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LIGHT INFANTRY: A SUGGESTION!

By Captain C. C. PEARSON, 2nd Bn. Oxfordshire Light Infantry.

THE British Army differs from all other European Armies in one particular, viz., that, while it possesses no infantry battalions specially trained and equipped for purposes of superior mobility, the principle of having a portion more mobile than the rest is duly recognised with the other arms. Thus we have "light" in addition to "medium" and "heavy" cavalry, and "horse" as well as "field" artillery.

In the infantry, however, all corps are equally mobile or immobile. Now, without doubt, the necessity for a lighter—a more mobile—infantry has constantly made itself felt.

The mounted infantry soldier and, more recently, the attempts to train a few men of each company of a battalion as "scouts," are the outcome of this crying need for light infantry.

Just as the present war in South Africa has brought into prominence the utility of mobile infantry in the form of "mounted infantry," so the series of campaigns on the North-West Frontier of India in 1897-8 has taught us the advantage—nay, the necessity—of mobile infantry as specially trained and selected "scouts."

At the hill manoeuvres near Attock (1899), in India, the experiment was tried of banding the scouts of a battalion together to act as a "scout company." The scout companies of the brigade were also formed into a "scout battalion," or, in other words, a light infantry battalion—an instance of history repeating itself, the light companies of regiments having been similarly treated during the American War of Independence. In fact, one has only to study the history of the British Army to find that at all times this need of mobile infantry has been manifest. It is no new need.

The former "dragoon" was merely the present mounted infantry soldier under another name, and somewhat differently equipped. He fought on foot, as does the mounted infantry soldier of to-day, and his horse was simply a means of conveying him rapidly from one place to another. Again, from towards the end of the eighteenth century until after the Crimean War, infantry battalions—other than fusilier and light infantry regiments—had both a "grenadier" and "light" company.

In 1803, when England was threatened with invasion, certain regiments of infantry were brigaded at Shorncliffe, where, under the eye of Sir John Moore, they were perfected in a new system of drill and manoeuvre, and the "light division," thus started, afterwards became famous throughout Europe. It is interesting, yet disappointing, to reflect that England, where the light infantry idea was brought to such perfection, is at the present day without a single real light infantry regiment in her Army! We have, indeed, regiments which bear the title.

1 Originated, some say.
of "light infantry," or of "rifles," and some of them have, with a certain measure of success, attained to some standard of efficiency as "light infantry"; but these so-called light infantry regiments, as a rule, differ very little from other infantry.

The question of the permanent establishment of mobile infantry will, in all probability, be raised at no distant date. Mounted infantry, light infantry regiments, the re-introduction of light companies will all have their advocates, but our present experiences in South Africa will naturally prove the best guide as to the future organisation of our mobile infantry.

It is with the hope of drawing attention to the subject that this paper has been written, and the following scheme for the organisation of a light infantry battalion offered for consideration.

The light infantry battalion herewith proposed is a combination of the light infantry and mounted infantry regiment; its strength and tactical divisions as laid down for an infantry battalion; but, as far as it can be done, the recruits should be selected for activity and general intelligence. It might be advisable perhaps to enlist them provisionally, so that any men who were unable to qualify in the special course of training required for an up-to-date light infantry-man could be relegated to other infantry regiments (of their own choice) where such qualifications are less needed. The light infantry soldier, when thoroughly trained, should receive a higher rate of pay than the ordinary linesmen. He would be well worth it.

One of the companies of the battalion to be equipped and trained as mounted infantry; one to be carried on "field cars"; the remaining six on foot.

These field cars to be built after the fashion of the Irish car, but their exact pattern and carrying capacity would have to be carefully thought out. Their primary object, of course, would be to carry a company of the battalion speedily to any spot where their services may be required, or as near to it as vehicles can be taken. They should, therefore, be specially constructed for going across country like a field gun. 2 Another

1 Should it be decided to train a certain number of men as scouts in all infantry regiments they should be paid at the same rate.

2 The ordinary Irish car, constructed to hold two persons on each side, besides the driver in front, with kits, etc., in the well, would require only one horse, even though its weight was somewhat increased by the vehicle being strengthened for going across country.

