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## OF FILE MARCHING

by GREG RENAULT



## Part I: Movements

**I**N THE BRITISH SYSTEM OF INFANTRY DRILL the basic unit of manoeuvre is the battalion, formed either in line or in column of companies. Strong emphasis is thus placed on marching in line, and changing direction by wheeling, advancing shoulders forward, and the oblique step. However, the British system also features a number of manoeuvres that can be performed when marching in file--where the unit, formed in rank-and-file, marches while facing to either the right or left flank. Possibly because the portions pertaining to file marching are scattered throughout the drill manual, I have noticed that many 1812 reenacting units that portray line infantry tend to underuse these manoeuvre options.

However, file marching is essential in a number of the actions required for a line company to perform its role in battalion manoeuvres.<sup>1</sup> The instructions for file marching are scattered throughout the Army drill manuals, but when examined together they suggest a utility for file marching by line units greater than current reenactor practice reflects.<sup>2</sup>

The following takes a closer look at the file marching options available to British line infantry.<sup>3</sup> Part I explains the basic manoeuvres, while Part II groups together the various sections from the drill manuals that address file marching. Unless otherwise indicated references in parentheses are to the NCO drill manual for regular line infantry, the 1807 *Manual and Platoon Exercise* [MPE], or the 1811 edition of the 1792 officers' manual, the *Rules and Regulations for the Formations, Field-Exercise, and Movements of His Majesty's Forces* [R&R].

My explication of aspects of file marching is divided into the following sections:

- Basic principles of file marching
- Changes of direction
- Turns
- Doubling and undoubling files
- Forming line from file marching
- Advancing or retiring by files from line
- Street firing
- Countermarch

## Basic Principles

### File Marching

An infantry unit formed in line of battle consists of two or three **ranks** of men standing side by side; the individual men from each rank that stand in front or behind each other constitute a **file** (hence the term “rank and file”). Units usually march so that the ranks move forward or backwards (“to the front” or “to the rear”). However, if the men in a unit face to either the right or left flank before marching, the unit marches in the direction of its files —this is **file marching**. (MPE, 16)

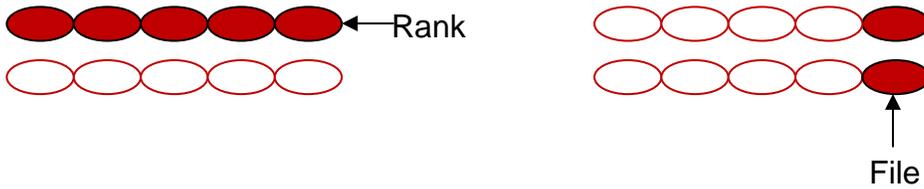
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<sup>1</sup> S. 66-69 of both the *Manual and Platoon Exercise* and the *Rules and Regulations* contain 25 exercises that a company should be able to perform. Exercises 9, 16, 17 and 21 contain the following file marching maneuvers: counter-march by files, march to the flanks, form to the front, form to either flank, file from the flank to the front or rear, reform line. (MPE,77-8; R&R, 59-61, 106, 108) Similarly, S. 86 in Part III of R&R contains 36 exercises that a battalion should be able to perform to demonstrate proficiency at drill. Twelve of these exercises (2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 19, 27, 28) involve file marching movements. (R&R,105-110) Finally, note that of the infamous 19 movements that units are required to perform during an inspection and review, ten involve file movements (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 15, 16). (R&R, 261-268)

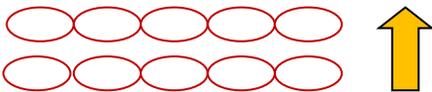
<sup>2</sup> Recently the Crown Forces has added marching in files formed four deep to the usual march formation of a column of sections..

<sup>3</sup> This is a study of file marching movement available to regular infantry. Thus, while I rely primarily on the 1792 *Rules and Regulations* and the 1807 NCO abstract, I also occasionally draw on light infantry and militia manuals as well as private treatises to clarify the file marching maneuvers used by line infantry.

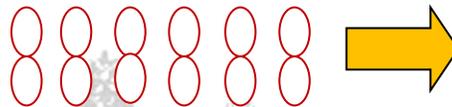
## Rank and File



## Marching to the Front



## File Marching



## Step

Length of the pace is the usual 30 inches. File marching utilizes the **lock step**, in which the files remain closed up, and soldiers step slightly ahead of the spot vacated by the foot of the man marching in front of them.<sup>4</sup> (*MPE*, 16, 44, 91: *R&R*, 27)

**Recommendation:** When file marching do not call out the steps. Instead, let the lead file set the pace for the following files.

**The lock step, as shown in Maltby (plate 1, following p. 6):**



## Time

File marching may be taught in ordinary time (75 steps/minute), but in the field is to be done in **quick time** (108 steps/minute), especially when file marching is involved in battalion changes of formation.<sup>5</sup> (*MPE*, 13, 16, 36, 44, 70, 91: *R&R*, 14, 28, 53, 126)

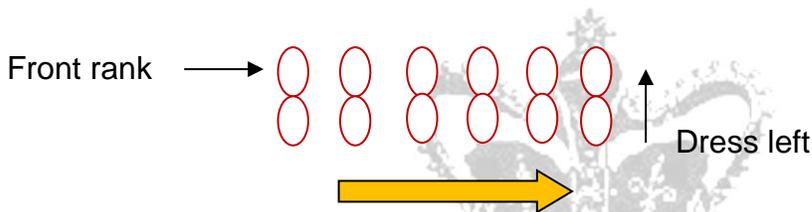
<sup>4</sup> Suasso (1816) notes that as the distance between files when file marching is approximately 22", a lock step must overstep that of the preceding file by 8" to retain the ordinary 30" pace (56, 57, 58, 61, 140, 180).

