

## Firing by the Left Oblique

While reviewing the manual of arms for reenactor units, a number of topics came to mind. The most difficult to discuss and fully comprehend was that of the firing sequences at the oblique. There are modern, historical and safety issues as well that immediately came to the forefront to complicate the discussions. Therefore, I began researching the history of the drill in respect to these issues and have come to some startling, but obvious conclusions.

In the article "Dry Books of Tactics: US Infantry Manuals of the War of 1812 and After, Part II," by Donald E. Graves, he notes that in 1814, Brevet Major General Winfield Scott was the best scholar of military science available to the US military and was instructed to provide a manual for the US Army. Using the French Army's manual, *1791 Reglement*, it became the basis for the *1815 Regulations*. Neither of these two works provided any drill for light infantry and riflemen so another board was convened to create the *1825 Infantry Tactics*. For militia units a compact version was later created known as the *Abstract of Infantry Tactics* and was first published in 1829. Both the *1815 Regulations* and the *1825 Infantry Tactics* were based on the *1791 Reglement* with a few changes. When the French revised their *1791 Reglement* with the *Ordonnance of 1831*, Scott, following suit, revised the US manuals to reflect the revisions and produced the *1835 Infantry Tactics* known today by most reenactors as *Scott's Manual of Arms*. The French once again made revisions to their system, reducing the ranks from three to two and producing the *1845 Chasseur Regulations*. It was the US, which followed with the work of Major (later Confederate General) William Hardee, which thus translated and produced the *1855 Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics*, known today as *Hardee's Manual of Arms*. Hardee only reproduced the manual of arms up to the company level and relied on the third volume of Scott's *Tactics* for brigades and larger units. Confusion was caused when references by Scott's volumes to earlier volumes did not match references in Hardee's manual. In 1862 both Scott's and Hardee's manuals were replaced with *Casey's Infantry Tactics* for the US Army. Hardee was by then a Confederate officer.

Keeping this brief history in mind, with General Scott having influenced the basic drill for both US and militia units in the United States for almost fifty years, the pattern of drill had not changed all that much except for the major change of going to two ranks from three.

If Hardee was to be making major changes in the manuals of the US Army for five years before the onset of the Civil War, it would be only natural to conclude he would have explicitly indicated with the instructions involving the major variances in the drill as he had other areas of the manual. Therefore, it was at this point that the oblique firing issue has arisen. Hardee does not specifically state through which interval the rear rank man was to fire, leaving the modern idea open to the interpretation (*Heitman's Simplified Tactics* and *Casey's*

*Annotated* that one was to fire the left oblique through the interval to the right of one's file partner. Historical precedent and no further explanation will not naturally draw this interpretation. It is to this issue I now focus our attention

In discussing this issue, I will refer to the direct and oblique aiming sequences with the actual commands being given, READY, AIM, FIRE (direct fire), and READY, AT THE LEFT/RIGHT OBLIQUE, AIM, FIRE (oblique fire). It is important to remember the order in which these commands are given because they give rise to the proper sequence of events of the discussion. All manuals are clear that the commands are the same.

295. Oblique firings are executed to the right and left, by the same commands as the direct fires, with this difference, that the command AIM shall be preceded by the caution RIGHT (or LEFT) OBLIQUE; at which caution the men of the rear rank will fix their eyes on the interval through which they are to aim. [*1830 Abstract*]

278. Oblique firing will be executed to the right and left, and by the same commands as the fire direct, with this single difference—the command AIM will always be preceded by the caution right (or left) OBLIQUE, which will be given after the command READY. [*1835 Scott's*]

266. The oblique firings will be executed to the right and left, and by the same commands as the direct fire, with this single difference—the command AIM will always be preceded by the caution, RIGHT or LEFT OBLIQUE. [*1855 Hardee's*]

While the *1830 Abstract* definitely states to look to the right or left interval in preparation for the aim, the final Scott's work in 1835 and that of Hardee in 1845 are almost word-for-word the same, and the soldier would have reacted the same in preparation for the direction of the expected firing.

This is to indicate that, with the exception of the caution to the right or left, the commands themselves will be exactly the same as that of the direct fire. Nowhere does it say the procedure of firing through the gap to the right is the same, only the commands that will be given are the same. Obviously, from the instruction later on, each directional aim has a different procedure to follow. The sequence and placement of the cautionary command is of vital importance later on, as we will see in the discussion. This section has no bearing on the actual firing methods, except for the additional cautionary words inserted to direct the fire to the right or left.