The number of cars might be materially reduced, but without altering the establishment of horses, by using a two-wheel car lengthened a few inches so as to hold three men on each side, one on a step-seat at the back, and an eighth man on the driver's box, widened for this purpose. Two horses would be required for such a vehicle, the due balancing of which it is calculated could be adjusted by a proper distribution of the contents of the well, kits, food, and spare ammunition. The men would, of course, hold their rifles upright between their knees.

Another vehicle of this class is the long car, which can carry twenty-two people, drawn by three or four horses, according to circumstances. These, if strengthened could go over any ground where heavy military carriages or wagons can be used.

The "wells" in all these cars should be deepened. Each kind has its advantages, but by experience and testing alone will it be possible to fix upon the best all-round vehicle for the service advocated in this paper.
use for the cars would be to carry working parties with all the necessary requisites for throwing up entrenchments, impeding an enemy's movements, especially during a retreat, and such-like operations. For carrying sick and tired men, and even a company at a time, they could also be utilised, and in this way the marching powers of the battalion would be materially increased, as it would be enabled to make long and rapid marches with a minimum of discomfort and fatigue. Probably it would be found most convenient to have one company permanently told off to the field cars, though it is obvious, for the reasons here given, that all the men of the battalion—except, of course, the mounted infantry company—should be exercised with them.

Whatever pattern car is selected, it would have to carry the arms and personal equipment of the passengers together with their food and spare ammunition. The car equipment should include sufficient entrenching tools, saws, axes, etc., for removing obstacles when the cars were proceeding across country. Trained drivers to be employed, who would have charge of the cars and their equipment together with the horses and harness. The car and mounted infantry horses (a portion of the latter to be provided with rope traces for assisting the car teams over difficult ground) should, as far as possible, be all trained to both harness and saddle work, so as to be available, if circumstances required, for either the mounted infantry or car company.

For personal equipment and uniform the following is suggested:

A light L.X. rifle of about 7 lbs. (experiments have been made in India with a rifle of this description with good results). A bandolier for ammunition.

A three-sided long bayonet with scabbard, to hang on a stout web waistbelt.

Two good sized, stout havresacks, the belts of which should pass under the waistbelt. One havresack to contain a shallow aluminium canteen in which the food could be packed and kept from damage; the other a flannel shirt, pair of socks, and drawers.

Greatcoat to be carried as at present—folded or en bandolier, as required.

Norfolk jacket with turn-down collar and large waist-pockets. Scarf (tied as a hunting scarf) round the neck and fastened with a safety-pin. This article would be useful as a bandage or sling.

Colonial hat or helmet, according to climate. Field cap as now worn.

Knickerbocker breeches (no braces).

"Spat" putties and shooting boots, but lighter than the "ammunition" boot.

Khaki, without doubt, should be the material for the "working kit," but for full dress the jacket or coat would, of course, be red; trousers as at present, and hat or helmet of dark green, with plume of the same colour for the former. Possibly—and it would be more economical—the same hat or helmet, with a close-fitting khaki cover, would do for the working kit.
With regard to his training, mobility, it must be remembered, is the sine qua non of the light infantry soldier. Every member of the battalion should, therefore, be an exceptionally good marcher—a result only to be attained by practice and due attention to the feet and foot-covering (socks and boots).

In modern warfare it has become necessary for all infantry soldiers to be instructed in the duties which, formerly, were the light infantry-man’s speciality. Nevertheless, we have been repeatedly reminded in this country—as already observed—of the need of large units (battalions) which, while being able to move swiftly to and fro, are really adepts at skirmishing, reconnoitring (including outpost duties, advance, flank and rear guards), and scouting. Each one of these duties requires careful and even elaborate training, more especially in the case of officers and sergeants, who, in addition, should be constantly practised in sketching ground rapidly and making short, readable, businesslike reports thereon and of the resources of a neighbourhood, estimating numbers, judging distances and finding the way across country with or without maps.

All this, to use a familiar expression, may appear a “tall order,” but the training herewith suggested should not be beyond the capability of an active and intelligent man.