<sup>5</sup> When a battalion in line countermarches, Ordinary time is used. (*R&R*, 126)

## Dressing

The men in the front rank **cover** each other “so that the head of the man immediately before may conceal the heads of all the others in his front”. (MPE, 36, 91) The men in each file **dress to the file’s front-rank man**: “The centre and rear ranks must look to, and regulate themselves by their leaders of the front rank, and always dress in their file.” (MPE, 44; R&R, 28) For this purpose “Each file is to consider itself as an entire rank” (MPE, 47; R&R, 28) Thus in a unit that is file marching by the right flank, the files would dress to the left.

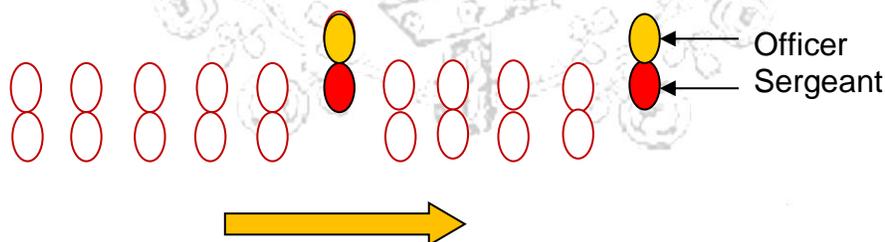
**File marching by the right flank. Files dress left towards the front rank.**



## Places of Officer and Sergeant

The officer always directs the company from the leading flank file when the company is file marching. When a single unit is file marching, the officer’s position is in front of the front rank, the sergeant to his right. When more than one company is involved, the position of the sergeant is in front of the front rank, with the officer on the sergeant’s left. (R&R, 37-8,122; Campbell, 12; Suasso, 179)

**Position of officer and sergeant, companies file marching by the right flank**



If the company is to file march by the **left flank**, when the company faces left the officer and sergeant face right about and, trading places as they move behind the rear rank,<sup>6</sup> shift to the left flank to direct the company. (MPE, 54-5; R&R, 37-8; Suasso, 178; Campbell, 4, 5)

<sup>6</sup> The about-face is per Suasso, p. 178. Note in the midst of this process the sergeant and officer will need to switch places in order to allow the officer to precede the sergeant into his position on the left flank.

## Intended Direction of Commands

The direction for executing orders regarding a unit engaged in file marching is always **relative to the direction that the files are moving at the time the order is given**. (Campbell, 15; implicit in all the other manuals) Eg, a file-marching unit ordered to form to the front will form in the same direction that it is marching, without regard to the original direction of its battalion front. Similarly, if ordered to form to the right, the unit will form to the right of its current direction of march.

## Change of Direction

Units marching in file may change direction 90 degrees to the right or left, by the files sequentially **wheeling on a moveable pivot**. (MPE, 45; R&R, 28)<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, a unit's direction may be altered (changed less than 90 degrees) by the files sequentially moving **right or left shoulders forward**. (Campbell, 14)

**Oblique marching** for a unit that is file marching is done the same as when a unit marches in line. (MPE, 47; R&R, 30)

Files maintain dressing throughout changes in direction ("*Each file is to consider itself as an entire rank*") (MPE, 47; R&R, 30)

## Turns

A turn is a change of direction performed while marching, which is conducted simultaneously by each soldier in the unit. At the command to *right* or *left turn* the soldiers all change direction 90 degrees, and continues marching in the new direction. The effect of a right or left turn is to change a unit's **formation** as well as its direction while on the march, from marching in line to marching in file, or from marching in file to marching in line. Useful for company-sized or smaller units. (MPE, 41, 42; R&R, 26) Infantry may also turn right- or left-about to reverse direction but not formation while marching (LC Militia, 51, 53; Suasso, 134-5, 136n).

**Footwork:** No directions regarding footwork for turns are provided in the Army manuals or the period light infantry manuals. This strongly suggests that turns were done simply, likely by pivoting on whichever foot hit the ground after the command was given, and then stepping off in the new direction with the opposite foot.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Neither MPE nor R&R provide a specific **command** for changing direction when file marching. This movement occurs in the 15th and 16th of the required battalion manoeuvres; command suggestions found in various treatises on the 18 Manoeuvres range from "*By files, to the right, wheel*" (Dickson 1799) to "*File right*" (Russell 1805), becoming shorter over time. See the versions found below in **Part II: Sources**, section 8.

