This article was downloaded by: [New York University]
On: 09 January 2015, At: 23:07
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered
Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41
Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Royal United Services Institution. Journal

Publication details, including
instructions for authors and
subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rusi19>

A Review of the Improvements in Military Tactics and Formations in Germany during the Last Year (1873)

Colonel Ouvry Late C.B. ^a

^a 9th Royal Lancers

Published online: 11 Sep 2009.

To cite this article: Colonel Ouvry Late C.B. (1874) A Review of the Improvements in Military Tactics and Formations in Germany during the Last Year (1873), Royal United Services Institution. Journal, 18:78, 441-449, DOI: [10.1080/03071847409427090](https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847409427090)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071847409427090>

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>

have been turned when the battle began, the flight of the discomfited Romans would therefore have naturally been by their right flank towards Rome by Passignano, and finally where would have been the hills to the "*right and left of the pass*" described by the *most exact of all historians*, Polybius? who wrote at the time and visited the ground, and was to all intents a General himself, for the constant companion of Scipio could scarcely be less. The way in which the relative position of the armies *appears to me*, makes Polybius clear, and seems in no way discordant with Livy, while it saves Hannibal from the blame of having exposed his cavalry to destruction, had his infantry been defeated. Placed as I believe them to have been, they did the same work, and in case of defeat would have been able to make their retreat. I should like to examine the ground at leisure with Polybius, who may always be trusted, I think, and who is proved to be far more correct than Livy in all the marches of Hannibal over the Alps.

A REVIEW OF THE IMPROVEMENTS IN MILITARY TACTICS AND FORMATIONS IN GERMANY DURING THE LAST YEAR (1873).

(*Précis of an Article from the "Militair Wochenblatt."*)

By Colonel OUVRY, C.B., late 9th Royal Lancers.

THE past year may be described as rich in respect to the changes which have been made in the tactics and formations in the German Army consequent on the experiences of the last campaign.

If we look back on the period since the Austrian campaign, we find that, beside the work of organisation, tactics also have not been overlooked or neglected; and this fact may be clearly seen—

1st. With respect to the artillery, in the employment of its masses independently on the battle-field.

2ndly. With respect to the cavalry, in the investigation of the best methods for the field organisation of larger masses and their employment on reconnoissance duties in front of an army.

3rdly. With regard to the infantry, in the introduction of changed tactical formations, and a different method of employing that arm in action, many competent judges having entertained justifiable doubts whether the old forms could be retained any longer under the new conditions of breech-loader against breech-loader.

Much has been written concerning this latter point, and much thought and calm consideration has been given to it; the result being a very general opinion that the best solution lies in an *increased employment of the loose and dispersed mode of fighting*.

In the year 1869, instructions as to the employment of troops in action, for the use of superior Officers were issued, which, although not a common property of the army, sooner or later must have exercised an influence with respect to the simplification of formations and a more general employment of the dispersed method on the field of battle.

Up to the summer of 1870, however, it cannot be maintained that these modifications, the necessity for which were so apparent and generally acknowledged, had taken root permanently in the German infantry. Troops were still skilfully manœuvred in company-columns, and the details of skirmishing were perfectly carried out, but close-order formations were most frequently employed, and volley-firing zealously maintained. Then came the war of 1870 before the Germans had time to mature and bring into operation the new regulations.

The cavalry and artillery, which had taken most serious warning from the experiences of 1866 (*vide* "Tactical Retrospect," translated by the writer of this paper) came into the field with a system of tactics which were nearly perfect, and obtained, the former in reconnaissance service, and the latter on the field of battle, the most brilliant success.

The success of the infantry, it is true, was not inferior, since the decision of most of the battles remained with that arm,—but on isolated occasions, the tenacious employment of the close-order system, as well as on other occasions, a too extensive dispersion, which rendered leading impossible (on account of the larger masses which were let out of hand) was much to be deplored.

That infantry are the chief sufferers under fire in action has always been the case since the eighteenth century, but tactical forms and methods of attacking can do much to reduce this loss to its lowest possible measure. After 1871 again, the Army did not repose upon its laurels; the reorganisation regulations, published in 1870, were promulgated and given to the infantry in 1871.

But it soon became apparent that, although these regulations contained much that was excellent in the new sense with regard to real improvement, still they were not a full and complete expression of the experiences of 1870-71. Even in 1872, in the General Order of 4th July, new experiments in battle-formations for infantry were ordered to be made.

