses a tempo, often broken down into movements, in order to better understand the mechanism.

As soon as the trooper knows perfectly the different movement positions of a tempo, he executes the tempo without stopping on these movements.

## Instruction on Foot

Applications of the sabre exercise:

For the sabre exercise, the troopers are formed in a row three meters apart. They are in fatigues<sup>5</sup> and képi. Non-commissioned officers have the usual dress.

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<sup>1</sup>*sang-froid*

<sup>2</sup>Original footnote: The curved sabre called *bancal* (model 1882) has just been temporarily returned to the light cavalry.

<sup>3</sup>The difference between the *latte* and the *bancal* is that the first has a straight blade and the second has a curved blade. Additionally, there was no 1885 model sabre. But an 1882 model was adopted by the cavalry. Is this a typo?

<sup>4</sup>The terms used are *coups de pointe* and *coups de contre-point*.

<sup>5</sup>*bougerons*

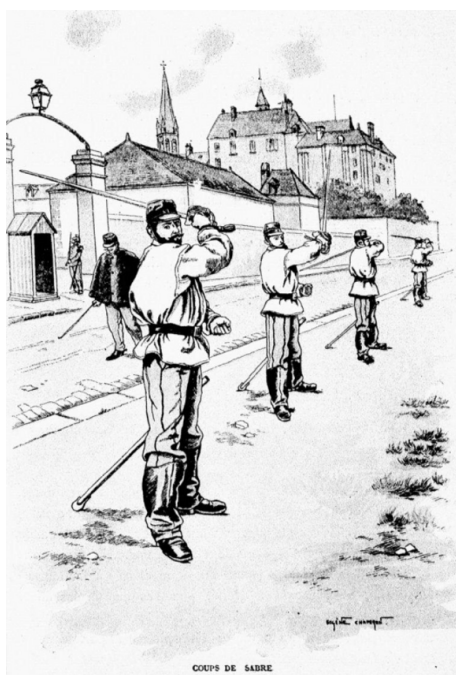


Figure 2: Sabre Strikes

The troopers being at *ready sabre*, at the command: EN GARDE, draw the sword,<sup>6</sup> bringing the right foot 70 centimetres from the left, placing the left hand as if holding the bridle, bringing the right hand forward and a little above the left hand, the right hand in the third position, the tip of the sabre directed at the height of the right shoulder, the edge to the right, lower than the back of the blade,

Placing [oneself] *en garde* is the basis of the attack, of the parade, of the riposte and of the counter-riposte.

The troopers are returned to *ready sabres* at the command: Ready — SABRE, bringing the right foot back next to the left, hooking the scabbard, and assuming the position of *ready sabre*.

Sabre strikes are divided into forward strikes and side strikes.

In order to assert the superiority of the point strike over the sabre strike, each exercise includes two point strikes, separated by a sabre strike.

The troopers, placed in the guard position, execute the forward strikes as indicated: *forward strikes to the right* (or *to the left*), and the *side strikes* at the instructions: *side strikes to the right* (or *to the left*).

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<sup>6</sup>décrocher le fourreau

— *Forward strikes on the right.* — Point horizontally and slightly to the right, the wrist above the head to the right with the elbow bent, the edge of the sabre in the air, the point back and cut diagonally forward and to the right, the arm describing a windmill which returns to the guard position. Point again forward and to the right, and return to guard.

— *Forward strikes on the left.* — Point horizontally and slightly to the left, raising the wrist above the head to the right, the elbow bent with the edge in the air, the point back, and cut diagonally forward and to the left, and return to guard.

— *Side strikes on the right.* — Turning the head to the right, direct the tip of the sabre to that side, point horizontally in the direction of the blade. Bring the wrist above the left shoulder, the tip of the sabre behind, and cut horizontally to the right, the arm describing a windmill above the head, which returns to the guard position. Point again forward and to the right, and return to guard.

— *Side strikes on the left.* — Turning the head to the left, direct the point to that side and point in the direction of the blade. Bring the wrist to the right, at head height, the tip of the sabre back, and cut horizontally to the left, the arm describing a windmill, which returns to the guard position. Point again forward and to the left, and return to guard.

