

ON THE BEST DETAIL FORMATION FOR
THE NEW INFANTRY TACTICS.

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As our system of Infantry tactics has up to the present time been so extremely mathematical in its character, and as it is evident that we are on the eve of a tactical revolution, there is need to keep in view two things; first, when a revolution is imminent there is no risk of ill considered modes of carrying out changes that are advisable in principle being adopted; and second, that the effect of a revolution in which such errors occur is generally to produce an equally indiscreet restoration. I say this, because, from all one hears and reads about "the Prussian system," it would appear as if many were falling down and worshipping the German tactics of 1870-71, with the excitement and blind zeal of devotees, instead of examining them dispassionately with a critical eye, and improving upon them if possible. The success of the Germans does not prove that their tactics were perfect in detail, it only proves that they were based on good general principles; and the circumstances in which they were developed make it most unlikely that they were completely matured and perfected. For they were introduced after the war had begun, when it was found that the old mode of fighting would not do, and therefore they were adopted in the very heat of the struggle, when it is not easy to elaborate a system, and when, if the system taken up, however crude it might be, was found to serve the purpose at the time, most probably it would be adhered to, as it was; for no General who found his system doing his work efficiently in actual war would be likely to try experimental operations in presence of the enemy. Besides all this, there was no true opportunity of testing how the system would work in detail in the event of disaster. It would be much more easy to accept the new German tactics wholesale, had we had an opportunity of seeing how they worked in the case of an army obliged to retire under defeat. Had the French been successful in a few important engagements, it would then have been known practically how the Prussian system was suited to produce an orderly and well executed retreat. Tactics are as much, if not more needed to prevent disaster becoming destruction, than to make success triumphant. Therefore there is need to be cautious how we adopt entire, principle and detail together, a system, the character of which is so novel that one hears it talked of as "swarms of skirmishers," "systematic disorder," "organised disorder," &c. &c. It is quite evident, that just in proportion as the principles of the new system necessitate *disarrangement*—I use this expression as a more correct one than *disorder*—so is it essential that the greatest care should be taken to adjust the tactical component parts of an army, in order as much as possible to prevent disarrangement leading to disorder in the true sense. And in order to do this it is necessary to endeavor to find out; not so much what is the best system, looking to the peculiarities of the country, the nation, and the army. National characteristics must be considered. A system which may be the best for an army raised by conscription may not be so suitable for one raised by

voluntary enlistment. A system adapted to an army the regiments of which are not much moved about from place to place, may be most unsatisfactory when applied to an army the regiments of which are constantly being moved. Any peculiarity in the mode of officering a force may be an important element in fixing the detail part of its tactics. And lastly, as the primary duty of an army in the defence of the country to which it belongs, the tactical detail of its system of manœuvring should be that best suited to the peculiarities of the country, whether those be natural, or the result of the mode of laying out and fencing adopted by the inhabitants.

It is most earnestly to be hoped that the compilers of the next "Field Exercise" will not adopt anything from the Prussian system merely because that system was in the main successful, and this for two reasons. First, because it is undoubtedly crude, and not tested in a very crucial manner, as the French only fought against it when to a great extent they were already demoralized; and second, because the detail part of tactics ought to vary in accordance with national peculiarities and local specialities. This does not mean that the details are to be fixed on merely because the most suitable for the particular country; but it may often happen that there are two ways in which a matter of detail may be done, both of which would be held equally good when considered as to their suitability for general service, but of which one might be vastly superior for purposes of national defence, looking to the peculiarities of a country and its people. In such a case there could be no question as to which it would be advisable to adopt. And therefore I say again, it is most earnestly to be hoped, that while the tactical principles which have proved themselves good are followed, all matters of detail should be separately and carefully considered, and none should be adopted except such as, being suited for modern warfare generally, are, at the same time, the best suited to our special national circumstances.

I shall now state briefly what are the general principles, as it humbly appears to me, upon which our infantry tactics ought to be based, in consequence of the altered conditions resulting from the increased precision and range of fire arms. After the principles have been laid down, the mode by which it is proposed to work them out in detail will be stated. In the first place, I would suggest, as a fundamental principle never to be departed from, that the company should be a complete skirmishing body in itself—skirmishers, support and reserve. (1) Under the old system, which is to be superseded, in which skirmishing was only preliminary to battle, and not a substantial part the battle itself, there might be no harm in scattering a whole company into a long line which often covered several hundred yards of ground. They were not intended to stay out for protracted fighting. But such

* Since this was written, I have seen in Colonel Gawler's latest work the following:—"The War caught the Germans in their columns, and they got some startling lessons. It was too late to practise the line, or to get their skirmishers better in hand, so, with admirable good sense, they adopted the skirmishers swarm. The success of the loose and very extended formations adopted by the Germans, was certainly owing to the demoralization of the French, and the raw levies which had filled up the gaps in their ill-provided army."

(2) Since the above was written I have seen the same idea strongly urged in an article in the *Standard*, which confirms me in the opinion, as the military articles of that paper are undoubtedly among the very best that appear, and are evidently the work of a good master of the art of war.

a plan is obviously unsuitable, if the "swarm of skirmishers" is to be, or even may be, the fighting form of the actual and decisive engagement. It is evident that there is no way in which a company could be arranged which would more prevent it being under control of its captain, than to spread it all out into a long thin line, and engage the whole of it at once with the enemy. If he is really to be, as he ought to be, the controlling spirit of his company when fighting, he would need most herculean bodily powers to enable him to run about so as to see how his long thin line was working, whenever they left flat and open ground, that being the very time when his control is most needed. (m) And however active he might be, he could never accomplish the feat of being in two places at one and the same time. A slight undulation, or a clump of trees, may shut out half his command from view, and while he is looking after his widely scattered brood, the other half may get astray all together. This was often illustrated during the late Autumn Manœuvres, although they were fought in an exceptionally open country, the long line of one company in skirmishing order often got quite out of control of its captain, in consequence of the nature of the ground, and sometimes a great part of it disappeared altogether from his view and was lost to him during the rest of the fight. And often, from the same cause, the line of skirmishers being so long, the connection between supports and large portions of the skirmishers were totally lost.

(m) I believe that in the Kaffir war, in which most of the fighting was in extended order, captains of companies suffered terribly from the over exertion caused by their having to look after a whole company extended, and often they could not do it at all.

[To be Continued.]

IS ENGLAND "EFFACED"?

Events change so rapidly that deliberate judgments are reversed by the logic of facts, and questions fools put but wise men cannot answer are seen to be silly and puerile in the light of subsequent disclosures. We are all victimised by opinions and predilections, and when we are most vigorous in assertion we are frequently less than ever in possession of the truth. Take two examples. Russia has just published some papers bearing on the secret history of the Crimean war. They show a singular delusion as to the enmity of France and the friendship of England. What Russia feared most was not Great Britain, but the Second Empire. Prince Menschikoff assumed "a certain identity of views" between Russia and England. He was never more mistaken in his life, as events have proved. Lord Aberdeen drifted into war, and the English nation was roused in condemnation of his imbecile administration. It meant to fight and beat Russia, and it succeeded. The second example is more modern. Two years ago certain impudent critics gabbled about "the effacement of England." They found believers, as even constructors of mermadies will, amongst English speaking peoples. Germany had crushed France, and wrested from her the two brave provinces whence she drew her best soldiers. England stood by, consenting to the spoil, fearful of the Teuton, dreading the Junkers, loving only her money bags and cotton bales. Since then the *Atadama* and the San Juan awards have gone against us. Are we one whit the worse? Our critics are silenced. They had a taste of English feeling when the indirect claims