The war had given occasion for the appearance of a flood of military literature, in which those authors who had seen actual service, although proposing various expedients, all agreed that infantry tactics, as they had been re-constituted after 1866, required further changes in the direction of a more extensive employment of the dispersed system in action, and the more frequent exercise of the same in larger masses than had hitherto been the custom.

The formations, experimentally introduced in 1872, pointed to this, and also to the best means of obviating losses, or reducing them to the smallest possible figure, as the attacking infantry during the last war had suffered most painfully on many occasions.

It was thought possible to attain towards this point, not only by a strong development of skirmishing fire, but also by deploying the supports into a second line of skirmishers, or forming them into very

small closed sections, and by the adoption of the line-formation for whole battalions in the second line, and by file-formation of the supports immediately following.

But it was lost sight of, that the premature breaking up of the supports destroyed their character as such; that the splitting them up into small sections in close order took them out of the hands of the Officers; and that file formation was no protection in presence of an oblique fire; and, lastly, that the advance by battalions in line often caused great confusion on account of the nature of the ground.

In short, in the above expedients, it was apparent that every one of them was conceived in the sense of avoidance of loss, while too little consideration was given to the preservation of a simple tactical order.

The reports of the Generals Commanding must have very generally been an expression of the above remark, for in the year 1873 all that was good in the several propositions was retained, while that which was complicated or doubtful, was struck out and rejected. The General Order of the 29th March, 1873, is about the most important progressive step in infantry tactics which has been made during the last ten years; its principles may be thus shortly expressed:—

1st. An extensive employment of skirmishers and the company-column, which are the correct battle-forms for infantry. In the first line this formation should always be resorted to. In the second line, under circumstances, company columns may be formed, but the whole or half-battalion formation may also be employed. Under an artillery fire these battalions may be deployed into line. As a rule, the skirmishers should be thrown out *per saltum*, 50—100 paces to the front at the double on the plain.

The *direct* supports can also exceptionally follow the skirmishers, either in line or in sections; to break up the real supports, and deploy them into a second line, or their formation into sections in closed order, is not admissible.

It is further laid down in the above order that a cavalry attack, *even on an open plain*, as a rule may be repulsed while keeping the line formation; still the square is to be retained (and very properly) in some measure as a reserve formation.

At the same time a number of evolutions were definitively struck out of the line exercises of the infantry, which simplified them considerably, and an injunction was added, that the formations which had been retained as necessary and efficient, should be strictly observed with the greatest nicety and exactness. There is something very encouraging, when we see the opinions of intelligent and well-instructed bodies of Officers agreeing with, and greeting with pleasure, regulations from the highest authorities, as we find the German Officers did on this occasion.

In these orders, the mode of formation and methods of fighting appear to have been laid down and indicated with the greatest clearness and perspicuity.

Certainly the paragraphs in the regulations which treat on the line of battalions and the employment of columns formed on the centre

in action were not struck out; but still it was very clear that the employment of lines of battalions in the first line of the larger divisions of troops was wholly inadmissible, and the use of the column on the centre for a direct attack was to be regarded as a rare exception, and the exercise of such attacks was to be restricted to *very short distances*. The advance also of lines of half battalions into the line of skirmishers for the purpose of delivering volleys was rejected. The advance in lines of battalions was only (as their employment in that form in two or three lines was merely admissible to protect them under an artillery fire) to be undertaken without skirmishers, and this was to hold good at all inspections.

If now we were to put the question whether the General Order was acted up to, according to its essential spirit at all infantry exercises, we hold that it could only be answered affirmatively under much reserve; according to all report, in both the greater and the smaller exercises of the infantry, the old forms were much resorted to.

Firing lines of battalions, and skirmishers kept back behind the front "at call," were also to be remarked at these exercises, as well as occasionally the employment of the column on the centre, for an attack over a long stretch of ground.

At other places the order to form company columns was formally complied with, but they were only opened out to very small intervals, apparently in order not to let them out of hand. Such an opening out as this can serve no good purpose, for the mere word of command "form company columns," is in itself no talisman against shell and shrapnel; on the contrary, such a method of dotting over the plain with a number of small columns, separated only by very short intervals, could only result in an increase of the casualties from a hostile artillery. Many are of opinion that the column on the centre should not be rejected in all cases, as soon as the troops come within the zone of the artillery fire of the enemy; the inutility, however, of such a formation became very apparent since 1866, as soon as the range of effective musketry fire was reached. We consider, in the great majority of cases, it will be sufficient if the second line moves in half battalions and not in company columns.

