



‘Playing the Game off their Own Bats.’ The Peninsular War, British Light Infantry (LI) and the 20th Century Legacy

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Liddell Hart declared that the lesson of military history is that no one learns. Generally he is right, though there have been striking exceptions; Jutland’s searing lessons resulted in 20 years of rigorous peacetime training in night fighting. At Matapan Admiral Cunningham manoeuvred his battleships with the dash of a Captain D handling a division of destroyers in a flotilla scrimmage.¹ Similarly this essay examines another exception, an army using a campaign almost a century old to develop doctrine.

Two definitions: this paper uses LI in a modern tactical sense to describe less structured, looser tactics relying on initiative. Used collectively of units, it includes both Light Infantry and Rifle regiments, despite their tactical differences.² Secondly ‘line’ indicates non-LI ‘heavy’ infantry.

There are three prime reasons for the adoption of open rather than close order tactics; first the effects of greater enemy firepower which forces soldiers to disperse and use ground for cover and second, as in North America and Tirah, the terrain itself. Third there are the effects of enemy tactics. Though theory may separate the three, practically they are deeply interwoven.

General Braddock’s defeat on the Monongahela first proved the need for open order tactics to the British. There French and Indian irregulars shot down disciplined professionals from cover. Braddock’s dying words were: *‘we shall know better what to do next time.’* To counter such tactics the rigid line had to be abandoned and for the first time in the musket era regular British infantry had to fight individually. Consequently LI proliferated in North America in the 7 Years’ War.³ But there were wider implications than just the tactical; Frederick the Great had ordered that: *‘[i]f a soldier...looks about to fly, or so much as sets foot outside the line, the [NCO] standing behind him will run him through.’*⁴ In dispersed combat such enforcement was impossible, while soldiers, isolated from officers, had to think for themselves. To reconcile the conflicting imperatives of control and initiative, the LI pioneers had devised a system, based on internal discipline, regimental pride, cohesion and education. After 1897-1899 the growth of firepower forced heavy infantry down a similar route. General Hamilton, a veteran of both wars mentioned below and an ex-Adjutant General, responsible for discipline and personnel issues, looked back:

‘Tirah...[and South Africa] had convinced our officers that, in open country and during daylight, the ancient mechanical discipline ... could not be applied to the new tactics.

¹ Cunningham 1951, 112, 142, 157-8, 161-2, 330-5.

² Gates 1987, Chapter 6. Griffith 1999, Chapter 11.

³ Fortescue 1910, 285, 329-330, 408-9.

⁴ Hackett 1983, 123, citing Frederick the Great.



Armament, necessitating ... wide extensions, isolated the individual. Neither by voice nor revolver could the captain dominate a firing line extended at [5-10] paces interval.⁵

Discipline instead of being enforced 'externally' would now have to be maintained primarily by factors internal to individuals: comradeship, cohesion, regimental pride and patriotism. A British manual reflected the change:

'The soldier must be given a far higher aim than that of merely satisfying ...the drill instructor. He must be encouraged to feel that in perfecting himself as a fighting man he is preparing to take his part in furthering the aims of his country... Among soldiers so trained, individuality and self-reliance can safely be developed without any fear of sacrificing discipline. The strongest form of discipline in an army is that which comes from the conception of duty in its highest form which is the spirit of loyalty to King and country.'⁶

A CO noted that modern tactical conditions demanded low-level initiative:

'... the tendency of warfare on the [Frontier] is to bring out the individual qualities of each soldier and to demand his employment as an individual ... [T]he great lessons of ... Tirah ... were decentralisation and the necessity of ... refurbishing the almost forgotten art of skirmishing.'

He contrasted two roughly simultaneous campaigns:

'In Egypt [the Sudan 1898] ... few beneath the rank of Brigadier were called upon to show aught but courage...In the wild fastnesses of Tirah, no subaltern officer ... could tell but that ... his life and the lives of his men might not depend on his own power of initiative.'⁷

Hitherto most units in the British Army had stressed tactical control, downplayed initiative and enforced taut 'external' discipline.⁸

Tirah, the sternest campaign of the 1897-8 Frontier Rising, demonstrated that control and close order tactics were inadequate in the face of modern firepower; soldiers had to disperse. Two British officers, Lt Cols Verner, an instructor at Sandhurst and Rifle Brigade officer, and Henderson, professor at Camberley, analysed Tirah. They advocated dispersed tactics, based on fieldcraft and skirmishing; these in turn demanded initiative and hence more internal discipline. Experience from the Peninsular LI buttressed their proposals. Verner commented:

'The unusually heavy losses experienced by our troops in the fighting on the Indian Frontier in 1897 was mostly due to the able manner which the Afridis...took advantage of the ground and worked in unison (as did the Riflemen at Tarbes [in 1814].....)⁹ to assist

⁵ Hamilton 1921,101.

