

## Light infantry: deploy skirmishers forward from line, *R&R* vs. Campbell

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The British system of light infantry movement grew out of the Army's experiences in the colonial wars of the Americas. Europeans were very familiar with the use of irregulars for the *petite guerre*; Austria introduced them to the world of linear warfare in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and other countries quickly followed. However, for the most part these duties were performed by auxiliaries from outside the regular forces, which were not subject to the discipline and training of the standing army and were primarily used for the "war of outposts", having little or no role in major engagements.

But England's colonial conflicts in North America and the West Indies, conducted in wilderness and jungles, featured aspects of the *petite guerre* on a larger scale which could not be conducted primarily by auxiliary units raised on an ad hoc basis. While the British did rely on some irregulars (eg, native allies) and auxiliaries (rangers, colonial units), they also adapted regular line units and created new light infantry units able to employ the hybrid fighting techniques required for combat in the Americas.

Thus, while British light infantry *doctrine* appears to be largely derived from the European tradition of the *petite guerre* (Ewald, Rottenburg, Jarry), it developed a system of *tactics and movement* derived from irregular combat, but formalized in a manner consistent with standard Army discipline. The result was light infantry: regular Army units trained to fight in a non-linear manner as well as in traditional linear formations. This formalization can be clearly seen in the development of a system of file marching for light infantry troops, which to some extent is distinct from the system of movement utilized for infantry engaged in linear warfare.

Elements of the British file marching system are found in Bouquet (1764), Townsend (1772) and Howe (1774). However, the LI companies created in 1771 received minimal subsequent direction from the section on LI exercise added to the official *Rules and Regulations (R&R)* in 1794. The file marching movement options found in the *R&R* were likely adapted in the field to the needs of LI service, suggested by comments from Grey's 1794 and Abercrombie's (1795-6) West Indian campaigns, and John Moore's experience in the West Indies and in Ireland (1797 *Instructions*). Rottenburg's 1798 manual (Rottenburg served under Moore in Ireland; his manual features language similar to Moore's), the first major officially sanctioned LI manual, addresses rifle exercise and outpost duties, but significantly omits any directions regarding file movement. Perhaps at the time customary practice, plus the options provided by the *R&R*, was deemed sufficient.

The LI units continued to adapt the file movement system that evolved and survived in Army practice since the 1760s. As entire LI units replaced the composite battalions of the 7yrs and AWI, LI doctrine matured to address the requirements of a larger European

conflict—and the LI system of movement as practiced in the Peninsula was finally made explicit by Neil Campbell in 1808 (reprinted 1812; cf. Cross 1824).

Prior to Campbell skirmishing movements were primarily done on the perpendicular. File marching is to the front, rear and flanks. Files extend by or close to flanks. But complex perpendicular movements (eg forward, then to a flank) are not as efficient as direct movement along a hypotenuse. Surely the Lights and Rifles would have moved by the shortest route (hypotenuse) to their objective.

### Skirmishers in the *Rules and Regulations*

A brief section on Light Infantry was introduced into the *Rules and Regulations* in 1794, and included in all subsequent printings. This section was also printed separately, virtually unaltered, in 1797 as *Light Infantry Exercise*. The following excerpt from that section deals with the deployment and recall of skirmishers.

When the column deploys into line, the light companies will face each as its battalion does, file with it it the rear; and when the battalion forms in the line, will take its proper post in divisions behind the second and seventh companies.

If the light companies are ordered to cover the line to the front, either by word or signal, the divisions will move to the front, from their inner flanks, round the flanks of the battalions; and when at the distance of fifty paces, the leading flanks will wheel towards each other, so as to meet opposite the centre of the battalion, opening their files gradually from the rear, so as to cover the whole extent of the battalion; the sergeant coverer of each division attending to the files taking their proper distance, the files are to halt and front of themselves.—In this position, and in all extended order, the post of the officer commanding is in the rear of the centre, and the movements are to be regulated by the company belonging to the battalion,

When the light companies are called in, the line may either be halted or advancing. In the first case they will retire towards the line, closing to their outer flanks by degrees, so as when they come near their battalions they may be in two divisions, ready to file round the flanks of the battalion to their places.—If the line is advancing, they will only close to their outer flanks, so as to be in two divisions, by the time the line comes up to them, when they will instantly face outward and to the rear.

R&R [1792; 1812 edn, 1815 printing]. 277; *Light Infantry Exercise*, 12-13.

