Royal United Services Institution. Journal

Publication details, including instructions for
authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rusi19>

Training Recruits at Regimental Depots

Major A. W. A. Pollock 2nd Provisional Battalion

Published online: 11 Sep 2009.

To cite this article: Major A. W. A. Pollock 2nd Provisional Battalion (1902) Training Recruits at Regimental Depots, Royal United Services Institution. Journal, 46:291, 676-683, DOI: [10.1080/03071840209419005](https://doi.org/10.1080/03071840209419005)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071840209419005>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan,

sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

TRAINING RECRUITS AT REGIMENTAL DEPOTS.

By Major A. W. A. POLLOCK, 2nd Provisional Battalion.

IT has been announced that the whole system of training recruits at the depôts is under consideration, and that in due course an improved scheme will be promulgated. The authorities have doubtless consulted many officers who have had practical experience in such work, and it would therefore be useless to add any further proposals to the number that must already have been submitted. Yet it may be of some service to describe the plan which I myself actually carried out during the two years that I served as Major of the depôt of my own regiment, from October, 1896, to October, 1898.

It has always been my view that a recruit at a depôt is in much the same position as a boy at a private school; and that just as we send our sons to be "grounded" at a small school, so as to fit them for a great one, so the recruit at the depôt ought within a given period to learn more than could be taught at the headquarters of his regiment during the same space of time, for the simple reason that he has, or should have, a far greater amount of individual instruction. Actually the utter ignorance of everything beyond the barrack square, and the very inferior knowledge even of drill and manual exercise, displayed by recruits on joining the battalion from the depôt, had consistently astounded me; but with only this result that I became convinced that the fault lay with the instructors. I had never served at the depôt as subaltern or captain, and when I was sent there as a major my mind was full of schemes for the expulsion of the useless drones whom I expected to find. This was because I had no knowledge of the actual procedure, but only of the results. Fortunately, I kept my own counsel for several days, contenting myself with observing what went on. At the end of a week I assembled the drill instructors and explained to them my views of the situation, which were these: I had expected to find lazy and inefficient non-commissioned officers, but actually I had found them generally zealous and efficient; one, at least, being up to the very highest standard that I had ever met in the regiment or out of it. Upon the other hand, I had discovered the reasons why the recruits were ill-trained, which were simply that "duties" were permitted to keep them from parade; and further

that the little time actually spent on parade was wasted, partly by a slavish observance of the official "system," and partly owing to the use of squads for the education of young officers, for whose needs "rope-drill" would answer the purpose equally well. The "system" being followed to the letter, resulted in stupid men being rushed on to work for which they were unfit, merely because they had spent a certain number of weeks at the dépôt, whilst the men in the "first squad," instead of receiving the final polish that they needed, were kept standing nominally at attention, but actually standing as they pleased, whilst young Militia officers stuttered and stammered over yards of "detail." I went to the colonel, and from him obtained a "free hand," subject only to my consulting him before making any innovation glaringly contrary to regulations or custom. The measures adopted were as follows:—

1. Every recruit, even if one of the senior batch, and therefore liable for "guard," must have a certain amount of training every working day of his life except Saturday, and the utmost amount possible within the maximum number of hours.

2. No recruit to be put on any fatigue or other duty on any pretence whatever, so long as there was an old soldier alive in barracks to do the duty.

3. In order the better to secure the reality of the foregoing, the weekly drills of old soldiers were abolished, and their parades reduced to one per month—"monthly musketry" and half-an-hour's drill. The result was excellent as regarded the recruits' training, but worked ill in another respect. At the next general's inspection the recruits were not asked to show their skill on parade, or on the drill field, but the old soldiers were directed to perform bayonet exercise in "quick time"—in marching order—and naturally failed to give satisfaction. The dépôt was badly reported upon to the War Office, but we did not care.

4. Recruits were no longer passed to higher squads by length of service, but by merit, and every man passed upwards was promoted by myself personally, on the barrack square or drill field, before the eyes of his comrades, whenever I considered him fit for advancement. This produced emulation. In rare cases I also caused careless men to revert under circumstances of similar publicity.

