

is close order drill necessary in the atomic age?

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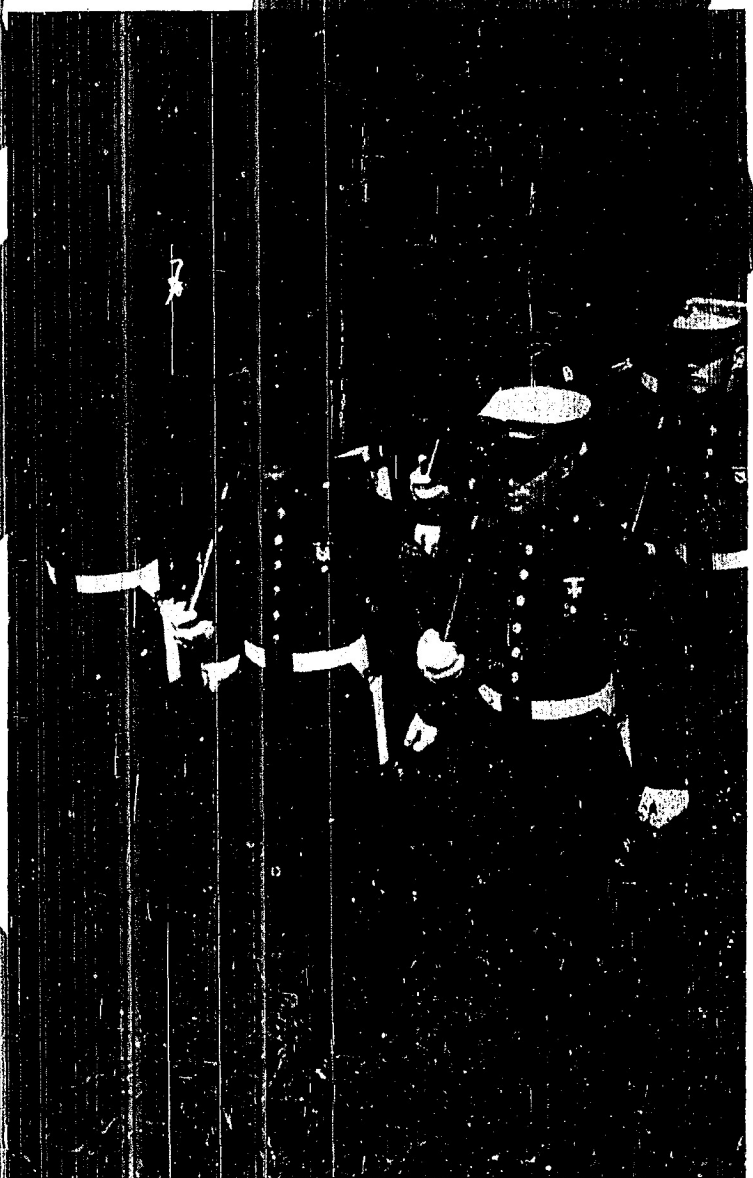
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By Col R. H. Williams

☛ THERE IS APPARENT A RENEWED interest in close order drill throughout the Marine Corps. This interest has manifested itself in the return to the old squad drill at posts and stations. It is further revealed in efforts to devise still a third type of drill which may ultimately replace both types now in use, adapting the 8-man, 2-rank squad drill to the 13-

man Marine infantry rifle squad. It therefore seems appropriate to re-examine close order drill, or drill for foot troops, with a view to determining whether it is truly of value in the atomic age or whether it is an archaism at which we traditionalistic military minded people persist in wasting millions of man hours annually, time which an in-

dustrial efficiency analyst might well believe could be better devoted to training more directly related to the waging of modern war, or even profitable labor.

Let us stipulate first that from the beginning of organized warfare until as late as 1914 it was unquestionably of value. The formations and intricate maneuvers performed end-

lessly on the drill field were the very same maneuvers and formations that infantry used in battle. The parade ground was father to the battlefield. The hours spent teaching men to stand at attention, shoulder to shoulder, and to stay that way and fire their volleys on order when an enemy charged them were not ill spent. The movements, at close order, of units from the company to the division, endlessly practiced on the parade ground, enabled field commanders to maneuver their troops in combat. Drill for foot troops in the case of the Greek Phalanx, the Roman Legion, the Swiss Pikemen, the English Archers and the infantrymen of the 18th and 19th Centuries was in fact combat training.