⁶ CT 1907 (1910), 18.

⁷ GHG VIII (June 1900), 52, 23. Written by Lt Col, later Lt Gen Franklyn.

⁸ Evans 2008, Chapters 2 and 7. Some LI regiments were an exception.

⁹ Ayrton & Taylor 2008, a skirmish in SW France in 1814.



*and support one another, and thus to develop their fire so as to obtain the maximum value from it with the minimum exposure and loss to themselves. The accounts by officers who served in [Tirah] bear a striking resemblance ...of the methods of fighting of the Riflemen during the Peninsular War.'*¹⁰

Henderson continued the argument:

*'The skirmishing tactics of the famous Light Brigade... form therefore an admirable model for the British Infantry of today... We want soldiers with wits... [T]he development of individual intelligence and resourcefulness... must be a main end of regimental training... [Skirmishing] was the style of fighting in which the ... Light Brigade excelled. These are the tactics of the Boer and the Afridi.'*¹¹

Henderson's *The Technical Training of Infantry* analyzed some of the key features of Moore's training at Shorncliffe. The LI pioneers had devised a system, combining internal discipline, initiative, education and training, focussed at the company level, to cater for the demands of dispersed combat.¹² Henderson was emphatic:

'Those who have had occasion to study in contemporary records... the innumerable engagements of the Peninsular War, need no further evidence to convince them that it was to the skill, the resolution and the trained judgement of these officers that the success of the [Light Division] is to be attributed. Their most marked characteristics were that when they were left alone they almost invariably did the right thing.'

He concluded:

*'In training our officers and men as [LI] after Sir John Moore's model, we shall be giving them the best training for battle on whatever ground it may be fought.'*¹³

Here it is probably worth explaining the importance of skirmishing, which a Frontier and LI veteran analysed:

*'The men follow the lead of their officers, thinking and acting for themselves (his emphasis). By this is meant that they judge where to find cover, how to make the best use of it, when to leave their cover, when to fire...[and] what to fire at.'*¹⁴

Skirmishing was the antithesis of the control-based close order and volleys which had dominated British infantry tactics hitherto. It was becoming essential as battlefields

¹⁰ Simmons 1899, Verner's introduction xix–xx. Verner edited *RBC*, deeply involved with the Peninsular and regimental history. Evans 2008, Chapter 2 argues there was an LI revival in the 1890s.

¹¹ *The Times* 31/8/99. *The Times* archivist suggests that Henderson was the author.

¹² Space prevents a full analysis of the LI system; individuals such as Hutton, Verner and Henderson argued that it involved the above. FULLER 1914 examined it.

¹³ Henderson 1905, 347-8, 352.

¹⁴ Plowden 1900, 286, based on Tirah. Rough terrain in both America and the Frontier fostered LI tactics.



expanded spatially. In 1897 British infantry had fought as close together as a yard apart, by 1902, impelled by enemy firepower, they extended up to 30.¹⁵

Probably due to Tirah, the Oxfordshires republished in 1897 Col Gawler's *The Essentials of Good Skirmishing*; the campaign had shown its importance, yet *IDB 1896* ignored it. Later the editor, Mockler-Ferryman, remarked:

*'The principles laid down in [Gawler] are as sound ... as they were when written... forming the foundation of the resuscitated skirmishing in the new Infantry Drill (sic).'*¹⁶

Others emphasised skirmishing's tactical importance, till then seen as an LI speciality. Col Hutchinson, later Director of Military Operations (DMO), then Director of Military Education India and a Tirah veteran, consequently recommended reforming battalion light companies.¹⁷ The new manual, *IT 1902*, analyzed it:

Skirmishing implies extended order, in which each individual acts and thinks for himself, and makes use of all his powers, physical and mental, to attain a common object. It is absolutely essential...that...the intelligence of each recruit should be developed by every possible means, and that a spirit of independent action...should be sedulously encouraged...Skirmishing is the all important formation in modern warfare.¹⁸

Verner had supplied Henderson, the main author of *IT 1902*, with LI material to help in writing it.¹⁹ A magazine urged: 'it is to this old system of [LI] training that we must look for the effectiveness of our military training in the future.' Lt Col Maude, an ex-sapper and tactical analyst, praised the Peninsular LI and a widely-circulated article stressed the LI system as how to improve contemporary tactical performance.²⁰ That 3 more or less independent sources stressed LI indicates that their prominence in contemporary thought. Later Field Marshal Roberts urged:

*'The necessity for thoroughly developing the system of trainingpractised by ...Moore. Discipline is as important now as it was.... but self reliance is what is wanted, not the rigid discipline of the barrack square. Officers, [NCOs] and men must be encouraged to think and act for themselves.'*²¹

Here Roberts suggests the reason behind many of the changes which were occurring during his time as CinC. Col FC Carter advocated LI skills, criticising the Army's heavy infantry bias since 1815. Brigadier, later Lt Gen, Haldane used Moore's methods to train

¹⁵ Evans 2008, 45, 182.

