



How to Defend in Water: The French Sailors' Surprising Method of Self-defence (1921)

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I. SOURCE MATERIAL CATEGORISATION

As I was researching for potential sources on French military combat, I happened to discover a significant quantity of military manuals, all with similar origins. Either they were productions of the Ministry of War, a French political organ inseparable from military science in the nineteenth century, of the school of Joinville-Lepont or,¹ at seldom occasions, of the Ministry of the Navy (formerly known as the Ministry of the Navy and the Colonies)

The traditions and martial knowledge² described in this type of sources can be divided into two categories³: the first is what we chose to call war fencing, that is the handling of military weapons destined to be used on the battlefield, and combat sports practiced in the barracks and destined to develop the soldier's abilities.

I.1. War Fencing

There are several types of war fencing: bayonet fencing,⁴ principally for the infantry; fencing with sabres on foot, destined to officers and to sailors; and fencing on horseback, with a saber or a cavalry lance (Fig. 1).

Here are some examples:

For bayonet fencing: Ministry of War, *Pas gymnastique. Escrime à la bayonnette et supplément à l'école des tirailleurs en usage aux chasseurs d'Orléans et dans plusieurs corps de l'armée* (Paris: Blot, 1849).

¹ The School of Joinville-Lepont, also known as the "Normal Military School of Gymnastics of Joinville", was created in 1852 and played an important role in the evolution of military martial arts and associated sport practices. The school assured the training of sword-masters and military provosts.

² The acronym HEMA will be introduced further ahead.

³ These are not, as we will see, the *only* existent categories.

⁴ See Garry, *La baïonnette, histoire d'une escrime de guerre*.

For Sabre fencing: Ministry of the Navy and the Colonies, *Manuel pour l'enseignement de la gymnastique et de l'escrime* (Paris: J. Dumaine, 1875).

For fencing on horseback: Ministry of War, *Décret portant règlement sur les exercices et les manœuvres de la cavalerie* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1911).

