



From the 4th edition

USNLP Handbook for Civil War Naval Reenactors

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Naval Skirmish Drill

The question of how sailors were drilled during the Civil War for operations ashore is as yet without a firm answer. No manual unique to this situation is known to exist. That officers were schooled in some form of infantry tactics at the naval academy is suggested by comments that they found them “as useful as philosophy and rhetoric.” And throughout the war diaries and official records mention in passing “landed the men ashore for drill.” The single specific reference is that of Admiral Dahlgren to the squadron off Port Royal in August 1864, in which he suggests that “the drill and the maneuverings are to be few and exceedingly simple,” adding “The light-infantry drill will be best adapted to this service, and to the habits of the seamen,” and ordering “The men should be landed occasionally for practice, especially as skirmishers.” (His letter is quoted in its entirety at the end of this section).

Following is a simplified version of the Army’s skirmish drill from Casey’s Infantry Tactics. Adopting this drill—and becoming proficient at it—affords a shore party an active and important role in any reenactment. If your entire crew is familiar with the procedure, you can easily accommodate any “strays” that may be assigned to your command, (e.g., dismounted cavalry or infantry), who can follow the lead of the sailors.

As per Admiral Dahlgren, skirmish drill is very much suited to “the habits of the seamen”—or, rather, to their lack of familiarity with Army-style, mass formation movement. It is also much more appropriate to the smaller numbers of sailors (both in history and at reenactments). Letters in parentheses refer to the diagrams at the end of this section.

Deploying as Skirmishers

Ahead of the Main Army

If you are sent to the field ahead of the main body, march your men in two ranks parallel to the anticipated line of battle, halting as you approach the near edge of the field (A). Count the men off by twos. If counting off resulted in a group of less than four men at the end, (i.e., a one and two in the front rank with a man behind each of them), the officer or PO will order these men to “*Form the reserve!*” at which command they will break ranks and reassemble at its midpoint on the side away from the enemy. The officer will indicate to the Petty Officer (who should be one of the last four men) where he wants the skirmish line formed, and will then command:

“Ship’s company – as skirmishers– take intervals – MARCH!”

All but the rearmost four men (and including the men assigned as a reserve) will march forward twenty paces, leaving the original group of four behind (**B**). As the main group marches off, the first “four” should face towards the enemy and proceed to the point indicated by the officer to form the line. At twenty paces, the four now-rearmost men will halt while the remainder of the column continues to move forward, dropping “fours” off at the same interval. As each is dropped off, it will turn towards the enemy and move to take its place in the line. When the group in the middle of the line turns to move towards the line, the men assigned to the reserve will follow, but will stop approximately twenty paces in rear of the line (**C**). When the last “four”—accompanied by the officer in charge—has reached its designated position, the officer will quickly check the line. If the men are not spread out sufficiently to cover the front or if they are spread too widely, he will command:

“Ship’s company – extend (or close) intervals – two (or other amount) paces – MARCH!”

(**D**) When the line is of an appropriate length, the officer will signal by waving his arm. At this command, the “fours” will spread out at five-pace intervals so as to form an evenly-spaced line (**E**).

Deploying as Skirmishers

As Part of the Main Army

If you entered the field in column with the main force, deploying as skirmishers is a little different. The following example assumes your position on the right flank of the main body of troops. As above, your men should be formed in a column of twos and should be counted off by twos, those men at the end amounting to less than a “four” forming the reserve. If the main body has not yet right faced to the enemy, the officer will issue this command. He will also inform the Petty Officer in charge of the rearmost (leftmost) “four” where to anchor the right end of the skirmish line, and will then order:

“Ship’s company – as skirmishers – by the right flank – take intervals – MARCH!”

The rightmost “four” will march directly ahead towards the enemy, guided by the petty officer, to the point designated for the skirmish line (**H**). Each of the other fours will step off at an angle sufficient to place them at even intervals along the skirmish line, such that the path of the “four” nearest the petty officer will deviate only slightly from that group, while the officer’s “four” will move at a much greater angle. The reserve will accompany the center “four” and will stop twenty paces in rear of the planned line. Once in position, the officer can extend or close the intervals and signal for deployment of the individuals within each “four.”

