

THE RIFLE COMPANY

Living history units seldom muster anything like company strength on their own, but must occasionally organize as companies at an event (like Conneaut). This presents a problem. We only do well the things we practice, and practice time at an event is usually brief.

It does matter how we perform in front of the public, however, so there has to be some convenient way to shorten the learning curve when we are together in numbers. It may be comfortable to stay in our little squads or demi-platoons when we form up at Conneaut or the Gap, little clusters of eight to ten reenactors and a guidon that usually stands in front of 150 or so – but it's wrong. If it's wrong to wear sneakers instead of service shoes or jump boots, it's just as wrong to fail at organizing correctly. Authenticity is more than clothes and gear.

So here is a quick rundown on the company that will allow us to have at least a head start – if we read it. I focus here on the rifle company, Army straightleg infantry, because that matches what most living history units represent. You should glance at the essay on the platoon (filed with this paper) as a head start.

What is a company?

A company is the smallest administrative unit in the Army. Anyone assigned to troops is in a company of some kind. The Chief of Staff of the Army is officially in Headquarters and Headquarters Company, United States Army at Fort Myer, Virginia. Every name has to be carried on somebody's morning report, including those in transit or in the stockade. Anyone who isn't is unaccounted for, and this would blow the Army's anal-retentive mind.

It's also the largest unit in which the commander is expected to know every soldier by name. It is an extended family. More than at any other level, the commander is directly responsible for the performance, morale, and welfare of his troops. The size of the company is based on that requirement – how many varied people can one human being control at any time? Two millennia or more ago, the company was called an ordinis and was commanded by a Centurion. The size and general composition and place in the army has remained unchanged because it is based on unchanging human capabilities and limits.

The company is the soul of the Army.

(NOTE: In the cavalry, a company is called a "troop"; in the artillery, a "battery." Trivia: Cannon Company in a rifle regiment (See FM 7-5) is an infantry unit manning 105mm howitzers. The personnel are trained by the artillery, but they remain infantry, so they are a company.)

A rifle company (1940's) is composed of a headquarters section, three rifle platoons, and a weapons platoon. [See FM 7-10.]

The headquarters section contains those men and resources necessary for tactical command and administrative structure.

Command group: This consists of the company commander (Capt.), Executive Officer (second in command – Lt.), First Sergeant, Communication Sergeant, bugler, orderly and some messengers.

Administration group: Supply sergeant and armorer-artificer; mess sergeant, cooks, and cooks' helpers; company clerk.

Rifle platoons: Like the platoon, the company has three maneuver units, its platoons. The platoon structure and mission are described in the companion posting.

Weapons platoon: The heavy weapons of the company are concentrated in the weapons platoon, which consists of the following:

Command group: A platoon leader (Lt.), platoon sergeant (T/Sgt.), transport corporal (who is in charge of loading and positioning of equipment and ammunition transported by the weapons carriers); and several privates or Pfc.'s assigned as messengers or drivers.

Light machine-gun section: A section leader (S/Sgt.) and two squad leaders, each serving a light machine-gun, plus privates and Pfc.'s as crewmen and some messengers.

Mortar section: A section leader (S/Sgt.), three mortar squad leaders (Sgt.) plus crews, and messengers.

Duties

The company commander has absolute responsibility for his company. In war time, turnover for fools, martinets, and cowards is high (Herb Sobel was representative of a class, not *sui generis*). He has to know tactics, ordnance, administration, and training, and he has to lead by example – in the Army as well as in the hobby, the commander's most powerful weapon is force of personal example. It's hard to gain the respect and loyalty of the troops, easy to lose it.

The executive officer obviously assists the Old Man, but his area of responsibility is focused on making the company run – handling administration, supply, and maintenance – so the Old Man can focus on the combat mission. A good XO is always sleep-deprived. I relieved one for poor performance in my last company, and nominated one for beatification.

The first Sergeant runs the company administration and keeps the NCO's sharp. His finger is always on the pulse of the company, and his advice to the CO is priceless unless he is a schmuck, which is unusual. Soldiers should always have an eye out for the Top. Who should not let any lapse pass without correction.

