

The Fire-Disciplined Pell-Mell

To the Editor of the "Army and Navy Gazette."

SIR,—There have recently appeared some references to the fire-disciplined pell-mell firing-line, opposing its practice, which show a complete misconception as to what its advocates are aiming at. As the fact that the fire-discipline of the masses (*i.e.*, the fire-disciplined pell-mell), still practically ignored, may be due to such misconceptions, I trust that you will be able to afford me space in your columns to try to remove the most noticeable of them. These misconceptions appear to arise from the fact that those who make them do not consider at what stage of the infantry fight a pell-mell will probably occur, nor how it is proposed to manage such a pell-mell when it does occur. To begin with, it appears to be thought by some that the practice of the fire-disciplined pell-mell means the legalisation of disorder, is antagonistic to the axiom that the fire-units should be kept distinct as long as possible, and is therefore contrary to the Regulations. This is, however, quite a false view of the matter. No advocate for the practice of the fire-disciplined pell-mell ever dreamed of legalising disorder, or of denying that the fire units must be kept distinct as long as possible, nor does it in any way run counter to the Regulations, but, on the contrary, carries them out to their logical conclusion. Yet the opponents of the pell-mell quote the axiom that fire-units must be kept intact as long as possible, as if, in so doing, they settled the whole question of the close fire-fight, whereas really they have not reached the period when the fire disciplined pell-mell comes into play at all. Everyone admits that fire-units must be kept intact as long as possible; that is not disputed by anyone, and goes without saying. The question at issue is, what about the time when the "as long as possible" has been reached, and the "no longer possible" stares us in the face? Are we to go no further than the beginning of the thing, the advance into the close fire-fight, whilst still the "as long as possible" lasts, and ignore that more difficult period when the "no longer possible" arrives? Or, are we to experimentalise in the latter period for the first time in battle? Such experiments would probably be rather costly. The practice of the fire-disciplined pell-mell therefore is not in any way antagonistic to keeping the fire-units distinct as long as possible, but merely comes into play when it is no longer possible; when during the hours-long infantry fight successive lines coming up from the rear on a limited frontage, either to maintain or carry forward the struggle, are forced to mingle with those already in the firing line and a pell-mell ensues, men of different regiments, brigades, and even perhaps of different divisions, fighting shoulder to shoulder. He must be a bold man who will assert that this "no longer possible" stage will not often arrive in battle again, as in 1870; as at Spicheren in the Gifert Wald; as at Woerth in the frontal attacks of the Fifth Corps, or the infantry of the Eleventh Corps, or in the mixture of Prussians and Bavarians; as at Colombez-Nouilly on the western slopes on the Colombez brook; as at Vionville on the edge of the Bois St. Arnoul, or where the second Batn. 20th Regiment and the 5th and 8th Companies 91st Regiment advanced into the long firing-line of the exhausted 24th, or in the Tronville copse; as at Gravelotte on the edge of the Bois de Genivaux and about St. Hubert; as at Sedan with the Bavarians at Bazeilles, or the Bavarians and Saxons at Monvillier Park and La Moncelle, or the infantry of