If your company is on the left wing of the main army, the above order would include “*by the left flank*” rather than the right, and the officer would accompany the rightmost “four” and the PO that on the left (**G**). If you are in the center of the army, the order would be “*by the center*,” and issuing it would result in your “fours” deploying outward in a fan towards the enemy line. In this case, the PO should accompany the middle “four” since they will reach the center of the intended line first, and the officer should accompany the group on either end as they will be the last to assume their position (**I**).

Once deployed along the line, the officer will retreat to the reserve position, from where he can supervise and control the entire line. Any messengers, flag bearers, drummers or buglers should also take position with the reserve. The reserve has several functions: it serves as a rallying point (see below); holds extra men that the officer can feed into the line as needed; carries any extra

ammunition which can be sent forward as needed; and provides a spot where the men on the line can look to the officer for instruction.

Advancing, Retreating, and Firing as Skirmishers

Once deployed and ordered to advance, each “four” further subdivides itself into two teams of two (comprised of a “one” and a “two” from the counting off). Each person on a team will leapfrog with his mate as the line moves forward or back (**F**). Ones will advance twenty paces when ordered and fire; they will immediately reload and, once loaded, their mate, the Two, will advance twenty paces to come up even with them and then move forward twenty more paces. He will then fire, reload, and come to the ready as the One now leapfrogs his position. This continues until the order to halt is given or a line designated by the officer is reached. One rifle should always be loaded in each team (two in a “four”) To retreat, the lead man—whichever it happens to be when the command is given) fires his rifle (if loaded) and then turns about, pulls back away from the enemy twenty paces in rear of his mate, turns about and reloads. When he is reloaded, his mate fires and moves back twenty paces in rear of his companion. This continues until the order to halt is given or a designated line is reached. In a skirmish company of twenty men, ten will be loaded and on the line at all times, with the other ten forming a second line to their rear.

The reserve moves forward or backward with the skirmish line, maintaining the twenty pace interval between that line and its position.

Rallying and Reforming

When the main body of the Army advances, skirmishers need to make room for them. Whereas skirmish formation is necessarily loose conforms more to the ground than a textbook, the larger formations need room to maneuver. If possible, the officer will recall his skirmishers just before the infantry advances. This can be done in one of two ways, the first of which was also used when the battle went badly.