<sup>8</sup> Given the Army's tendency to regulate everything minutely, especially drill, I suspect that if turns were to be done in a defined manner, the manual would have stated so. I found two specific period methods: one takes 2 counts ("check, turn, step") found in the LC Militia manual, 51, 53. Another, found in Suasso, 134-6, adds a

# Doubling and Undoubling Files

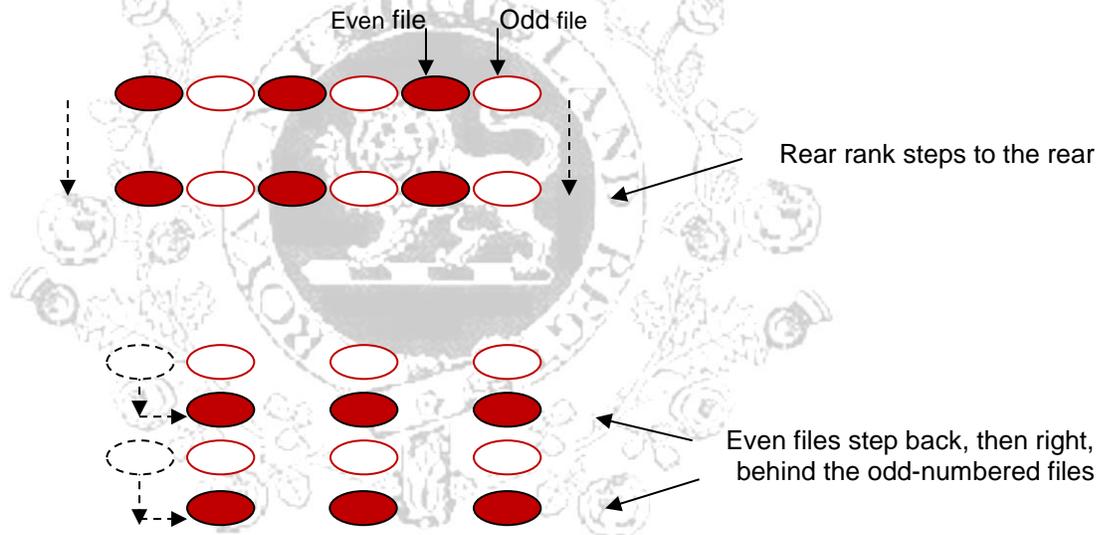
Units that are file marching may double and undouble files; this can be done while halted, or on the march.<sup>9</sup> Files need to be numbered beforehand.<sup>10</sup> When files are doubled during file marching, the lock step is not necessary.

## 1. Halted (in line)

### From two to four deep

- *Form four deep*—rear rank takes one step to the rear.
- *March*—even-numbered files take one step to the rear with left foot, then sidestep to the right with the right foot.
- This places the even-numbered files behind the odd-numbered files, to create files that are four deep. The unit may then be faced either to the right or left for file marching.<sup>11</sup> (Cooper, 59)

### “Form four deep”



closing step, so turns take 3 counts and about-turns 4. Both of these methods, however, interrupt the flow of movement by adding counts to the turn; to my mind this hampers the utility of turns and increases the likelihood of collisions between files. Timothy Pickering makes the same point in his 1774 manual for Massachusetts militia, 44-46. Note the 1856 *Field Exercise*, 3, describes a pivot without pause on the foot opposite the turn's direction.<sup>9</sup> The movement "form four deep" does not appear in the Army manuals for our period. However, its presence in a number of other period manuals suggests that forming fours for file marching was a widespread practice. See: LC Militia, 53, 55; Cooper, 55, 59, 71; Barber, 70-71; Dickinson, 135-6; Suasso (1825) 181-3; PEI Militia, 5. It does appear in the postwar 1824 *Field Exercises and Evolutions*, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> A company would be sized and numbered when it is formed on the company parade prior to battalion formation. E.g., see Cooper, 70.

<sup>11</sup> The Crown Forces follows Cooper's version. Slightly different versions can be found in LC Militia, 53, Dickinson, 135, and in Suasso (1825), 181.

### From four to two deep (Halted, in line, faced to the front.)

- *Form two deep*— even-numbered files side-step with the left foot, then forward on the right foot;
- *Close to the front, march*—rear rank takes one step forward.

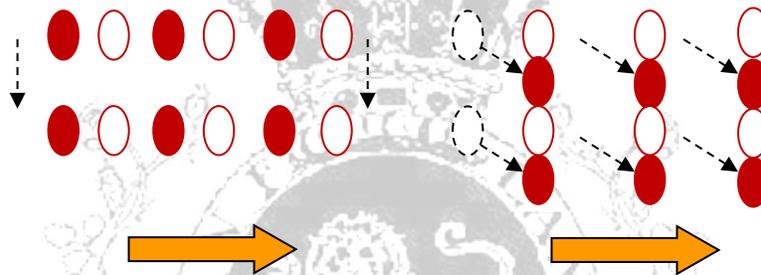
## 2. On the March (file marching)

The following examples are for a two-rank unit marching by the right flank.<sup>12</sup>

### From two to four deep

- *Form double files*—rear rank side-steps to the right; even files step up to the right of the odd-numbered files. (Cooper, 71; Barber, 70)

“Form double files”



### From four to two deep

- *Form two deep*—reverse of the above; the even-numbered files mark time one pace, then step left behind the odd-numbered files; the rear rank then side-steps to the left. (Cooper, 71, Barber 71)

When file marching by fours, “At the words “halt, front” the corps forms two deep as above directed.” (LC Militia, 55) I.e., the unit halts, fronts, and automatically forms two ranks.

The same method can be used to move from double files to a single file, and back again:

### From two to one deep (“Indian files”)

- *Form Indian files*—files undouble. “Each rear rank man takes one diagonal pace inwards to the rear of his file leader.” (Campbell, 8; Barber, 70)

### From single file to two deep

- *Form double order of files*—“Every rear rank man advances until he is in a line with his file leader.”—stepping up on the left side when marching to the left flank, and on the right side when marching to the right flank. (Campbell, 8; Barber, 71)

<sup>12</sup> Cooper and Barber are silent on what to do when marching by the left flank. Having the odd-numbered files step up to the left works best when the unit has an odd number of files. Cf. Campbell and Barber on Indian files.

