

F I L E   S P A C I N G   R E V I S I T E D

BEING FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE TACTICAL

SPACING OF THE BRITISH INFANTRY IN THE

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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## FILE SPACING REVISITED

In the first essay on this subject, sent out last spring, I proposed that generally the British infantry, operating in North America during 1775-1783, adopted a condition of "open files" - somewhere more or less than an arm's length in distance - when engaging in fire combat. Presented in that preliminary paper were various bits of information substantiating the use of open files previously (in three ranks - although this did not quite have the same effect), and under training conditions. The statements of various post-war critics were also offered. What I was looking for, and now have - thanks to the responses of various members of the British Brigade - are confirmatory bits of documentation from additional contemporary sources which leave little room for doubt about the case. These will be presented below, followed by a little of the philosophy behind the tactical innovations for fighting in America, and a section on practical problems and questions arising from "open files".

My thanks go out to the persons, who have taken time to reply to my last paper and have provided the passages quoted below:

Michael Grenier (64th Regt.) -

Quotation from the Orderly Book of the 64th Regiment dated 26th May 1776 (repeating orders of General Howe):

"The Grenadiers and battalions of the Line in future to form in three ranks, with the files as formerly ordered at 18 inches interval."

Radford Polinsky (33rd Regt.) -

Quotation from the Orderly Book of Gen. Howe, Boston, 29 Feb. 1776:

"Regiments when formed by Companies in Battalion, or when on the General Parade, are always to have their files eighteen inches distant from each other, which they will take care to practice in the future, being the order in which they are to engage the enemy."

and

Quotation from the Orderly Book of Gen. Howe, Halifax, 26 May 1776:

"The Grenadiers and Battalions in the Line are to form in the future in three ranks, with the files as formerly ordered, at 18 inches interval."

Michael McAvoy (71st Regt.) -

Quotation from Captain Hinde's THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LIGHT HORSE (London, 1778) addressing the British light infantry in America:

"They were always drawn up two deep and two feet between files."

Vincent J-R Kehoe (representing 10th Regt.) -

Quotation from John Williamson's THE ELEMENTS OF MILITARY ARRANGEMENT,

AND OF THE DISCIPLINE OF WAR; ADAPTED TO THE PRACTICE OF THE BRITISH INFANTRY (London, 1782) Vol.I p.54:

"In close order, the officers and serjeants fall into the ranks with the private men, which are one pace distant from each other. The files are half a pace distant, or half the length of an out-stretched arm. That is the regular distance on parade; but in the field the files may be opened or closed as exigencies may require."

The following three notes (via Radford Polinsky) are from a thesis by Joseph Walukonis. I have not yet had time to check the original sources. -

From Gen. Burgoyne's Orderly Book (Edited by E.B. O'Callaghan, Munsells Historical Series No.VII, Albany, 1860):

Page 4, orders for 20 June 1777, specifies lines of two ranks with open files.

and

Hadden's Journal and Orderly Book (Edited by H. Rogers, Albany, 1884), covering Burgoyne's campaign on p.75 mentions:

"...according to the present established rule of open files and two deep."

and

From Gen. Sir Henry Clinton's THE AMERICAN REBELLION (Edited by W. Willcox, Archon, 1971) p.95:

In reference to Howe's final policy of two ranks and open files, it is noted that Clinton did not implement any change in the formation because: "We have always succeeded (with) it; the enemy have adopted it; they have no cavalry to employ against it...."

The reasoning behind the evident change from the "doctrinal" three-rank, closed files formation to two ranks at open files is perhaps best summed up by Frederick Myatt, Curator & Librarian of the School of Infantry, Warminster, in his book, THE BRITISH INFANTRY 1660-1945 (Poole: Blandford Press, 1983):

"The basic tactical requirement in North America was for a looser, more flexible system, based on small bodies of men fighting in rough lines, often of one rank and never more than two; the third rank had never been of great value as far as fire power was concerned, and in thick country it became a positive menace. Extension was everything, so that if you could lap round the flanks of your enemy you were well on the way to beating him." (p.65)

While in Europe there was some utility at this time for having three ranks and closed files - the threat of enemy cavalry or heavy infantry attacks - such conditions did not obtain in America. The Rebels had neither arm in sufficient numbers to pose a serious threat to British forces in the field. On the other hand, there were serious disadvantages to close formations in the colonies:

1) Dense formations provided a "target-rich environment" (to use a modern phrase) for an enemy which actually paid some attention to marksmanship.



2) As opposed to the relatively open battlefields of Europe, the more rugged terrain in America made maneuver at close intervals a futile pursuit.

3) A third rank detracted from the firepower and extension of a unit. (Even in Europe at this time, the third rank was relegated to the role of attrition fillers.)

Thus, American conditions - especially after debacles such as Bunker Hill - called for a more open order for maneuver and fire combat, while shock action was still possible through rapid concentration for a bayonet assault. Of course, to say that the British operated exclusively at open intervals would be as wrong as saying they operated strictly according to the doctrine of 1764. It is a tribute to the professionalism and flexibility of the British Army that it was able to adapt to prevailing conditions. For example, Radford Polinsky has pointed out a cryptic passage in Gen. Cornwallis's orders for June of 1781, mandating "...that in the future the infantry in battle formation must be arranged in three files and closed squads." This may have been in reaction to the anticipated combat with the French, and probably actually means three ranks with closed files. However, he must have generally agreed with open order operations. As mentioned in Rogers' *THE BRITISH ARMY OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY* (New York, Hippocrene, 1977):

"In 1785 there occurred the last manoeuvres of the Prussian Army under the eye of Frederick the Great. They were viewed with astonishment by Lord Cornwallis, fresh from the loose formations and light infantry tactics of the American War of Independence. He wrote: 'Their manoeuvres were such as the worst General in England would be hooted at for practising...'"