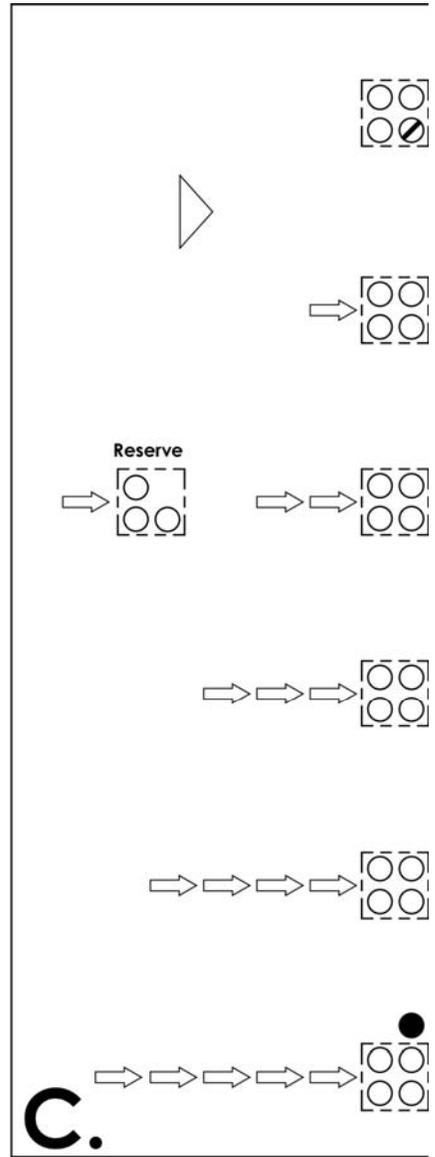
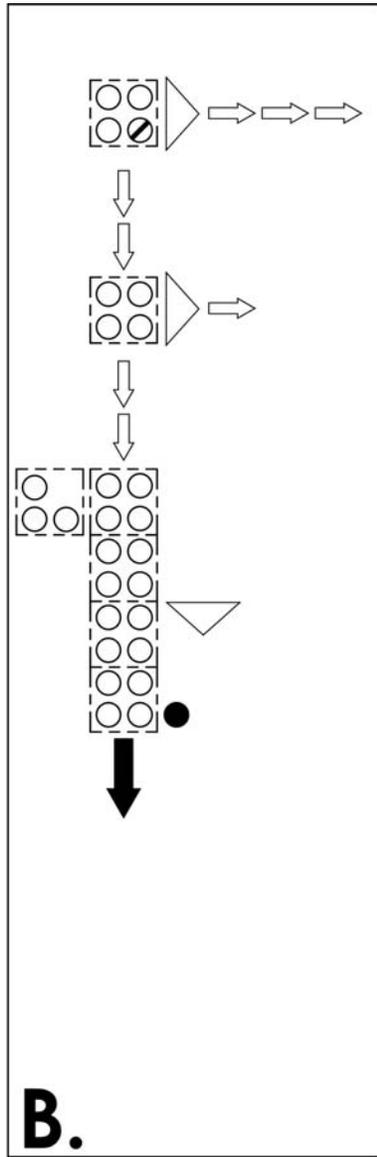
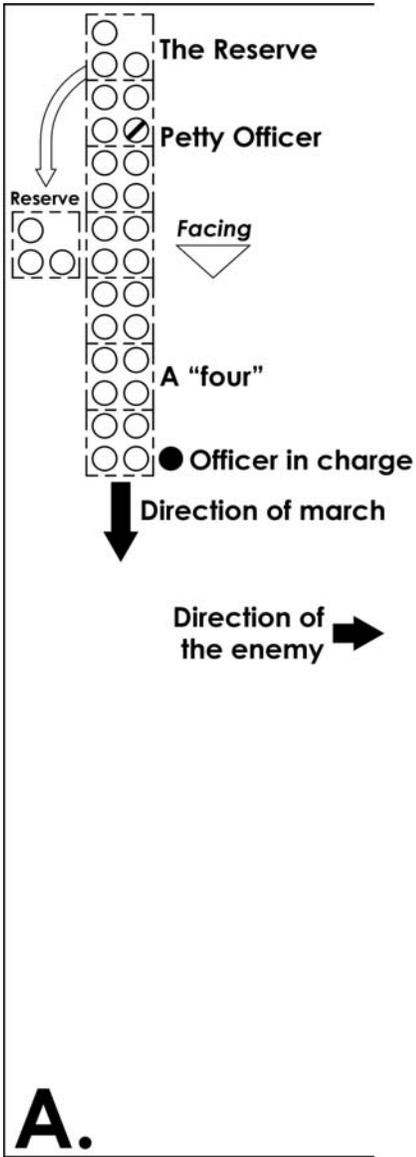
At a given signal (historically a bugle call, but today a messenger could be used)¹, all “fours” run to the reserve position (**J**). Yes, run—not quick time or double quick, but run. This maneuver is the “rally” and if it needed to be used, things were not going well. Now, running is the best option when your crew is scattered across the front of several hundred infantrymen eager to steamroller whatever is in their path. In reality, the regrouped company would form a circle—literally “rallying around the flag.” At a reenactment, depending on what the overall commander wants you to do, your unit can either form ranks in the center (where the reserve position is located) and advance with the Army as regular infantrymen or, to remain an independent command, wait for them to pass by and then move to either the right or left flank and redeploy in a typically loose formation (in effect, fighting like skirmishers again but on a smaller front). Another option is to “rally” to either flank—rolling the skirmish line up to the right or left and reforming on that flank (**K**). Discuss these options with the overall commander. If the timing is too tight, it will be unsafe to cross the front of a stampeding infantry company (especially if they are about to stop and fire!). If your crew cannot rally or reform to the flanks, each “four” should rally on itself so as to allow the most room for the infantry to move past (**L**). Once they are past, all “fours” should rally on the reserve and then redeploy as a unit.