## Form Line from File Marching

In some situations file-marching units will need to form directly into line while on the march. If the unit is to continue marching afterwards, it **marks time** until formed.<sup>13</sup> (Barber, 69, 72) The following examples are for a two-rank unit marching by the right flank. Reverse the directions for a unit marching by the left flank.

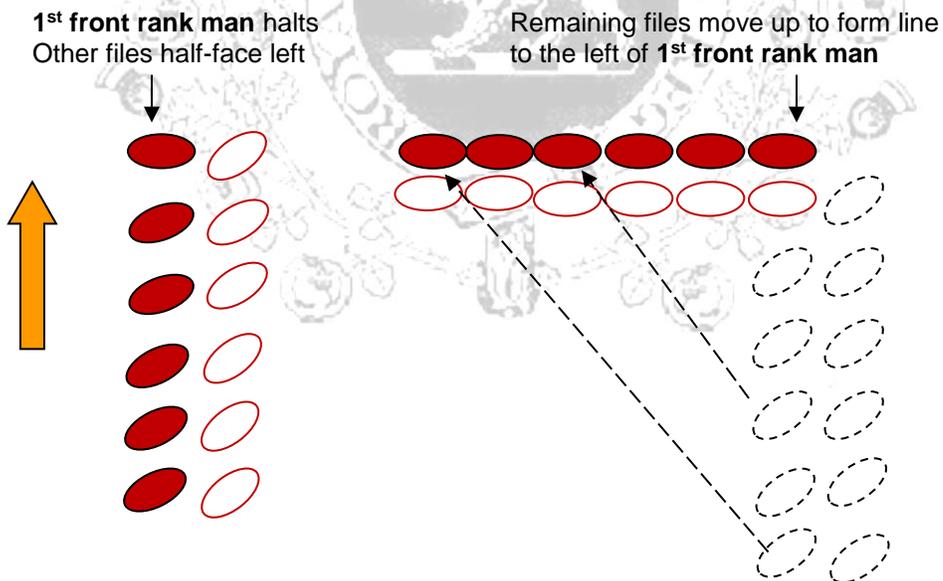
### Form line to the left

- Halt: *Halt. Front.* (MPE, 70) If formed in fours, files automatically undouble. (LC Militia, 55)
- Marching: *Left turn*—formation changes from file marching to marching in a line that is facing to the left of the previous direction of march.

### Form line to the front

- *To the front form*—the front rank man of the leading file halts, and is covered by his rear rank man. The other files make a half face to the left, and successively move up to form line, dressing to the right. (MPE, 70-71; R&R, 53-4; Moore, 180; Cooper, 71; Barber, 72; Campbell, 6) (If forming column, pivot and dressing move to the left.)

“To the front form”



<sup>13</sup> “But in all the formations, the company without waiting for express orders, dress by the directing flank as they form, and mark time until the officer on that flank gives the word forward; which he does as soon as he is satisfied with the dressing.” (Barber, 69)

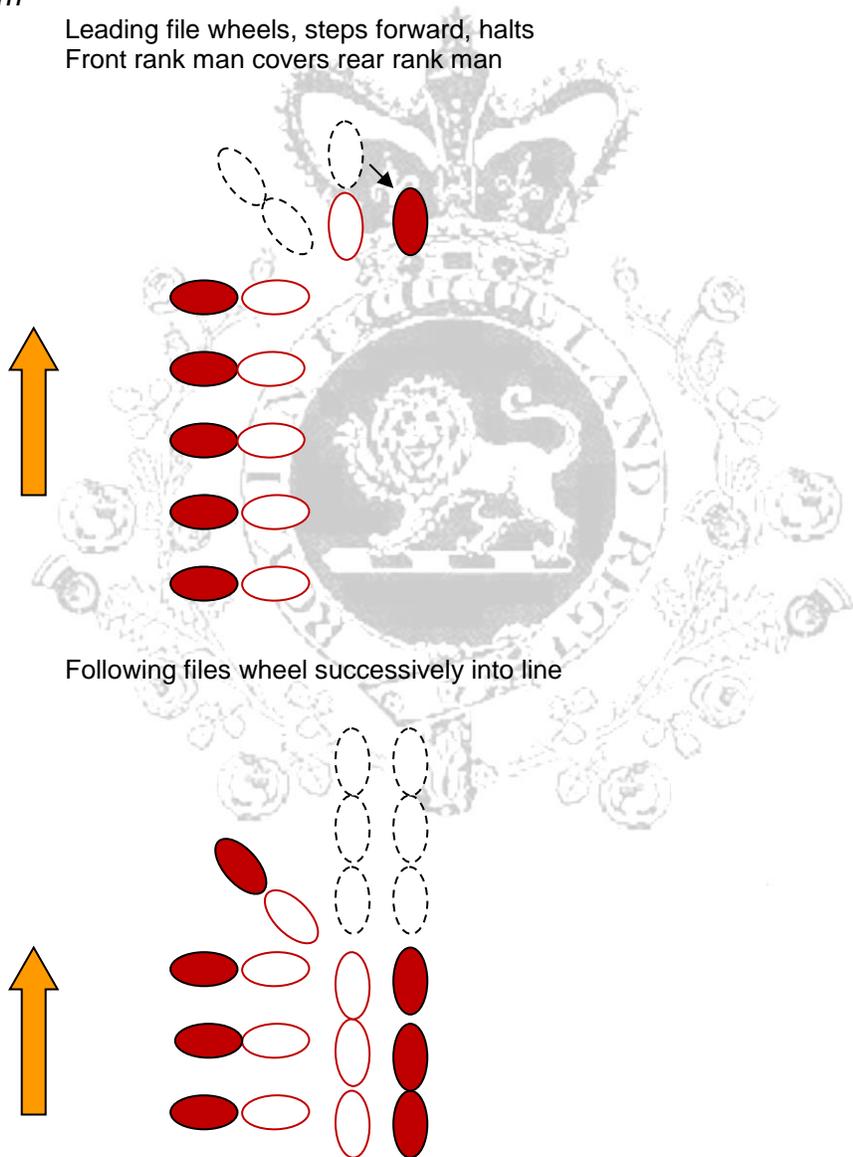
Adding a unit size designation to the above command creates a column of smaller or larger units. E.g., at the command “*To the front form sections*”, each section forms front on its right marker, to create a column of sections.

