

ON THE BEST DETAIL FORMATION FOR
THE NEW INFANTRY TACTICS.

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Now, it is clear to demonstration, that although it may be possible to train troops to fight well, even when they have lost their way and their commander, and to do so under any officer whom they may come across after they have lost their own, that such contingencies are not to be courted, but to be avoided if possible. The accidental, divergence of two parts of a line from one another may make a more dangerous gap, not easily filled up, and golden opportunities may be lost by a captain's command getting thus out of hand or by the support having gone after the wrong half of a company that has got broken up. Nor can it be doubted that anything which tends to cause risk of men getting separated from their known commander ought to be avoided. It is always to be assumed as a general axiom, that men fight best alongside of their own comrades and under the command of their own officers, and that officers have most confidence when they command their own men; and this is especially true of our British Infantry, and is likely to be true also of our Infantry Reserve.

It should also be remembered that it is not a wise thing so to distribute a captain's command that to attend to it properly he must go through excessive fatigue. An over-exerted man—a man who, to use a slang expression is "pumped"—is, until he has recovered himself, an inefficient man more or less. He is, for the time being, of reduced value, mentally as well as physically. A panting, breathless man is neither fit to observe, nor to give orders, nor to receive and carry out orders, so promptly and clearly as one who is calm. If troops fighting are so arranged that the officer in command cannot superintend them efficiently without over exertion, that is equivalent to making it impossible for him to superintend them efficiently at all.

It is therefore most indubitably an advantage to reduce the extent of front each captain has to command if this can be done without disadvantage otherwise; and that it can be done, not only without injury, but really with advance in other respects, can I think, be demonstrated. It is much better to do this than to carry out the idea of mounting captains on horseback. This has been strongly urged by some, but there are two reasons against it which are unanswerable. First, a man on a horse is too good a target to be placed in the fighting line; and second, as the tendency of modern fighting necessarily is to seek cover, instead of open ground, a captain would too often find his horse an encumbrance rather than a help. To mount captains would be a wrong remedy for an evil that requires to be cured, not nursed.

There is another great advantage to be derived from having the supports formed of the same company as the skirmishers, and that is, that support or reinforcement can be brought up at any special point at which

it is required, without destroying the tactical unity of parts, or providing supports where it is not needed. At present skirmishing drill is conducted far too much as if the whole line of skirmishers should always be relieved or reinforced at the same time, and this is done by the battalion commander only. There could not be a worse arrangement than this. It may often happen that it would be a most useful thing to send forward fresh men to a very short portion of the fighting line, where to do so to the whole line would be most foolish, or perhaps even dangerous. And in an enclosed country it is beyond all question that the commanding officer of a battalion cannot always judge for his whole battalion when and where, and to what extent, to order up supports. It is very likely at most critical moments it may be quite impossible for him to have all his men under his eye at once. The officer who is actually up with the fighting line can best judge what is the requirement of the moment as regards support or reinforcement. In this view, two great advantages are attained by making the company supply its own support and first reserve. In the first place, the actual fighting front each captain has to look after is reduced to a reasonable length, so that he can attend to it efficiently; and in the second place, he can bring up fresh men at his point in the line the instant he finds they are needed, without the other parts of the line being encumbered by support which they do not want, and which may be uselessly exposed to fire. And moreover, by this arrangement, one captain might be able to give efficient help to the captains on either side of him. For example, a captain who held a strip of plantation might bring up his support into it, while his skirmishers fired on the enemy in his immediate front, his support posted at the corners of the wood might keep up a slanting fire upon those opposed to the skirmishers of the company on their flank, so as to aid them to get quickly and with little loss over the more open ground, and reach a hedge or any other cover available. And a captain might often get the advantage of a double fire, by using his support, where the nature of the ground would admit of it, to fire over his skirmishers while they were moving. Such things as these can always be best done on the small scale. Wherever anything is to be done, not by a set word of command, but by a direction conveyed and explained, so that it may be worked out, not formally but intelligently, it is obvious that there is less likelihood of failure if the unit to be worked upon is small and compact than if it is large and stretched out, and also that the command of the *directly* acting part of the unit, and the part which may be brought in *actively* to assist, should be in one person.* Another great advantage of such an arrangement is, that a blunder is confined to a smaller part of the fighting line, and therefore more easily corrected. There is much less risk of that happening which under the present system is likely to happen, namely that while a captain is looking after one part of his long line, another part has begun to retire when it should not, because one man in the line has chosen to draw back and others have followed him, (1) which may compel the captain to retire the whole line against his will, because by the time he gets to that part of the line the thing may be too

* This is doubly true when the tendency is to choose ground which gives cover, rather than open ground.

(1) See Wellington Prize Essay, p. 153.

far gone to be corrected. If a captain had the whole of his fighting line within easy reach he could instantly control any wrong movement by any part of it, which at present it is quite impossible to do. And if the front of each company be narrow, there is less risk of a blunder made by one company communicating itself to others. The men feeling themselves directly under order and in the hands of their captain, would have less tendency to act gregariously in mere imitation of those next them.

Further, the moral effect of the support and first reserve being of the same company as the line of skirmishers in front of it, can scarcely be over estimated, both as regards officers and men. On the men it would act powerfully, encouraging those who were in the front, and perhaps sometimes preventing demoralization. The man who would skulk if those behind him does not know him personally, might stay in the front and learn courage, if he knew that to fall back he must run into the arms of his own comrades. And the captain who was out with the skirmishers would have the comfortable feeling that his support and reserve were his own, subject to his orders, and, if brought up to reinforce his line, would bring not merely so many additional men under somebody else's command, but men of his own, the daily companions of those in front, bringing in the immense moral force of intimate sympathy, often worth a good deal more than mere physical effort. And further, the officers and non-commissioned officers brought up to support him would be his own, not those of some other company, or, as happens under the present system, of a different corps quite unknown to him. The command would remain the same, whereas at present it may be changed by reinforcements owing to the accidents of seniority. Any change in the immediate command of men who are fighting in the front is a great evil; in fact, one that it is scarcely possible to over-estimate.

The adoption of this principle would also pave the way to the practical introduction of an improvement which is now, I think, universally approved of, viz. the increase of the number of men in a company.* There cannot be a doubt that a large unit under one command, if it can be arranged so as to make it handy to work, is better than two small units under different commands. Of course as long as the small units are worked in such a way as to make it difficult to command them efficiently, it would not be safe to increase their size. Until the system of throwing out the whole of a captain's command into a long single line next the enemy is abandoned, companies must be kept small. But if each company is made to provide its own support and first reserve, then, as a part of it to be extended in the first instance will only be a fraction, there can be no objection to increasing the size of the working unit, to a certain extent.

The next principle for which I would plead is, that the support and first reserve together should be three times as great as the original skirmishing line, and that the first reserve belong to the company should be equal in numbers to the skirmishing line and the supporting line together. It is, I think, evident, that although battles may now be expected to be fought till near their close by the pushing forward of "swarms of skirmishers," the fact that they are pushed forward in that formation does not imply that the actual fighting front will

* This matter is forcibly treated of in Maurice Wellington Prize Essay.

* This was the opinion of all with whom I spoke on the subject at the Autumn Manoeuvres