

ON THE BEST DETAIL FORMATION FOR THE NEW INFANTRY TACTICS.

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But before going to this, let me say a word about "touch." If the reader is not already persuaded that the old system of close touch ought to be abolished, I despair of being able to convince him of this by argument. It is essentially a bowling green principle for retaining distance and dressing, and is based on a most unsound idea of the possibility of mathematical exactitude of movement. Thus the recruit at drill is treated as if every loss of dressing or of touch were a fault, and as if he were bound to recover it mechanically without the aid of his eyesight. The loss of dressing or touch may be no fault at all, and in ninety nine cases out of one hundred, where it is the result of fault, it is not the fault of the men in whom it is first apparent. What is wanted in the training of the soldier is not so much to attempt to bully him into never losing dressing or touch. That is impossible. It ought rather to be assumed that they must be lost sometimes, and he should be taught how to recover himself neatly. Nay, I go further and assert, that the perfection of movement for the soldier will never be attained until he is given the room to enable him to go a little out of the direct line, without deranging his company, and it is encouraged to do so when circumstances require it. By this I mean, that when men are marched over ground covered with small obstructions, it should not be necessary for them either to stumble over these, or to fall back so as to get round them, and then double up, thus breaking up the present connection by touch, but that the company should have such flexibility of form as to enable it to pass these without any derangement whatever, simply by the men availing themselves of the freedom allowed them by there being spaces between them. The great fault of the present system is that it ignores all obstacles which are not large enough to call for a command from those in charge of the men. It assumes the presence of large rocks or clumps of trees, but not of boulders or stumps; of corn ricks, but not of stooks; of sheets of water, but not of ruts and puddles. There is provision made for passing obstacles that are so prominent that the commander will see them, and give orders, but none for passing those that may come in the way of an individual soldier. In fact, the old mathematical idea is adhered to. Many men are treated as the geometric line, from which parts may be cut off as the necessity of the case may require. But each man in the line is treated merely as a point without breadth or length, as to which it is quite unnecessary to make any arrangements to enable it to pass obstacles. This should not be so. Both the steadiness of the whole and the saving of the energy of each part are dependent upon consideration being given to obstacles, however small, and formations being devised to enable the individual men to pass obstructions with the least derangement to the company and the least wear and tear to themselves. I cannot better express what is wanted than in the words of Colonel Lumley Graham of the 18th Royal Irish when pleading against "touch,"—total absence of constraint in the position of the soldier, both when halted and on the march so that he may be able to use his arms and

logs to the greatest advantage.* If this end is to be attained, touch must be abolished, and that it is essential to attain it admits of no doubt. As long as "touch" is retained, there are only two ways in which the individual soldier can act when passing bad ground. He must either force himself over difficulties as best he can, or he must break rules and lose touch, either by lurching to one side and bumping his comrade, or by falling to the rear, going round the obstacle and then coming up again. There should be no need for this, and the adoption of the four deep formation would put an end to it altogether; men marching in fours deep, with arms length distance, could pass obstacles without difficulty to themselves, and without deranging the other "fours" in any way.

And now, let us see how working by four deep formation would answer in detail. In the first place it would remove the last excuse that remains for the retention of what Colonel Lumley Graham calls an "arbitrary" and what I call an "artificial" front. There is nothing in the whole of our present drill system more objectionable and uncalled for than the tyrannical dominion accorded to that useless idol *Front*. That drill should be conducted as against an enemy, and that it is needful to keep a stout front to him, I admit; but I deny altogether that, in order to do this, a battalion must have an artificial front fastened upon it, so as to hamper its freedom of movement. There is no need arbitrarily to fix a front and back to a body of soldiers. If in real warfare the actual position of the enemy is not known at a particular time, of what avail is it that a battalion or a company has a particular side that is called the Front? And if the position of the enemy is known, what need is there to make it a matter of study, to bring one arbitrarily chosen side of a battalion or company towards the enemy, when there is no true difference between that side and the other? Why should artificial complications be devised for large bodies of troops, which would never be thought of by sensible men, if dealing with a small number? Let me use here an illustration that I formerly gave in one of the Military Gazettes in answer to the objections of an old soldier to my proposal, published in 1867, to abolish artificial fronts:—

