

INFANTRY TACTICS AND THE ORDER OF BATTLE.

The following excellent paper on infantry tactics and the order of battle, is from the *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, to which work it has been contributed by Lieut.-Colonel W. J. Williams, of the Royal Artillery:—

1. *Swarms of Skirmishers and Extended Supports.*

Some of our students of tactics now recommended to us swarms of skirmishers and ranks of opened out files in support. No closed formation, it is said, can live under fire; we must attack and defend, especially we must attack, with swarms of skirmishers; and supports must be extended. These opinions seem to us to be zealous exaggerations. In their impatience of our old steady drill, and of our regulation of withdrawing skirmishers that we may have a steady line in front, some of our reformers are carried too far. They go with those German authors who have departed farthest from what is still the German regulation; we would rather hold with him who inspired the "retrospect of the retrospect." It was the German regulation which prevailed against the French army; the closer order of battle was tried only against the levies which France put into the field after her army was lost.

If we examine the theories of swarms of skirmishers and of opened out supports, we find both theories wanting. Swarms of skirmishers is not a much safer formation in line; and opened-out supports must suffer as much as supports with closed files. It is difficult to fix the exact meaning of swarms of skirmishers; but we may fairly suppose that swarms of skirmishers would cover about the same front as would be covered by the same number of men in line. If the skirmishers were not equally distributed along their front, and as their loss, at that particular time, would be a little less than the loss of a line; but the tendency would be to an equal distribution along the front, and as the skirmishers should be more equally distributed, they would suffer more loss. That the theory for opening out the files of supports to attain to greater safety is fallacious, becomes evident to us by the consideration that in infantry fighting supports are not aimed at. By rain of fire passing over the skirmishers a company of 100 men in support would suffer equally, whether it were on a front of 40 paces or of 80, or of 120; each file will still be in the rain.

There is no doubt that the term "skirmishing swarms," not swarms of skirmishers gives a true picture of what the Germans saw when they looked at their first line in close battle. They saw that their first line, with its reinforcements all in, had lost its organization of companies; and they saw that the men did not try to dress in ranks, but worked their way here and there in groups. This disorder was properly named the "skirmisher-swarm." We do not deny the power of the skirmisher-swarm; but we believe that swarms of skirmishers, sent out at first, would be wasted by fire until they were powerless. We allow that no regular formation can be maintained in the front line of battle; but we deny the necessity and the advisableness of adopting a loose array for our supports.

The true principle of modern Infantry tactics is to expose few men to the fire of the enemy, until the enemy being close to us, or we being close to the enemy, our strength is wanted. The object is to

bring our strength close to the enemy. The issue must be decided, now as heretofore, by the threatening advance of superior numbers ready with the bayonet.

11. *Necessary Change in our Tactics.*

The new conditions of musketry fire necessitate one chief change in our infantry tactics. We must cease to close skirmishers on their supports, and to assemble skirmishers on their reserve.

Our field exercise aims at securing to us the effective delivery of our musketry fire; little or no care has been taken to provide against unnecessary loss in our ranks from the fire of the enemy. The regulations give us skirmishers in front of our line; but the skirmishers are to run away to the rear, when the enemy comes close to them, or when they come close to the enemy. At what distance from the enemy are our skirmishers to run away and leave our line bare? The flight of skirmishers, near the enemy, would ruin the steadiness of our line, if it did not immediately cause disaster. If our skirmishers were to come back to us at any safe distance from the enemy, our line would be exposed to the fire of skirmishers, and we would suffer more loss than we should inflict. In either case, we could deliver no fire during the flight of our skirmishers, whilst the fire of the enemy would not cease. We must never withdraw our skirmishers. Our skirmishers must be the first to meet the enemy. To make our skirmishers strong enough to meet the enemy, we must reinforce them. The skirmishers, reinforced by all that may be left of the battalion, must fight in a skirmisher swarm, that is to say, in line without regard to organization of Companies and without regard to dressing. We must not be disturbed by the sight of our skirmishers running away round our flanks to the rear; our minds should be filled with the idea of advancing.