NOTE: The CO is responsible for everything that happens in his company, but a good First Sergeant will cover the Old Man's rear by flawless administration and by shaping up weak NCOs.

The job of the company clerk is to be abused and hammered, day in and day out, by the first sergeant. Sounds like a Jimmy Buffet song, but it's true.

IMPORTANT RULES: We talk loosely about responsibility and authority. Responsibility means you have to get it done; authority means you are provided the chops to do it.

Rule One: There is no responsibility without authority. If you do not have the authority to make things happen, you cannot expect to produce.

Rule Two: Authority can be delegated; responsibility cannot. You can give a platoon leader direct charge of an independent mission, but as CO it's your ass if he fails.

Forming the company

If nothing else, any serious living history officer should know how to form the company correctly. It may seem gratuitous, but it's extremely important. The Army runs from formation to formation, and there is a standard way to do it. I taught our company on the right of the line last August how to make it happen, and everybody got comfortable with two run-throughs. Never forget: every action has a specific purpose.

A time for formation has been scheduled and posted on the bulletin board. Squad leaders are responsible for assuring that all their soldiers know the time and are available and in the right uniform, with the right equipment.

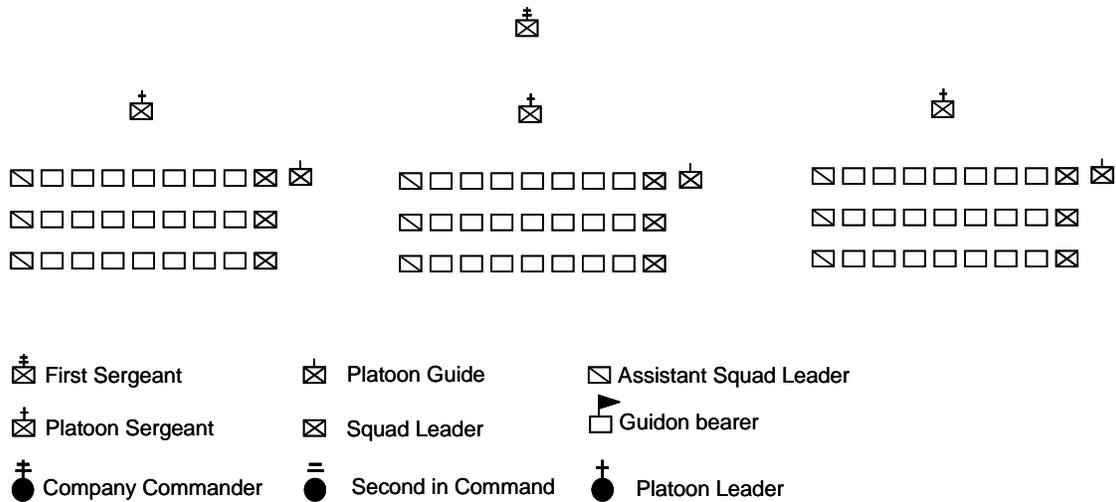
At formation time (or by the last note of "first call," which is the familiar tune still used at race tracks to call horses and jockeys to the starting gate), the First Sergeant walks out to the company street (the paved road – called the "hardball" – in front of the barracks) and takes his position where the center of the company will be, SIX paces in front of the position where the front rank will stand. He blows his whistle and commands " __ Company, FALL IN!" (If bugle calls are being used, he does this after the last note of "assembly"; the company has been forming on its own as described below.)

Platoon guides have moved to the points on which the platoons will dress and squad leaders quickly take their positions at the head of their squads, aligned on the guides.

[We are not used to having platoon guides, but they are a necessary part of drill. The guide is an NCO, a sort of assistant platoon sergeant (though in a pinch the platoon sergeant can act as guide). He marks the base position on which the platoon will form; the guide of the first platoon is the base point on which the entire company will form, and is actually the company guide. If you come to us from the Civil War hobby, he is the “right general guide”. He has very specific functions in dismounted drill, including making sure everybody is marching in a straight line, a skill that has to be learned.]

The platoon sergeants take their positions three paces in front of the centers of their platoons, facing the squad leaders.