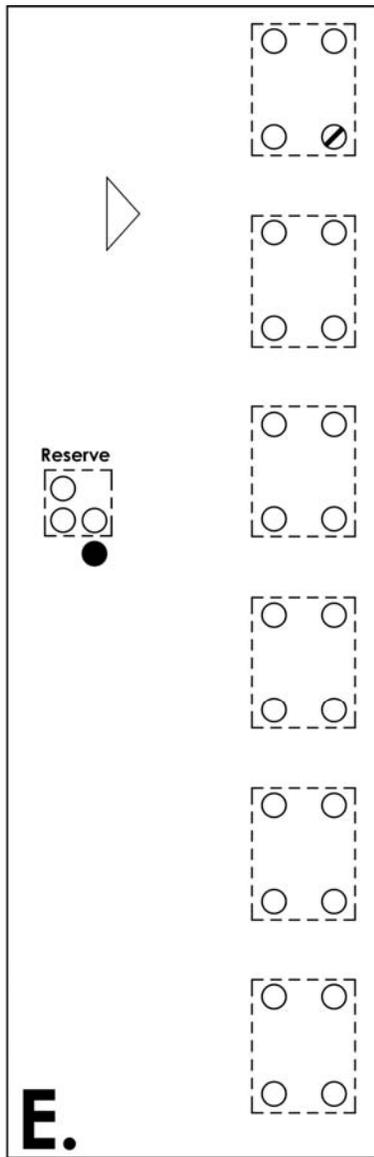
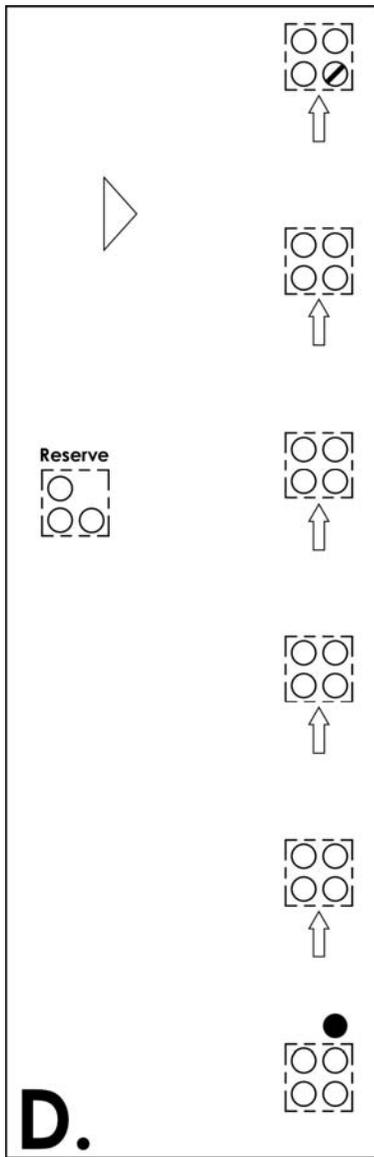
Special Considerations for Skirmishers