— *Combined strikes.*<sup>7</sup> — The troopers combine the preceding blows two by two at the simple instruction: *Forward blows or side blows.*

— *At will strikes.*<sup>8</sup> — The troopers perform the *at will strikes* forward and to the side, either to the right or to the left, until the command: EN GARDE.

*Mannequin exercise.* — When the troopers have been sufficiently practised in the preceding movements, the instructor makes them repeat them on a mannequin to accustom them to delivering the blows freely in a well determined direction.

The mannequin is held in place<sup>9</sup> by a post. On the upper part is found a carefully padded canvas stuffed with hay which represents the different parts of the human body.

*Individual and group combat.* — The troopers, formed in two ranks and armed with a wooden sabre (ash or beech), are in fatigues, képi, mask and gloves.

The instructor moves the first rank six steps forward and commands each trooper to turn around, so as to place the two ranks face to face. The troopers are then placed four meters apart from each other at the command: *Open the lines, MARCH.* The central trooper does not move. The troopers on the right make a to-the-right and make to face by a to-the-left until they are at the regulatory distance. The troopers on the left make to face by a to-the-right until they are at the regulatory distance.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>*Coups réunis*

<sup>8</sup>*Coups à volonté*

<sup>9</sup>*est retenu en serre*

<sup>10</sup>The drill terms used are unclear: *faire un à-droite* and *faire un à-gauche*.



Figure 3: Mannequin Exercise

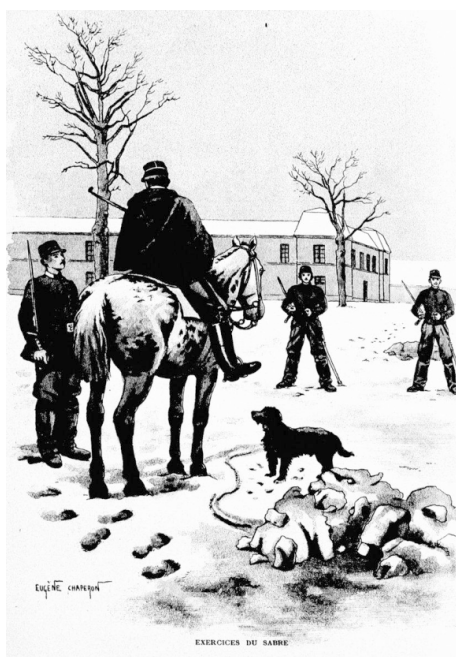


Figure 4: Sabre Exercises

The instructor successively puts himself on guard in front of the troopers of each rank and crosses blade edge against edge to make them clearly understand the need to *point while trying to run as much as possible*. He then teaches them what is meant by the *strong* and the *weak* of the blade. The *strong* used to parry. The *weak* is the most effective part for the sabre strike. In all movements, *the tip of the sabre moves away from the body as little as possible*.

### Point Strikes

The instructor, after teaching each trooper to *point*, to *parry*, to *riposte* and *counter-riposte* in all directions, commands:

1. Attacks to the right at the point — by the first rank.
2. Break.

The first two troopers go to meet each other. When they arrive at a suitable distance, the trooper in the first rank strikes his opponent forward and to the right. The latter parries with his nails downwards (hand in *tierce*) and ripostes. The trooper of the second rank makes a point strike at the trooper of the first, who parries with *opposition* or *suppression*<sup>11</sup> and ripostes in the same way.

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<sup>11</sup>*écrasement*, an obsolete fencing terms describing an action similar to the *passata sotto* (<https://duelingsword.wordpress.com/2018/12/02/fencing-tactics-derobement-par-ecrasement-de-la-garde-after-la-marche/>)



Figure 5: Point Strike against Infantry

Both *ready sabre* and go to occupy the vacant place in the rank opposite theirs, making a half turn to the right.

The two troopers who follow succeed them without being told.

These attacks are repeated by reversing the role of each rank:

1. Attacks to the right at the point — by the second rank.
2. Break.

The instructor stands to the side to better correct mistakes.

At the commands:

1. Attacks to the left at the point — by the first rank.
2. Break.

The first two troopers march to meet each other, stop at a suitable distance, fall into guard and cross sabres edge against edge.