"If twenty files of soldiers marching down a street (in company) against a town mob, suddenly find the mob, which they expected to be in front of them, rush in at the end of the street behind them, their natural procedure, to meet the mob, would be to turn about simply, and so repel them. What I, and those who think with me believe is, that this, which is the natural mode of procedure in the case of a few men, is also the natural mode, however large the body of men may be, and that if the natural mode is at the same time a workable mode, it should be followed in preference to any other artificial mode."

Nothing could more plainly show the artificiality of "Front" than this, that the expressions "Front" and "Flank" are often applied in the "Field Exercise" itself, when speaking of tactics, not to the position of the enemy but to the battalion abstractedly. For example, "Front turn" by no means implies that when the turn has been made the battalion is truly fronting the enemy, although according to theory it should do so. Again, "Flank march" by no means implies that a body of troops is being marched to a flank as regards the position of the enemy. Instead of this, on two separate occa-

sions the "Field Exercise" speaks of *flank march* being a useful way of effecting an *advance or retreat*, a mode of expression more Hibernian than clear.

Can this tyrannical bugbear not be got rid of, and the commanding officer be allowed to form his front as he pleases? If he can be trusted to dispose his men to fight the enemy, he surely can be trusted to fix their front for them. "Right in front" and "Left in front" are gone, and no one wishes them back. Would it not be well to send "Front" after them? If, so early as 1833, when all was still as stiff and rigid as possible, this was laid down; "Battalions must know how to perform the countermarch, but otherwise, both in Exercise and in the real practice of troops in the field, they should be so prepared as to render it immaterial which rank is in front." (1) It is surely time now, in 1872, to consider whether this exception should be made the rule. And nothing could be more simple, particularly if the four deep formation well adopted. And the simple formula is this. In order to form the two line rank as at present—on the word "Two deep," *Second and fourth man of section of four, step to the left and forward*, in order to form again into four deep, *The same men (that is the left man of each two) step back and to the right*. To move to the right or left, the company being already in fours, the order would simply be *Right Turn or Left Turn*. Whenever the temporary duty for which two deep had been formed was over, the alternate men who come up to form two deep would fall back into four deep at once. The diagram shows, that the order in which the men stand to one another is always the same whichever way they are turned.

* Field Exercise, 1870, pp. 116 and 273.

(1) Field Exercise, 1833, p. 96.

[To be Continued.]

RUSSIAN FORCES IN THE CASPIAN SEA.—The Cologne Gazette gives an account of the Russian forces in Central Asia. On the Caspian Sea Russia has seventeen steamers of together, 980 horse power and 4400 tons, and seventeen sailing vessels of together 120 tons. This fleet is considered sufficient to transport in a very short time half, if not the whole of a division across the Caspian Sea. On the Sea of Aral are stated to be six Russian steamers of 186 horse power and 500 tons. The regular forces which have been advanced to the Russian frontier districts consists of 18 battalions and 4 batteries, to which, however, are to be added considerable contingents of the Tshernomic and Caucasian line Cossacks. In reality this force is to be considered only as the vanguard of the Russo-Asiatic army. After the complete subjection of the Caucasus, the main body of that army is now the so called Army of the Caucasus, of which the front is continuously and exclusively directed towards Asia, and which may be transported at any given moment to Central Asia by the fleet of the Caspian Sea. This explains why that army has not been dissolved after the subjection of the population of the Caucasus. It is composed now of 6 divisions of infantry, 1 division of cavalry, 31 batteries with 167 cannon, 2 battalions of sappers and miners, and 36 garrison battalions—altogether, when on the war footing 163,759 men, of whom 90,000 to 100,000 may be put in the field immediately. One of the newly formed railway battalions has already been joined to that army.

* A new system of tactics, 1867