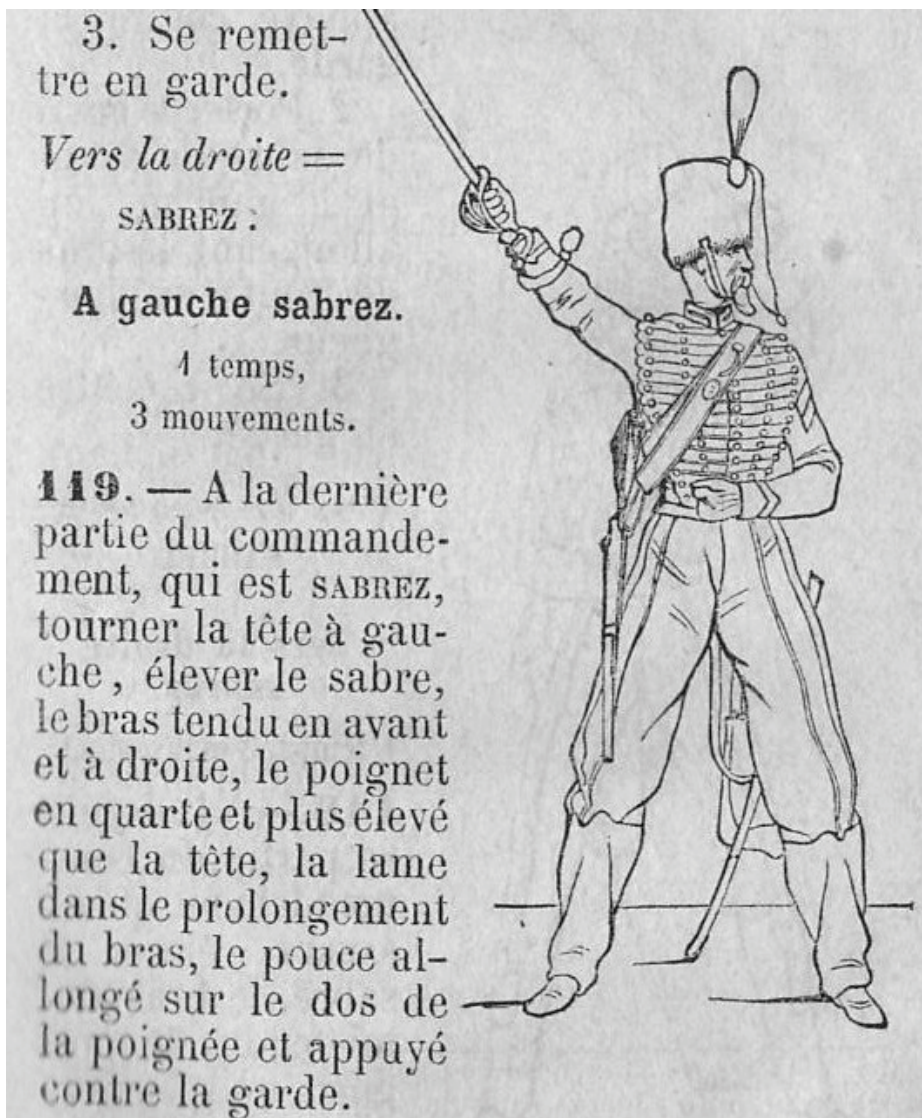


Fig. 1 : "To the left, strike!" Cavalry manual, 1873

I.2. Combat Sports

They are taught to soldiers in the barracks, not with the objective of being useful on the battlefield, but for them to assimilate gymnastic and martial values. Thus, these sources, while keeping a martial angle, provide the soldier with a set of exercises aiming at developing his mental and physical abilities. These combat sports for the barracks are most often: French boxing, "civil" fencing (i.e. fencing with a foil or a sword), and combat with canes or with long sticks known as "batons de Joinville" (Fig. 2).⁵

Here are some examples of texts containing lessons of combat sports:

Ministry of War, *Règlement d'éducation physique* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1910).

Anonymous, *Pour tout le monde, école du soldat, escrime* (Paris: Félix Verney, 1870).⁶



Fig. 2: Gard with the stick, manual of gymnastics, 1893.

I.3. Self-Defence

Aside from these two categories of military art of combat, there is a third one, limited and very recent in the historiography of this topic: self-defence. It appeared in the military manuals in the twentieth century and was the prerogative of French kick-boxing or cane

⁵ Referring to the Normal Military School of Gymnastics that created and developed it.

⁶ This text has the particularity of not being a production of the Ministry of War, but the result of a civil initiative.

civilian enthusiasts, such as the well-known George Dubois or Emile André.⁷ The first manuals destined to military instructors to include techniques of self-defence appeared in 1917 from the turmoil of the First World War.

Example: Center for Physical Instruction of Joinville le Pont, *Notice sur le corps à corps* (Paris: Devambeze, 1917).

This art of combat, most frequently practiced bare-handed, that is simultaneously intended to be practical, i.e. used in real situations, and an indoor exercise, is very often absent from martial studies. The reason to this omission is clear: it is difficult to imagine that the French army (or any modern army for that matter) would have completely abandoned self-defence today. However, if the need for this praxis still exists, defining a clear continuity between what self-defence was and what is currently is a hard task. Which parts of these methods have been forgotten? How much is still passed down? For if no rupture in transmission can be found,⁸ self-defence cannot be considered as part of HEMA, but part of the European Martial Arts, as a "living" art of combat.

Conversations with currently serving militaries about their methods of self-defence revealed that the modern practice of this art is sometimes far from its ancestor, more closely related to other contemporary methods such as krav-maga. Indeed, if the pertinence of throwing an Adrian helmet⁹ was clear in 1917, it would be much less obvious in the twenty-first century (Fig. 3).

⁷ Dubois, *Comment se défendre dans la rue*, and André, *100 façons de se défendre dans la rue sans arme*.