The trooper in the first rank thrusts at his opponent forward and to the left. The latter parries with the nails upwards (hand in *quarte*) and ripostes while maintaining the *quarte* position with his hand. The trooper in the second rank thrusts at the trooper in the first, [who] parries and ripostes in the same way.

The two troopers *ready sabres* and go to occupy, describing a half turn to the right, the place left empty in the rank opposite to theirs.

These attacks are repeated by reversing the role of each rank:

1. Attacks to the left at the point — by the second rank.
2. Break.

To accustom the troopers to understand how to defend themselves, the instructor orders:

1. Attacks on the right (or on left) attacks with the point — at will.
2. Break.

Each trooper spontaneously takes the initiative in combat. He has complete freedom to prevent or parry his opponent's blow.

### **Sabre Strikes**

The instructor successively varies the direction of the same blow and alternately threatens this or that part.

The trooper, after parrying the sabre blow, invariably ripostes with a point strike.

It is good to remember that sabre strikes on the left are less effective and uncover much more.





Figure 6: Rank against Rank

At the commands:

1. Attacks on the right with the sabre — by the first rank.
2. Break.

The trooper in the first rank strikes his adversary with his sabre across the right (or to the right). The latter counters with the head parry (or towards the right) and responds with a thrust forward and to the right.

These attacks are repeated by reversing the role of each rank:

1. Attacks on the right with the sabre — by the second rank.
2. Break.

At the commands:

1. Attacks on the left with the sabre — by the first rank.
2. Break.

The trooper in the first rank cuts his opponent across the left (or to the left), the latter parries in *quarte* with his nails upwards and responds with a point strike forward and to the left, his hand in a *quarte*.

These attacks are repeated by reversing the role of each rank:

1. Attacks on the left with the sabre — by the second rank.
2. Break.

At will attacks are executed on the commands:

1. Attacks on the right (or on the left) with the sabre — at will.
2. Break.

Each trooper has complete freedom to *attack, parry, riposte* And *counter-riposte* following his own inspiration.

### **Instruction on Horseback**

*Individual and group combat.* — The troopers, armed with wooden sabres (ash or beech), are in fatigues, mask and gloves. The horses are saddled and bridled. The instructor is on horseback.

The instructor varies the fencing exercises with movements in three gaits, the handling of the horse being the most essential object of this work.

The troopers walking in two columns, the instructor makes them double individually, their backs turned to the short side, and cross their sabres, first at a walk, then at a trot, and finally at a gallop.

The troopers, after having doubled, are stopped rank by rank, fall into guard, and repeat at the three paces the right and left attacks detailed on foot.

They are taught to seize the opponent's weak side and defend themselves from attacks from behind.

At the commands:

1. Attacks on the right — by the first rank.
2. Break.

The troopers on the right of each rank move towards each other, letting themselves to the right, and fall into guard.

At the moment of crossing, the trooper in the first rank thrusts to the right towards his opponent [who] parries in *terce* and ripostes with a point strike, so as to confuse parry and riposte.

The troopers turn around, attack each other again, readying their sabres on their shoulders, and place themselves behind the right of their rank.

These attacks are repeated by the second rank.

1. Attacks on the left — by the first rank.
2. Break.

The troopers proceed as for attacks from the right, but they let each other on the left and comply with what is prescribed on the firm foot.

These attacks are repeated by the second rank. For attacks from behind, the trooper of the second rank attacks from behind in a circle to the right. Then we reverse the roles.

Here are the main means of defense when attacked from behind:

1. Face the opponent with a half turn;
2. Face the opponent by a half turn of the shoulders;
3. Stop suddenly, if attacked from behind on the right.

These attacks are made at the commands:

1. Attacks from behind — by the first rank (or second rank).
2. Break.

*Pursuit.* — The pursuit is the equestrian preparation for combat. It is performed without masks and sabres.

Placed in two ranks, face to face, the two troopers on the right advance towards each other and seek to strike his opponent on the left shoulder with the right hand at the commands:

1. For pursuit.
2. Break.

The pursuit stops as soon as one of the troopers has been hit, or at the command: **HALT** from the instructor.

*Individual and group combat.* — The instructor has them again put on masks and gloves.

The unit for individual and group combat is the platoon.

The fight is always carried out at a brisk pace and ends at the first touch, or at the command: **HALT**.