The opening out for action of company columns with too small intervals, has often for result the crippling the full effect of the fire of the companies in critical moments and rendering it ineffective. This proceeding, which, according to the correspondence now before us, has been very general (we speak only of exercises and not field manœuvres), clearly shows that the tactical orders of March, 1873, were formally adhered to, while, in order to bring the troops within compass of one leading, the proper spirit of the order, viz., "to develop large swarms of skirmishers, and hence great fire-power from the several company columns, was departed from.

Also the *per saltum* mode of advance did not form a prominent feature in the exercises; on the other hand, however, at the field manœuvres, battalions were seen to move *per saltum* to the front with the greatest conscientiousness whenever a cannon shot was heard at the advanced guard.

The *per saltum* (*sprungweise*) mode of advance, however, frequently means the men being blown when close up to the enemy, and it is rendered impossible by high standing crops of grain. The men also by such quick advances under such circumstances frequently would become jaded in a distant artillery fire, and the order would be loosened. On open ground, however, and in effective artillery fire, it must remain the rule.

The faulty development in the company columns which we have alluded to above, was caused without doubt by the former methods of conducting our sham fights at the greater infantry exercises. If we open out the first line of a brigade on the peace establishment into company columns, at intervals of a hundred paces from company to company, it will have a front of 1,200 paces; if six companies are deployed as skirmishers, and six remain in close order as supports, the front will extend at least 600 paces. The interposition of the supporting companies or the prolongation of the wings must, in the present times, frequently occur in order to develop the necessary fire-power, and hence we may calculate a breadth of front during the engagement of a brigade even in action, of some seven to eight hundred paces; and in this the brigade will preserve the whole second line intact. Then an objection may be taken that with such an extension of front, even at exercises, it would be impossible to command the brigade as it would be beyond the compass of the human voice; and here we see the reason which often gave rise to the crowded state of the company columns which we have alluded to. If we must still retain the deep organisation, at any rate the first line must be opened out so as to allow a full development of its fire-power.

That the dispersed mode of fighting is the one on which all our forms must be calculated, cannot be doubted; but at the same time firing from a closed mass, and the charge in the same formation must still continue to form a part of our exercises, for certain cases may occur when such forms are necessary, but the regulations should point out that these occasions are exceptional.

The following paragraphs might be inserted with benefit into the infantry regulations.

§. 1. The closed order should chiefly be employed for marching on to the field of battle, and in all movements generally under a cannon-fire; on occasions of expeditions at night time; *occasionally* against cavalry, and in the exceptional cases where the situation prevents an expeditious transition into the opened-out form; and finally by all supports of the firing-line. In this order, firing, and the attack from company-columns should be exercised, as well as from the column on the centre; but the last must be employed only over very short distances.

All acting in lines of battalions, together with attacks and volleys of the same may be entirely struck out of regulations.

2. The dispersed formation with supports in close-order, is the form chiefly to be employed by infantry; in this formation the firing will be carried out and the attack made.

3. The formation in two ranks will always be maintained.

In carrying out these formations in the exercises of regiments and brigades, we should like to see the time of the former curtailed, while that of the brigade might be prolonged.

In the so-called "rendezvous formations" the command may be carried out as formerly by the the Officer commanding, whose word of command is repeated by line and battalion-leaders; the concentration of the troops allowing the voice to be heard. The movements in this formation should be made with the greatest regularity and exactness. The Brigadier also is in a position to exercise a supervision over the whole exercise, and to observe and rectify the movements of troops, and also to form the brigade into half battalions or company-columns at *one-half* or *one-third* the regulated distances (intervals) so as to keep it within the compass of the voice. No looseness should be allowed during the exercise.

But when a regiment deploys for actual engagement at full distances, the command can only be exercised by means of messages through Adjutants, or orderly Officers; two Adjutants or orderly Officers should always be at the disposal of the Brigadier.

The time of a brigade exercise should be prolonged; it should not merely be allowed time to carry out the sham fight, but also preliminary elementary studies, such as the practising of the most expeditious deployments in various directions and the throwing out and change of direction of its skirmishing lines, &c.

