

Common Sense on Parade, or Drill Without Stays.

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BUT here comes in the question: Can the opinion of those be submitted who still maintain that moving with intervals is unnecessary in the fire-swept space; and that closed lines covered by skirmishers, in the style of Wellington, can still advance in attack to the deciding point? Can the following statement be accepted? "It seems to me the true solution is to be found in the proper use of skirmishers, in the old sense of the term. . . . It may be doubted whether a closed two-deep line, preceded by active skirmishers, would be likely to suffer more in advancing over open ground than the same number of men would do if distributed in several open lines, one behind the other, and not preceded by skirmishers."—(General McDougall.) The gallant general who penned these words has so often before spoken of the modern combat from the point of view of an advance with intervals as the probable mode of the battle of the future, that this return to the closed-line view would seem to be the result of a kind of despair induced by dread of that higgledy-piggledy style of combat to which the German system tends, he being rightly unable to accept the idea of order being maintained by skirmishers closing in, and new units coming up between them. Proposals which lead their authors to such results that they must abandon the principle that "men will never obey the orders of anyone so completely as his in whose knowledge they confide" (Home), and are compelled to suggest intentional changes of command during the battle, such as that the senior officer shall speak somewhat after this fashion: "Lieutenant A—, you take charge from this tree to that sand heap" (Von Boguslawski)—such proposals cause a recoil. A system which fixes commands, not by units of the troops engaged, but by spaces of ground, from a pump or a bush to a ditch or a dungheap, is rather alarming, and there is a tendency to shrink back to the old, and to believe that, after all, it will be better to accept it with all its risks, rather than "run to ills we know not of." But while it is in no way surprising that the extraordinary character of such proposals by the Germans, and their rash adoption by so many of our own military class, should cause others to draw back, these latter will not be excusable if they retreat too far. To go back to the point at which the attempt to devise suitable detail formations for modern conditions began, may be wise; to go further back and seek finality in obsolete manœuvres, unsuited to the conditions cannot be wise. The question, therefore, is not between the old mode and the new. Condemnation of the new will not set up the old. There are two questions for decision, not one. The first is, are the old manœuvres compatible with modern conditions? If the stern logic of facts compels a negative answer, then there is no room for pitting the old against the existing new. The old must stand rejected absolutely.

It is unnecessary to repeat here the facts already adduced, and the arguments already used, for the purpose of showing that the old system—the advance of solid lines over the fire-swept zone—is obsolete, and cannot be accepted in theory. Already "German training is directed to making aim on everything like a closed body that can be seen, and only on the open fighting line when there are no closed bodies to aim at."—(Colonel Sir Lumley Graham.) If foreigners were to learn through their intelligence departments that British troops were to be advanced in line, their men would very soon be instructed to disregard the coming skirmishers, and concentrate fire on the solid. Besides, the passage quoted above in favor of the retention of the solid line proceeds on two false assumptions. It assumes that the reinforcing troops, under any modern system, would come forward in formal open lines, and not in portions, and in varying forms or abnegations of form according to ground, taking advantage of cover and adopting every expedient that may prevent unnecessary loss, while retaining the power of recovering form. It is also assumed that there are no skirmishers in front, in contradistinction to the old mode in which there were skirmishers covering the closed line. But in the modern attack those in the first open line, though not skirmishers, are a skirmishing body, in the sense that they are thrown out with an interval and cover the main advance; and although their duties are not limited to those of the skirmishers of former days, yet they are as effectual to cover the general advance as were the old skirmishers in the days of the advance in line entire. It may therefore suffice to say finally, as regards the proposal to work in the old closed line formation, that such a mode of advance gives the maximum of exposure to aimed fire, with the minimum of real flexibility and possibility of using cover. It also involves such an amount of worry and fatigue in the attempt to maintain a regular and close advance over the long fire-swept space, as would militate seriously against the

possibility of the troops arriving at the point of contact in that good "fettle" (Scottice) which shall tell decisively at the final moment. "The object of marching is to get over ground with the utmost economy of strength. One cannot therefore insist too much on marching easily."—(Koppel.)