5. In gymnastics, as in drill, length of service was ignored, and men were passed upwards or kept back as their strength or cleverness dictated. No man, at drill or gymnastics, was permitted to attempt—so to speak—to spell "Constantinople" until he had shown his ability to spell "cat."

6. The instructors were told off to the different classes of instruction that they were severally most competent to undertake. It requires

one sort of man to tackle the yokel at his first drill, and another to put the final polish on to the already fairly smart recruit.

7. The teachings of Prince Kraft were followed in the idea that by gymnastics and "setting-up drill" you must first make the yahoo into a man, and then with comparative ease proceed to make him a soldier. The improved regulations of 1897 having this end in view, did not oblige me to alter anything. It so happened that my hours for gymnastics and for drill coincided exactly, as well as the division of the duty for each purpose.

8. My theory was, and is, that it is during the very earliest period of his service that most can be done to teach the recruit his "duties in the field." He is keen to learn, because soldiering is new to him, and he has not been sickened by endless guards and fatigues. By reading to him the accounts of hard-fought British battles and pointing out simple lessons from them, telling him things and catechising him upon them, at lectures and at odd times when squads are "standing easy, a great amount of indispensable knowledge can be imparted. In so far as regarded "lectures," I disobeyed the regulations of 1897, by which the officers' lectures were abolished.

9. I took the entire charge of the Line recruits upon myself, the adjutant devoting his attention to the Militia. The Line officers of the depôt assisted me by doing what I directed them to do, but I left them no initiative. For example, if I was wasting valuable time in the canteen I would request a particular officer to superintend this or that which I had ordered to be done by one of the squads, or to lecture for me upon a particular subject on set lines. But I never avoidably permitted the canteen or other institutions to interfere with my personal attendance at drill or exercises.

10. The regulations of 1897 having abolished the teaching of firing exercises, and a rude knowledge of these being needful for "extended order drills," I arranged with the officer commanding the home battalion that skill in laying down kits should no longer be expected of the recruits. Thus I gained one hour per week, and devoted it to firing exercises. From the time that the recruit received his rifle, he showed no kit until about a week before leaving with a draft; and whilst the younger recruits were laying down and showing kits, the more advanced squads spent their time at firing exercises and drill in marching order.

11. During my two years at the depôt only one route march took place, and this was because neither I myself nor any other officer was available to conduct a tactical exercise.

On route marching days we always had what I have called a "tactical exercise," but what might more accurately be described as a game of hide-and-seek. A simple scheme was prepared and posted with a map of the

ground in the recreation room. From half-a-dozen to a dozen natives of the chosen locality went out and were supposed to represent hostile scouts, whilst the rest of the recruits advanced as reconnoitring parties from Taunton. Every lane and field-path would be known to the scouts, whilst their opponents would be strangers to the country. The scouts tried to get through, the others tried to capture them. The recruits enjoyed themselves, and had plenty of wholesome exercise of a 'usefully instructive character. They learned to "see and hear without being seen or heard."

I remember one scout being caught under amusing circumstances. He had been sighted and lost; but one of his comrades who had been captured shortly before gave him away by an indiscreet remark to a fellow-prisoner, which was overheard. A cottage was visited, and the "scout" was found having a comfortable dinner with his mother!

The idea of these "exercises" was similar to that of "Reading without Tears," or "Philosophy in Sport"—but I think that it answered the purpose intended.

12. Outpost drills and the setting out of advanced and rear guards, etc., were practised on the barrack square, and from time to time the knowledge gained was given a chance of practical application by means of outposts or other exercises in the country carried out in conjunction with the local Volunteers. The old soldiers of the depôts and the Militia recruits were employed also in these exercises. The organisation of picquets, etc., was arranged so that every group, patrol, etc., should include the maximum and minimum of original knowledge. A group would, for example, contain one old soldier (group leader), two first line squad, two second line squad, and one Militiaman; or a reconnoitring patrol, one old soldier and two or three recruits.