⁸ Some official definitions of HEMA such as that of the French Federation of HEMA, insists on the rupture of transmission as a crucial point in the qualification of a martial art as "historical". However, this assertion is debatable and needs interpretation as it is the case here. See "Préambule" in "Charte Française des AMHE".

⁹ The Adrian helmet, made of sheet of metal and weighting less than a kilogram, was used by the French army since 1915. It was also sold to France's allies.

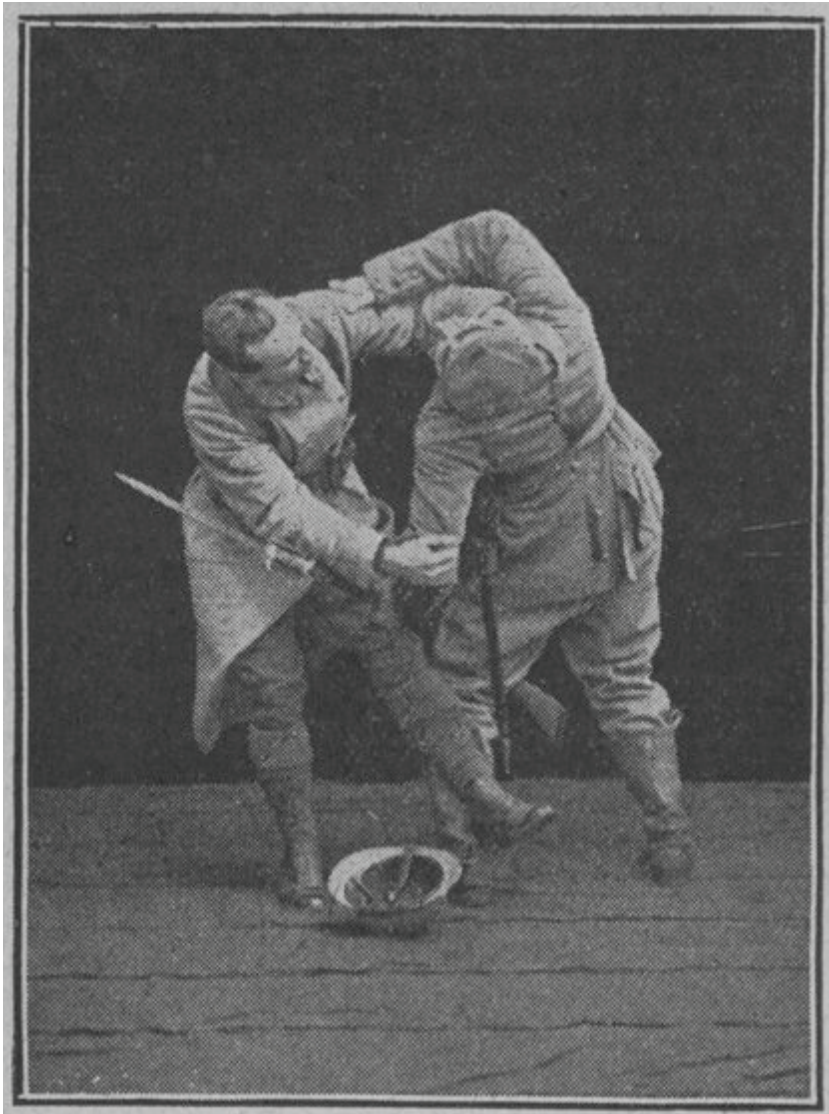


Fig. 3: Throwing the helmets to disarm your opponent

Therefore, we choose to consider this forgotten part of the history of military arts of combat as part of the Historical European Martial Arts. However, the reader must always keep in mind that if one part of this practice has been forgotten, one might still be alive today.

II. THE 1921 MILITARY REGULATION:

The central text of this research note is an extract from a manual published in 1921 and destined to military instructors of the National Navy.¹⁰ This substantial text (440 pages) was integrated to the manuals on March 23, 1921, less than three years after the armistice on November 11, 1918. It is a physical training regulation that contains a set of practical exercises that potentially cover all that a soldier would know. Similarly to the regulations for infantry and cavalry, this text tackles several military arts of combat. No military fencing here but, but several combat sports: French kick-boxing and two types of wrestling, nothing very original for a publication of the time.