**Form line on the right**

- *To the right form*—the leading file wheels to the right, takes one step forward (to move out of the way)<sup>14</sup>, the front-rank man steps in front of his rear-rank man. Remaining files continue marching, wheeling successively into line, dressing to the right. (*MPE*, 71; *R&R*, 122-3; Moore, 180; Campbell, 6; Barber 77)

“*To the right form*”

Leading file wheels, steps forward, halts  
Front rank man covers rear rank man



Following files wheel successively into line

<sup>14</sup> The step forward is found in Campbell’s version. It eliminates the need for the marching files to oblique behind the forming line, as occurs in the *M&PE* version.

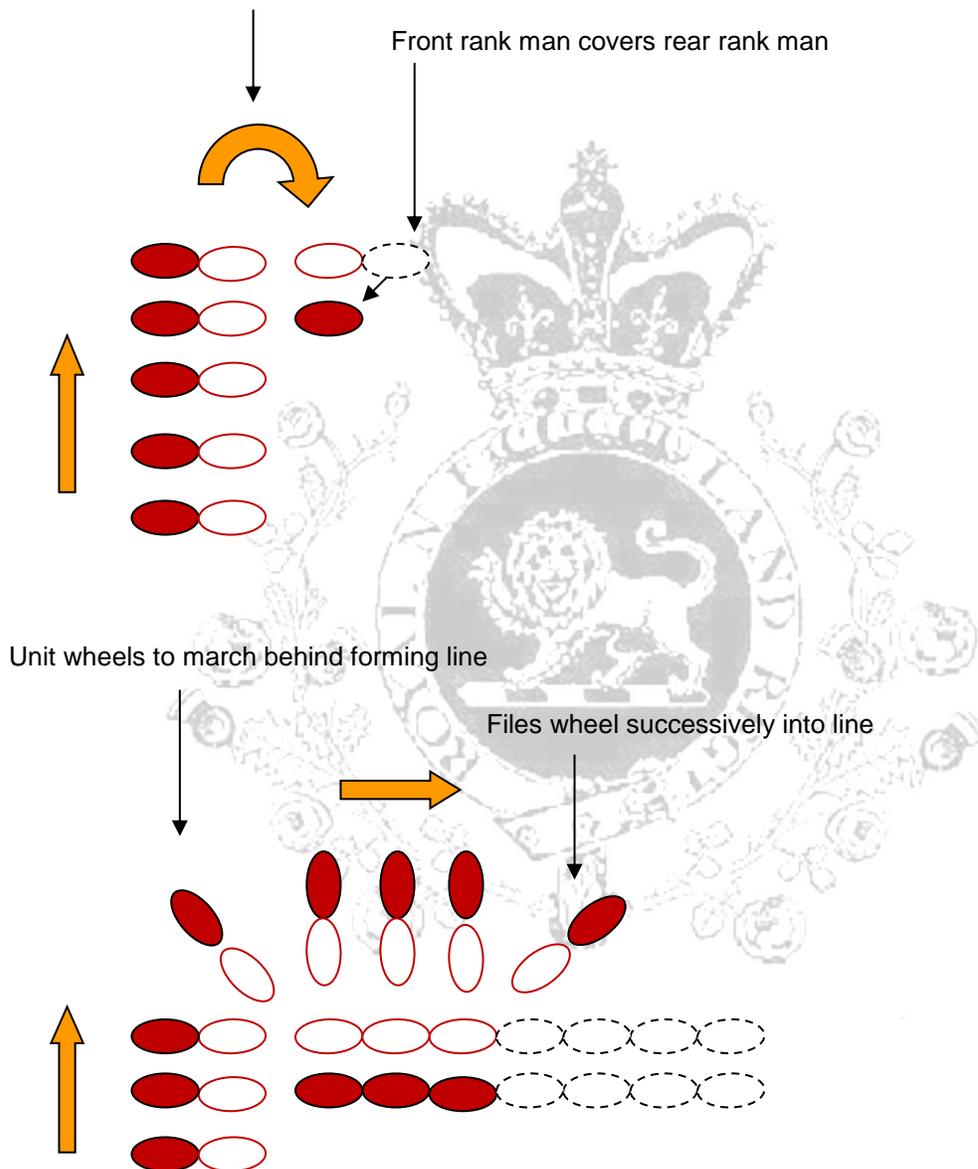
## Form line faced to the rear

- *To the rear form*—the leading file wheels right 180 degrees, halts, and the front-rank man “covers” (steps up in front of) his rear-rank file mate.<sup>15</sup> Remaining files wheel right behind the first file, then wheel successively into line. (Campbell, 6; Barber, 75)

“To the rear form”

Leading file wheels to face to the rear

Front rank man covers rear rank man



<sup>15</sup> This is my adaptation of Campbell & Barber. I have the first file wheel rather than face about, in order to clear the way for the remaining files (as Campbell does when forming on the right). An additional advantage is that the movement can be taught as a simple combination of a change of direction (“file right”), immediately followed by forming to the flank (“to the right, form”). I chose the command “to the rear form” in order to remain consistent with the intended direction of command. Cf. the table of various commands for this movement in Pt. II, *Sources* below, p. 27.

