

"Skirmishing is not nearly so trying..."

By
Bob Braun

There were few more salient opportunities for the Civil War soldier to demonstrate his mastery of tactics than on the skirmish line. Today, proficiency in skirmish drill has become one of the hallmarks of the advanced re-enactor. However, the employment of the skirmish drill, and skirmishers in general, in most modern demonstrations betrays a significant lack of understanding. Not merely "something to do for the spectators," there were specific martial intents for skirmish practice.

First off, what IS skirmishing?

Brigadier-General Silas Casey, in his *Infantry Tactics* (p. 181) stated that "...skirmishers are thrown out to clear the way for, and to protect the advance of, the main corps." In the age before wireless communications, skirmishers provided both "early warning" to advancing columns and screening the movement of such columns. Further, skirmishers were deployed in front of developing battlelines to ascertain the ground, determine enemy strength (and enemy skirmishers), and to provide a means to clear the front of an advancing formation of skirmishers, lightly defended works, and even (occasionally) entanglements.

While all this sounds rather involved— even dangerous!— many of our Civil War ancestors preferred the skirmish line to the highly regimented battalion line.

Captain John William DeForest led his Company "I", of the Twelfth Connecticut on a skirmish line outside of Port Hudson, Louisiana, on May 27, 1863. He recorded

Skirmishing is not nearly so trying as charging or line fighting. In the first place, you generally have cover; in the second, if you are shot at you can also shoot. Now to fire at a person who is firing at you is somehow wonderfully consolatory and sustaining; more than that, it is exciting and produces in you the so-called joy of battle. I was presently shouting with enthusiasm, cheering my men with jokes and laughter, jumping over fallen trees instead of crawling under them, and running about regardless of exposure. Then the close whistle of bullets, or their loud *whack* as they buried themselves in stumps near me, would drive me temporarily to shelter. Such is skirmishing when it goes nicely, or, in other words,

when the enemy is not too numerous. As to being slaughtered and driven back and scared to death, you can not make it pleasant under any circumstances (John W. DeForest, *A Volunteer's Adventures*, pp. 111-112).



As for the "danger", Captain DeForest remembered that "...skirmishing is not dangerous. Two men mortally and two severely wounded constituted my whole loss in something like three hours' [sic] fighting out of a company of forty-two muskets" (DeForest, p. 114).

Why bother to interpret skirmishing at all? Weren't most skirmish situations were similar to that experienced by Captain DeForest?

Certainly not. Earlier that same May at Hazel Grove near Chancellorsville, Virginia, a beleaguered Captain Charles Weygant, Company "A", 124th New York State Volunteers was ordered by his commander, Colonel Augustus Van Horne Ellis to "return with Companies A and F [and] cover the line from which the division [Third Division of III Corps, led by Brig.-Gen. Amiel Whipple] had just been withdrawn, and remain there until recalled" (Charles Weygant, *History of the 124th New York Volunteers*, p. 114). Weygant recalled he "hurriedly deploy[ed] Company F and a portion of Company A at long intervals, and retain[ed] the remainder of Company A as a reserve" (Weygant, p. 114). Weygant's mention of a skirmish "reserve" was in compliance with General Casey's *Tactics*, p. 181, where he stated that "every body of skirmishers should have a reserve, the strength and composition of which will vary under the circumstances." [It should not surprise us when we learn that Casey's *Tactics* was the drill manual of the 124th New York!]

Weygant and his two companies were evidently forgotten by their colonel as the rebels, Tennesseans under General Archer, advanced to take the high ground of Hazel Grove. General Whipple, himself, "drawing his cloak around him [presumably to conceal his rank while at such an exposed position]" ordered the captain to "'check them a little if possible and then make your escape—if you can'" (Weygant, p. 114). As the general rode away, Weygant opened fire on the rebel's "advance line of infantry." He wrote afterwards

Never did a skirmish line behave better, or were

muzzle-loading rifles fired more rapidly; but on came the solid lines of the foe, who, when I ordered my skirmishers to fall back on their reserve, were not forty yards away... Then for the first time, I had visions of rebel prisons. There we stood, on the open ground, one hundred facing ten thousand. A single volley would have swept us out of existence. Glancing to the rear I noticed that, near at hand, a slight ravine ran around a knoll, and whispered the order, "Every man for his life." (Weygant, pp. 114-115.)