## Explication:

### 1. **Column into line**

- When the battalion is formed in column the light company is in its usual place as the 8<sup>th</sup> company.
- When the battalion deploys into line formation, the light companies deploy as the other companies do (marching by the flank); however, the light company does not form on the line, but splits into two divisions which take their posts behind the battalion's flank companies.

*...when the battalion forms in the line, [LI] will take its proper post in divisions behind the second and seventh companies.*

### 2. **Skirmishers deployed to cover the front of the battalion**

Each division

- Faces inward (towards the centre of the battalion), then countermarches towards the battalion flank, and around the flank towards the battalion's front.

*...the divisions will move to the front, from their inner flanks round the flanks of the battalions;...*

Note this movement puts the divisions' front rank on the left or outside of the file marching unit..

- When the divisions reach the point where the skirmish line is to be formed (the R&R says fifty paces; presumably this would vary in the field), they change direction towards the centre.

*...the leading flanks will wheel [ie, file right or left] towards each other so as to meet opposite the centre of the battalion...*

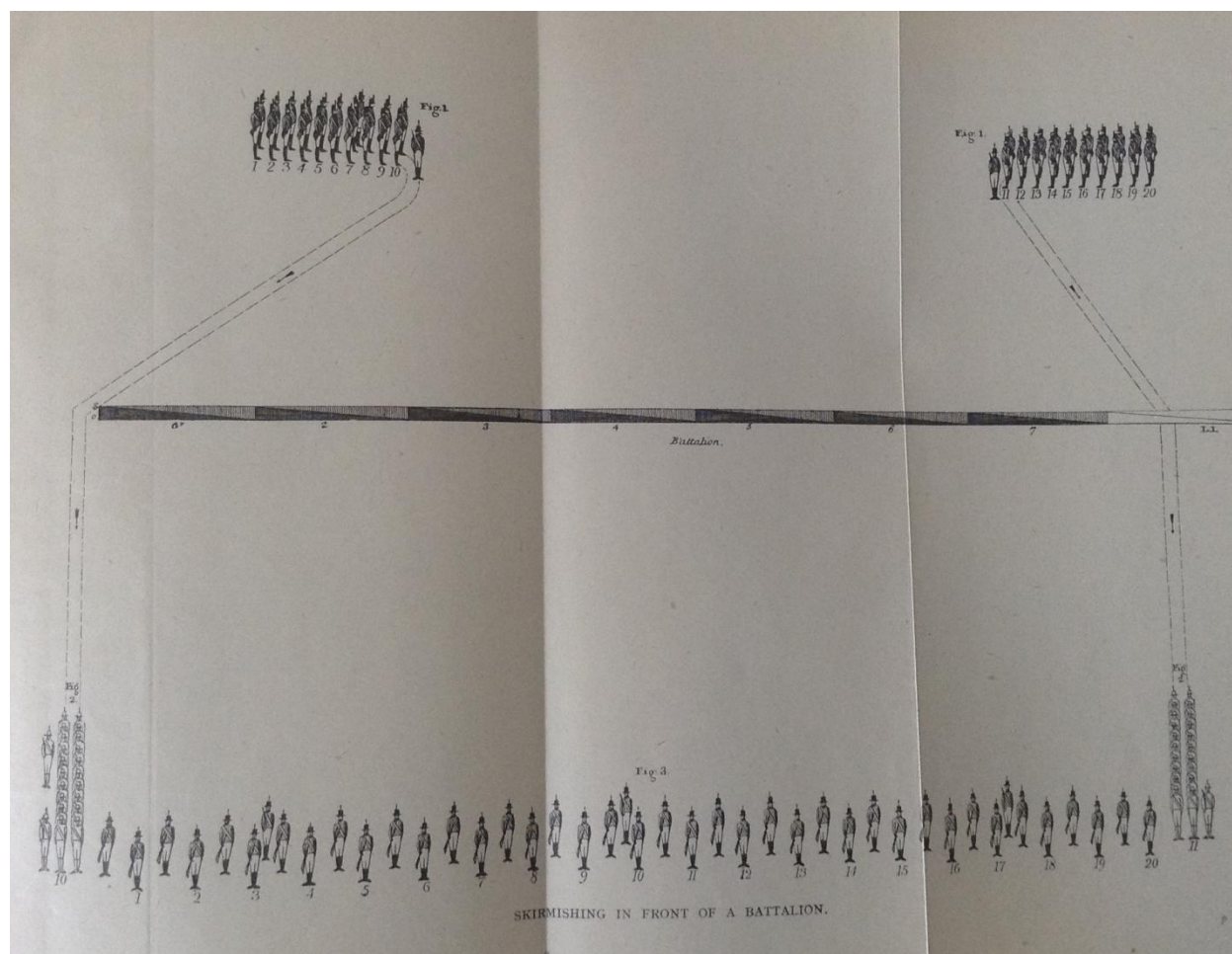
Note with this movement the front rank of the LI divisions is now towards the front (presumably the reason the divisions commence deployment by leading with their inward flanks).

