

The Avenger Ignored

The French had to wonder if their intelligence coup could be believed.

By Charles W. Sanders, Jr.

Seldom in history has a nation been faced with an incident of espionage so important that its final resolution could determine the very survival of that nation. In the years immediately preceding the Great War, however, the European nation of France was presented with not one, but two such incidents.

The first incident would provide a sinister shadow of the scheme of attack the world would later know as the Schlieffen Plan. It would deliver into French hands, in amazing detail, hard evidence that any German invasion of France would involve a violation of Belgian neutrality and a wide turning movement west of the Meuse River aimed at outflanking French forces.

Through an astounding series of actions driven primarily by military and political expediency, however, this "gift" then would be largely ignored and eventually discarded.

The second incident would be a blatant hoax perpetrated by self-serving officers of the French General Staff against their own army and country. It would be devious in its intent, vulgar in its execution—and believed by almost everyone. It would serve as a primary justification for prewar French plans, and it would very nearly result in the death of France.

Had the French Army gone to war with Germany in 1900, it would have marched under the edicts of Plan XV (so named because it was the 15th plan of defense developed since the disastrous Franco-Prussian War of 1870). This plan concentrated the bulk of the French forces opposite the Prussian-occupied provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. The planners believed that it was here, along with the common frontier with Germany, that the greatest threat existed.



German troops overwhelm the French as the Schlieffen Plan directs their invasion from the North, via Belgium, in August 1914. The French had learned of the plan 10 years earlier.

In 1904, the *Service des Renseignements*, the clandestine operations branch of the French General Staff's *Deuxieme Bureau* (Intelligence), received a letter that would dramatically change this estimate. The letter, posted from Liège, Belgium, had been sent to the *Bureau* from an individual who described himself as a "Colonel on the German General Staff." He professed to have a copy of a "top-secret plan" that would be of immense interest to French intelligence, a plan he would sell for 60,000 francs. The letter was signed, "The Avenger" ("Vengeur" in French).

Was the letter a ruse or was the Avenger in fact a traitor with useful information for sale? The *Bureau* would take no chances. An officer experienced in clandestine operations was summoned in the greatest secrecy, briefed on the situation, and dispatched on the

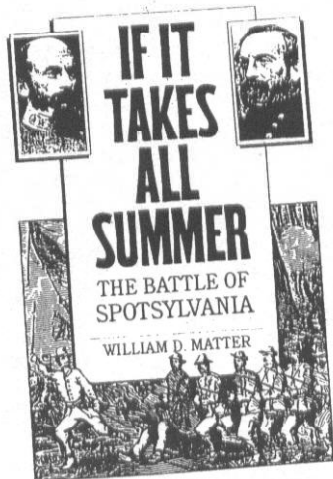
first available train to Liège. On reaching the border city, he proceeded to a café rendezvous as instructed in the letter. He was soon joined at his table by a man whose facial features—except for a mustache—were cleverly concealed by several strategically-placed bandages.

The two men talked briefly, each taking the measure of the other. Mutually satisfied with the *bonafides* presented, they made arrangements to meet again, and separated.

The French officer, a captain, returned directly to his chief at the *Bureau* and rendered a full account of the meeting, closing with his assessment that the Avenger was indeed genuine and recommending that the contact be further exploited. *Bureau* analysts agreed, and the captain and the Avenger conducted subsequent meetings in Liège, Brussels, and even inside France.

After several meetings, the *Bureau*, convinced of the value of the Avenger's offerings, agreed to pay his price for the secrets. At their final meeting, the French captain passed the mysterious stranger a parcel containing the 60,000 francs demanded, and received from the stranger a set of papers and maps. Close inspection of these documents by analysts at the *Bureau* revealed they depicted nothing less than the German plan of troop concentration and invasion routes for a future war with France.

The map clearly showed the German intention to mass opposite the Belgian frontier and then to attack across that country in a wide sweep that would carry at least four attacking columns to the French border north of Mezieres and Sedan. The purpose of this blatant and brutal violation of Belgian neutrality, the very existence of which the Germans had sworn by treaty to protect, was obvious to the French General Staff. The Ger-



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mans were planning to invade France from the northeast, through Belgium, with the intent of turning the French left flank and sweeping south to Paris.