Captain James Wren, Company "B", 48th Pennsylvania Volunteers had to react to an equally dangerous situation during a skirmish line fight at South Mountain, Maryland, September 14, 1862. As his company exchanged fire with rebel skirmishers, some of the enemy shots were reaching the Federal battleline to Wren's rear. A new regiment, the Ninth New Hampshire, fired a jittery volley into the backs of Wren's men. The confused captain, with images of being temporarily "surrounded" at Second Bull Run fresh in his mind, was certain that the rebels were in his rear. He ordered his company to "'Rally to the right & Left from Center, double-quick to the rear' & it was done very quick..." He reasoned in his journal that, "If it was the enemy in our rear, better to be taken prisoners than be all Slaughtered [sic] & if it was our own troops, we would not receive thear [sic] 2nd Volley" (John Michael Priest, ed., *From New Bern to Fredericksburg*, p. 66). Wren rejoined the left of his regiment's line as the Ninth New Hampshire was taken out of line. then was asked by Lieut. Col. Joshua K. Seigfried, 48th Pennsylvania Volunteers, then requested Wren to advance his company as skirmishers a second time, with the assurance that there would be no firing until they returned. Wren regained contact with the rebel skirmish line. He then directed his men to "open fire on them & [fall] back." Wren drew the enemy skirmishers to within "75 or 80 Yards of our Battleline" then, for a second time, ordered his company to "rally to the right & Left, double-quick to the rear" (Priest, ed., p. 66). Wren reported the rebel advance to Lieut. Col. Seigfried, who directed the 48th Pennsylvania to join the brigade volley that decimated the oncoming Confederates.

Other skirmish situations were equally challenging. Lieutenant Ralsa Rice was acting commandant of Company "B" 125th Ohio Volunteers near New Hope Church, Georgia. There, the 125th's Major Joseph Bruff directed Rice and his company forward as skirmishers. Rice remembered that he "was given the route and general instructions. We were to advance until the enemy's main line was encountered and then hold our position. The bugle would sound the signals. I ventured to as if we had to comply with the regular skirmish drill. 'Take your own way, so long as you get there,' said the Major. Our line was a short one, only a little more than a regimental front" (Baumgartner and Strayer, eds., *Yankee Tigers*, p. 100).

Lieutenant Rice informed his company that the situation was one of "every man for himself. Each man must

be his own reserve. Take advantage of everything offering protection. We have not a man to spare" (Baumgartner and Strayer, p. 100).

Rice later remembered that "with the sound of the bugle our men deployed at once, and in line behind the trees, awaited the signal [to advance, to be delivered by bugle as well]. I saw an officer, whom I recognized [Adjutant Edward G. Whitesides, 125th Ohio], approaching from the rear on horseback. He had witnessed our preparations and rode up, saying, 'Get your men back here into line, then deploy them as you should! Don't you know your tactics better than that?'" (Baumgartner and Strayer, p. 100).

It would be prudent to interrupt Lieutenant Rice's narrative here to note several important points. Unlike Captain Weygant, Rice was operating without a skirmish reserve, as was prescribed in most manuals. Additionally, Rice maneuvered by the sound of the bugle, in compliance with Hardee's *Tactics* (the manual of the 125th Ohio) and Casey's *Tactics*, which stated that "the movements [of skirmishers] will be habitually indicated by the sounds of the bugle" (Casey, p. 182). How many of us recall not performing some evolution and receiving a chastisement similar to "Don't you know your tactics better than that?" Can you *imagine* being deployed as skirmishers today, in a manner similar to Major Bruff's "Take your own way, so long as you get there" order? Clearly, there were situations in combat which required, if not demanded, innovation on the part of commanders. This meant occasional departures from the manual. If done today, such departures would elicit ridicule or rebuff from so-called "drilled" authentic.

