

ON THE BEST DETAIL FORMATION FOR THE NEW INFANTRY TACTICS.

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(Concluded from Page 122)

If this simple mode of formation and movement were adopted, all trouble in connection with fronts would be at an end. The supernumeraries would, when the company was turned about or halted after moving to the right or left, take post behind the company, which they could do at once by passing through the intervals. All counter-marching, and forming to the right and left about, would be got rid of. At present, if two companies are marching on markers, the one in the formation that used to be called "Right in front," may be able to march straight in, and "Halt front," while the other, which happens to be what used to be called "Left in front," must either form to the left or left about on reaching the marker, or must counter march before it can get in to position. By what is proposed, all such differences would be got out of the way. No matter which four were leading in marching on a marker the order would be precisely the same in all cases. The company would be marched on the marker, and the order would simply be "Halt—right" or "Halt—left," a manifest gain in all the three requisites of tactics—"simplicity, celerity, and convenience."

The wheel by touch, the most unnatural, cumbrous, and difficult of all manœuvres, in which men are made to do so artificial a thing as look one way and feel another, would also be got rid of, if a four deep formation with intervals were adopted. The men would invariably move up the shortest way, the guide on the named flank (when the wheel is not made from the halt) at once taking up the new direction according as the wheel is a quarter, a half, a three quarters, or an entire wheel, and moving on a short pace, the rest taking up the short pace as they come up, and the whole getting the word "Forward when all the company had come up." There would thus be no crowding of the pivot flanks of companies, and no loss of time, as there is by the present system of wheeling.* And the movement itself is not dependent for its execution upon the ground being even. A gorse bush not bigger than a lady's bouquet, or a hole only large enough to let in a rabbit, will destroy the best wheel that ever was got up by months of labour in a barrack yard under the present system.

The adoption of such a formation would also, besides saving time and labour in the execution of movements, confer a vast benefit on the soldier, by freeing him from the evils which have been already pointed out as attendant on crowding men together when undergoing fatigue. Each man would move perfectly freely, and have fresh air on either side of him. And instead of forbidding the swinging of the arm, it should be made the rule. Again, in route marching, when men must march long distances in a column of fours, they should march as far apart as the road will admit of. The best way would be that two of the strings of four should go along one side of the road, and

two along the other, the supernumeraries keeping in the middle, and any fast traffic requiring to pass either way going down the middle also. In this way, each man would have a good chance of fresh air, and the dust, instead of being confined inside the columns of fours, would to a great extent be dissipated outwards. At present, the rear centro men of fours run every risk of having a large quantity of dust forced into their mouths, nostrils and eyes. Then whenever there was a halt, the company should be marched off in reverse order to that in which it was marching before, so that each half of the company might in turn get the full benefit of any advantage one side of the road had over the other, such, for example, as shade from the sun by a hedge, or a firm footpath to walk on, or a breeze blowing from one side. All these things sound like trifles; but nothing is a trifle where endurance is called for; and there can be no doubt that in the past such things have not received the consideration they are entitled to.

The adoption of the four deep formation for all duties except a few for which it might be necessary to have the men brought up two deep, would greatly tend to simplify all the movements which are of any practical value. When moving in columns of companies, the width could be reduced to the extent of one half, without any change of formation. In wheeling a quarter column, the advantage of being in fours would be very great. And in forming square, there would be no need for different devices to enable the column to form square two deep or four deep. If the order was "Two deep," the second and fourth men would step up; if the order was "Four deep," the men would close into the centre when moving into square. In short, in every way, a battalion would be more flexible, without there being anything tending to relaxation of strict drill, which is so essential to the maintenance of steadiness and discipline. The change would consist in this that the system would be less cumbrous, and more what tactics framed for actual use ought to be; as distinguished from a system devised as if there was no place that troops could be marched over, where the individual men would meet with a greater obstruction than a bluebell or drisy.

When the matter is considered with care it is astonishing how few are the duties for which it is necessary that the men should be formed two deep, and how temporary is their nature. I think there are only three—inspection, some kinds of firing, and charging. All these are exceptional; and surely there is no need that men should be kept in a two deep formation as their normal position, and obliged constantly to be forming into fours to be moved about, and being brought back to "two deep," merely to be in the position suited for these purposes, when but a couple of steps are necessary to bring them into it at any moment. Inspection, which is preliminary and not an active part of duty in the field, may at once be thrown out of view, even if it were not quite as simple an operation for the second and fourth men to come up and form two deep, as it is for the rear rank at present to fall back to open order. Such as regards firing

*This is on the assumption that the present mode of wheeling several companies outwards is to be adhered to. But I think it is well worthy of consideration whether it could not be better to keep companies entire in forming square. The only excuse for the present mode is that it meets the case of there being an uneven number of companies in the battalion, but this does not really form a serious difficulty in the way of adopting the other mode.

if firing in skirmishing order be thrown out of view it may well be questioned whether there is any need for a two deep formation for firing at all. That a four deep formation (two ranks kneeling) is better for volleys than a two deep formation, may be asserted on the highest authority; and the Prussians, who seem to have studied this matter very carefully, are of the same opinion. Then as regards independent firing everyone knows that it will not do now to allow all the men to fire at once, but that, on the contrary, the firing must be restrained. Now, if there is to be such a mode of firing, and only alternate men are to be allowed to fire at the same time, it is far better that the men who are not firing should not be filling up spaces through which the enemy's shot might whistle harmlessly if they were empty. It would be much safer to make them stay in the four deep formation and lie down behind. They can be brought up to fire in their turn if needed, when those in front have expended several rounds. It is quite certain that men thus formed would suffer less loss than if they were formed two deep. Missiles passing through the space would be harmless, while in the case of those which took effect there would be many chances of deflection, or even stoppage, before they could reach these ranks. The greatcoat strapped on the back of a man in the front line is by no means a cover to be despised, while the six inches of cartouche pouch on either side of the waistbelt may often act the part of the lady's miniature, that, lying on a duellist's breast, turned aside his opponent's bullet. Even the rifles of the two front men may cause a shot to fly off harmless which would otherwise have reached the men behind them.

If this formation were adopted, it would be better to increase quarter column distance from six to eight or ten paces, and indeed this will be necessary at any rate, if the now universal opinion that companies ought to be increased in size receives effect, as it is scarcely possible to doubt that it will.

I come now to the main point of the whole argument in favor of a general adoption of the four deep formation, namely its adaptability to the throwing out of skirmishers, support, and first reserve, in the best form for the upholding of tactical unity and the ensuring of a tactical refitting together of the different parts of a company, when reinforcement brings them together again. I propose then, that when the order is given to them to skirmish, the captains of the companies that are to skirmish shall, from the position of the "fours deep" order forward, as skirmishers, the front row of fours, the second row forming the support, and the two remaining rows the first reserve. (Use the word row, lest I should mislead by using the word rank, although truly speaking the company in "fours deep" is just a company in four ranks). The support would be extended the same as the front line, and the two rows forming the reserve would be at their usual arm's-length interval. Thus the company unit, instead of being cut across into pieces, as is done if one section is sent to skirmish, another to support, and a half company kept in reserve is sliced lengthways, one slice being sent forward, the next slice which naturally fits on to it following, and the third slice being ready to be fitted on if required. Therefore when reinforcement takes place, it is a work of exact restoration—the men are coming up behind their own comrades. And if the first reserve is also pushed up into the fighting

* This matter was treated of at length in my proposals for the simplification of Infantry Drill published in 1867.