13. Except in the case of gymnastics and exercises for the practice of "duties in the field," no parade was avoidably confined to any single subject. Recruits get sick of being kept too long at the same work, and, therefore, variety was always introduced so far as possible—say, ten minutes at manual exercise, and then ten minutes' other drill of some sort. Catechisms on duties in the field, or other branches of knowledge, always took place during the intervals of "standing easy."

The general plan adopted has been described, and it now only remains to describe the method employed for teaching particular subjects—on the barrack square and on the ground. I need scarcely say that the "black board" in the lecture room was regarded as an important aid to preliminary instructions.

Field Signals.—The squads were formed as for bayonet exercise, and the signals performed by word of command. Those who knew the signals made them as ordered, and those who did not copied the actions

of those who were more advanced in their course of instruction. Bugle sounds were frequently given with the order for a signal, and thus the recruits learned the field calls and signals simultaneously.

Extended Order Drill (elementary).—Ten minutes or quarter of an hour before the conclusion of a parade the first squad would be formed in single rank on the grass, and the other recruits, including men in plain clothes who might have appeared on parade that day for the very first time, were placed as a rear rank. Selected men of the second squad took front rank places if necessary. The front rank was then turned about, so that each man of a file should recognise the other. The front rank man was responsible that he went right himself, and made his rear rank man go right also. I then stood at one end of the square and by whistle and signal put the squad through all the signal work applicable to movements in extended order. The flank men of sections were always selected; and with this safeguard there was never any difficulty. Everything except advancing and retiring was always done at the double.

Extended Order Drill (advanced).—The first squad was organised in permanent groups on the usual regimental system. If any man was absent upon account of sickness or any other cause there was a blank file in his group. If two men were absent the remaining two joined the group next to them for tactical purposes, or in case of forming fours became an "odd file." The squad then proceeded to practise extending from fours at the double on emerging from a defile (the passage leading to the officers' quarters or some other convenient defile), and the extensions made were to the front or obliquely as ordered. They would also extend man by man from behind cover or rally on cover. (See lecture by Major A. W. A. Pollock at the R.U.S. Institution, March 3rd, 1898, and reprinted in Appendix III., "Simple Lectures for Company Field Training.") These last movements were always covered by the fire of successive sections. Recruits commanded sections, whilst the instructors merely corrected mistakes in words of command, or in the execution of them. These exercises were performed, in short spells, on the grass by the barrack square, so that the other recruits might see how things ought to be done, or during more prolonged lessons on the drill-field when the instruction was fully carried through the general course of what may be termed the drill of attack and defence—that is to say the art of performing the drill movements required at the moment for a particular tactical purpose, with rapidity and precision. "Casualties" were freely made, and these men brought up again as reinforcements, cast pell-mell into the firing-line.

Outpost Drills.—The recruits marched to the drill field with an advanced guard—of which more hereafter—and were then disposed as a picquet furnishing a proportionate number of groups (six men). The

imaginary positions of adjacent picquets and of the flank groups belonging to them were pointed out to the squad before the dispositions were made. The squad was then told off into groups, reconnoitring and visiting patrols, and relief for sentry over arms. The spare men forming the main body of the picquet were represented by a "flag," with an instructor provided with paper and pencil. The duty of this non-commissioned officer was to take down all reports received from the front and to give instruction to all men temporarily or permanently at the post of the picquet. The groups, each with a non-commissioned officer, then marched to their posts and mounted double sentries, the exercise being assumed to be as for night duty. The non-commissioned officer with each group instructed and catechised, but a recruit was the actual group leader. The reconnoitring and visiting patrols were sent out with non-commissioned officers or old soldiers in charge. I went round, asked questions and gave instructions. In my pocket I had ready on paper a series of scraps of information that groups were supposed to have discovered—such as a "shot fired apparently near such and such a place"; "sound of wheels somewhere else"; "voices in another direction"; or that a "prisoner had been taken." It was the business of the group-leader to send back such information to the picquet where the non-commissioned officer in charge took it down in writing. Afterwards we compared the information acquired with the information actually reported.