After that starts a long chapter in which the different swimming techniques are presented. Because this manual is destined to sailors, there is no mention of exercises like swimming on a chair or suspended to a rope, that were used to put infantrymen in real-life situations (and show that ridicule never killed a soldier, see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: An infantry footman learning to swim, manual of 1893.

Lessons are substantial, covering various types of swimming such as front crawl and breaststroke; but they also tackle the problems of swimming with clothes on and describe how to carry someone unconscious or semi-conscious.

¹⁰ National Navy, *Règlement d'entraînement physique des équipages*. We based our research on a reprint (1928) of the original version (1921).

Then comes a very unusual chapter, simply entitled "Se defendre étant appréhendé" (How to defend when grabbed) addressing the very particular situation of having to defend in water, with examples and illustrations.

This manual, with its curious application in water, stands out as an exception in the already exceptional practice that is self-defence (practice that only became part of the official manuals in 1917).

In this situation, however, don't even think of throwing your helmet or getting out your hidden knife, for your adversary is a particular one, and killing him is not the issue here. On the contrary, that person is drowning and in need of your help, which doesn't make the danger less real, as the victim, driven by fear and a primal instinct of survival, will grab you as hard as possible and put you both in danger.

From this point on, the aim is not to hurt but to control this temporary adversary. The following transcription of the original source (translated into English) might help the reader making his own opinion:

Transcription of pages 286, 287, 288 of the manual:

6° How to defend when grabbed (Fig 5 and 6).

To avoid being grabbed by someone you intend to save but who struggles in the water, always get close to him from behind and grab him either by his armpits or by his arms above the elbows. Hold him firmly tight. If he tries to turn around to grab his rescuer, don't resist, but move around with him to stay behind his back.

The rescuer can find himself grabbed in different ways by the person he intends to save:

1° By the wrists;

2° By the arms;

3° By the neck;

4° By the torso;

5° By the legs;

6° From behind;

7° By the clothes.

Generally speaking, to get free from someone's grip before it gets too strong, use some wrestling parries, especially the front tackling that consists in pushing the opponent away by pressing your arm on his neck.

If the drowning person has managed to grab you firmly, use one of the following techniques to break free:

1° Being grabbed by the wrists: turn your wrists around to the inside and stretch your arms laterally (Fig. 5).

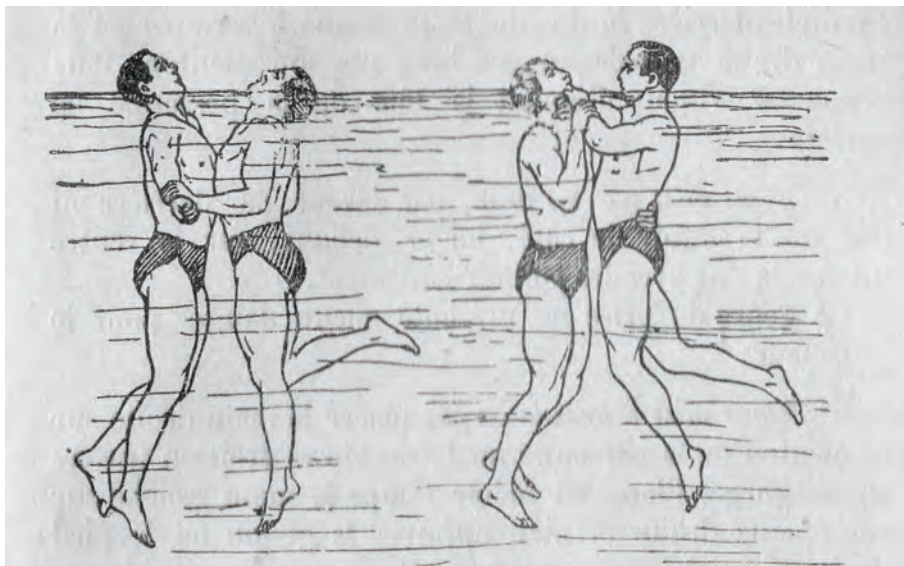


Fig. 41. — Défense du sauveteur appréhendé.