III. *Order of Battle of a Brigade.*

A brigade should consist of three or of six battalions, because the normal order of battle of a brigade is three lines of equal strength. We will suppose a brigade consists of three battalions. A battalion should consist of eight companies; a company should consist of sixty files.

The normal order of battle of a brigade is three lines of one battalion each. In the open there should be a distance of 300 yards between the first and second and between the second and third lines. In the open, and under fire, our first battalion would be exposed to unnecessary loss if the whole of it were placed in front from the commencement; we should therefore divide our first battalion on three lines. In the open then, and under fire, our brigade would stand on five lines. In front would be the two flank companies of the first battalion, at 150 yards in their rear would be Nos. 2 and 7 companies of the same battalion as supports, and at 150 yards in rear of the supports the remaining companies of the battalion in reserve. At 300 yards in rear of the reserve of the first line would be the second battalion in second line. A 300 yards in rear of the second line would be the third battalion in third line. The two flank companies of the first battalion should be extended on a line of 400 paces, the proper front of a battalion and of a brigade; the companies in support should remain, each company, in closed line the companies in reserve should be in line. The second and third battalions should be in lines. The brigade would thus stand on a front of 400 paces; and in the open, and

under fire, but distant from the enemy, the brigade would have a depth of 900 yards.

In this order of battle there is nothing new to our field exercise. We are accustomed to see a brigade formed with its three battalions on one line, or at most, on two lines; but these shallow formations are due to our practice of holding too great a front, and of dispensing, partly or wholly, with second or third lines. Shallow formations would avail us, and would perhaps be necessary, against a numerous enemy, inferior in morale and in arms; but only the deeper formation of battalion in rear of battalion could give us the chance of showing the value of our soldiers in a fair field against an enemy worthy of our best endeavours.

IV. *Defence.*

In the open, a brigade would stand in its defence in five lines ordered as above stated. The flank companies of the first battalion would stand on the line intended to be defended. All the formations would be in line, except the two companies in front, which would be extended on a line of 400 paces. In this order the brigade would remain under the cannon fire preceding the attack of the enemy. This first cannon fire would be aimed mostly at our guns, which would be in line with and on the flanks of our two companies in front. Our infantry would suffer very little from this first fire; whilst they would all be near enough to come up in time to meet the enemy on the line selected for defence.

Our infantry should still be withheld as long as possible from the cannon fire, which the enemy would bring to bear upon us from his second artillery positions taken up nearer to our front. Only upon the appearance of the infantry of the enemy within 700 yards of our front, should two companies commence to fire and our nearest formations commence to close up. Although they would still for some time be exposed to the cannon fire which the enemy would direct upon us across the front of his attack, our second and third lines must commence their advance as soon as our two companies have opened fire.

Upon the nearer approach of the enemy it would be necessary to reinforce our two companies with the supports; to move up the supports nearer to the skirmishers, and the reserve nearer to the supports; to reinforce the skirmishers with two more companies, and then to throw the two remaining companies into the skirmisher swarm. These reinforcements should not be made too soon. Meanwhile, the second and third lines should have continued their advance, and in doing so the third line have much lessened its distance from the second line. The third line, on approaching the front should form double company columns. Upon the arrival of the second line at a distance of fifty yards from the front, and the arrival of the third line at fifty yards from the second line, both lines should advance. The first line, in skirmisher-swarm, would then get up and lead the charge.

As we are here considering the fighting of a brigade only with reference to a certain order of battle, we do not propose to treat of attacks on a flank of the enemy striving to break in upon our front. We shall content ourselves with saying that some action against a flank of the attack of the enemy is almost necessary to the safety of the defence.

V. *Attack.*

In the open, a brigade should advance with its three battalions deployed in three