As the squad members arrive (pouring out of the barracks), they fall in to the left of their squad leaders; squad leaders note their arrival by name and file. All soldiers fall in at order arms (if under arms) except those carrying the carbine, BAR, etc.; these fall in at sling arms.



When the platoons have fallen in (they are not yet “formed”), the platoon sergeant looks at the first squad leader and says: “REPORT.”

The first squad leader salutes (yes, an NCO is saluting an NCO) and renders his report; for example: “Private Slipschitz absent.” NCOs, though they render and return the salute, do not use “sir” – this is reserved for formally addressing those “other people” who are not yet part of the formation. Then the second squad leader salutes and reports: “Private Ryan on detail.” Then the third squad leader salutes and reports: “All present.” The platoon sergeant returns each salute.

[On saluting: If the company is formed without arms, the hand salute is rendered when taking reports. If the company is under arms as for drill, the salute is given from “order arms” (see FM 22-5). If the company is falling in wearing combat gear and preparing to move to the field, soldiers fall in at “sling arms” and salutes are rendered as in FM 22-5: left hand crosses the chest and secures the sling, right hand executed the hand salute.]

When the last squad leader has reported, and if the company is under arms, the platoon sergeant orders: "Inspection – ARMS!" All soldiers then execute inspection arms as appropriate for the weapons they carry. Presuming no loose rounds or clips are ejected, the platoon sergeant then orders: "Port ARMS! Order – ARMS!" (M1 rifle carriers go to the order; others back to sling arms. NOTE: The command "lock pieces" was discarded by 1943 and replaced with "port arms" or "order arms")

The platoon sergeant then faces about, which signals the first sergeant that the platoon is formed.

When platoons have formed, the first sergeant commands: "REPORT!" Each platoon sergeant reports in turn with a salute: "One man absent!", etc.

The first sergeant then command "POSTS!" At this point, the platoon sergeants move at quick time and by the shortest route to their positions in the formation (to the left of the rear squads).

The first sergeant faces about, signaling the company is formed. At this point (or at his convenience) the company commander takes his position facing the first sergeant, who salutes and says: "Sir, one man absent." At this time the company Guidon bearer takes his position to the left rear of the commander.

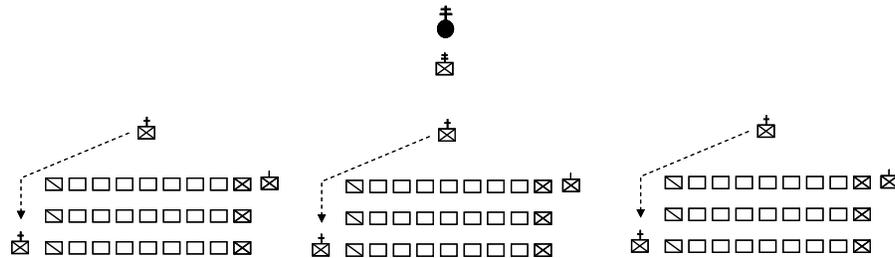


Figure 2: Company assembled and reports taken, first sergeant sends platoon sergeants to their posts.

The company commander returns the salute. The first sergeant faces about and moves smartly and by the shortest route to his position to the rear of the last file of the center platoon.

The company is now ready to be turned over to its officers.