But was the information reliable? Could the Avenger be trusted? This was the question General Jean Pendezec, the Chief of the French General Staff, had to answer, and upon his answer hung possibly the fate of France. Pendezec ordered the *Deuxieme Bureau* to immediately contact its agents in Belgium and Germany to determine if other indicators of German intentions could be found. In reply, the *Bureau* received report after report of recent German construction of railways and troop billets in the border towns adjacent to the planned areas of concentration shown on the Avenger's map. This construction, until now seemingly random and unthreatening, suddenly assumed an ominous aspect.

When Pendezec presented the evidence to General Louis Andre, Chief of the *Troisieme Bureau* (Operations), the clouds grew darker still. Andre, after reading the report, produced a similar study compiled earlier and independently by his staff, which concluded that the Germans, due to recent railway construction, now had the opportunity to transport and supply a large force in an attack across Belgium to the Meuse River. Coupled with the documents recently received from the mysterious German, this "capability" of a German attack through Belgium became a virtual certainty. The Avenger was authentic, his warning clear.

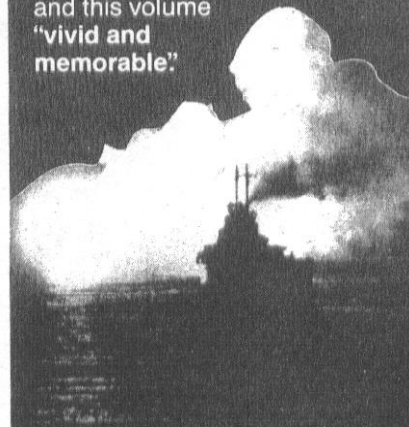
French reaction to the revelations was, if not swift, at least decisive. On May 22, 1907, the Supreme War Council published "variation A" to Plan XV. The change extended the initial deployment areas of the French army to the north and west of Verdun along the Belgian frontier, a crucial shift that would block the threatened German invasion from that quarter.

Reason had triumphed, but the victory would prove fleeting. In less than two years, the nation would turn away from the northern threat and again focus its attention almost solely on the traditional enemy approaches from the east, across Lorraine. There were numerous reasons for this tragic turn, but chief among them was the advent of the "cult of the offensive," a doctrine about which British military historian B.H. Liddell Hart once said "rested on the sentimental assumption that Frenchmen were braver than Germans." Their "strategy of the bull," he also wrote, "had replaced that of the matador."

The seeds of the doctrine of the *offensive a outrance*, or "offensive to the limit," had been planted at the *Ecole de Guerre*

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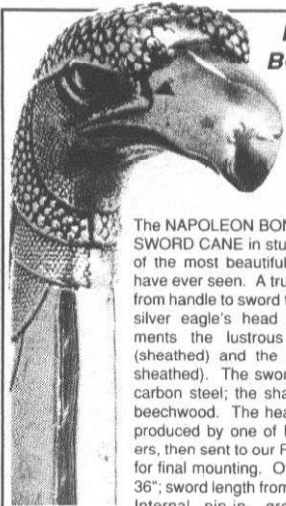
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years earlier by General Ferdinand Foch. His chief disciple, Louis de Grandmaison, developed Foch's ideas into full-blown dogma, which countenanced only those plans that stressed the offense as an acceptable form of war. Plans that sought a balance of offensive and defensive operations would not be published. In contrast, General Victor Michel, Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, had proposed a radical revision of the existing French war-fighting plan. His proposal still was based on the information gained from the Avenger and the other reports indicating that the Germans would almost certainly violate Belgian neutrality in a wide sweep west of the River Meuse. He proposed to counter such a sweep by shifting the major portion of French forces from their planned areas of concentration in Alsace and Lorraine to new defensive positions along the Belgian frontier. To man this extended front, Michel proposed to augment regular units with reservists.

To the disciples of the school of the offensive, however, this proposal was completely unacceptable for two reasons. First, it proposed the use of reservists in front-line assignments. The spirit of the old long-service professional army was still very much alive, and the regulars harbored feelings both of distrust and jealousy toward reservists. Second, the proposal called for the "abandonment" of large portions of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, lands that had assumed an almost mystical quality since they had been "stolen" by the Prussians in 1870.

