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Lieutenant-Colonel W. J. Williams R.A.  
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## ON INFANTRY TACTICS.

Communicated by Lieutenant-Colonel W. J. WILLIAMS, R.A.

*I. Swarms of Skirmishers and Extended Supports.*

SOME of our students of tactics now recommend 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 looser 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 for a given number of men under fire than 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, 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 of 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 the 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 would still be in the rain.

There is no doubt that the term "skirmisher-swarm," 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 on 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.

## II. *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 regulation gives 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 our 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 should 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 that 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. At 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 and 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 on 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 our two companies commence to fire and our rearmost 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 of the first battalion 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 their advance, the third Line should 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 50 yards from the front, and the arrival of the third Line at 50 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 Lines at distances of 300 yards apart. This would certainly be the best formation in which to advance under cannon fire.

On the arrival of the leading battalion within musketry range, or 700 yards, of the enemy, the two flank companies should run out, extending from their outer flanks, lie down at 300 yards to the front, and fire; Nos. 2 and 7 companies should run out, each company in line, and lie down at 150 yards to the front; and the remaining four companies should lie down in line. The second and third Lines should continue their advance. The skirmishers would then be at 400 yards' distance from the enemy; the supports and reserve at distances of 150 yards to the rear; and the second and third Lines would be closing up.

There should be as little delay as possible in the advance of the brigade. The object is only to get within charging distance of the enemy: to waste the enemy by fire is the proper duty of artillery, both before and during the attack. The skirmishers should gain ground by short runs, and always lie down to fire. The supports, advancing always at the double, and always lying down when not advancing, should gradually draw nearer to the skirmishers and reinforce them as they need reinforcement. The reserve, advancing always at the double, and always lying down when not advancing, should gradually draw nearer to the supports, and replace them, and then reinforce the skirmishers. The second Line should draw nearer to the first Line, and the third Line nearer to the second Line, both Lines lying down when not on the move. The third line should form double company-columns on its passage out of the zone of cannon-fire. All the formations in rear must conform with the movements of the skirmishers; and, at any time during the advance, every formation in rear should be near enough to support the formation next in front.

Before the arrival of our skirmishers within charging distance, or 50 yards of the enemy, the whole of the first Line should be in skirmisher-swarm. When the skirmisher-swarm is within charging

distance of the enemy, the advance of the second and third Lines, at distances of 50 yards, will cause the skirmisher-swarm to get up and lead the charge of the brigade.

What is urged against this method of attack is that the leading battalion, sent up to the front in successive detachments to spread along a line of 400 paces, would be a confused swarm, out of hand of the battalion-commander, out of hand of the captains, and not to be trusted to lead the charge. To this we reply that there is no other practicable method of advancing a brigade through the open, to bring it into contact with the enemy; and that men can be trained to act in a skirmisher-swarm as well as they could act in that formation which, within 50 yards of the enemy, should represent what, on parade, is a line. The impulse to charge, when at close quarters, cannot be communicated by word of command of battalion-commander or of captain, nor by sound of bugle, but only by the sight of a wavering enemy, or the resolute advance of a good support. The skirmisher-swarm, leavened by its Officers, would act, not by word of command, but of its own impulse. It is vain now to talk of any better line in front. No line could be marched up to the enemy; and if a perfect line could fall from the skies to find itself near the enemy, it would quickly assume the shape of a skirmisher-swarm. The disorganization of companies in the leading battalion must not be held to be an insuperable objection to the only practicable method of advancing a brigade to attack the enemy.

Again, it is objected that the skirmisher-swarm would not be able to manœuvre. To this we reply, that the skirmisher-swarm would have only to advance, and that it could reform at leisure when its work was done. Infantry have very little manœuvring to do in battle.

The objection that to drill for a loose method of fighting would be injurious to discipline seems almost unworthy of refutation. Much discipline is, no doubt, imparted by steady drill; and our soldiers may still be drilled to approach perfection; but both Officers and soldiers must be taught how to fight. A logical deduction from this objection is, that the discipline of our soldiers is partly dependent upon their stupidity.

#### VI. *Double Company-Columns.*

By double company-columns we mean quarter columns of four half-companies. A battalion in line would form four double company-columns on the right half-companies of right companies; or two central double company-columns on the right half-companies of Nos. 3 and 5 companies, the two companies on each flank remaining deployed; or double company-columns in the right or the left wing only, the other wing remaining deployed. The change of formation could be made on the move, at the halt, or with the right half-companies of right companies lying down. The columns would usually remain in line at deploying interval, under the direction of the battalion-commander; but a senior captain should command each double company-column much as in cavalry, a captain commands a squadron.

We advocate the formation of double company-columns in third Line

not under cannon-fire. This formation would undoubtedly be the best for the first and second Lines to rally upon should they be repulsed in attack or defence. We could usually form our third Line in double company-columns, when it had arrived within 300 yards of the enemy; for the cross cannon-fire of the enemy could seldom be brought to bear on us so close to him. Covered by two lines in front, the third Line would always suffer less from musketry-fire when in company-columns than when in line.

#### VII. *Conclusion.*

The order of battle of a brigade being as we have stated above, brigades would be placed side by side, not one in rear of another, in defence. Artillery would be placed in the front line in the intervals of divisions, so that guns would be separated from guns by intervals of two battalions, or about 800 paces. Cavalry, and the reserve of artillery and infantry, would be independent of the general order of battle.

In attack, brigades should advance one in rear of another, on a front of 400 paces, rather than side by side. A rear brigade would advance, at 300 yards distance from the rear of the brigade in front, in three lines with distances of 300 yards; and close its lines and lessen its distance from the brigade in front during the advance. An attack should always be prepared by artillery, and then supported by artillery well advanced on the flanks. Deep attacks on a narrow front are the most favourable to the action of the artillery of the attack; and by deep attacks only, can we reasonably hope to bring a superiority of force to bear upon the enemy. Two or more divisions, attacking together, would advance on a front of one division, or 800 paces; but 800 paces is the limit imposed upon the breadth of an attack, by the necessity of having artillery firing inwards across the flanks, in support, and the necessity of arising in superior force upon the enemy in his lines.

SHORNCLIFFE,  
19<sup>th</sup> October, 1872.

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