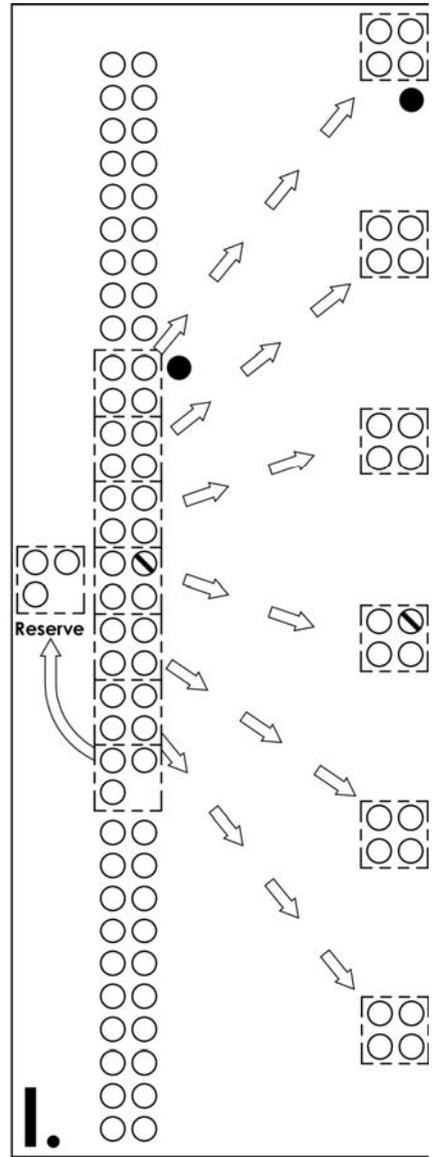
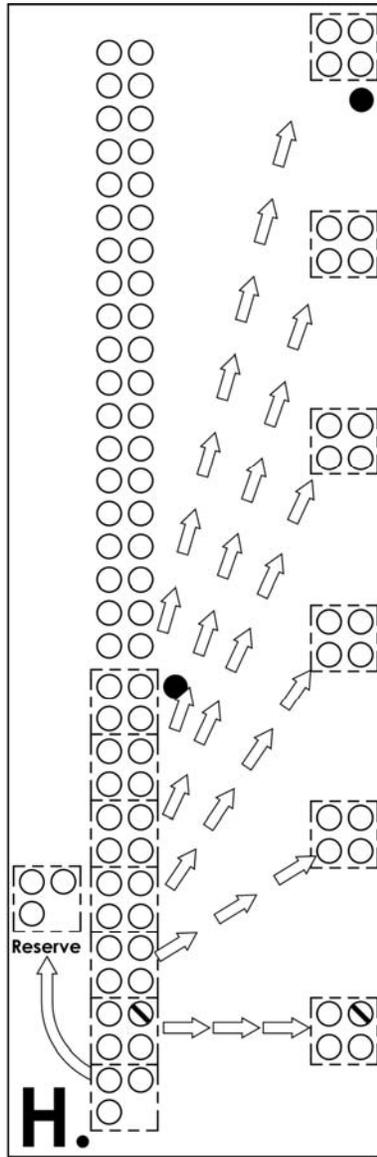
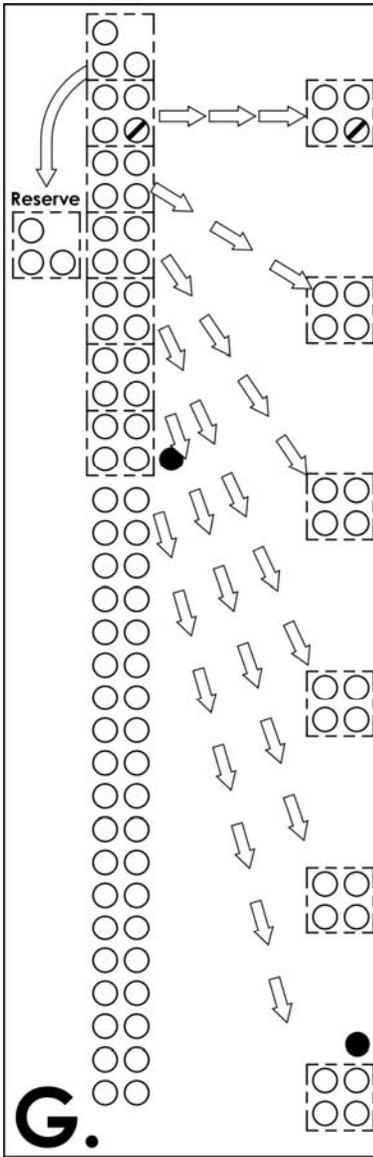
While this is not a mandate for intentional sloppiness, skirmish drill allows for a certain lack of precision. As per Casey’s:

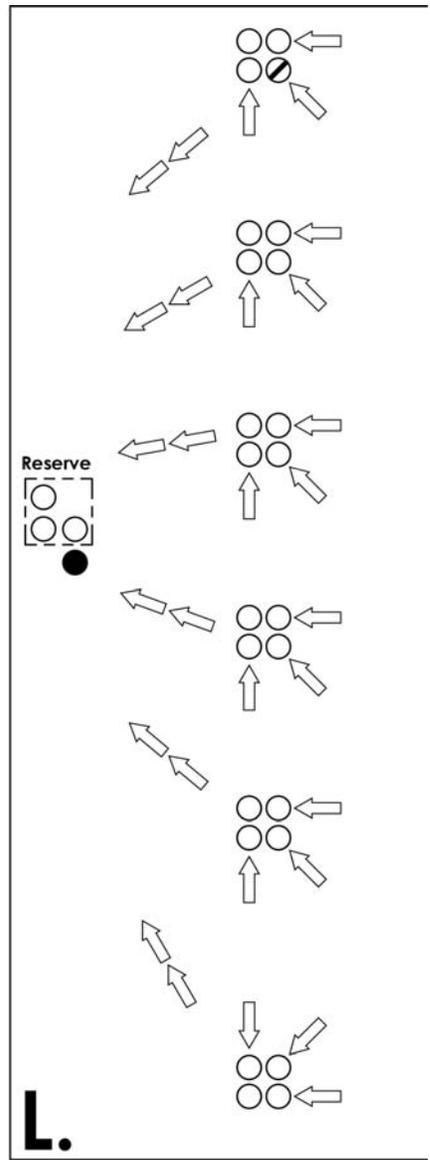
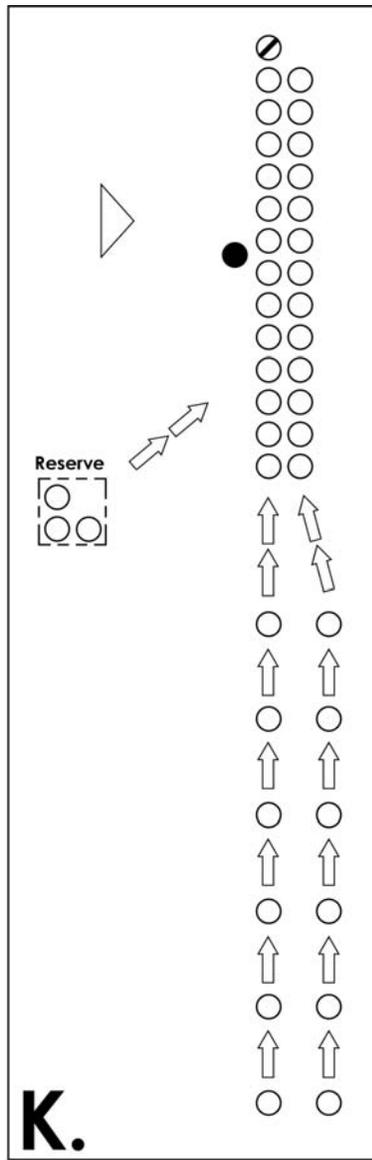
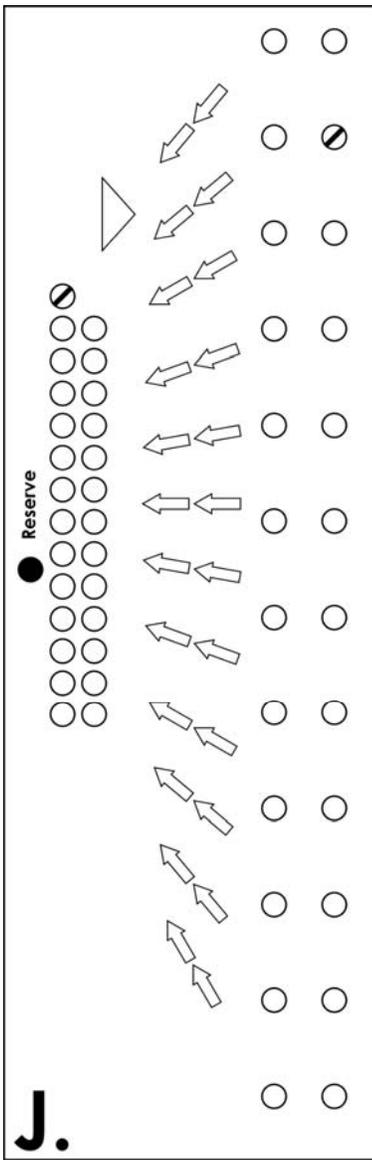
¹ Gives the powder monkeys something to do . . .

1. It is not expected that these movements should be executed with the same precision as in closed ranks, nor is it desirable, as such exactness would materially interfere with their prompt execution.
2. The reserves should be placed behind the center of the line of skirmishers, the company reserves at one hundred and fifty, and the principal reserve at four hundred paces. This rule, however, is not invariable. The reserves, while holding themselves within sustaining distance of the line, should be, as much as possible, in position to afford each other mutual protection, and must carefully profit by any accidents of the ground to conceal themselves from the view of the enemy, and to shelter themselves from his fire.
3. The movements of skirmishers will be executed in quick or double time. The run will be resorted to only in cases of urgent necessity.
4. Skirmishers will be permitted to carry their pieces in the manner most convenient to them.
5. When skirmishers are ordered to move rapidly, the officers and non-commissioned officers will see that the men economize their strength, keep cool, and profit by all the advantages which the ground may offer for cover. It is only by this continual watchfulness on the part of all grades, that a line of skirmishers can attain success.
6. A chain of skirmishers ought generally to preserve their alignment, but no advantages which the ground may present should be sacrificed to attain this regularity.
7. Skirmishers should be particularly instructed to take advantage of any cover which the ground may offer, and should lie flat on the ground whenever such a movement is necessary to protect them from the fire of the enemy. Regularity in the alignment should yield to this important advantage.