¹⁶ *OXLIC X* (1901), 161-2. See fn 19 below.

¹⁷ Martin 1899, 2-3. Hutchinson 1898, 239-240. Light companies were not LI but were a feature of the Army in the Napoleonic era.

¹⁸ *IT 1902*, 134-5. It emphasised fieldcraft and initiative.

¹⁹ 'Review *Infantry Training (Provisional) 1902*,' *RBC* (1902), 160. The works given to Henderson included Gawler's and Manningham's books. Evans 60-1.

²⁰ *BA LXVIII* (1902), p 622; Maude 1902, 18; Verner 1900, 471.

²¹ Roberts, 1905, 23. He had just handed over as CinC.



his brigade; later Col Maurice recommended them to inculcate initiative.²² All 3 were from line regiments.

Between 1899 and 1914 this paper argues that the British Army attempted to construct a system similar to the LI's and for similar reasons, to permit initiative to be delegated in dispersed combat, while maintaining discipline. The Army's discipline became more internal and improved substantially. Education of both officers and soldiers was radically overhauled, partly to incorporate the skills needed in dispersed combat:

*'Education makes ... men more intelligent, which is what we require nowadays when men are often isolated from their officers and required to exercise ... initiative.'*²³

Basic training altered accordingly; Robertson, the first to rise from private to Director of Military Training, commented on the post-1902 changes: *'The soldier was no longer treated as ... being without intelligence... down whose throat it was the business of the NCO to force as much parrot-like drill as possible'*.²⁴

RSM Plumb felt that the new cavalry school's instruction was much better than the old central depot's: *'cut and dried methods,' giving more scope to the: 'men's intellectual powers.'* The new manuals stressed initiative and skirmishing. An anonymous infantry CO observed in 1914 of the changes which had taken place in his arm since 1902: *'we are all [LI] now.'*²⁵

There are other fragmentary traces of interest in the Peninsular War; British officers began touring the battlefields, some explicitly to learn lessons. The first one traced involved Generals Seymour and Harrison in 1891-2, while Capt, later Lt Col James published a guidebook, *Battles around Biarritz*, in 1896.²⁶ Verner and Mockler-Ferryman toured the Light Division's battlefields in 1899. The most significant visitor was Brig Gen May, who lectured and wrote on Salamanca, inspired by the Army's post-1902 emphasis on manoeuvre.²⁷ Col Robertson, later CIGS, visited Torres Vedras, Busaco and, with pleasing symmetry, Oporto, while Col Haldane toured Salamanca and Moore's route to Corunna.²⁸

Col Bird, a Staff College instructor, wrote on the war, seeking lessons for the present.²⁹ The Peninsular and Napoleonic Wars entered the Army's syllabus for professional exams.³⁰ The committee considering officer supply on mobilization looked at the Peninsula and the DMO, General Ewart, was surprised at the frequency with which

²² Carter 1905, 8. Haldane 1948, 269-70. Maurice 1914, 5-7. His father edited *Moore's Diary*.

²³ Tables 1 & 3. WO 163/12 'Précis 324,' 61-2. Evans 2008, Chapter 7.

²⁴ Robertson 1921, 157.

²⁵ Plumb 1908, 97-8. *MRs* 1898 16, *MRs* 1903, 29-30, 47, also stressing decentralised command.

Evans 2008, Chapter 7. *BA* (1914).

²⁶ Adams, 25. *OXLIC* (1900), 227.

²⁷ *OXLIC* (1899), 34; see Bibliography; EVANS 2008, Chapters 5, 9.

²⁸ Robertson, 144-5. Haldane 1948, 276-7.

²⁹ Bird 1912.

³⁰ Table 4.



soldiers were commissioned there.³¹ Many books on Moore, other LI officers and the Peninsular War appeared in the period, while regimental journals continued their coverage.³² Here it is possible to speculate that this stress on what contemporaries saw as a largely British campaign suggests greater intellectual self-confidence by an army hitherto dominated by French and German influences.

This paper argues that between 1897 and 1914 the British moved from stressing control and external discipline to promoting initiative, education and internal discipline. As the evidence above suggests, these changes owed much to the LI example. But it would be wrong to argue that this was decisive in impelling change, which the Mauser would have enforced, but it assisted the process.³³ A contemporary summarised the Army's direction of travel:

*'[T]he new method of training ... is tending towards inculcating habits of self-reliance and independence ... [T]he private ... is to become ...capable of thinking and acting for himself, and not...a mere machine. The machine was good enough in the days of "Brown Bess" when troops could be manoeuvred in close formation to within 300 yards of the enemy; but now ... men who may find themselves 10 or 20 yards from a comrade, and perhaps 100 yards from a section commander, must ... "play the game off their own bats."'*³⁴

³¹ WO 163/15 'Council Minutes 21//3/10,' 1-2 and 'Précis 453,' possibly Oman 1912 was used.