The beauty of the "outpost drill" is that all concerned see the whole thing, and thus get a knowledge of the entire machinery.

Outpost Exercises.—A simple scheme would be set and displayed with a map of the ground in the recreation room upon the day before it was ordered to take place. A line within stated boundaries was occupied, and a few chosen men well acquainted with the country were sent out to represent hostile scouts. Reconnoitring patrols searched the ground in front of the outpost line, and visiting patrols made good the intervals between any widely extended posts. This was all that could be done by day, owing to the lack of a sufficient enemy. In night work, upon the other hand, more extensive operations were frequently possible by co-operation with the local Volunteers. The Taunton companies of the 2nd V.B. often combined with the depôt in forming a section of outposts against the Wellington company of the same battalion, or *vice versa*. Much useful work was done in this way.

Advanced and Rear Guard Drills.—Sometimes instead of an extended order drill during or at the conclusion of a parade, an advanced or rear guard would be disposed on the barrack square, and the men of each portion of it catechised and instructed as to what they themselves and the other small bodies were intended to be and for what purposes.

Advanced guards always preceded parties marching from the barracks to the drill field.

There were many windings and twistings on the route, and so men were taught the system of keeping touch with the units behind them. With the "Point" marched an instructor provided with a series of signals written down on paper, such as "no enemy in sight"; "enemy in sight"; "enemy in force"; "enemy advancing"; "enemy halted"; "enemy moving to his right"; "halt"; "enemy retiring"; "advance"; "double"; "enemy retiring at the double"; etc. These signals were passed to the rear, and taken down on paper by an instructor marching with the support. Then, when the squad had formed up on the drill field the signals sent back were compared with the signals received. This done the squads proceeded with the attack or outpost drill that they had marched out to perform. Finally, when returning to barracks, a rear guard drill was similarly arranged.

Enough has, I think, been said to explain the procedure employed. I was told that I was only wasting time and that the recruits would speedily forget. The critics proved wrong. When the battalion proceeded to Aldershot the knowledge displayed by the young soldiers at the first outpost exercise of the brigade was noticed and remarked upon by the general officer commanding. I was also told that the ordinary drill would suffer. Actually I was repeatedly informed by the officer commanding the home battalion that both in parade drill in general and in handling their arms a very marked improvement was observed. This was simply because by means of being given variety, the recruits were not bored, and the additional instruction introduced was, I think it will be admitted, of a useful description. Finally, it may be added, that in the "Progress Return" sent with each draft it was marked against each man's name, in red ink, what squad he had belonged to at the depôt (1st, 2nd, or 3rd), (a) at drill, (b) at gymnastics; and it was also indicated by a large or small "M" whether he had run the mile in or under the seven minutes in drill order or without arms. Small prizes were given for the final trial at the mile, which took the form of a race; and the boys were immensely keen about it. A single example will suffice. The mile was to be run on a Monday morning. Private Rabjohns, whose home was four miles distant, wanted a pass from Saturday to Monday. It was July, and the mile was to be run at 7 a.m. I gave the pass. Rabjohns turned up and ran his mile in 6 mins. 21 secs. in drill order *by himself*, as he elected to so run after a short rest upon his arrival in barracks. This performance shows that the recruits entered into the spirit of their training. I shall never forget the remark made by a delighted Militia recruit when watching a man scouting: "Look on thic man, he be a workin' thickey hadge for all like a tarrier dorg."

Depend upon it, the time when the soldier can best be taught his "duties in the field" is at the very commencement of his career. He can and should learn at the depôt the entire foundation of his future efficiency as a fighting man. Afterwards he only needs opportunities for putting into practice the elementary knowledge already gained. What applies to the soldier applies equally to his officer, who should be treated at Sandhurst on the same lines as the recruit at a depôt.