Note that this move can be used to have a unit that is retiring by files form to its previous front.

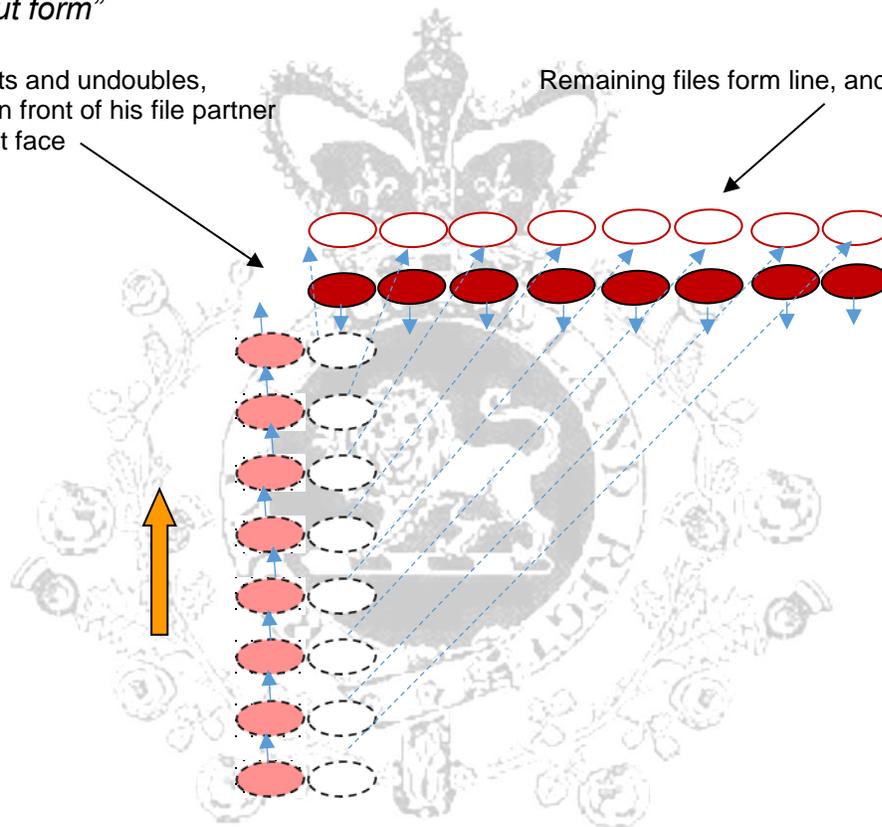
### Alternate method of forming line faced to the rear

- *To the right about form*—The leading file halts and undoubles, rear rank man in front of the front rank man; both files then right-about face. Remaining files fan out to right to their place in line, undoubling as they do so, rear rank in front; sequentially they halt and right-about face to form line on the right marker. (Moore, 180; Barber, 74; Cooper, 64)

### “To the right-about form”

Leading file halts and undoubles,  
rear rank man in front of his file partner  
Both right-about face

Remaining files form line, and right-about face



## Advance or Retire by Files

This maneuver is used to change the unit's formation, while retaining its direction. It can be executed from either flank, from both flanks simultaneously, be performed to either the front or to the rear, and conducted either from the halt or when marching.<sup>16</sup> A unit in line faces to the designated flank, and file-marching, immediately wheels to either the front or rear.

