

A SUMMARY OF FIREARM TACTICS

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I will present here a select number of different tactics to see their development and progress from the 16th to the 19th century.

General Firing

During the 16th century (and later, up to the 18th century in some states), shooting and firing mostly took place in ordered lines, which were not especially deep (mostly, so that the three lines could operate freely). The way it worked was as follows:

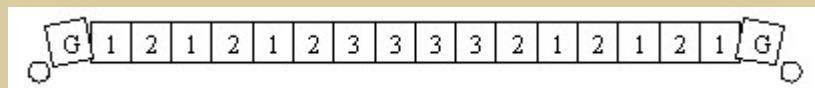
- the first line fired
- the first line turns and moves to the rear
- while the second line (moves forward to be the first) fires; the previously first line reloads
- the second moves to the rear after firing
- the third line fires and, during it, the one that fired before reloads
- the third moves to the rear
- the first line fires again while the third reloads

And so on and on. This tactic was taken into use by both cavalry and infantry (although cavalry used it in a deeper version mostly and even infantry had seldom only three men deep lines).

English and Dutch in the War of the Spanish Succession

Marlborough and the corresponding Dutch generals managed to create effective formations to withstand the French. It allowed to maintain an effective fire almost constantly and operated at the scale of battalion (800 men for the English):

- the battalion formed a line that was some 250 meters wide
- the grenadiers were placed at the edges of the battalion
- the two pieces of artillery each battalion had were aside the grenadiers
- the battalion was divided into groups
- the battalion was some three meters deep and had also a depth of three men
- there are drummers in the rear of every battalion
- the graph below represents the English battalion in a firing position



English firing in groups

- the round objects at the corners are Artillery pieces
- the 'G' is for Grenadiers
- groups numbered 1 are reloading
- groups numbered 2 are firing
- groups numbered 3 are preparing for firing

These battalions were able to produce continuous fire against the enemies and were successful even under enemy fire



(the French mostly used the same tactic that is described in the previous chapter: 'General Firing').[1]

The French Column

The French Revolutionary generals understood the weaknesses of line formations and, therefore, devised a tactic against it: the column. The column was supposed to be able to push with force through the weak enemy lines. This, however, also meant that in the column, most people couldn't open fire upon the enemy. One column was made up of eight companies; there were also additional support companies ahead and behind the column.

The column was able to manoeuvre, and, since it was escorted by a battalion of irregular men, it easily confused the ordered groups and lines of the adversaries. The column also took larger advantage of the landscape.

The British counter-to-a-column

British quickly developed a counter-tactic, however. Since the column took great advantage in landscape, the British started to place themselves above hilltops – mostly so that the main forces were behind the hilltop and regiments of irregular infantry were hiding ahead. The irregular forces changed fire during the time when the columns advanced. However, when they were at a set distance, the British lines attacked the column from ahead and the sides, supported by artillery and the irregulars. This way, the columns had a larger basis of fire and the columns were unable to respond. As a last effort, the Brits charged with bayonets and the columns usually fled quickly.

The Prussian Battalion in the Middle of the 19th Century

The Prussians developed a rather unique way of battling the enemy, although it could be said that they evolved along with the time. The battalion had 800 men in four companies – this division made the Prussians quite successful in firing.

The second and third company were kept in reserve (400 men) in four columns. Some one hundred and fifty steps ahead of this reserve were another 266 men stationed in two small columns. These and the men ahead of them were all of the first and fourth company. One hundred and fifty steps ahead of these were 67 men in two smaller columns. And finally, one hundred and fifty steps ahead of these two were the remaining 67 men, however, they were already placed in a single line covering some 200 meters.

When the assault stopped, the reserves came into play and pushed the assault further. Also, each of these parts could easily take cover and were hard to notice even on an even landscape.

John H. Morgan's Cavalry Tactic

The cavalry charges never got a place in the fighting that took place in America. The Civil War general, John H. Morgan, devised a way of fighting suitable for cavalry – although this presumed the cavalry dismounts.

Units from the wings moved forward to scout and let know of enemy movements. These gave information to the rest of the regiment. The rest of the wing units remained in reserve. Men divide themselves in groups of four: three move forward and one remains to hold the horses. The three dismounted men move forward and all together form a curved line. The distances between each of these people is, depending upon the scouting information, some 100 to 200 meters.

Summary

We've now seen five different tactics, each of them a representation of their times and effective means of breaking the enemy down. Each of those that follow, can easily defeat the previous one – in fact, one might say they are meant for destroying the previous one.

References and Notes:

1. Marlborough also commanded that his cavalry would not stop shooting as the French did, but rather, charge in with swords and sabers. This made his cavalry also more prominent than the French.