The right oblique doesn't seem to cause anyone much concern and is for the most part being done accurately in the modern drill. Therefore only the left oblique becomes the focus of the discussion at this point.

301. At the word READY, both ranks will execute what has been prescribed for the direct fire. [1830 Abstract]

283. At the command READY, the three ranks will execute what has been prescribed for the fire direct. [1835 Scott's]

267. At the command READY, the two ranks will execute what has been prescribed for the direct fire. [1855 Hardee's]

Although the *1830 Abstract* is quite explicit, nothing had changed between *1835 Scott's* and *1855 Hardee's*, except for the reference to the two ranks of Hardee's rather than the three of Scott's. With each step of instruction sequential, it often times refers back to previously learned lessons. What both authors are indicating here is that at the READY command, the soldier will assume the position of ready, that is, looking forward as if they were going to be doing a direct fire. The soldier at this point is assuming that aim will be in any one of three directions and unless cautioned will execute a direct fire.

The next few sections from each of the manuals deals with the right oblique and are omitted from the discussion. We continue with the left oblique:

302. At the word AIM, the front rank man will direct his firelock to the left, inclining the left knee without moving the feet.

303. The rear rank man shall advance the left foot about six (6) inches, and towards the right heel of the front rank man on the left of his file; and shall also advance the upper part of the body, bending the left knee, and aiming through the interval to the left of the front rank man of his file.

304. Both ranks shall throw back the left shoulder. [1830 Abstract]

284. At the cautionary command LEFT OBLIQUE, the three ranks will throw back the left shoulder and look steadily at the object on which they ought to fire; in this position the men of the center and rear ranks will be ready to take aim in the interval to the left of the men in front, and in an oblique direction. [1835 Scott's]

270. At the cautionary command, LEFT OBLIQUE, the two ranks will throw back the left shoulder and look steadily at the object to be hit. [1855 Hardee's]

Here we begin a slight variance between the three manuals. Instructors would have been familiar with the older versions of Scott's while instructing Hardee's. One can only conclude that if Hardee were attempting to make a major change in the manual at this point he would have indicated the changes as he had done elsewhere in the manual. He makes no such statements and in fact leaves out detail, possibly indicating that the information was already known to the instructor and it was not necessary to repeat the obvious. One must note that with the *1830 Abstract*, the sequence of the cautionary command and AIM seem to be reversed. This is not the case for the revision by Scott in 1835.

For the most part, each man whether he is in the front or rear rank (or center rank of Scott's) should at this point turn their upper torso and shoulders about 45 degrees to the left, twisting at the waist. There is no difference between the stance of the rear rank man or the front rank man (or center rank man) at this point. However, it must be noted that with the body turned this way the center and rear rank man having been aligned directly with the front rank man, have no place to look but through the interval to the left of the front file partner. It is also noted that Scott's position of ready has the muzzle of the gun straight up and this twist to the left would be every easy to do without bumping into the man ahead of them. No feet have moved, the body is twisted to the left and all the men in the file are directly behind the front file partner.

The militia manual of arms known as Chandler's written for Wisconsin militia in 1861 to add clarification to US manual of arms indicates: "At the cautionary command LEFT OBLIQUE, the ranks will throw back the left shoulder, and look steadily at the object on which they out to fire; in this position the men of the rear rank will be ready to take at in the interval to the left of the men in front, and in an oblique direction." [1861 Chandler's pages 34 and 35]

Another militia manual of arms which came out at the same time, *1861 Baxter's*, also follows along with: "At the command LEFT OBLIQUE, the two ranks will throw back the left shoulder and look steadily to the left oblique." [1861 Baxter's pages 56 and 57]

At this point, one must remember that this movement is done before the command AIM and before the movement of the feet in the rear ranks. Therefore, all the men have turned to the left and are looking at the target. The only way the rear rank man is going to see the target is by looking through the interval to the left of his file partner. This is key to understanding the prescribed sequence of the next few movements. If the rear rank man is to continue looking steadily at the object to be hit, he must not take his eyes off the target. If he were to fire through the interval to the right, he would have to do so for a moment as he moved into the aiming position. To fire through the right interval immediately indicates a deviation from the manual at

this point and will further deviate in order to create a somewhat left oblique firing.