The brigade exercises are of the greatest possible importance for the infantry, even more so than those of the Division, and more time should be given for them even at the expense of the regimental exercises, but never at the expense of the field manœuvres, which are always the practical high schools of tactics and the method of leading troops.

The protection of flanks has now assumed an increased importance, as in order to avoid as much as possible the effect of the greatly increased fire-power, an enemy will always avoid the front as much as possible, thus in simple deployments, the flanks may be re-inforced by supports, *en échelon* on their rear.

The issue of the Mauser arm has commenced, so that in the next campaign our infantry will meet the enemy on equal terms in this respect.

The cavalry reforms have been equally important. The view that the sabre is the arm which forms the essential characteristic of the cavalryman must, since the experience of 1870-71, fall to the ground. The most complete independent action for cavalry must be the watchword in the future, and to aid this *a good fire-arm must be supplied*. Frederick the Great even was not wholly opposed to foot exercises for cavalry; on the contrary all he laid down was, that while in the saddle, the dragoon should only use the sabre. As a general rule, this principle may still continue. The first cavalry leader of Germany, perhaps the first of the world, Seidlitz commenced his career by the defence of a village with dismounted curassiers.

Curassiers! and this leads to the question why not give them fire-arms the same as carbineers, and thus make them independent? It is quite impossible to foresee the conditions which may arrive in the course

of a war; we cannot know previously whether we shall only require our cavalry as mere instruments to charge the enemy in battle.

Why should we not employ cuirassiers as a regiment on permanent outpost service? "No sudden innovations" is certainly a maxim which holds good most particularly with regard to changes in the Army; we Prussians have obstinately held fast to those things which, in other places, have been even derided as pedantic; but here we must acknowledge that conservatism would be unjustifiable.

If we, retaining the designation, were to take away the cuirass and supply a carbine, all such regiments would be alike disposable either for the charge or independent outpost duties. We must not forget that the Seidlitzian cuirassiers although they had cuirasses, had only a hat on their heads; the helmet certainly appears more necessary than the cuirass, and yet what did we not do with that cavalry a hundred years ago? At the commencement of the next war, according to all probability, cavalry masses will come into contact, for most certainly the experiences made by our cavalry in 1870 will not be wholly overlooked by our enemies.

With regard to the orders promulgated in cavalry regulations of 1873, we may mention as worthy of notice:—

1st. The obligatory employment of columns of squadrons, instead of columns of troops as the proper battle columns. They can be either close, or open, at squadron distance. This formation suits itself to the inequalities of the ground, and economized space is convenient for deployments, and the form is proper for an attack.

No inversion is permissible.—The old Prussian cavalry, however, did not fear inversions. Seidlitz attacked the Russians with large cavalry masses in inverted order, and we know the brilliant success of his attack, by which the battle was won.

2nd. The attack to the front is regulated to a distance of 1,400 paces including the advance at a trot. Without doubt in the future the cavalry must be accustomed to move rapidly over long stretches of ground; but it must be remarked that all their swiftness cannot compete with the improved modern infantry fire; quick movements of cavalry may render feasible, attacks on broken infantry before they have had time to rally, but it must be borne in mind that it is only under these circumstances that the attack of cavalry is justified.

Infantry even when retreating and after they have lost their tactical order, so long as they have from five to ten cartridges left, are always in a position to resist so long as they keep their confidence and self-possession. The riding down of the French infantry at Mars la Tour does not militate at all against this. We can show against this ten other examples where the most gallant attacks of the French cavalry were repulsed by our infantry.

Maurice of Saxony required his cavalry to charge in full career over a space of 2,000 paces in the most perfect order, which is held by a most distinguished practical cavalry officer to be simply impossible.—[Clearly H. A. O.]

Here the question arises whether it is not likely that all that might be won by such rapid attacks, is not liable to be as quickly lost

by the fatigue which necessarily results from attacking over such long distances and which would render the following up of the movement impossible, so that the operation would be fruitless.

Many wise practical rules have also been laid down for attacking artillery, and if the carrying out of the same must depend in a great measure on the nature of the ground, still the impression of sound principles on really good and efficient Officers cannot be otherwise than advantageous.