The instructor makes the troopers fight at the commands:

One against one	}	1. For combat, 2. Break
Two against two		
Rank against rank		

Horsemen, in real combat, can be served with advantage by their weapons:

1. By striking the head of the opponent's horse;
2. By cutting the bridle hand or the reins;
3. Taking the opponent on the right and a little behind.

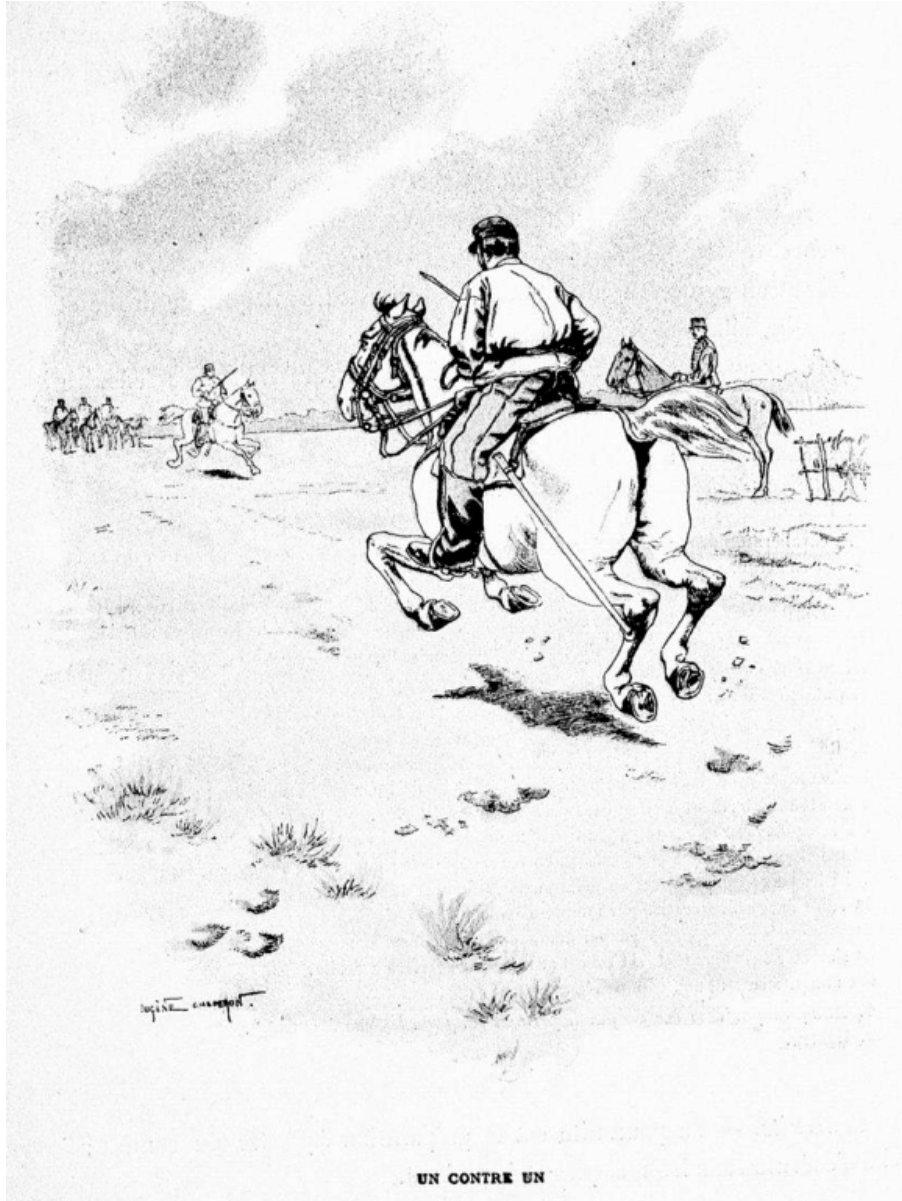


Figure 7: One against One

Facing a lancer: the trooper *dances*<sup>12</sup> around him parrying the lance thrust by *opposition* or *suppression* and extends a point strike with all his strength.

Facing an infantryman: the trooper charges full force, blocks the bayonet and thrusts or cuts vigorously.

If several horsemen have to fight a group of infantry skirmishers, they try to divide them to fight them isolated.