Rice and his Company "B" stood, anticipating the bugle call to advance. When it came, he noted that he and his company "ran forward and did not stop to gauge our speed with those on our flank. The breastworks of the enemy had to be found and the sooner we got there, the quicker it would be over with" (Baumgartner and Strayer, pp. 101-102). He recalled meeting rebel skirmishers "as we entered the brush." Company "B" pressed them back. Upon gaining a ravine, Rice halted his men "and found all present and accounted for" (Baumgartner and Strayer, p. 102). The Lieutenant found the rebel works to his left, atop a bluff and on the far side of an open field. He recalled that he "found to my discomfiture that I was 'treed.'" At that point, Rice "heard the bugle again sounding 'Forward'" (Baumgartner and Strayer, p. 102). He later wrote

On gaining the top of the bluff I saw unmistakably the works of the enemy. I noticed at the same time a large fallen tree lying on a line parallel with ours. I assembled the company behind this natural fortification. From it we kept up or part of the demonstration. With no recall or orders to fall back, we remained until dark... (Baumgartner and Strayer, p. 102).

It is notable that Lieutenant Ralsa Rice "sent back no killed or wounded men" (Baumgartner and Strayer, p. 104)

during the course of this episode at New Hope Church.

Skirmishers also performed duties that would be termed "reconnaissance" or "patrolling". Captain Joseph Wren and his Company "B" of the 48th Pennsylvania Volunteers was ordered to form a skirmish line to cover the front of Brig.-Gen. James Nagle's brigade on the evening of August 30, 1862 on the gloomy battlefield of Second Bull Run. Wren had "orders to advance and find out what the enemy was doing & then Come [sic] back and report [that] which [they were doing]" (Priest, ed., p. 58). Wren protested, claiming his men might fire on one another in the dark. He suggested, "The only way I can see to form this line for the safety of the men is to form a single file & [feel] each other." General Nagle agreed, informing Wren to "use your best judgment." Captain Wren then formed his company

in [a] single rank and each man felt the other by a touch of each other & in single file, by the right flank, we advanced about 1/4 mile when we could see the enemy all around thear [sic] Camp fires, which was [sic] very small ones... I returned to our lines and reported that the enemy was all Quiet and about thear [sic] Camp fires & in about a half an hour, our whole Brigade retreated & fell back to Centerville (Priest, ed., p. 58).

A similar sortie was made by Captain Weygant of Company "A", 124th New York Volunteers. Just the evening before his effort to screen the retiring Third Division, III Corps at Hazel Grove (mentioned earlier) he and eleven picked men were sent to scout forward from the regiment's right-flank. His orders were to reconnoiter the road as far as possible, in preparation for a night attack by elements of the III Corps. This assault was deemed necessary in an attempt to recover the small arms ammunition train of the Third Division, lost in "Stonewall" Jackson's surprise attack. Weygant and his patrol carefully worked their way forward, or northerly, along the Hazel Grove Road through a clearing on either side of the road known as "Vista." He would remember his first impressions in this "no man's land"

The moon was shedding a dim light, the air had a sulphurous taste, the road was narrow, the trees were tall and stood close together, and the gloom was intense. Quietly and cautiously we crept along one side of the road in the edge of the wood, stopping at every sound and peering through the gloom at every shadow (Weygant, p. 109).

Weygant's reconnaissance, and that of Captain Murray of Company "B" (who conducted a similar mission from the regiment's left flank) paved the way for General Daniel Sickles' midnight assault towards the Orange Turnpike—and one of the more interesting, and forgotten, exploits of the Battle of Chancellorsville.

