

From the Archives of “The Light”

Newsletter of the 5th MI, Co. K

Skirmish Drill

Skirmish Drill – I haven’t had time to write a lot about historical stuff in the past few newsletters and want to get back to it now. Since we’ve done skirmish drill at both of our past drills and Mark is now working with us to become better with understanding bugle calls, I thought this would be a good time to talk about Skirmish drill.

I highly recommend to all that you get a copy of the manuals we use in drill and read them on your own time. Though some may call this studying and that may sound either 1) boring or 2) scary it is a good thing to do. Just read them. In this article, I want to talk about the first 12 paragraphs in the book “Instructions for Skirmishers.” No, I’m not such a geek that I counted, General Casey is kind enough to number all the paragraphs in his book. It makes it easier to discuss.

Para. 1 – *“The movements of skirmishers should be subjected to such rules as will give to the commander the means of moving them in any direction with the greatest promptitude.”* Ok, this drill is set up so that the small body of skirmisher can respond quickly to a threat from any direction. Good to know.

Para. 2 – *“It is not expected that these movements should be executed with the same precision as in closed ranks, nor is it desirable, as such exactness would materially interfere with their prompt execution.”* We’ve talked about doing skirmish well and quickly. That’s the key. Band-box drill is NOT needed here. Do it right, know your job and do it quickly. For sergeants establishing the line, this means get it close and don’t stress! The line will work, cover is more important.

Para. 3 – *“When skirmishers are thrown out to clear the way for, and to protect the advance of, the main corps, their movements should be so regulated by this corps, as to keep it constantly covered.”* The job of us as skirmishers is to defend the larger body of troops. It should go without saying that if the unit we as skirmishers are covering move to the right, so should we.

Para. 4 – *“Every body of skirmished should have a reserve, the strength and composition of which will vary according to the circumstances.”*

Para. 5 – *“If the body thrown out be within sustaining distance of the main corps, a very small reserve will be sufficient for each company, whose duty it shall be to fill vacant places, furnish the line with cartridges, relieve the fatigued, and serve as a rallying point for the skirmishers.”*

Para. 6 – *“If the main corps be at a considerable distance, besides the company reserves, another reserve will be required, composed of entire companies, which will be employed to sustain and reinforce such parts of the line as may be warmly attacked; this reserve should be strong enough to relieve at least half the companies deployed as skirmishers.”*

Para. 7 – *“The reserves should be placed behind the centre of the line of skirmishers, the company reserves at one hundred and fifty, and the principle reserve at four hundred paces. This rule, however, is not invariable. The reserves, while holding themselves within sustaining distance of the line, should be, as much as possible, in position to afford each other mutual protection, and must carefully profit by any accidents of the ground to conceal themselves from the view of the enemy, and to shelter themselves from his fire.”*

Paragraphs 4-7 are a group and I’ve left them together. They all deal with the reserve support for the skirmish line. Remember the way we do drill. It is set up so that one platoon is on the line and the other is held back as a reserve. This is the way the manual sets it up. Distances are given but exceptions are made for everything. Again, skirmish drill only works well when all members of the unit keep their wits about them and do their job well. Officers need to use their judgment rather than follow strict measurements. These four paragraphs are the first place where using cover (or “accidents of the ground” as they said back then) are discussed. We talk about this all the time in the drill.

Para. 8 – *“The movements of skirmishers will be executed in quick, or double quick time. The run will be resorted to only in cases of urgent necessity.* This is done to keep the men as rested as possible. When we skirmish, we are strung out wider than the general body of soldiers. We need our strength in case we are rushed or have to respond to an emergency. Unless ordered, all is at quick or double quick time. (Quick time is standard marching speed.)

Para. 9 – *“Skirmishers will be permitted to carry their pieces in the manner most convenient to them.”* There it is. We talk about this all the time in drill. Once your group of four has broken into skirmish line, here is the paragraph that lets you carry your weapon however it is best for you where you are.

Para. 10 – *the movements will be habitually indicated by the sounds of the bugle.*

Para. 11 – *The officers, and, if necessary, the non-commissioned officers, will repeat, and cause the commands to be executed, as soon as they are give; but to avoid mistakes, when the signals are employed, they will wait until the last bugle note is sounded before commencing the movement.”*

Again, I’ve grouped two paragraphs together. These paragraphs tell us to use Mark (our bugler) to the best effect and it gives us advice how to do that. Most important here are two things. First, officers and NCOs repeat the orders ONLY if needed. If those of us who are enlisted men learn the bugle calls and step off promptly, the only talking that should be heard (except when we are firing) is the captain speaking calmly to the bugler in civil tones of voice. NCOs and officers, talk only to reinforce the bugle calls.

The 2nd important rule given here is to wait to step off until the call is done. Remember, forward, by the right flank, and by the left flank all start the same. If you stepped off at the beginning of the call, you might go the wrong way! OOPS! Wait for the end of the call to be sure.

Para. 12 – *“When skirmishers are ordered to move rapidly, the officer and non-commissioned officers will see that the men economize their strength, keep cool, and*

profit by all advantages which the ground may offer for cover. It is only by the continual watchfulness on the part of all grades, that a line of skirmishers can attain success.”

This is the wrap-up of the introduction to skirmish drill. The last sentence is the most important to me. It says ALL grades (all ranks) must be continually watchful. We are all in this together. We work together and each do our job so the man next to him has the same load. Enlisted men, communicate with your file partner when firing and be quiet other than that. NCOs, establish a line without being too slavish to perfection and do it quietly. Officers, make good judgments and use the terrain to best advantage and use the buglers as much as possible. All – the better we learn the bugle calls, the better we do!

I hope this has been an insightful look at the introduction to “Instructions for Skirmishers.” I hope you take the time to get a copy for yourself this summer and read it. We’re discussing a school this fall specific to School of the Soldier and Instructions for Skirmishers. Look for more information soon.

See you in the Field!

Will Eichler