De Grandmaison, by now a lieutenant colonel and Chief of the *Troisieme Bureau*, countered Michel's proposal with two lectures at the new Center of Higher War Studies. He called not only for the rejection of Michel's plan, but for Army-wide acceptance of the *offensive a outrance* doctrine as well. The effect of de Grandmaison's lectures was electric—he succeeded in his aims beyond his greatest hopes. Not only was Michel's plan defeated, but Michel himself, long held by de Grandmaison and his "Young Turks" to be an impediment to the new ideas sweeping the army, was sacked. General Joseph Jacques-Cesaire Joffre, an enthusiastic supporter of the new doctrine, was named as the new Commander-in-Chief.

It now fell to Joffre to formulate his own war-fighting plan. It would, of course, be based on the doctrine of the offensive and would be, Joffre said, "opportunistic" and "flexible." The plan became the plan of record on February 7, 1914. The dire warnings of the Avenger were now completely discarded. Joffre's Plan XVII (17) was based on the premise

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that the German Army would mass on the common frontier in the Lorraine area and attack across the border at a number of points as soon as possible after war was declared. Any attack through Belgium would be shallow and would certainly not extend to the west side of the Meuse River.

While the majority of the senior leadership of the Army subscribed wholeheartedly to the doctrine of the offensive and would, when war came, carry out its tenets with vigor, they did not agree with the deployment of the army as directed in Plan XVII. This opposition smoldered and then burst into open flame. General Joseph-Simon Gallieni, the tough, experienced commander of the Fifth Army, was so astounded by his designated area of concentration that he appealed directly to Joffre to amend Plan XVII so that the Fifth Army could at least outpost the Belgian frontier. Joffre refused. Gallieni, always a soldier of principle, resigned. Gallieni's lack of faith in the plan was shared by no less than three of Joffre's five army commanders.

Clearly, Plan XVII had precipitated a major crisis of confidence in the French Army. If senior leaders did not accept the premises upon which the plan was based, they therefore did not accept the plan itself. The General Staff, reeling under the constant questioning and growing lack of faith in its abilities, desperately needed some tangible justification for the disposition of forces as laid out in the plan. As none in fact existed, members of the Staff decided one should be created. What resulted was the affair of the "Railway Carriage Plan," an incredible fraud and the most bizarre episode in the nation's preparation for the war.

In December 1913, when the debate over the soundness of Plan XVII was at its height, a General Staff officer anonymously published a pamphlet purported to contain the actual German plan of concentration. The officer, Lt. Col. Edmond Buat, claimed to have "found" a copy of the plan under his seat during a train trip in Germany. Buat's pamphlet depicted a German attack that would be centered on Lorraine. This attack would not violate Belgian territory in a wide sweep west of the Meuse as warned by the Avenger, but would penetrate to the west only to the extent needed to turn the French left. The attack was to be conducted with a force of 1.3 million men divided into a hard core of 905,000 regular troops and a follow-on force of 400,000 reservists to whom secondary missions would be assigned. None of the reservists would attack in the front line.

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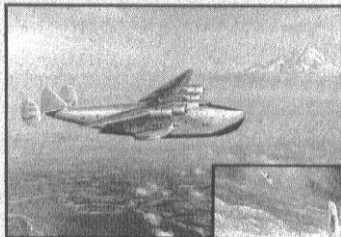
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The actual documents were never seen by anyone but Buat, but he was generally believed anyway. Such was the state of mind in the Army at the time.

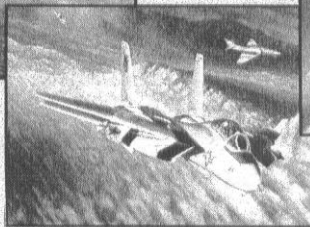
Buat's hoax was to have a telling effect. It was the prime agent in two decisions that nearly cost France the war. The first of these concerned the placement of the main French reserve, the Fourth Army. This reserve force had been placed near the center of the French line and, from this position, could have reacted to enemy actions either from the east (Lorraine) or from the north (Belgium). Buat's pamphlet seemed to answer the question of where the main German attack would occur. Therefore, Joffre reasoned, there was no need to hold the Fourth Army in reserve. On August 2, 1914, the first day of French mobilization in World War I, he moved the Fourth Army out of its reserve position and into the eastern line between the Third and the Fifth Armies. This action served only to thicken the French line. The line was not extended along the Belgian frontier, and, most importantly, French operational flexibility was markedly reduced.