FLAGSHIP PHILADELPHIA,
Port Royal, S. C., August 8, 1864.

Boat artillery and infantry, South Atlantic Blockading Squadron.

It has frequently happened that the peculiar nature of the duties in this command has required the service of bodies of men to be landed from vessels to act for a short time as infantry, assisted by light fieldpieces.

In order to meet similar exigencies commanders of vessels will take pains to select from their crews such men as may seem to have a turn for this kind of duty and have them drilled with small arms until they have attained the necessary proficiency.

In so doing it is to be borne in mind that the drill and the maneuverings are to be few and exceedingly simple.

The men should be thoroughly skilled in the loading and firing of their weapon, and firing at a mark is to be encouraged. The light-infantry drill will be best adapted to this service, and to the habits of the seamen.

The preferable arm, when it can be had, will be the new navy rifled musket, known as the Plymouth musket, because the first of the kind were made for the U. S. ship *Plymouth* when under my command, the pattern of which was got up by myself as most suitable for sea service.

It is a short musket, about 34 inches in the barrel, bore 0.69 inch, and rifled.

Its special bayonet is a short, broad, and stout knife, of the well-known Bowie pattern, the principal use of which I designed to be in the hand in close conflict, such as boarding. In campaigning it would also serve many wants; but it may be fixed and used as a bayonet.

There is also a sword bayonet similar to that of the French, making the total length of weapon, from butt to point, about equal to that of the army musket with the ordinary bayonet.

The musket is perfectly balanced for aim when the bayonet is not fixed; and its large bore gives great effect to buckshot, which, at short distances, is always to be preferred.

As a general rule we have too much neglected the use of this formidable ammunition for small arms.

The men should be landed occasionally for practice, especially as skirmishers.

The artillery is to consist of the boat howitzer, light and heavy 12-pounder, rifled and smooth.

These are to be organized in sections of two, with three sections to a battery, consisting of four smooth and two rifled 12-pounders. This, however, is designed rather as a matter of administrative organization to regulate the proportions of rifled guns and for supplies of ammunition, spare parts, etc.

I desire particularly to disabuse the naval mind of the idea which prevails as to the proper use of boat light artillery.

In designing these pieces, I never intended that they should be assembled in masses; just the contrary, as every effort has been made to simplify the piece itself so that but little practice is required to understand its manual and to use it, so it was intended to avoid the complication of them produced by combination in masses, as practiced in the land service.

The boat howitzer and its field carriage is so light that it can be drawn by its crew when no other artillery can be taken, over broken ground, among woods, up steep ascents, seeking cover where a tree or a bush, ditch, fence, or dwelling offers it. The ammunition is carried in pouches, so that no obstacle exists on this account.

And thus, from unexpected positions, difficult of access and scattered in many directions, the navy howitzers, while dispersed, and therefore less exposed to the enemy's guns, may concentrate or divide their own fire as may be best.

In other words, the piece is designed to bear the relation to other artillery as the light infantry does to infantry of the line.

The crew, carrying no arms but the Bowie knife, are to be supported by skirmishers, and when unable to retain possession of the piece, disable it by carrying away the fighting bolt, without which the gun can not be fired, and which is so nice of adjustment that it can only be supplied from the machine shop, and there is no substitute for it.

In general, the entire practice has been to reverse the purpose contemplated.

The published Instructions for the Naval Academy, and the habit, so far as it has come under my observation, have been to organize and maneuver in masses, as customary in the land service with light and heavy artillery.

I never have had the means before this to give this branch of the service its proper form. Now I am enabled to make the effort by the receipt of a number of howitzers and Plymouth muskets, with Bowie knives, etc.

But the personnel is wanted, and as a preparatory step I desire that commanders will select their men and drill them to their muskets, and to the howitzers if they have them.

When this has been done and reported to me, the organization of the squadron battalion for boat service will proceed.

JOHN A. DAHLGREN,
Rear-Admiral, Comdg. South Atlantic Blockading Squadron.