285. At the command AIM, the front rank will take aim to the left without inclining the knee or stirring the feet. The center rank men will take aim through the interval to the left of their file partners, without stirring the feet, the rear rank men will advance the left foot about six inches towards the right heel of the center rank men of their files; they will advance also the upper part of the body in bending a little the left knee, and take aim through the intervals on the left of their file leaders. [1835 Scott's]

271. At the command AIM, the front rank will take aim to the left without deranging the feet; each man in the rear will advance the right foot about eight inches toward the right heel of the man next on the right of his file partner, and aim to the left, inclining the upper part of the body forward and bending a little the right knee. [1855 Hardee's]

At the command AIM, the front rank will take aim to the left without inclining the knee or stirring the feet. The rear rank men will advance the upper part of the body in bending a little the left knee, and take aim through the intervals to the left of their file-leaders, without stirring the feet. [1861 Chandler's, pages 34 and 35]

At the command AIM, the front rank will take aim to the left without deranging the feet; each man in the rear rank will advance the left foot about eight inches, and aim to the left, inclining the upper part of the body forward, and bending a little the left knee. [1861 Baxter's, pages 56 and 57]

It would seem that in light of the instructions, *Chandler's* seems to be imitating the middle rank of the *1835 Scott's* while *1861 Baxter's* relies on the *1835 Scott's* rear rank. This is supported by the instruction of feet movement for the rear rank men.

Although Scott's tactics were not used by the majority of units during the Civil War, and none used the three rank battle line, I have sited this historical example of three ranks for the purpose of showing that the men in the rear ranks can safely fire through the interval to the left without any derangement of feet (center rank) or only a slight movement of the feet (rear rank).

175. When recruits are formed in two ranks to execute the firings, the front rank men will raise a little less the right elbow, in order to facilitate the aim of the rear rank men. [Hardee's]

This passage has been sited by a few reenactors to indicate that all the aiming in any direction is to be through the interval to the right of one's file partner. To the contrary, it says nothing at all about the subject. What it does say is, whether it is your rear rank file partner or the man to his right, someone is going to be aiming though the interval and to facilitate anybody firing from the rear, the front rank man should lower his elbow a little. This is not meant as an indication that the person being affected by a high elbow is your file partner. Although it is but one letter of one word, while facilitating the aim of the "rear rank man" might indicate your file partner, "rear rank men" does not.

It must also be noted that Scott's tactics further indicates:

301. If the squad (company, etc.) be drawn up in two, instead of three ranks, what has been prescribed above for the fire of the center and rear ranks, where all three fire, will apply to the front and rear ranks respectively, in the two rank formation. [Scott's]

This merely means that the rear rank man will move his feet the prescribed amount as if he were in the third rank.

Here is the critical point of the discussion. Scott's and Baxter's manuals indicated a step of six (6) inches with the left foot and Hardee's indicates a step of eight (8) inches with the right. Neither of these two steps will allow for firing through the interval to the right of the file partner. With the ranks ideally thirteen (13) inches apart, eight (8) inches will not get the rear rank man anywhere near the front rank interval to the right of his file partner, especially if that foot originates from behind the left foot, being placed there at the command READY. In comparison to Scott's manual, a six (6) inch step towards the front rank with the left foot and an eight (8) inch step with the right diagonally will virtually leave the rear rank man in approximately the same position. Remember the right foot in the "boxed" position is further forward to begin with and an eight inch step with the rear foot will not allow the heel of the right foot to even clear the toe of the left, assuming a shoe size of eight (8) or larger. In either case, neither step will sufficiently clear the distance necessary to reach safely the interval to the right of one's file partner. One must note there that the modern manual interpreted by Don Heitman still supports a mere eight (8) inch step to the right which in no way will allow the further interpretation of firing over the right shoulder. To compensate for this, most reenactors will take a step far greater than the prescribed eight (8) inches.

At this point I wish to emphasize the safety issue that when using the direct fire, the rear rank man is to step straight to the right eight (8) inches with his right foot in order to place himself more squarely in the interval to his file partner's right. This movement is obviously for safety purposes and having lined up directly behind one's file partner it makes sure that a true direct fire can be accomplished through the center of the interval. However, an eight inch step diagonally to the right and an eight inch step directly to the right are not going to place the rear rank man in the interval the same way. The diagonal step will



leave him too close to the shoulder of the man in front of him, his body not traveling to the right sufficiently for safety purposes.

