THE OTTOMAN ARMY
OF THE 18TH CENTURY
1. COMMAND STRUCTURE.

The Ottoman field army was commanded by the Grand Vizier, who had a three 'tug' (horsehair tail) standard. Each horse tail was placed vertical down the pole, not horizontally. Second-in-command was the Kaimakan, which means 'superintendent of slaves'. His role was to act as chief of staff to the Grand Vizier. He was also known as the Boluk Pasha, being third-in-command of the Janissary corps. He too was entitled to carry a three-tug standard, as were the Pashas of Cairo (Egypt) and Baghdad (Iraq). amusingly the Pasha of Cairo's proper title was 'Wali'! The number of horsetails was an indication of the seniority of the general.

Other Pashas - or 'Leyerbeys' - from the Ottoman Empire were permitted a two-horsetail standard, while Beys (i.e.; Governors of the frontiers) had only a single tug.

The Aga of the Janissaries had a two or three-tug standard, depending on his social rank.

The Sultan, who rarely joined an army in the field during our period, was entitled to a 4-tug standard due to his pre-eminence as the Shadow of God Upon Earth.

Defeats in battle could be catastrophic for the leading nobles. For example, at the Battle of Zenta (1697), which the Sultan was present at, the Grand Vizier lost his life along with no less than seventeen Pashas. This was a particularly bad battle for the Turks though, with most of the cavalry on the wrong side of a river to intervene, and few avenues of escape available to the infantry and their commanders once they broke.

2. BATTLE TACTICS.

Ottoman commanders ideally liked to fight on open ground, which would be most suitable for their usually superior cavalry arm to operate properly. Often they were unable to enjoy such terrain, instead having to fight on ground not of their choosing, thus losing their greatest asset.

The Turks were said by their opponents to dread the effects of artillery, which could cause panic, especially amongst the less battle-worthy militia and levies. Being outgunned is quoted many times by Turks to explain a defeat.

Turkish Janissaries and cavalry, although issued with firearms, are said to have had
a great disinclination to actually use them, considering powder weapons 'unclean' and not 'manly'. This psychological bias against firearms appears to have lasted throughout the eighteenth century. As late as the 1780's the Baron de Tott, heard Turkish officers complain that they could not close with the Russians due to the latter's superior firepower, "... but when they stop this abominable fire, when they come forward like brave men fighting with cold steel, then we will see how these infidels stand up to the slashing sabres of the true believers!" That even by this late date the Turks were being reactionary rather than in general trying to change their ways, shows their mindset to be quite fixed on this matter.

The cavalry had only basic discipline, which prevented them from doing much more than adopt basic tactics in battle. Charges would be at the gallop, at full tilt, the intention being to cause the enemy to flee before contact was made, or at least cause some flinching and so disorder their lines, for when the enemy when not in a regular formation, the Turks were in their element and could break in, doing great execution. Man for man, in individual combat, the average Ottoman horsemen could outmatch his European opponent, but when enemy formations held and retained close order, the Turks would lose spirit themselves and quickly become disenchanted, having no other method of defeating their enemy. Not many horses will ride into a wall of men which won't move out of the way. For this reason, Austrian Cuirassiers facing them would fight knee to knee, and rely on their cuirasses for protection, and firearms to harry the Ottoman cavalry, who unable to charge home against a solid mass would reign up in confusion. If the Austrians charged, it would be at very slow speed indeed, to maintain formation and not permit any gaps to appear.

Ottoman charges would usually be uncoordinated with no overall master plan in play. Attacking piecemeal has never been a sensible military tactic, but with the level of command and control open to the Ottoman generals, they had little choice in the matter.

Under steady pressure, the cavalry would often lose heart and retire from the battle downhearted. Such charges could succeed, even against steady infantry. For example, in 1717 at the Battle of Belgrade two battalions of Austrian musketeers were routed after holding their fire too long, so when the mass volleys were discharged it caused casualties, but it was too late to halt the shock value of the cavalry charge, who simply didn't have sufficient time left to halt the charge or flinch and consider their situation. By the time their brains had worked out the danger they were in, the Turkish horsemen were upon the enemy infantry, who fled in rout after realizing the Turks were still attacking. It was really all a deadly version of the children's game 'chicken'!

Only the Colonel of the Austrian infantry, who had been mounted, escaped the resultant slaughter. So, while the Austrians lost around 1,200 casualties, the Turks suffered under fifty, for once having broken into an enemy formation they met little opposition worthy of the name. More often firepower would work to break a charge, so this situation was not typical, but it certainly provides a contrast to the stereotypical view of hopeless Ottoman cavalry charges doomed to failure before they even begin, does it not!
An Italian observer, Valentini had this to say regarding the skill of Turkish warriors using their swords; "In the hands of a Turk... splits helmets, cuirasses and all the rest of the enemy's armour, and separates the head from the body in an instant. There is rarely a question of light wounds in an engagement between cavalry and the Ottomans."

In 1738, at the Battle of Domaschy-Cornia, a ferocious Ottoman right wing charge captured a ridge and then swung in, penetrating as far as the enemy centre before being checked and repulsed. They then lost heart, retreating back over the Danube in considerable chaos.

The cavalry was known to conduct feigned flight, in order to coax out enemy troops and once they were exposed turn on their pursuers to cut them to pieces. This was a standard tactic. To quote Guinement de Kralio from the 1770's; "They attack in lively fashion without order, uncoordinated... it is of little danger to a veteran and disciplined army; but that which allows its lines to be broken by these troops would be lost; no one would escape because of the speed of their horses, managed by riders who rarely deal out blows without effect."

As with many proud horsemen before and since, the Ottoman cavalry looked down upon their own infantry, even the Janissaries and artillery, usually going off without thinking to enjoy their aid in overcoming the enemy. The cavalry would therefore be used up perhaps before the infantry even came into action.

Despite their almost mystical reputation these days, most European commanders were not terribly worried about the Janissaries, who they seem to think with full of 'hot air' but not actually terribly effective, much in the same way as the Russian Streltsy soldiers had been before dissolved by Peter the Great. The cavalry were respected by the enemy; the Ottoman infantry despised by their own cavalry and enemies alike.

The Janissaries were often put down in writings by the very generals who had to face them, so it is likely they were not a crack formation, but more along the lines of standard infantry when compared to European regulars. This, of course, suggests the 'average' Ottoman foot-slogger must have been of even poorer stuff, but I suspect that by this era the regional regulars were as good (morale-wise), although they could not replace the Janissaries in the line of battle, not being trained to fight in close order.

The infantry, while on the defensive, would deploy in line, but deeper formations could be used when going over to the attack. This had the disadvantage of reducing their potential firepower, apparently for no real gain, except perhaps giving the formations added momentum and élan to continue an advance. It was more usual for the infantry to be on the defensive, presenting a static formation around which the cavalry could rally after a charge. Dense assault formations were therefore probably only used in the field when storming fieldworks or during siege assaults.