

The Company Column.

Ever since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, there has been two parties among tacticians and military critics as to the proper employment of Infantry, Cavalry, and Artillery. The same principles have pervaded these contests, that permeate political and social questions in all ages. There is a radical progressive party, and a radical conservative party. One party scorns the notion that the experience of thirty centuries is to be weighed in the balance with that of the last decade. With them the present is the only guide for the future, and the present age the most wonderful ever known. The other party decries the present, and finds nothing worth copying in it, pointing back to Napoleon, Wellington, Frederick, Cesar and Hannibal, to show that there is nothing new under the sun.

These are the extreme wings of opinion. Between them lies a third party, that admits good in both, and is willing to compare the present and the past, to learn lessons for the future. It is seldom that this party gets the opportunity of being fairly heard, and it is apt to receive kicks from both sides. The extremists in general have no argument to appeal to but that old and well known fallacy, the *argumentum ad verendum* or appeal to authority. They quote the opinions of Napoleon and Von Moltke, on one side and the other, forgetting that they are only opinion, after all, and as such, inconclusive. The middle party appeals to nothing but facts; and its reasoning, being of the inductive character balancing the weight of various evidence, is seldom dogmatic and never popular.

In the tactical fight of the present day, the fierce battle of the books, all three parties are represented, and we are glad to say that our own military writers are generally pretty safe in their conclusions, inclining to conservatism, but readily yielding to any new facts which invalidate their theories. The question as to the proper employment of Infantry is first in order of the three. One side maintains that the German system of company columns is the only system of battle tactics possible for the future, that it is perfect, and that every army that does not conform to it fails in perfection. This class holds up the German army as perfect in every detail, of tactics and administration. The most cultivated representative of this shade of opinion is general McClellan, whose papers on the subject were widely read a few months since.

The best representative of the moderate party on our side of the water is General Upton, the author of our present tactics, who has lately contributed a very able article to the *International Review* on the subject of the Prussian Company Column, in which he compares its advantages as claimed, and its disadvantage as admitted, in a manner full of interest to a military reader.

The ultra conservative wing, we are glad to say, has no distinguished representative on our side of the water, outside of the militia.

The Prussian Company Column may be familiarly described as follows: The company in line being in three ranks, and divided in two platoons, the third rank of each platoon falls back, and the left rank goes behind the right. The first and second ranks of the left platoon go behind the same ranks of the right, and we have the renowned company column, of three platoons of two ranks each. The rear platoon,

made of third rank men, furnishes the skirmishers, the first and second the supports. Each battalion has four companies, and goes into action in line of company columns. The skirmishers fight in groups, and are encouraged to get into knots, to seek cover, and to make short rushes forwards. No matter how many lines there are, each is commonly made up of these company columns of 240 men, at eighty or a hundred yards apart.

The partisans of the German school claim that this system is the best that has been applied to Infantry fighting since the invention of breech-loading fire arms. In support of this claim they bring forward the Franco-Prussian war and the victories achieved under the system. General Upton, in examining the claims of the German party, brings to light some ugly facts, which seem to show that the system might fail disastrously against English or American troops, accustomed to fight in line. The objections to the Prussian Company Column are many and weighty. First, it is based on the absolute and inflexible three rank formation, with inversions and countermarches, so happily abolished in our own Service. Secondly, it is deficient in officers and gives the latter more work than any man can do well in battle. Thirdly, by taking the best men for skirmishers and making them such permanently, it tends to depreciate the value of the whole company. The worst trouble, however, is in the unwieldy size of the unit, which takes the place of one of our small regiments, and yet is only part of a regiment. It was found by experience in the battle of Woerth, that companies from every regiment in a division, sometimes even from different corps, became entangled together at the close of a hotly contested action, confusing the command even in the advance after a success. What the result would had been had the success been a defeat it is not difficult to predict.

Moreover, from the unwieldy size of the companies results a great paucity of officers. The company is just as strong as one of our fighting battalions after a short campaign, and whereas that seldom numbers less than twenty officers after all casualties, the German start with only five and not seldom find every officer killed after a battle. True they have twenty non-commissioned officers who exercise a much larger control than our sergeants and corporals, but these are not officers. A great gap divides them from the commissioned gentlemen who come of noble blood, and that gap is seldom or never leaped over. The captain of a company is expected to oversee and direct a front equal to that of our regiments, and for that purpose is mounted; but a little consideration will show that this horse is seldom likely to be useful. A mounted officer controlling skirmishers, fighting other skirmishers, cannot remain mounted for many minutes without losing his horse. On foot he has more than he can attend to. While the large company with few officers may be well adapted to the enormous armies of Germany, where every officer saved implies a reduction of crushing expenses, it can hardly be said to be a model to follow in small armies such as those of England and America, where the strength depends on courage, firmness and high training. A instance of the value of our system as compared with that of large companies, and of the great superiority of deployed regiments over lines of company columns is afforded in the recently issued volume of Kinglake's "Crimean War."

This volume is devoted to an exhaustive analysis of a single battle—that of Ink-

man. It is a perfect storehouse of facts, from English, French, and Russian sources and especially valuable as bearing on the question of company columns. As it happens, the Russian regiments on that day possessed exactly the same organization as the present German regiments. They had three battalions, each of four huge companies, and they advanced in exactly the same manner, in line of company columns covered by clouds of skirmishers. Strange to relate, in every instance these company columns were repulsed by single lines of English troops, and the whole story of the day is one of repeated repulse by single lines, of both company and battalion columns covered by a powerful fire of artillery.

It is true that the line system of fighting is not adapted for all troops. In this same battle the line proved fallacious with a French regiment, which faltered and broke when it was in line, and stood well enough when formed in column of attack—our double column. It requires firm, stubborn troops, with the old Berserker spirit, men ready to stand and fight to the last gasp, if it is their duty, no matter what the odds may be. With such men the line develops its real superiority over the column, be it large or small, covered with skirmishers or not. But the story of Inkerman show that, fighting in line against masses in column, one against six or seven, the more officers present the better. It is rare for the men to run if they see their officers encouraging them to stand. Before we resolve to adopt the Prussian company and the company column with its few officers for our model, it may be well to wait and see if that organization would stand the test of an overwhelming assault, as at Inkerman, any better than our own old style which conquered the company column on that day of slaughter.—*Army and Navy Journal*.

The new Austrian field gun is described by the *Cologne Gazette*. As soon as the old-fashioned system of muzzle loading field artillery is given up by that country, there will be little difference between the guns of Austria and Germany; although, of course, the former is not in a position to compete with the latter in the production of large numbers of field pieces. The new gun has its tube or barrel of cast steel, and the system of manufacture adopted is that known as the ring-construction. Several steel rings are placed whilst hot upon the after part of the gun, which is, as we have said, itself formed of the same material; these rings contract in cooling, and, like the tire of a carriage wheel, closely embrace the ground work, and thus add great strength to that part of the weapon which most needs it. The breach of the gun is formed by a "cylindro-prismatic" or circular end, which is of great simplicity and is an invention of Krupp's. The contrivance is marked not only by an extreme power of resistance, but by the facility with which it is worked. The orifice of ignition differs from the old "touch-hole" which has been in vogue during so many centuries, in passing transversely through the after part of the gun and the breach into the chamber which contains the charge. The form of the projectile is not yet settled, but the powder adopted is coarse, the grains being from six to ten millimetres in size. This powder burns slowly, but as the strain upon the gun is much less, the charges are able to be made much larger, and a velocity half as large again as the usual one is expected to be gained. This principle is, of course, well known to the English artillerymen.