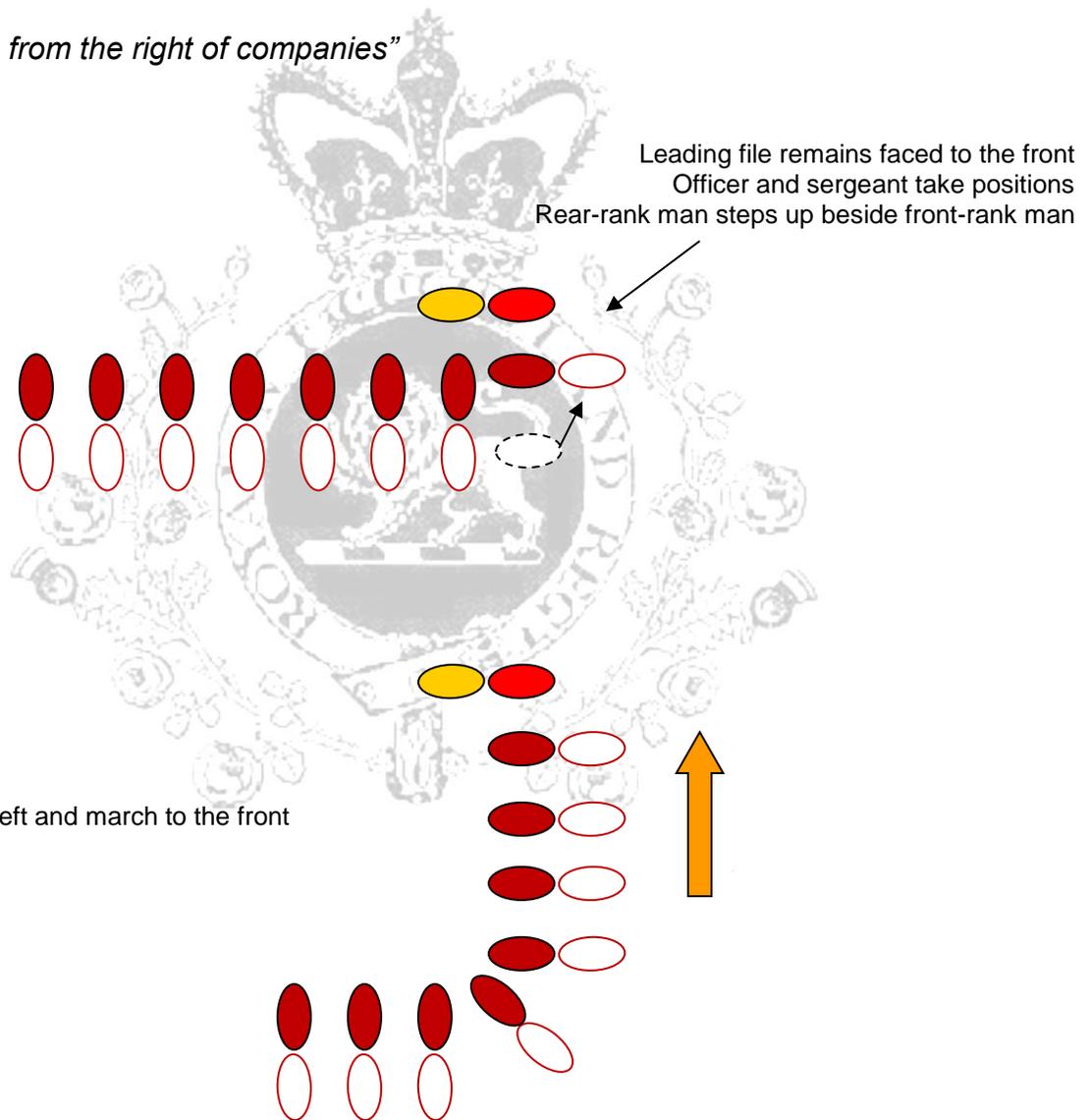
<sup>16</sup> A company may also execute this from the center with doubled files. The 1<sup>st</sup> section proceeds by files from its left, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> section simultaneously proceeds by files from its right. (Campbell, 9-10)

The following examples are for advancing by the right flank. When retiring or conducting the maneuver from the left flank, change the direction of the wheels.

### 1. Halted

- *Advance by files from the right of companies--caution.*
- *Right face*—all face right but leading file. Officer and sergeant take their places in front of the leading file. Rear rank man of leading file steps up beside the front rank man.<sup>17</sup>
- *Quick march*—files wheel left in succession to follow the leading file. (*R&R*, 102; Campbell, 3-4)

*“Advance by files from the right of companies”*



<sup>17</sup> The leading files “*throw themselves to the flank according as they are to move, so as to be disengaged from the last file of the leading platoon.*” (*R&R*, 102).

## 2. Marching

- *File from the right to the front*--“The whole turn to the right, and file to the left.” The unit performs a right turn, the front file immediately wheels left. (Cooper, 71; Barber, 70)  
OR: *Pass companies by files; Right turn; Left wheel (R&R, 240-242)*
- *Advance by Indian files from the flanks*—“The file at each flank advances, led on by sergeant, and when the rear rank man has cleared the front, the next file inwards follows [by performing a turn], and so on successively.” (Barber, 72)

Advancing or retiring by files from the flanks is used in combination with other movements for the passage of lines and obstacles.

## Street Firing

The two manoeuvres **retiring by files**, and **forming to the rear** are combined in the street firing drill as follows: a battalion is formed in a close column; the unit at the head of the column fires, retires by files from either or both flanks, then reforms at the rear of the column to face in the original direction (“to the rear form”), loading on the move. Following units sequentially repeat this pattern, each firing in turn as the movement brings them to the head of the column. (If the column is advancing, the head unit advances beyond its predecessor’s position prior to firing.)<sup>18</sup> (Suasso 1816, 264n.; *Complete Drill Sergeant*, 32; Bland, 86-87; Pickering, 119-123; Hindle, 15; Williamson, 71-2; Campbell, 27-30)

## Countermarch

This maneuver reverses the direction and orientation of a battalion column, on its own ground. Each company in the column reverses its orientation by file marching in place, to end up faced towards its former rear. Facing is always **away** from the former pivot, with the countermarch conducted by the **rear** rank. (*MPE*, 63-4, 95; *R&R*, 46-7, 99, 129-30; Suasso [1825], 276-7)

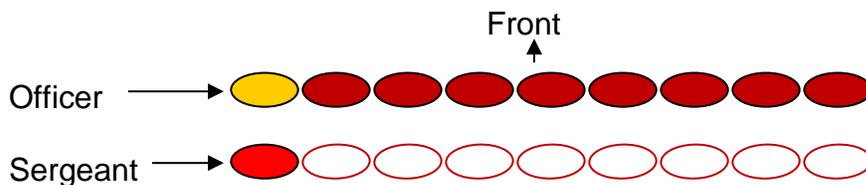
For a battalion column right-in-front (officer and sergeant on the left flank):

- *Companies will countermarch*—caution.
- *To the right face*—unit faces; officer moves from left to right flank of unit; sergeant steps into officer’s place and faces by the right about.
- *Quick march*—officer leading, files wheel 180 degrees to march behind the rear rank, up to the standing sergeant.
- *Halt, Front, Dress*—after the unit dresses on the sergeant, the officer replaces the sergeant in the front rank. (This last command is given at company-level.)