Further insights are available from the journal of Charles B. Haydon, a Lieutenant with Company "I", 2d

Michigan Volunteers. While both observing and directing company drills, which consisted of the bayonet drill, some battalion drill, and the skirmish drill, he wrote of the latter

The skirmish drill is one of the finest in use. Whether you view them stretched out in a long line, 5 [sic] paces between the men, or rallied in their pugnacious little groups of fours, with a bayonet at each corner, or in their stronger groups of sections or platoons they are active, self reliant, sharp, mischievous fighters. It is a curious thing to see them when firing... at the command commence firing [sic] the odd-numbered men run forward 10 paces very quickly, throw themselves down on their bellies, fire, roll over on their backs and & commence loading. While they are loading, the even numbered men run up 10 paces beyond them, throw themselves down, fire, and commence loading. By this time the odd number men are ready again in turn & advance 10 paces beyond these & throw themselves down as before & so they keep going (Stephen W. Sears, ed., *For Country, Cause, and Leader*, p. 102).

According to this account, the signal for the odd or even numbered men to advance and fire was the start of the loading process of the appropriate comrade. This practice, as recorded by Haydon, was a slight departure from Casey's *Tactics* (p. 203), which prescribed the rear-rank man to fire "when his front-rank man has loaded." There was no mention of the use of the word "ready" to signal when one of the file members had completed loading by either Haydon or Casey. This verbal signal is a common practice today, despite the indications from the accounts that such chatter would compete with hearing voice or bugle directions, and doubtless add to the confusion already compounded by the noise of musketry.

Lieutenant Haydon also offered clues as to how skirmish practice was adapted to field use

You will see nothing but the smoke when they fire or their heads peeping up above the weeds & grass except when they advance. *This when near the enemy is always done by an oblique or zig zag movement* [emphasis added]... They are of course to seek the shelter of all the trees, logs, ditches & inequalities of the ground which are at hand (Sears, ed., p. 102).

The use of "oblique or zig zag movement" is interesting, and would certainly account for the low casualty rate in the skirmish accounts examined here. The high grass provided Haydon's skirmishers with concealment, and the officer himself was quite aware of the use of natural cover, as prescribed by most manuals.

Another clue that indicated a desire for preservation of the men was found in Casey's *Tactics* (p. 202-3) which stated that "skirmishers [firing at a halt] will not remain in the same place whilst reloading, unless protected by accidents in the ground." This suggests a "fire—roll—load—fire" individual

ground." This suggests a "fire—roll—load—fire" individual tactic technique quite similar to those taught to modern infantrymen today.

Lieutenant Haydon's journal indicated that Company "I" practiced the skirmish drill, along with bayonet exercise and occasional battalion drills, most days when they were not involved in guard or fatigue duty. They did not engage in skirmish drill on Sunday (p. 102-3), when the normal inspection routine and church call preempted most of the time needed for meaningful drill. Finally, Haydon recalled on October 10, 1861 that he and his company "had a very interesting skirmish drill... Three Co's. [sic] were out together, drilled with the cavalry a part of the time. They & their skirmishers drill together every day" (Sears, ed., p. 106). This account provides additional validation for the infantry skirmish exercise done with cavalry at the Mudsill Spring Muster in March, 1994.

Clearly, the evolutions of the drill manual require examination in the context of the reminiscences of the men who had to put them into practice during real combat situations. In this light, the skirmish drill was not just an exercise. It was a viable part of the "rules of engagement" of the period. It provided maximum flexibility and opportunities for innovation. The drill was applicable in a variety of tactical situations: covering or screening movement, discovering the enemy, "shock" troops leading the advance, and the vital missions of reconnaissance and patrolling. No wonder that soldiers continued to drill in skirmish evolutions long after the lessons of the Schools of the Soldier and Company had been mastered!

Although little used for re-enactment "tactical" purposes today, the skirmish drills deserve a major revival. It provided the truest expression of the "art" and tactical skill of Civil War soldiering.