the Eleventh Corps in the advance from Floing to Gazal. It is at this stage, when the fighting has long been going on, and at this stage only, that the practice of the fire-disciplined pell-mell endeavors to provide a means of at once remedying the confusion, of forming new units out of the mixture of the old ones, and of still controlling the fire after volleys have become impossible owing to the noise and wild excitement. The Infantry Drill lays down (pages 124-7) that units are to be kept intact as long as possible; it also looks further ahead and says (pages 100-4), "it may be expected that the stress of battle will have brought about in certain portions of the field a mixture of companies, battalions, and even brigades, rendering the work of command more and more difficult." If such a mixture of units, such a pell-mell, according to the Infantry Drill, "may be expected," then it is surely only common sense to bestow some attention on the management and control of such an "expected" pell-mell. It cannot therefore be urged that the practice of the fire-disciplined pell-mell is in any way contrary to the Regulations. On the contrary, its practice appears to be part of "the important duty of the efficient preparation of infantry for the practical requirements of the battlefield" laid down in the Army Order which prefaces the Infantry Drill. The fire-disciplined pell-mell is essentially the fire-discipline of masses, such as must be concentrated opposite the decisive points, and such as the Infantry Drill lays down (page 115) are to be so concentrated; when the successive lines come into action on a limited frontage, to maintain, or restore, or carry on the struggle, or to drive back counter-attacks, or to gradually accumulate sufficient fire-power to break down the enemy's resistance. It has little to do with the practice of battalion attacks, except that it requires the men to be sometimes practiced in forming new units out of a mixture of old ones and in controlled mass-fire. But it has everything to do with a divisional attack where masses are concerned, as will be at once seen if it be assumed that a powerful counter attack has driven the first line back upon the second; or has forced the leading echelons of the second line to advance into the first line to enable the latter to maintain its ground, as happened in 1870 not unfrequently; or if it be assumed that the enemy's fire-resistance is as strong as at Gravelotte, at the Quarries and Point du Jour, and the second line has to reinforce with echelon after echelon and cannot as yet, for an hour or hours, carry the position. It is here that the fire-disciplined pell-mell will come into play, rapidly changing disorder into order again, and reasserting command and control of fire. Those who advocate its practice, far from being the advocates of confusion, wish to provide a means of conquering confusion whenever it appears, for which the practice of fire-disciplined pell-mell provides a simple remedy, easy to understand and easy to work; and it is in its simplicity that its chance of being successfully employed in the heat and din of battle lies. It has been argued that because the Germans won their battles in 1870, despite the confusion into which they fell, that we can do the same, and, therefore, need not bother our heads about how to conquer confusion as it will be all right. But those who argue thus forget that the nations have not stood still since 1870, and that fire-discipline is a different thing now to what it was then. Would they, or would any troops, fighting in confusion, win again if pitted against troops trained, directly confusion appears, to at once overcome it and form into new units of command, and to deliver, not a wild, rolling, independent

fire, but a steady, controlled, mass-fire, varying in direction and intensity according to the target? The answer does not seem far to seek.

In conclusion, it may be observed that those who advocate the practice of the fire-disciplined pell-mell uphold above all things order and discipline in the attack, that they completely admit the advantage of keeping units distinct as long as possible, and that it is only after the advance into the close fire-fight, when by the long duration and excitement of the fight, and by the fact that many leaders are down, and the orders of those who remain can with difficulty be heard except by a few men close by; when by the action of successive lines coming up on a limited frontage and units are at length perforce mixed up, then, and then only, does their system come into play. It does not pretend in any way to be a system of attack, but merely claims that in a protracted struggle, as successive lines come into action, it must be the last formation of any form of attack, and that therefore it should not be neglected. It is to be hoped that the misconceptions as to its purpose which have so long hindered the recognition and practice of the fire-disciplined pell-mell as a last fighting formation will gradually disappear. To that end let us not only fix our attention on page 124 of the Infantry Drill, but also consider pages 100 and 115. Let us cease to think that the last word has been said about fire-discipline when the axiom has been produced that fire-units must be kept distinct as long as possible, and instead let us give some general attention to the question of what is to be done in a protracted fight when the "no longer possible" stage is reached, and confusion requires a remedy and a prompt one. What we require is that whenever unavoidable confusion and mixture of units shall occur, we may be able to at once evolve, with the ease and rapidity of custom, order out of disorder, and may be able to prevent a wild, rolling, rapid, independent fire breaking out all along the line by resorting to a steady, controlled mass-fire, slow, rapid, or magazine according to the target, which by custom the men fall into.

Taking into consideration pages 100 and 115 of the Infantry Drill, it appears that the logical outcome of the distribution of our troops in three lines, with the second line massed in several successive lines opposite the important point or points (given an enemy on the offensive-defensive striking back with powerful counter-attacks) is the practice of the fire-disciplined pell-mell as a last battle formation. Intact units and volleys "as long as possible," by all means, but let us also be prepared for the "no longer possible," so that when it suddenly appears in battle amidst the deafening roar and confusion of the close fire-fight, we may have something to fall back upon that we know and have learnt how to work.

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Not In a Hurry to Get There.

Lord Wolseley, one day lately, when in Cork, was accosted by a poor beggar woman, who asked him for a trifle. The new field marshal, putting his hand in his pocket, drew out a shilling, which he gave to the woman, who, overcome by his generosity, exclaimed, "May all the saints bless you, kind sir; may you be in Heaven this very night." "Thank you for your kind wishes," replied Lord Wolseley, "but you need not be so particular about the time."