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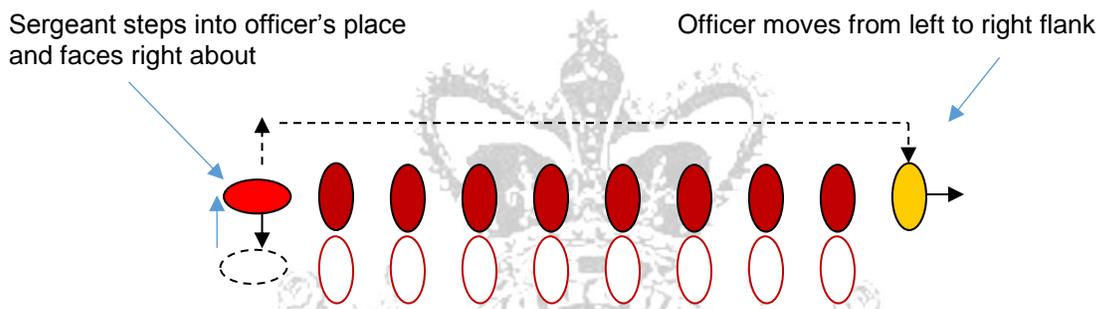
<sup>18</sup> An alternate method is for a company to wheel outwards by subdivisions after firing, face to the rear, then file to the rear of the column. (Dickinson, 127-133; *Complete Drill Sergeant*, 32)

*“Countermarch”*

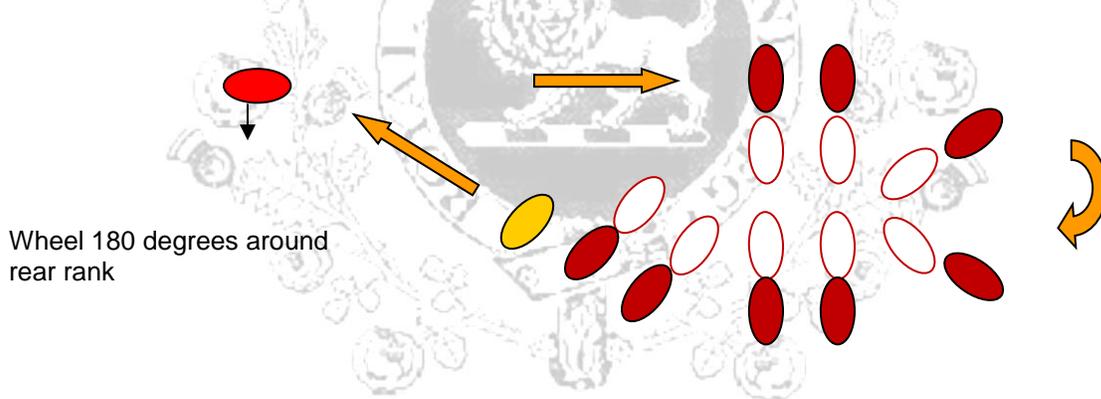


Unit is in a column that is right-in-front. Officer and sergeant are on the pivot flank (left flank)

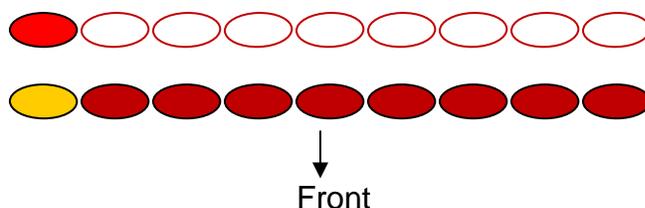
*“Right Face”*



*“Quick March”*



*“Halt. Front. Dress”*



Unit halts and dresses on sergeant. Officer replaces sergeant in front rank. Column orientation is now left-in-front, facing its former rear. Officer and sergeant are on the new pivot flank (right flank).

## Alternate countermarch

Used when a company needs to countermarch on its own ground (Campbell, 23-4).

- *Column will countermarch by companies upon their own ground—caution.*
- *Covering sergeant faces about and takes ½ pace (which places him between the ranks, facing towards the rear); Officer takes ½ pace forward, and faces right-about*
- *Right and left face--the front rank faces away from the pivot; rear rank faces towards the pivot*
- *Quick march--ranks follow each other around outside of sergeant, until the ranks switch places*
- *Halt; front; dress--Halt and front in the new direction; dress*
- *Officer and sergeant resume places*

An entire battalion may also countermarch in a similar fashion when in line, marching in ordinary time across its front or rear, in whole or in subdivisions (*R&R, 125ff*).

## Conclusion

The above explanations are meant to demonstrate the file marching system contained in the British Army drill manuals for line infantry, *circa* 1812. These maneuvers add options to the regular maneuvers in line and column, ones that provide greater flexibility for line infantry units, and which in some situations could be especially appropriate for movement in North American settings.

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Unless otherwise noted, sources consulted are scanned copies of original documents, available online.

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