If the proper foot placement is observed, the rear rank man simply cannot fire around the right of his partner safely at all, let alone in a left oblique manner. In order to compensate for this, modern reenactors will have to dramatically move their right foot well beyond that prescribed by the manual. This extra sized step will allow them to reach the interval and compensate a little for the distance between ranks, but will in fact dramatically shorten their height again increasing the danger of firing between men of the front rank which will now be relatively taller. Mathematically if the rear rank man were to step to the interval covering both the eight inches to the right and thirteen inches forward, they would actually be making a fifteen to seventeen inch step. This is definitely well beyond that prescribed by the manual. It also means their stance is far less stable causing even further danger. The extra lean to actually move the gun to the left aim will even more jeopardize their stability.

This takes us back to the prescribed eight inch step of the manual. A simple, short step will greatly stabilize the rear man's stance and thus increase the safety issue. Remember a step diagonally to the left foot of the man to your file partner's

right is actually a step to the side. Remember that your shoulders are already turned diagonally to the line.

Continuing on, upon movement of the feet, a slightbending of the right knee and inclining a little forward at the waist will further stabilize the position. The bending forward is not towards the front line, but forward into the aim as prescribed by historical precedent, that is into the interval to the left of the file partner. This stabilization of feet and comfortable lean will allow the last minute adjustment to insure maximum safety before firing.

These motions done in response to the command aim can all be done while "looking steadily at the object to be hit" as stated by the Hardee's as well as Scott's manuals.

If done according to the manuals, an oblique firing of thirty-five to fifty-five degrees can be safely attained. I have found that the angle is a little less on the right oblique because with the rifle at the right shoulder, a fifty-five degree angle is causing the rear rank man to lean to the left a little beyond the safety factor. If one is to fire at an angle of less than thirty degrees which is being recommended by modern reenactors, this can be attained with a slight variation of the direct fire.

**Jeff Blakeley**

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## FIREARMS SAFETY ALERT

### Beware of Hot Caps!

Don Steiner, a National Park Service Historic Weapons Safety Specialist (and subscriber), sent along this note:

To all, many thanks for your e-mails regarding percussion caps. I had a couple phone calls with Cascade Cartridge Inc (CCI) technical support. Their engineers are aware of the current concern and are looking into it. As they pointed out there is a warning on the cap.

They made them hotter to fill the request by the reenactment community who wanted more noise. Like the eighty-grain rounds that some units use not loud enough!

I picked up a box of CCI caps today (13 May 2002) and ran almost one hundred caps through four different muskets. I had six caps fragment and these were from a musket that had a hammer out of alignment and did not hit the hammer square. Given the fact that they are hotter and with less metal to secure a wing in place, I have serious reservations about using them in NPS sites. I immediately called a halt to using them in the National Capital Region of NPS (Washington DC area) and working through the process of placing an NPS service wide ban on the use of six wing CCI caps at NPS sites.

So troops, if you are planning on shooting a musket at a NPS living history firing demonstration, *do not* bring CCI percussion caps. Thanks again everyone for your input.

**Don Steiner**

## MISCELLANEOUS

### John Zaharias now in Gettysburg.

The "Baron of Buttons" has announced to the public that he has now become a property owning citizen of Adams County, Pennsylvania. John Zaharias has purchased a building in the town of Gettysburg to be used as a retail outlet for his goods, as well as those of Lynne Bury and Elizabeth Rock's mercantile and Don Griffin's Re-enactment Eyewear. His shop is located at 336 Baltimore Street (three blocks south of the "square"). The shop's phone number is (717) 337-3500. It is open seven days a week starting at 10 PM and closing at PM (Mon-Thurs), 8 PM. (Friday and Saturday) and 4 PM. (Sunday). John will be maintaining his mail order business out of Missouri for the present time and will continue to maintain a presence in the field.

John Zaharias is the source for antique and reproduction buttons and accessories (buckles and hooks and eyes). He recently started offering reproduction tin-backed and paper-backed tin utility buttons for trowser suspender attachment and fly closure.

### Tea with the Tailor.

Susan Y. Taylor of Tea with the Tailor has let us know that she has been producing 1860 era clothing for the last eight years. She is an experienced seamstress. We would like to hear from anyone who has had garments made by Susan.

**Tea with the Tailor**, PO Box 581, Mt. Jackson, VA 22842 and (540) 740-4004.