- As the divisions march inward, the rearmost files sequentially halt and face to the front in extended order.

*...opening their files from the rear, so as to cover the whole extent of the battalion;...*

We now have the two divisions of the light company deployed as skirmishers covering the front of the battalion line.

The plate below, from T.H. Cooper's 1808 *A Practical Guide for the Light Infantry Officer*<sup>1</sup>, illustrates this movement as described in the *R&R*. (Battalion front is at the bottom of the page.)



### 3. Recall of skirmishers

When skirmishers are no longer required to cover the battalion front, they are recalled in two manners:

- If the battalion is **advancing**, the divisions reverse the motions used to deploy, closing to the outside flanks, then file marching behind the battalion flanks as the line passes them to resume their usual posts in rear of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> companies.

<sup>1</sup> Plates from Cooper, as reproduced in F.C.J. Fuller, *Sir John Moore's System of Training*, p. 200. It appears Fuller did not reproduce all of Cooper's illustrations.

*If the line is advancing. they will only close to their outer flanks, so as to be in two divisions, by the time the line comes up to them, when they will instantly face outward and [file] to the rear.<sup>2</sup>*

- If the battalion is **halted**, however, the skirmishers need to retire in order to return to their posts behind the battalion line. Note this is not done in the same manner by which the skirmish line deployed. The LI divisions deployed by **perpendicular** movements, first marching forward at 90° to the battalion line, then changing direction 90° to extend parallel to the battalion line. But the *R&R* states that when the battalion is halted the skirmishers are to simultaneously **retire** and **close**. The skirmishing files of each division

*... will retire towards the flanks, closing to their outer flanks by degrees, so as when they come near their battalions they may be in two divisions, ready to file round the flanks of the battalion to their places.*

So in this case, the prescribed movement is **diagonal**, each skirmishing file taking the most direct route back to their proper flank. As the distance marched would be less than that of the perpendicular mode used to deploy skirmishers, it would presumably occur more quickly, so would be useful to clear the battalion front promptly or get the skirmishers to a place of relative safety. Although the manual is silent on this point, were the divisions to retire with their front ranks inwards, they would not need to countermarch when returning to their positions behind the line.

## Campbell

These movements underwent modification during the army's extended campaigns in the Peninsula, and are reflected in Neil Campbell's 1808 compilation of light infantry movements.<sup>3</sup> As we can see from the quote below, Campbell describes skirmishers deploying **forward** on the diagonal, similar to the *R&R* method for retiring:

*Extending while Advancing.*

*When a party is ordered forward to cover, in extended order, a space which is then pointed out, the officer commanding it should immediately select objects as the extremity of this space for the*

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<sup>2</sup> The word "file" is not present in the *R&R*, but added to the *Light Infantry Exercise* (p.12).

<sup>3</sup> A Field Officer, *A Course of Drill and Instruction in the Movements and Duties of Light Infantry* (London: T. Egerton, 1808). Campbell was major in the 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment at the time, and compiled a course of study in response to an 1807 General Order from Wellington "prescribing to all the corps under his command a very extensive and constant practice of *file movements, changes of position* in DOUBLE QUICK time, and other *light infantry duties*.... (iii) . Campbell notes his compilation is founded "upon the system which has, in late years, been pursued by the British Army." (iv) The second edition was published substantially unchanged with same pagination in 1813, this time under Campbell's name

*men on each flank, and one in the centre for the centre file; they should at once, take a direction towards those objects, and the other files should take intermediate points selected by the other officers and non-commissioned officers, so that the whole will be extending gradually as they advance, .... (69)*