³² See Bibliography. This author estimates that more works appeared on the Peninsula in the 15 years after 1900 than between 1885 and 1900, but centenaries appeal to publishers!

³³ Tables 1,2 and 3. Evans 2008, Chapters 2, 7 & 9.

³⁴ Anon 'Army Shooting, and Its Improvement' *Blackwood's Magazine* CLXIX (Edinburgh 1901), 320. Attributed to Lt Col Mockler-Ferryman, the *OXLIC* editor.



Table 1. Courts Martials (CMs) in the British Army 1898-1912.³⁵

Ser	Year	Average Strength	No of CMs	CM Offences	Number Imprisoned	% of CMed
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)
1.	1898	225,027	9676	14,044	8001	4.47%
2*	1904	287,240	12,017	16,382	10243	4.5%
3	1906	263,117	8125	11053	6725	3.24%
4	1908	251,324	7181	10083	6338	3.11%
5	1910	252,686	6433	9404	6345	2.72%
6	1912	253,762	5161	7557	4380	2.18%

* Incomplete data 1899-1903. In any event wartime data may mislead as the absence of alcohol on operations improves discipline.

Table 2. British Army Recruit Education Standards on Enlistment 1896-1908.³⁶

Ser	Standard	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903 ³⁷	1906 ³⁸	1907 ³⁹	1908 ⁴⁰
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)	(i)	(j)	(k)	(n)	(o)
1	Good	7%	4.6%	4.9%	7.1%	8.3	9.8%	5.5%	6.7%	22.4	18.3	5.2
2	Read/Write	90%	92%	92%	90%	89%	88%	92.5%	90%	34.77	34.3	20
3	Read Only	1%	1.4%	1%	1.3%	1.5%	1.3%	1%	1.5%	36.15	36.3	31
4	Illiterate	2%	1.7%	2%	1.7%	1.3%	1.0%	1%	1%	6.66	27	30
5	Cat E	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	13.5

The improvement in 1899-1901 was possibly due to the enlistment of more educated soldiers attracted by the war. The system of classification changed in 1905 and again in 1908. No explanation is given for Cat E. NA is not available/applicable.

³⁵ GARs 1898, 1904, 1912.

³⁶ ARIGR 1900 (1901), less for col (c) from ARIGR 1899.

³⁷ ARIGR for the first nine months of ... 1903 (1903) for cols (j)-(k).

³⁸ GAR 1906, Table 5 p 105.

³⁹ GAR 1907, Table 5 p 94.

⁴⁰ GAR 1908, Table 5 p 91.



Table 3. British Army Soldier Education Certificates 1903-1912.⁴¹

Ser	Year	Average Strength	NCOs and Men on Regt Strength with Education Certificates	% (d) of (c)
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
1.	1903	303,600	79,860	26.3
2	1904	267601	111,928	41.8
3	1905	254,748	120,754	47.4
4	1906	245,978	128,749	52.3
5	1907	232,154	129,308	55.7
6	1908	235,409	139,065	59.0
7	1909	237, 205	148,025	62.4
8	1910	236,496	159,778	67.6
9	1911	237,722	168,148	70.7
10	1912	234,901	172,670	73.5

It should be noted that the strength columns of Tables 1 and 3 disagree. The author suspects that Table 3's figures assumed, rightly or wrongly, that officers were educated.

Table 4. Peninsular and Napoleonic War Topics in British Army Exams.⁴²

Ser	Year	Reference	Campaign
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
1	1893-97	AO for each year	no Napoleonic campaigns in this period.
2	1898	AO 139	Peninsular War start of 1813 to San Sebastian
3	1900	AO 217	Peninsular War 12 Jun 1813 to 1814
4	1902	AO 34	Napoleon's campaign France 1814
5	1905	AO 153	Peninsular War 1812-13
6	1907	AO 1	new paper in mil history to be set on Waterloo campaign
7	1908	AO 165	Waterloo
8	1912	AO 6	Napoleonic Wars 1805

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GARs 1909& 1912.

⁴² Data drawn from WO 123 'Army Orders (AOs).'



Bibliography

General note, all books and magazines London unless specified otherwise. Books with a date in their title eg *IT 1902* do not have it repeated below.

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Abbreviations. Most are covered in the text; those that are not are listed below.

CIGS Chief of the Imperial General Staff

CinC Commander in Chief

CO Commanding Officer

FM Field Marshal

RSM Regimental Sergeant Major

WO War Office (file reference at the National Archives)

⁴³ Originally published in 1891, another edition apparently appeared about 1900.