But now it is all so different. No drill movement is of any *direct* value in combat whatsoever. Is it therefore a waste of time? Should we reduce drill to its simplest elements and employ it only to the extent which is necessary to form a body of men in some order, get them to face toward the place to which you wish them to move, get them started, and be able to stop them when they get there? Of what use, after all, is all this business of executing marchings and facings smartly and precisely; of the manual of arms? Of the constant repetition of it all? Does it make any difference?

I say yes it does, IF. A very large IF, and it is not sufficiently recognized. IF it is conducted *properly*. Why? Because if it is conducted properly it is, of all forms of training, the greatest builder of discipline. It inculcates that great military habit of obedience and integrates the individual into the fighting team which obeys the leader in the stress of battle.

I must define my terms. Just what is meant by conducting close order drill *properly*? Just this: that every time the squad leader, platoon leader, or company commander marches his unit to the drill field for close order drill, he conducts that drill during the entire period in the same manner in which he would do so if the Commandant of the Marine Corps were present and observing.

The drill instructor acts as a reflector to the man he drills. If his

bearing is soldierly, his movements precise, his commands sharp, his corrective comments to individuals immediate and unflinching, if he refuses to overlook anything short of perfection in the execution of the movements he orders, he will have a profitable drill period. After it, the individuals comprising the unit will be a little more of a cohesive group than they were before. The unit will have acquired to a greater extent the habit of obedience to the word of command of the leader. He will have built up a greater discipline. And incidentally, 30 minutes of such drill is quite a work out. Time devoted to drill conducted in this manner is not wasted, though it does not possess the direct relationship it once had to combat training.

But what do we frequently find in place of the above? We see a company marching out to drill. Upon reaching the drill field there is a rest period before beginning. The smoking lamp is lighted. Officers and NCOs gather in little groups to converse. Then there is a few minutes of desultory platoon drill. Another rest period. Then the sergeants and corporals drill the individual squads. The manual is not very sharp and no one does anything about it. Rifles are canted and at various angles at the right shoulder in marching and no one seems to notice or care. Occasionally a listless admonition is heard such as "dress those pieces properly." Nothing much occurs as a result of this because each of the individuals concerned believes this corrective to be

addressed to others, not himself.

Such periods of close order drill are not merely useless and a waste of time—they are *detrimental*. If poorly executed movements are regarded with indifference, if mistakes and imperfections are ignored instead of being sharply corrected, if the entire affair is carried out in a perfunctory manner interspersed with frequent rest periods for a smoke—then you are breaking down what discipline the unit possessed before you began, because you have taught the individuals and the group that it is not necessary to obey orders promptly, to carry out duties properly to the best of their ability. You have condoned that which should *never* be condoned in military life—not to give of one's best.

It is better not to drill at all, rather than to conduct it improperly, for in the atomic age the only possible justification for time devoted to close order drill is the inculcation of discipline.

I do not propose in this article to compare the different types of drill or to argue their respective merits. I am perhaps partial to the old squad drill because that was what I was brought up on. There is a danger, however, in believing that the adoption of a different form of drill which is more complicated than the simple drill which we have used for the past 15 years, will in itself prove to be the answer to improving discipline and raising the general level of smartness throughout the Marine Corps. I have heard some express the view that because the old squad drill, and the adaptation of it to the 13-man squad which is now in the experimental stage, are more complex, that quality in itself makes them greater discipline builders than the present simple drill.

To this view I must reply that I have seen many poor and sloppy drills and ceremonies in the past few years with the present, simple form of close order drill. It is not so much the type of drill we use, but the attitude towards it which company officers and NCOs adopt when they drill their men which counts. A more complex drill in itself, only offers more scope for teaching indiscipline—unless it is conducted *properly*.

USMC