In short, it is through calmness and effort that troopers will learn to defend themselves with energy, composure and without hesitation, and will acquire the correct hand and body position, accelerating the movements to gain precision and speed, essential qualities for any good sabre fencer.

(To be continued)

Romuald Brunet

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<sup>12</sup>*voltiger*

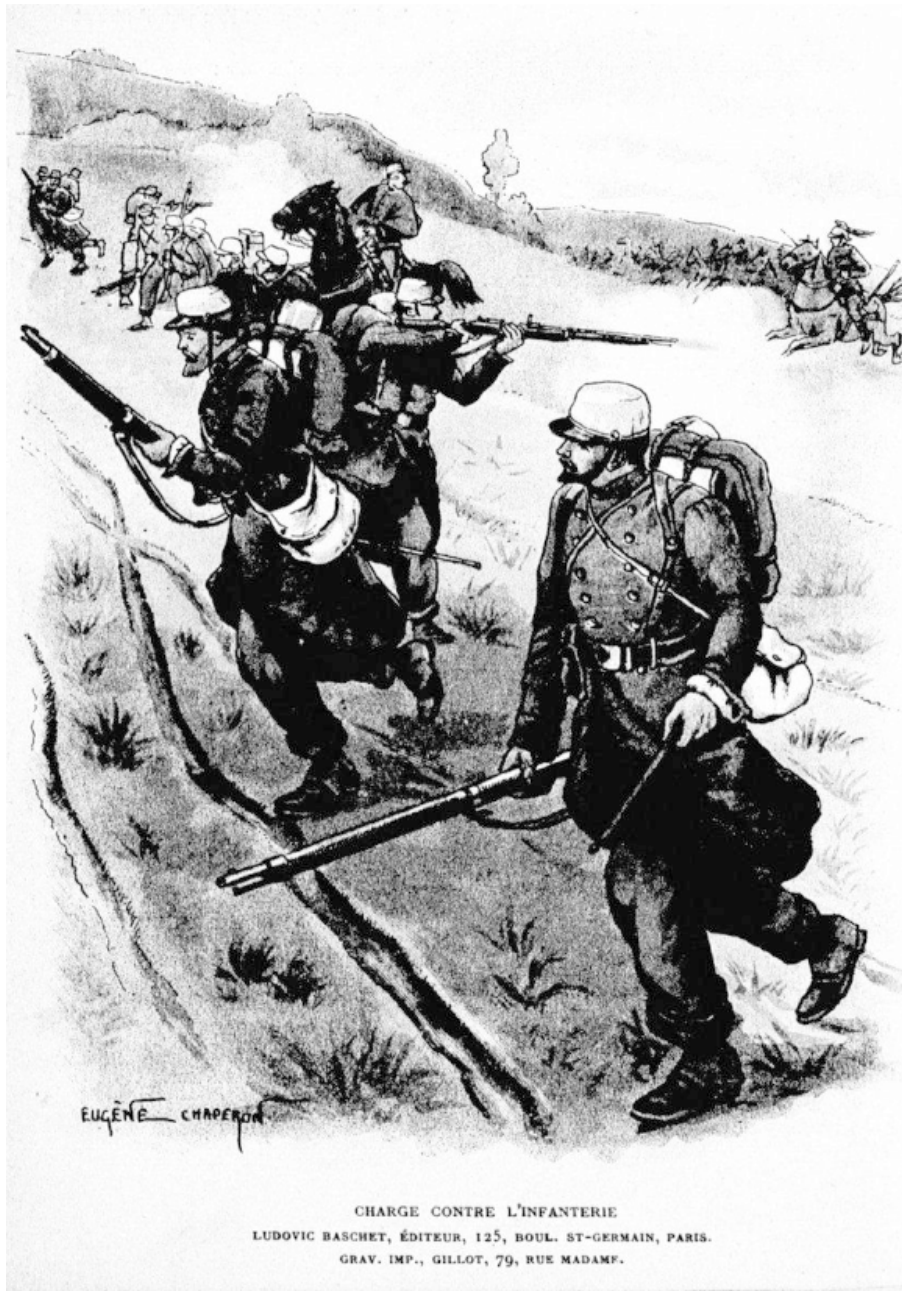


Figure 8: Charge against Infantry