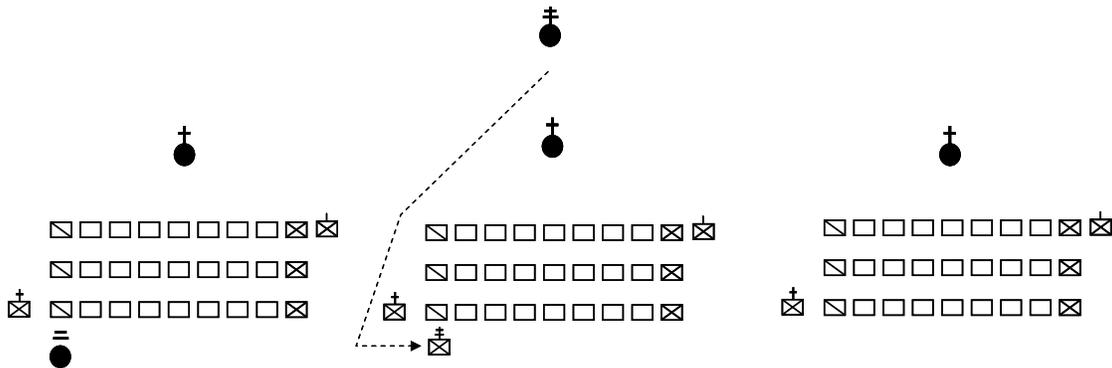


Figure 3: First sergeant, platoon leaders, and Guidon bearer take their posts. The company is formed and turned over to the commander.

NOTE: A rifle company would normally form as four platoons: 1st through 3rd rifle platoons, right to left, and the weapons platoon on the left. If it was a full inspection, the company's jeep and trailer would be parked centered on the rear of the weapons platoon. Supernumerary men (clerk, messengers, etc.) form at the ends of platoons as "file closers".

[NOTE: Military units form from right to left, for reasons that go back to the Roman legion. Because soldiers carried the shield on the left the right side was exposed, and so formations tended to drift nervously to the right in advancing on the enemy. For this reason the steadiest veteran cohort was given the right flank position in the line of battle. The motto of the U. S. 1st Infantry: "To the right of the line".]

“Moving out”

If the company is going somewhere in formation, the simple (and correct) way to move out is as follows:

Company commander orders “Right – FACE!”

The entire company simply executes right face EXCEPT:

-- the platoon guides, who face about and step to a position in front of the last (now right) rank of the platoon, then face left. They are now in a position to “guide right.” The first man in the last file of each platoon follows the guide.

[NOTE: FM 22-5 does not provide details about the guide’s various dances; this information is hidden elsewhere, since it is not necessary for every soldier to know it.]

-- the platoon leaders move from their positions in front of the platoons to the head of the left file (the position formerly occupied by the guides).

-- The Guidon bearer and company commander move to the front of the column, Guidon bearer to the left rear of the company commander.

-- The first sergeant and bugler position themselves behind the commander and Guidon.

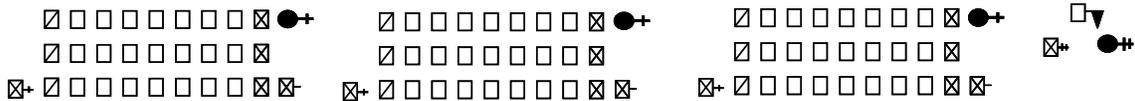


Figure 4: Company prepared to march in column.

A perspective

Close order drill changed dramatically in the latter part of the 19th century, but some things stayed the same. The main reason for the changes was technological: the infantry long arm evolved quickly after the late 1850’s from a slow-fire muzzle-loading contraption that could put out 3 rounds per minute to rapid-firing repeaters. This caused a seismic shift from close-order linear combat common in the Civil War to extended-order combat, since a dispersed line of less vulnerable soldiers could now put out a good sustained rate of fire. Basically, all infantry became skirmishers.

But the basics of close order remained for administrative activities, training, and ceremony – and are still around today.

This doesn’t mean there hasn’t been evolution. Until the days after WWI, infantry had a marching style of some complexity called, informally, “squad drill”. It got this name because squads moved simultaneously as units and as part of the whole. Oddly, this style persisted at West Point until the 1960’s as a matter of tradition (“unhampered by progress”); it ended when President Kennedy insisted that all three service academies have the same size and West Point was obliged to more than double to 4400. Unfortunately, a brigade of 4400 using squad drill simply could not fit on the Plain, where parades are held; reluctantly the United States Military Academy started teaching cadets to use the drill manual they would use as officers. Old grads huffed that the “Corps has gone to hell”, but they are always doing that.

Since the 1941 drill regulations, there have been only a few changes. At “dress right” all ranks started putting up their arms. “Lock pieces” simply became “port arms” or “order arms”. But the basic dance, the Kabuki theater, has stayed the same, because it looks so damn good.

“Fall in!”