During this study, questions have arisen from time to time about the actual implementation of "open files" in the field. Gavin Watt of the King's Royal Yorkers has written that his corps regularly maneuvers at open files, and that this proves no difficulty for trained troops. Recruits, however, require practice as they are more comfortable at close intervals - as are most untrained soldiers. He has also pointed out that the "close order" and "open order" commands of the Guards are actually the ones for spacing ranks, so another command - such as "open files" will have to suffice.

1. Isn't the idea of "open files" just some archaic holdover from the matchlock and pike era, which was rendered obsolete by this time, but perpetuated in the writings of those such as Bland?

No. The manual exercise for the matchlock required a three-foot distance between each file, and was performed with the piece held at arm's length in front of the man for safety reasons. Bland's first edition was not published until 1728, after the universal adoption of the flintlock in British service. Bland's instruction for open files in training (confirmed by Prebble's observations on 1779 drill), which was maintained to his last edition (1762), called for an arm's length between files, which afforded officers and sergeants a better view of the men's performance, as well as the ability to wander through the ranks to make corrections. It also allowed the men a better opportunity to see the "feugleman"

(demonstrator) in front of the company.

2. How does a line of two ranks actually go to open files and fire?

Assuming, for drill purposes, that a company is formed at close intervals in two ranks, the commander needs to order "Open files, march!" At that command, each man side-steps to his left, and holds up his right arm to reach his proper interval, i.e., just touching the left shoulder of the man on his right. When all are properly spaced and dressed, an order of "Front!" should be sufficient. Distance between ranks can be found in the normal manner for drill. To execute firing from open files, simply proceed with the platoon exercise, having the 1st Rank operate normally (as per 1764), and having the 2nd Rank operate as the 1764 prescribes for the "Rear Rank" (not the Centre Rank). To bring the soldiers back to closed files, order "At close files, dress!" and the men move to their right until they have found their proper interval.

Note that when operating in a single rank, the full arm's length distance may not be necessary or desirable. In that case, half an arm's length may suffice. This can be obtained by placing the right hand on the right hip and extending the elbow to the man on the right. This method is cited in Darling's RED COAT AND BROWN BESS (Bloomfield: Museum Restorations, 1970) p.13: "The distance between men in ranks was 'half an out-stretched arm' or when the hand is bent against the side, the elbow is to touch the right hand man. Anon. THE DISCIPLINE OF WAR, p.11, Dublin, 1744."

3. On the battlefield, how does one really deploy in open files?

As far as the mechanics of deployment are concerned, I think a lot of perceptions are formed by the fact that reenactors often seem to march to battle on a company front, with the army in a column of companies. This is because the units are so small that they can do this. It also means that they fill up the available space on roads etc. It is thus natural for reenactors to deploy at tight intervals. In the 18th century however, this was not possible because companies had larger fronts. Units marched to battle on roads in column of twos, and then deployed to a company and battalion front when necessary to form the line of battle. (As an aside, militarily, the column is the formation which provides the commander with the greatest degree of speed and control in maneuver.) Since reenactors don't have to deal with mounted commanders, couriers, etc. passing up and down and taking up road space, it never occurs to them to not occupy the entire road width.

If you march a group of men in a column of twos and halt them at their proper marching interval (an arm's distance to the next man in front), then face them right or left and wheel them at the same interval through 90 degrees, you have a company front with men at open files. As far as battalion and larger units go, Michael Orr (Lecturer in War Studies, Sandhurst) described the formation of a line of battle in his book DETTINGEN 1743 (London: Charles Knight & Co., 1972): "These lines of battle were not continuous, but were broken up by the 'intervals' which were maintained between each unit. In theory these intervals were the same size as the front of the unit itself, but in practice the ground did not always permit such spaciousness. The purpose of the intervals was to allow units in the rear to pass



forward to reinforce or replace their fellows in the front."(p.6.) Thus there was a basis for units leaving ample room for flanking battalions to "expand" to an open frontage even if they had not already deployed that way. Again, it seldom occurs to reenactors to leave any room between adjacent units under most circumstances, when historically it was apparently routinely done.

4. How can you quickly execute a bayonet charge with your men deployed in open files?

When in open files, arrayed for two rank firing (as treated above), the conversion to a bristling hedge of bayonets is as easy as saying "Rear rank, two steps forward - march!" - whereupon your two ranks have become one shoulder-to-shoulder rank. Against Rebels this should be sufficient, allowing the army's second "line" or reserve to provide depth in case of trouble. Maintaining a second rank of bayonets within a unit can do little except supply attrition fillers, as their muskets are at the "recover" during a charge.

I hope that this paper encourages some readers to recreate the adaptability and flexibility that the British Army demonstrated on the battlefield in the American Revolution - with so much success. Well founded tactical doctrine, combined with the British hallmarks of good discipline, agility of maneuver, speed of fire, and vigorous use of cold steel, can prove an unbeatable combination on the reenactment field.

As always, comments are most welcome.

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