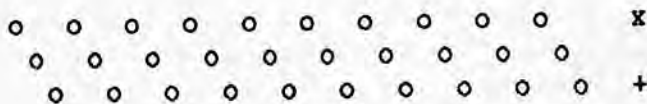


FILE SPACING IN THE BRITISH INFANTRY
1775-1783

The following analysis addresses the spacing between files in line of battle in the British infantry during the American Revolution. Hollywood and reenactors both seem to love the "shoulder-to-shoulder" spacing that would bring joy to the heart of Frederick the Great, but there is strong evidence to suggest that a more open order prevailed in actual practice. Units executing precision marching did, in fact, maintain bodily contact in order to execute wheels. In the battle line however, did this situation obtain? I think not, for the reasons set forth below. Before we continue, remember that official doctrine at the time specified three ranks for combat although, as we know, two ranks (or even one) was the norm during the Revolution.

Starting the investigation with the previous generation, a good concise description of British linear doctrine is presented (with diagrams) by Michael Orr, Lecturer in War Studies at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, in his work, *DETTINGEN, 1743* (London: Charles Knight & Co., 1972). Orr's book, considered the best modern account of the battle by J. A. Houlding (*FIT FOR SERVICE, THE TRAINING OF THE BRITISH ARMY 1715-1795*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), was written specifically for the wargaming community and thus paid a great deal of attention to the esoteric detail of tactical doctrine. On pp.8 & 9 Orr states:

"The soldiers were in three ranks a pace apart, with a pace between each file (emphasis mine). When the preparatory order "Make Ready", was given the front rank knelt where it was, the centre rank moved half a pace to its right, and the rear rank a full pace. In this way each rank was echeloned so that at the order "Present", when the muskets were levelled and pointed at the target, the weapons of the two rear ranks were to the right of the man in front. This movement was known as 'locking' and it was an improvement on the earlier system, which the French still used, in which the rear ranks presented their pieces directly over the heads of the men in front, a habit which often led to serious accidents in the front rank."



(front)

The diagram is a firing platoon in line of battle for European 3-rank operations, ready to fire with ranks locked. o = soldier, x = platoon sergeant, + = platoon officer. The colours are considered to be to the left of the page, therefore the officer and NCO are on the opposite side.

Proceeding onward, we come to the *THE MANUAL EXERCISE AS ORDERED BY HIS MAJESTY IN 1764, TOGETHER WITH PLANS AND EXPLANATIONS OF THE METHOD GENERALLY PRACTIS'D AT REVIEWS AND FIELD-DAYS, &C.* Some of the inspiration for the 1764 drill regulations came from Prussian

practice, but this must not be overemphasized. According to Houlding (p.210), "Although a few of the motions in the 1764 platoon [drill] were taken directly from the Prussian exercise of the 1750s, it was (like the platoon [drill] in the 1756 Regulations from which it mostly derived) an essentially English production."

I have examined the following editions:

1. Boston: Printed by Isaiah Thomas, 1774.
2. New York: Printed by H. Gaine, 1775.
3. Philadelphia: Printed by R. Aitken, 1775.
4. Williamsburg: Printed by Dixon & Hunter, 1775.

These American versions are essentially the same, and include verbatim copies of the 35-command Manual Exercise, the Platoon Exercise, and methods of drawing up a battalion on parade (including ritual "firings" for the benefit of the reviewing officer). Reenactors of British Infantry during the Revolution generally consider "1764" as the "Bible" for employment of arms because it was the only officially sanctioned regulation published until the 1778 version (which was not distributed to British troops in America). However, the 1764 manual is only part of the story.

First, the available editions represent abridgements of the full regulations. For example, "There are several other Maneuvers, sometimes practis'd by the British Regiments in Europe." (Gaine, p.34); and, "The Regiments sometimes march past the reviewing Officer in Companies by Fours. - This is so generally known and practised, that particular Directions are here unnecessary." (Gaine, p.16)

Second, the "1764" was obsolete by 1775, and the American editions had inconsistencies. In this regard, the book does not account for the introduction of light companies, and thus does not include them in diagrams of the battalion. Nor, for example, does it account for the replacement of pole arms by muskets in the hands of officers and NCOs on American service. Gaine, typical of the American versions, states that the distance between files when forming up is 4 inches (p.13) and 6 inches (p.35).

The point in all this is that the "1764" was not a "battle manual", but a basic training tool and handbook for reviews. If we read between the lines however, we may glean a few important items from it. Looking again at Gaine (p.12), the positions for multi-rank firing are described. At the command to make ready, the center rank "stepping at the same Time a moderate Pace, or two Feet to the Right..." takes position, while the rear rank is to "step briskly streight to the Right with the right Foot a full Pace..." Now, if files are a mere 4 to 6 inches apart, it is not necessary to uncover the files by such distances, however, if we return to the "locked ranks" with a full pace between files, then these distances are realistic, and coincide with Orr's description.