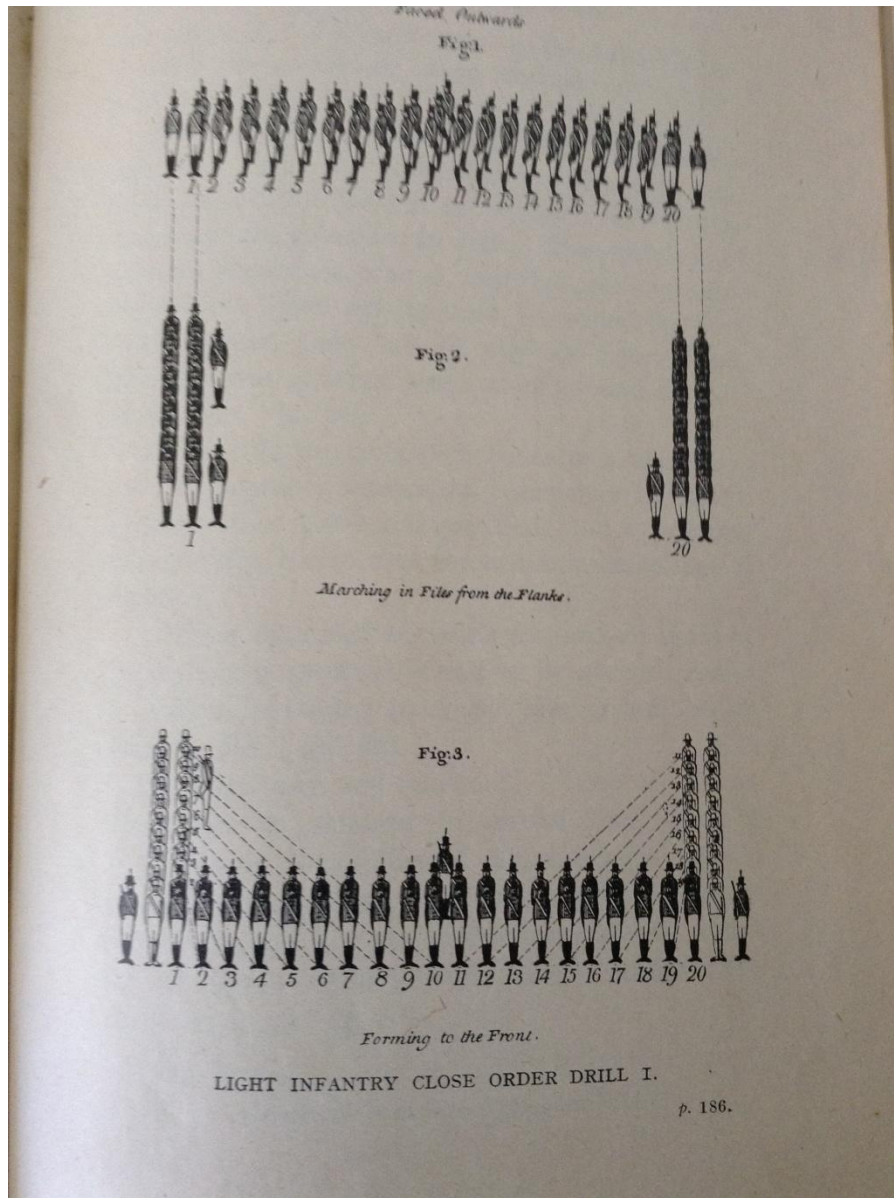
*The march and the extend will be the sounds for this when it becomes necessary to have recourse to the bugle. (70)*

While Campbell does not illustrate this particular movement, he does illustrate several types of closings on plates IX and X, all of which are done using diagonal movement.

### **Cooper variant**

A final variation to consider would be to have the skirmishers directly advance by files to get around the battalion flanks when deploying, rather than using the countermarch by files specified in the *R&R*. T.H. Cooper, in his 1808 *A Practical Guide for the Light Infantry Officer* (plate VI), illustrates close order marching for light infantry which can be adapted to skirmisher deployment. (Cooper's illustrations are consistent with the instructions found in Section I of Campbell on close order file movements.) Cooper has the light flank companies face outwards towards the flanks to wheel by file. If used to deploy skirmishers, this movement would have them move around the battalion flanks by their nearest file rather than the by the countermarch specified in the *R&R*. This puts the front rank of each division on its inside as it marches forward (the *R&R* method puts the front rank on the outside). The LI divisions could then form to their front. A simple adaptation for skirmishing would be to then either extend and/or advance once formed. These movements could also be reversed to recall the skirmishers.

Directly advancing by files from the flanks (no countermarch), per Cooper (front is at bottom of page):



### A suggested variant

Skirmishers can be deployed by combining the movements discussed above:

- (1) Skirmishers **advance in close order by files from the flank** (R&R, Cooper, Campbell). I.e., "Advance by files from the right/left".
- (2) At any point after clearing the battalion line, skirmish files simultaneously **advance** and **extend**, to fan into the skirmish line (Campbell).