The touch is laid down as "stirrup to stirrup." When this was first introduced, in 1854, it had many opponents who maintained that it was only necessary to ride thus closely at the moment of the shock in a charge, but there can be little doubt that stirrup to stirrup is the correct system.

If we now take a brief review of the balance of opinion with regard to the employment of cavalry, we see that a certain number hold that the efficiency of cavalry on the field of battle is fully re-established, and that in future all efforts should point at using that arm in the sense of the Scidlitzian or Napoleonic mass tactics. All that is required for the solution of the problem is to find the necessary capability and art of massing and directing the onslaught of large bodies of cavalry, at the proper time and place, and providing for their support; the only reason of failure hitherto has been that the efficiency of the cavalry in itself has not been such as it was of old.

[I strongly protest against this doctrine; if men and horses were of the same nature as railway locomotives, the theory might hold good. The wedge practice under the new conditions of the breech-loader, *i.e.*, the attack of cavalry on unbroken infantry as a general rule is to be deprecated.—Translator, H. A. O.]

For many reasons which would be too long to discuss here, we are not of the above opinion; our wish is to keep to the excellent cavalry tactics of 1870; why sacrifice our fleet and glorious array of cavaliers—the eyes and the ears of our hosts, under whose watchful clouds we calmly assemble new forces, either for the toilsome march, or the bloody wager of the battle? why immolate them, by demanding from them the impossible, thereby depriving ourselves of the old "veil" which they spread before our ranks? if a victim should be actually required, reserve it for a moment, such as that of Vionville when such a sacrifice was a dire and indispensable necessity.

But if we do not agree with those who we consider as hot-headed theorists, concerning this employment of our cavalry, there can be no doubt that we should exercise and teach the cavalry to move in large masses, which, on account of its great difficulty, is so much the more desirable. The occasion for sacrifice like that of Vionville may occur again.

There can be no doubt that cavalry manœuvres on a large scale should form a part of the annual exercises.

In infantry, the time of action in battle is comparatively long, while that of cavalry is usually confined to very short periods, hence more can be learnt at exercises on a large scale by cavalry, *i.e.*, the exercises are more useful to cavalry than infantry.

The success of the cavalry in the Seven Years' War, in the opinion of many, greatly depended on the rapid rallying after a charge, and the repeated renewal of the attack by hurling the re-formed masses against the enemy.

No doubt the cavalry exercises in large masses without infantry has its disadvantages, inasmuch as it would be better to have infantry present than to have them supposed.

In cavalry brigade exercises, care should be taken not to be led away by the theories of hot-headed young men to venture on inconsiderate attacks with single squadrons upon unbroken infantry.

The artillery received guns of a different calibre in 1873. Their tactical behaviour at the field-manœuvres was generally appreciated; but occasionally they were said to have approached their guns too near to the enemy, and brought themselves for a lengthened period under musketry fire; but it is better to err a little in this respect than to revert to the tactics of former times.

For Officers, on command from the infantry to the pioneers, simplified instructions have been issued. Occasionally, on suitable occasions, instructions might be given to throw up a field work or fortify a post.

Such are some of the novelties which have been introduced in 1873, it remains for the Army to apply them—all depends on the zeal and diligence of the Officers to carry out that which has been laid down by superior authority. Genius and natural gifts, no doubt, play a conspicuous part in all human undertakings; still it is not less true, that diligence and assiduity go half way towards winning the battle.

H. A. O.

ARTILLERY-FIRE IN PEACE-MANŒUVRES.

By Captain L. M. CARMICHAEL, 5th Royal I. Lancers.

ANYONE who has been present either as an actor or spectator at recent camps of exercise will acknowledge that there is no point in which some change is more needed than in the manner of making artillery-fire known to the objects of it. I have constantly heard artillery Officers, at the discussion which often follows a sham fight, assert that they had fired on for long periods, and annihilated bodies of troops, whose Commanders have then and there stated they never saw, sometimes never heard the guns in question, and were quite unconscious that they had been the objects of their special attention.

Latterly, umpires attached to batteries have had it impressed upon them that they or their gallopers should always ride and inform bodies of troops who appeared unconscious they were under fire, that they were being fired upon, and could not remain in their present position. But to ride 2,000 yards to make a communication which is never received with exuberant gratitude, is not a pleasant task; and it is not surprising that it is far less often attempted than it ought to be.