And surely it is clear that no more harassing mode could be adopted for marching 1,500 or 2,000 yards than a close file line. The celebrated 1,000 yards advance in line at Potsdam was considered a marvel by military critics, when small-arm fire could not be opened upon the line till three-fifths of the distance had been covered, and then only very slowly from muzzle-loading muskets. Now the march would be twice as long, and for the whole distance under effective and rapid fire from long-range breech-loaders, aided by shrapnel from artillery effective for the whole distance. No skirmishers could adequately protect such a line now. It would cease to be a line long before the point could be reached at which its shock power as a line could take effect. And even if it could reach the deciding point, it would do so at such waste of energy in the survivors as would prevent its power from telling with effect. Even if its external solidity remained, it would be the solidity of flabbiness. Exhaustion would have taken the backbone out of it. Touch being undoubtedly fatiguing when long continued, can only be justified when the form of combat is such that, as already quoted, "the small effects of exertion and privation on the troops can come but little into consideration" (Von Clausewitz), and when the conditions of combat enable troops to produce a strong moral effect by their close, wall-like appearance and action. Now the engagement opens at such distance that no such moral effect can be produced by sight, and that fatigue counts as a very serious factor—a dominating factor in the situation. In such circumstances, therefore, "touch" serves no good end now, but both positively and negatively serves a bad one. Negatively, it gives too good a target for fire, leading to the machine being smashed; positively, it puts drag and friction on the machine, wasting power and wearing it out. There is nothing for it, therefore, but to confess that "all idea of drawing up troops in line to fire upon one another is finally exploded."—(Von Boguslawski.) "The infantry soldier must come to an open order of fighting, and his teachers had better recognize the fact and train him so that he will not be astonished when the moment of trial comes. This necessity is at the bottom of all new tactics for infantry."—(Col. C. B. Brackenbury.)

Abandoning then, definitely, the idea of going forward in a closed line, the second question arises sharply and free from embarrassing considerations—Is the new mode of an advance in a line with intervals with successive reinforcement to thicken up the line, carried out in the best way? That is to say, are the best means taken to secure: 1. An orderly advance in the general sense. 2. A speedy advance. 3. An advance with the least bodily fatigue. 4. An advance with the least possible loss. 5. An advance with the least possible break down of tactical order and cohesion. 6. An advance with the least possible change of command. 7. An advance with the best possible chance of a firm solidifying at the crisis. 8. An advance with the power of rallying the force into order in the least possible time after shock. Many of these points react one upon another, and all are important. There can be but one answer to the question, after reading the conflicting opinions that have been quoted. The existing modes do not fairly satisfy the "tactical world," in which "chaos" still prevails. The "attack" is, therefore still in the experimental stage, and the general system of drill does not lead up to the "attack," such as it is.

One main cause of the difficulties is that the detail basis from which all the new modes of attack have been worked out, has had a positive tendency to result in systems in which maintenance of order and form was rendered unnecessarily difficult. The military mind having rejected bodies of troops in close files for the advance, has rather gone off at a tangent, and thoughtlessly accepted it as an axiom that they could only be got out of close files, and sent forward in a formation with intervals, by the one expedient of a lateral extension. Then came the difficulty. A lateral extension meant disarrangement of form on reinforcement, unless the extension was cancelled, and those extended closed in to their original form. This was found impossible, and so doubling up was accepted as inevitable. The result is that "modern theories tend to degenerate skirmishing into bodies of men in loose order, put in motion with a general idea, but from that time for the remainder of the fight irreclaimable."—(Colonel Gawler.)—*Colburn's Magazine.*

Her Majesty's ship *Vulture*, three guns, which was built at Sheerness, about 18 years ago, has been sold out of the royal navy as unfit for active service. The *Vulture* was one of the last wooden gun vessels built for the royal navy before the introduction of composite shipbuilding, and has had a considerable amount of foreign service. She was last employed on the East Indies station, where she took a prominent part in the suppression of slavery, capturing several dhows engaged in that nefarious traffic.