The following diagrams illustrate the steps in this process for the left flank light infantry company. Invert for the right flank company.

1. View of battalion left wing in line formation, light infantry flank company posted behind the left flank of the battalion line.



2. Flank companies are ordered to screen the battalion front. Flank companies face outwards towards the flanks; officer and sergeants take positions for file marching.

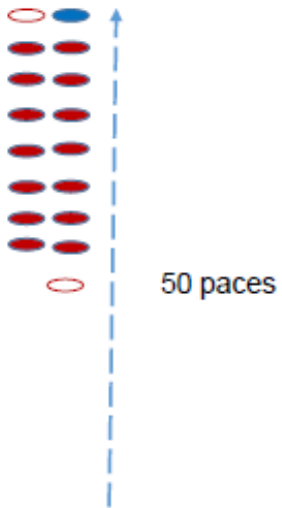


3. Companies file directly around the battalion flanks (no countermarch) to march towards the front.

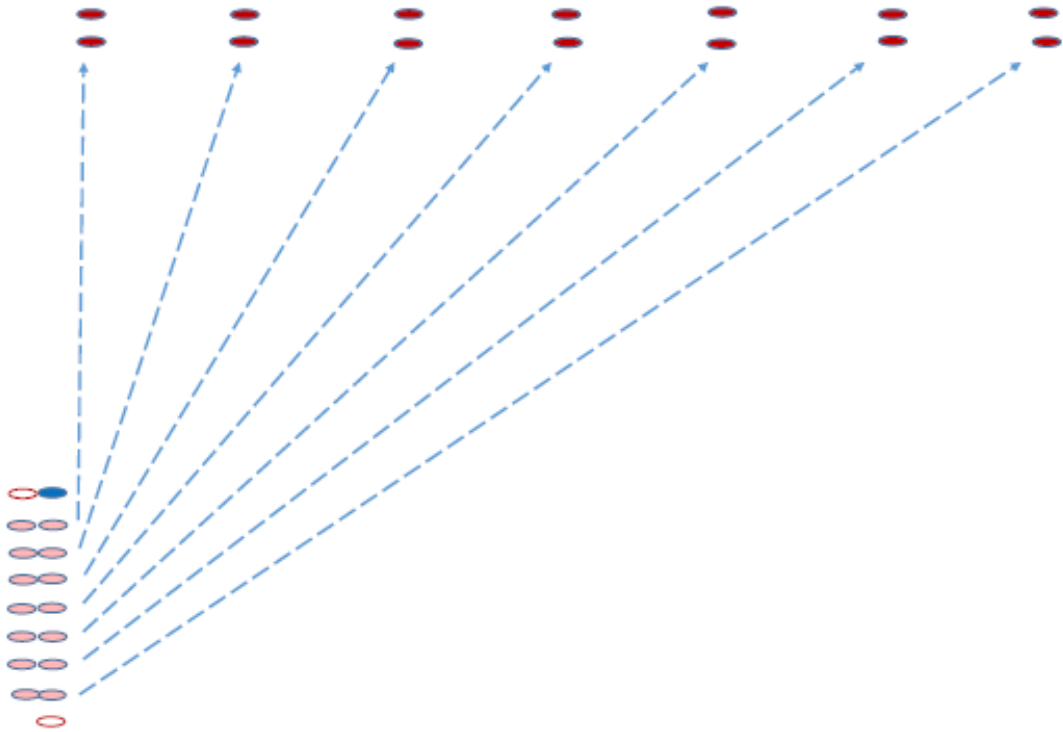




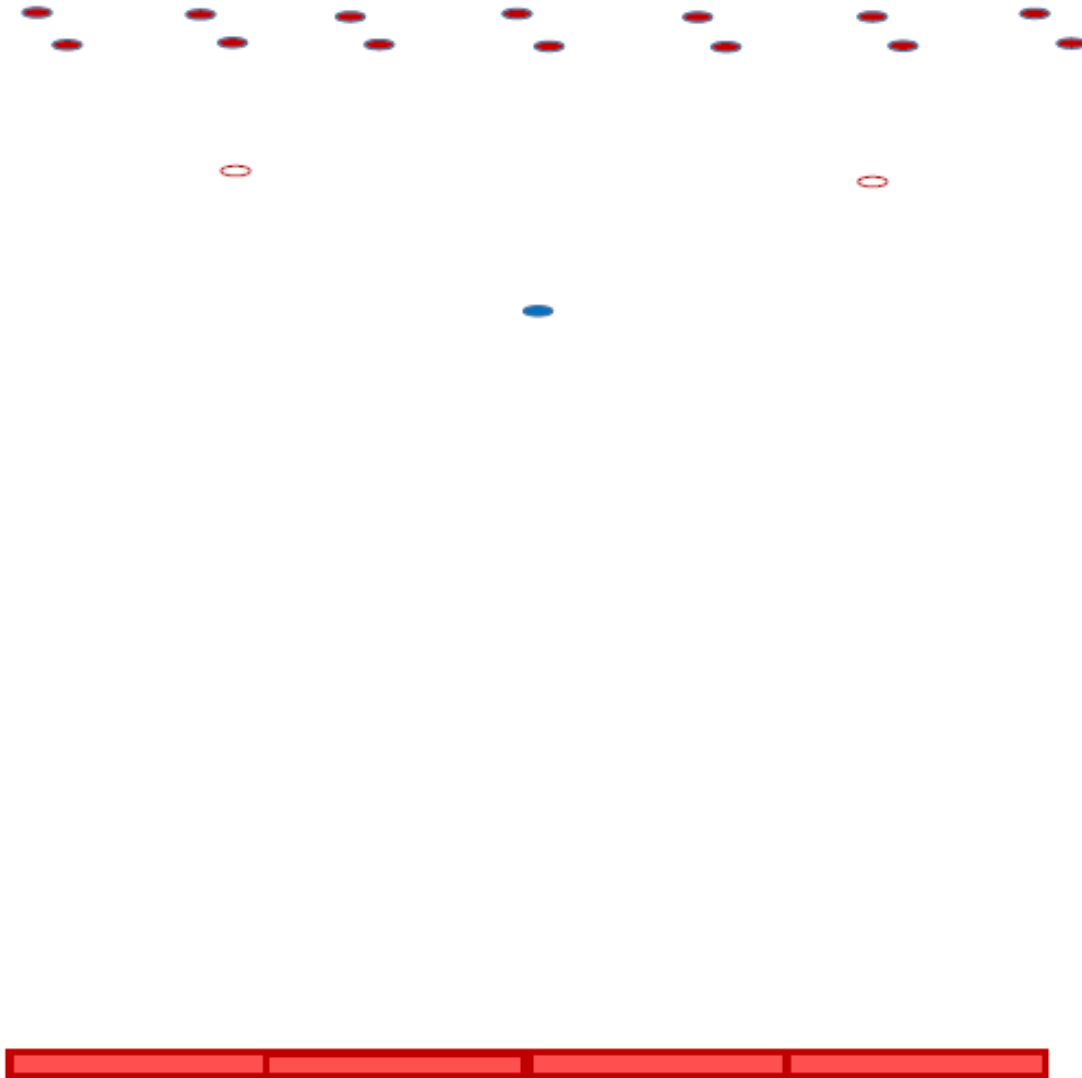
4. Companies advance.



5. Files fan out and forward, led by front-rank file, taking intervals as they advance.  
Halt at designated point



6. Sergeants take post behind the centre of their sections, officer behind the centre of the company. If forming skirmish line, rear rank members of each file take one step to the right of their file leader.<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> Skirmish doctrine also provides that a reserve equal to the size of the skirmish line be placed in the centre-rear of the skirmish line. I omitted the skirmish reserve from these illustrations in order to emphasize the movements involved in deploying the skirmish line.

When skirmishers are called in, if the battalion is **halted**, the above movement is reversed:

1. Retiring diagonally toward the battalion, reducing intervals between files as they retire, to assemble in file marching order near the line, then
2. File around the flanks of the line into their position behind the flanks of the line

If the battalion is **advancing**, the skirmishers

1. Close to the flanks, wait for the battalion to advance past them, then
2. File around the flanks of the line into position.

### **Command suggestions:**

Deploy 1 (perpendicular): skirmishers face outward; file around flanks; when get to line, form to front; extend files toward centre to deploy skirmishers

Deploy 2 (diagonal): division faces outwards; files around flanks; when clear of the line, files move diagonally (extending while advancing) to designated point of skirmish line

Retire 1 (perpendicular) close to outside flank; file to rear (front rank will be on outside); once past line "right/left about, form".

Retire 2 (diagonal): close while retiring, to form unit in close order, file-marching to the rear with front rank on inside; file right/left to place when past line

### **Sources**

A Field Officer [Neil Campbell] *A course of Drill and Instruction in the Movements and Duties of Light Infantry*. London: T. Egerton, 1808.

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