A gauche : manière de se dégager étant saisi par les poignets.

A droite : manière de se dégager étant saisi à la taille et par un bras.

Fig. 5: Règlement d'entraînement physique des équipages, fig. 41.

2° Being grabbed by the neck: Place your left hand on the back of your adversary while your right hand goes above his hands and onto his chin. Then vigorously push his head backwards.

3° Being grabbed by the arms: (to your front, to your back, or by one arm on the side) just swim on your front or back using only your legs. This kind of grabbing is not dangerous for the rescuer.

4° Being grabbed by the torso: Place your right hand on your adversary's chin or your right arm on his throat. At the same time, place your left hand on his right shoulder and press on his stomach with one of your knees or feet. Then push him away vigorously with your hands, knees and feet serving as a fulcrum.

5° Being grabbed by the legs: Swim with your arms to maintain your head above water. As the adversary must necessarily be under water, he won't be able to maintain his grip for long and will either suffocate or fall unconscious.

There is nothing to fear from this kind of grip, no matter how heavy the adversary may be, for it is always possible to float if you swim with your arms.

6° Being grabbed from behind: Fall instantly on your back and swim vigorously with your legs. In this position, either the adversary's head will be submerged, causing him to suffocate, or he will maintain his head above water and the rescuing will be successful.

7° Being grabbed by your clothes: grab one or several of the adversary's fingers and twist them vigorously.

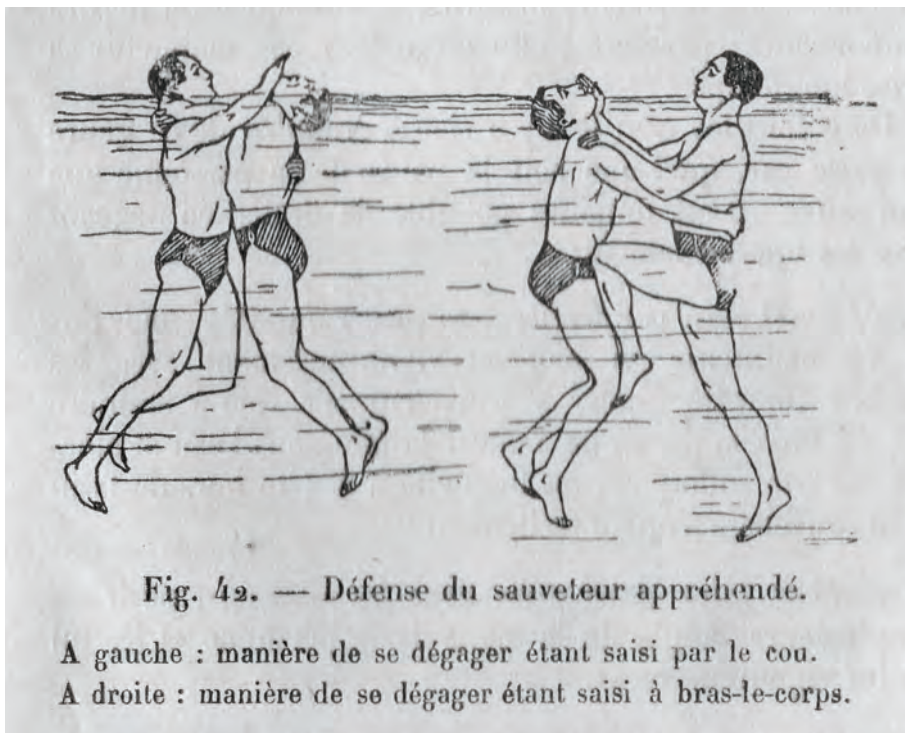


Fig. 6: Règlement d'entraînement physique des équipages, fig. 42

As you may now realize, this type of self-defence is all but ordinary. It comes with several unique problematics, such as the necessity to keep your head above water (thus using more energy as you must simultaneously swim and fight) and the inability to use either your arms or your legs when you swim.