The second significant result of Buat's hoax demonstrated how deeply the pamphlet was believed and how tenaciously the French General Staff held to its prewar assessments of enemy intentions. On August 6, the General Staff

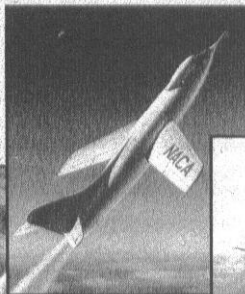
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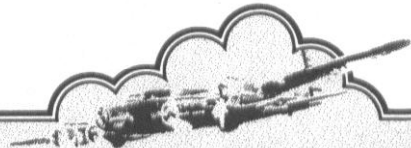
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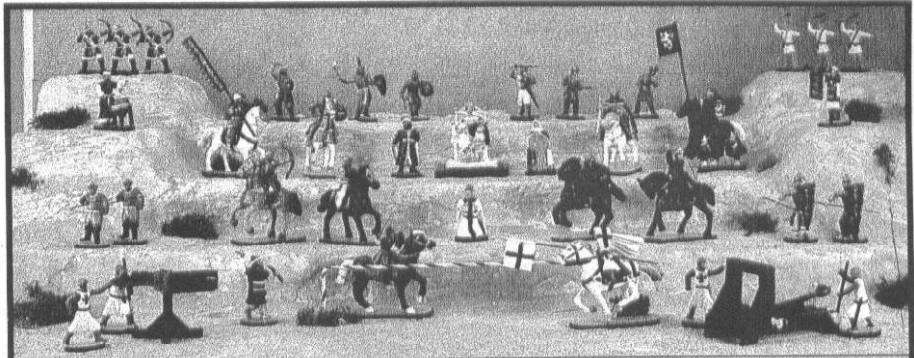
issued an intelligence report of German activities to that date. Although the Staff was in full knowledge of the German full-scale attack on Liège in Belgium the day prior, the report emphasized that the Germans were merely "executing a plan of concentration conceived two years ago, which we came to know of." The General Staff was determined to make the pieces fit into the picture they had preordained. As late as August 20, when the Germans were pouring into Belgium just as predicted by the Avenger 10 years before, General Henri-Mathias Berthelot, Joffre's Chief of Staff, was telephoning frantic commanders to say: "Reports on German forces in Belgium are greatly exaggerated. There is no cause for alarm."

The planned French attacks into Lorraine would continue as scheduled—and as if the massive, deadly threat now clearly sweeping down from the north did not exist. In the first six weeks of the war, the French *poilu* would pay a terrible price to ransom France from Buat's hoax.

Who was the Avenger, and what became of the imaginative Colonel Buat? The first question was never answered. The answer to the second is difficult to understand.

The identity of the Avenger remains a secret to this day. The most persistent rumor was that the German "colonel" was none other than General Karl von Bulow who, the rumor goes, resorted to treason upon seeing his chance at succeeding Count Alfred von Schlieffen as Chief of the General Staff eclipsed by Helmuth von Moltke, long a court favorite. Other rumors maintain the Avenger was a German double agent (most certainly untrue, given the accuracy of his information) or that he was "invented" by the French General Staff in an unsuccessful attempt to pressure the government into fortifying the Belgian frontier (also unlikely, given the disdain of the General Staff for fixed fortifications). The truth, as they say, may never be known, but one thing is certain—his information was dreadfully accurate.

The fate of Buat is quite well known. Already a well-known staff officer at the beginning of the war (his sharp intellect had earned him the nickname "Napoleon"), he proved also to be quite the ethical gymnast when, in 1915, without any evidence of professional guilt or personal remorse, he admitted the pamphlet was a fake and his account a lie. Buat, who perpetrated the hoax as a justification for proceeding with Plan XVII, became a general officer during the war and held numerous important assignments in the postwar army. Incredible, we now say, but fact is often stranger than fiction, and irony does often write the most intriguing history. □



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