We have further evidence that when battalions exercised their arms, they came to a condition of "open files", not addressed in the "1764". The works of Major-General Humphrey Bland were accorded official status by Royal Warrants. His book, A TREATISE OF MILITARY DISCIPLINE (London: R. Baldwin, 1759), states (p.12) "When a regiment is to exercise, or be reviewed, the files are opened, the distance of which between one another is one pace, or the length of an

outstretched arm. Order those of the front rank to stretch out their right arms to the right, and if they can touch the left shoulders of their right-hand men, they have their true distance." While Bland is here describing what a condition of "open files" is in a training context, it dovetails with the principle of locked ranks for combat. That this practice obtained during the period of the Revolution is confirmed in John Prebble's book *MUTINY, HIGHLAND REGIMENTS IN REVOLT 1743-1804*. He describes (p.191) the Western (Argyll) Fencibles at exercise in Glasgow in 1779: "When the Fencibles reached the links they wheeled to the right, halted and turned into line, opening their files by an extended right arm before ordering their muskets." Thus we see that both official doctrine and practice recognized the use of "open files", as did combat technique prior to the Revolution. What about combat during the Revolution?

To follow the analysis into the Revolutionary War period, one need only look at contemporary British Army critics of that war. Lt.-Col. William Dalrymple's book, *TACTICKS* (London, 1781), is treated in Holding (p.237). Holding states that Dalrymple "felt that the army's service in America during the Seven Years War and the War for Independence had led to a significant decline in the solidity - and appreciation - of British heavy infantry. Three ranks had given way to two, in most battalions, and file intervals were dangerously open [emphasis mine]." Like Dalrymple, Colonel Sir David Dundas, in *PRINCIPLES OF MILITARY MOVEMENTS* (London: T. Cadell, 1788), condemned the experience of the Revolution. His critique brings up a number of observations which I quote at length below from pp.50-51. Here Dundas presented the views of those using two-ranks in the Revolution, although he didn't like them:

"The method almost universally adopted in our infantry, and in ours only, of forming two deep, and at open files [emphasis mine], deserves the most serious consideration. Its advantages are said to be, That as infantry seldom or never shock with bayonets, all formations on a great depth are unnecessary. That as fire now decides; the more men that are thus usefully employed the better. That the fire of the third rank is thrown away, and more incommodes the front rank than it does the enemy. That at close files, men have not the use of their arms; and are apt to crowd, double, and get into confusion, when under the enemy's fire."

Dundas also commented (pp.9-14) that: "Most corps drilled on a depth of two ranks only, and at open rank- and file-intervals, both of which created weak and irregular lines;" (as quoted in Holding, p.240). If by "open files" one means a full pace between men then Dundas's subsequent criticisms would have some basis. However, 4 to 6 inches would have been close enough to achieve the "mass" which he seemed to be interested in, a la Frederick the Great. Again, the opponents of "close files" which he mentions in his last item, can only have a valid point of contention if the difference between "open" and "close" was something on the order of 1 pace versus 4-6 inches.

To illustrate, take a battalion of 400 men in two ranks, presenting a front of 200 men in the first rank. Allowing 24 inches for the space occupied by a man in full kit, this would make a front of 400 feet with the men "elbow to elbow". A space of 4 inches

between files would add 796 inches (66 1/3 feet) to the line, making it 1.17 times the shoulder-to-shoulder length. A space of 6 inches between files would add 1,194 inches (99.5 feet), making the line 1.25 times its original length. There's not much to get excited about with either of these distances. However, at an open file arrangement with (on average) 27 inches between files, 5,373 inches (447 3/4 feet) would be added to the length of the line, making it 2.12 times the shoulder-to-shoulder length. Such extension, while useful in America to allow for rapid movement over obstacle-strewn ground, would cause Dundas worry in a European environment because of the lack of solidity against enemy bayonet or cavalry charges. Thus, if we take the analysis of the critics into account, it makes sense that the "open files" discussed by Bland is the same distance (an arm's length) that would have upset Dalrymple and Dundas.

The above suggests that, contrary to popular belief, the British infantry had a habit of training and fighting, at least in America, in a two-rank, "open files" formation with an arm's length between each man in the front rank, and the second rank uncovering between them for firing. Incidental advantages to reenactors of "open files" deployment include enhanced safety - by removing the danger of having pans close to the heads of other men in ranks - and increasing the speed of loading and firing by providing more space to handle muskets, thus reducing constraints imposed by close proximity of other men to swinging muskets. As an aside, it is interesting to watch today's Guards of the British Army as they conduct the "Trooping of the Colour", a ceremony which they have performed since the 1750s. They form up in 8 "guards" of 70 men each, with an Escort to the Colour which takes the part of the old Grenadier company. When the Guards are formed for inspection, they are given the command "Open order march!" to achieve an open interval; and when they are being readied to march in review, they are first given the command "Close order march!" to assume the shoulder-to-shoulder spacing.

I would be interested to hear from other reenactors/scholars on this subject.

Chuck Kamps

Charles T. Kamps, Jr.
5812 Canvasback Road
Burke, VA 22015
(703) 250-8727