As it is a rescue, one must always try not to hurt the "adversary", the difficulty being the victim's tendency to condemn both him and his rescuer. Moreover, and even though it is

not written, it appears that the rescuer's life comes first, implying that he can drown the victim if need be (techniques 5 and 6 clearly show that).

Besides, the water element offers a new possibility in this type of combat: using gravity to maintain the adversary below the surface, causing him to suffocate and allowing the rescuer to handle him without risks.

III. A SOURCE THAT BRINGS UP NEW QUESTIONINGS:

A source like this Navy Manual, although very rare, is not the only occurrence of this uncommon type of martial art. Mickaël Vieillard, who compiled lots of documents regarding HEMA, published on his website a list of sources revolving around water.¹¹ This list contains an extract from a periodical journal that use to cover many types of HEMA: *La Vie au grand air: revue illustrée de tous les sports*.¹² This article, signed by a Mr Géo Lance, is devoted to water rescue. Lance briefly evokes the possibility of the adversary struggling back, as well as the necessity to break free from a grip, and describes some of the techniques from the sailors' method without going into much details (Fig. 7)...

¹¹ Vieillard, "Les AMHE dans l'eau", in *Mikarmatura*.

¹² See Lance, "Comment on sauve ceux qui se noient". It was also in this kind of periodical that the first methods of defense for ladies with a bicycle were published.



Fig. 7: Illustration from Lance, "Comment on sauve ceux qui se noient"

The civil background of this art of combat allows us to believe that, once again, the French martial life of the nineteenth century influenced the development of military arts.¹³

This art of combat in water, born at the time of the first global conflict, back when everything was put into manuals, can be considered as part of the gigantic list of military traditions covered by the Historical European Martial Arts. However, a similar form of practice still exists nowadays and is taught to lifeguards in the eventuality of a victim fighting back and putting the life of the lifeguard in danger.¹⁴ These techniques, although quite similar, left the movements that can hurt the victim aside and, most importantly, are taken out of the military context. However, though they are still taught, these methods are kept out of the official lifeguard's manuals and are only transmitted orally. This brings up the question of public acceptance: is it morally correct to hurt a victim for his/her own good? Moreover, the fact that it is orally transmitted reveals the desire to limit the accessibility of this method and shows us that it belongs to a very specific category of professionals. Thus, it is possible to establish a connection between this type of combat and the police-officer's manuals of self-defence written at the same time¹⁵ (also reserved to a very specific category of professionals for ultra-specific applications.)

Finally, these sources allow us to question the concept of the "opponent" by showing us that an opponent is not always someone with malicious intends. The whole domain of martial arts generally distinguishes two different kinds of adversary: the sparring partner, with whom the practitioner can develop his skills and learn, and the enemy, whose aim is to harm the practitioner, and often to hurt him or even kill him. This source adds a third category to this list: the involuntary adversary, who means no harm but can put the rescuer's life in danger. In this case, the aim is double: the rescuer must preserve his own life while saving the adversary's. In a way, this specific martial art might be the only one where victory implies saving the opponent's life...

This method is, in many respects, quite original. A combat in a dangerous environment, an enemy you must save, the possibility of drowning someone to save him, all these paradoxes are what make this sailor's art of self-defence unsettling, surprising, and most certainly unique.

¹³ As it is the case, we have demonstrated it, for most types of war fencing, see Garry, *La baïonnette, Histoire d'une escrime de guerre*.

¹⁴ We would like to thank Mathieu Cotterau, certified rescuer, for the fruitful discussions on this topic.

¹⁵ Example: Ministère de la guerre, *Manuel d'exercices physiques spéciaux à l'usage de la gendarmerie*. It describes several techniques of self-defense destined to handle dangerous suspects.

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