
Pro Rege

Volume 6 | Number 1

Article 4

September 1977

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Recommended Citation

Van Dyke, Louis Y. (1977) "Running Sore: An Inquiry into Napoleon's Peninsular Campaign (Part Two)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 6: No. 1, 14 - 17.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol6/iss1/4

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"The Running Sore": An Inquiry Into Napoleon's Peninsular Campaign (Part Two)

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In the last issue of *Pro Rege* we raised the question why Napoleon I should have been defeated in his military campaigns in the Iberian Peninsula when, seemingly, he held all the strategic advantages. As we noticed, however, there were elements in the Peninsular War that, while not always obvious, worked inexorably against him and brought him down. In the previous issue we examined geography and population and how these factors presented insurmountable obstacles to successful French control of Spain and Portugal. In

this issue we will consider the role of military tactics and its contribution to Napoleon's defeat.*

The Column and the Line

In eighteenth-century warfare, normal tactics involved smashing one of the enemy's wings either by a flanking maneuver or by assaulting the wing with superior numbers, while the rest of the enemy's forces were held immobile by inferior numbers. It was usually the cavalry that

*For this chapter I have relied exclusively upon Oman's book, *Studies in the Napoleonic Wars*, one of the best studies on the topic in the English language.

delivered the fatal blow by overwhelming the hostile cavalry, enveloping the wing, and attacking it from the rear. About the time of the outbreak of the French Revolutionary wars, however, this type of tactics was terminated.¹

The initial losses incurred by French Revolutionary armies resulted in commanders—who were in many cases left-over nobility—being denounced as traitors. Why else should the brave and virtuous French forces be losing battles? Perhaps out of desperation born of the fear of literally losing their heads, the commanders evolved a new tactic, which was nothing more than hurling masses of troops upon the enemy lines without regard to losses, thus hoping to overwhelm the enemy by sheer weight of numbers. The first successes of the French in the north were won in this way. The *levy en masse* gave the French generals a superior number of troops, while the Allies could replace their trained men only with difficulty.²

As the French armies gained experience in battle with accompanying improvement in morale and self-confidence, modifications of these tactics were made. Troops were not widely dispersed in long lines, but rather were arranged in columns so as to strike at important points in the enemy's line.³ A thick line of skirmishers would advance on the enemy line while at the same time protecting and concealing a row of heavy columns. The purpose of this tactic was that the skirmishers would engage the enemy and keep him so occupied that the massed columns could get within fighting distance practically unscathed and then, while still intact hurl themselves onto the enemy line. The columns would be exposed to fire only a short time and could sustain the losses incurred in these few minutes without losing their pace or their spirit. The line of battle employed by the Austrians, for example, could do very little damage to the advancing columns before the French swarmed all over them.⁴

The columns were formed either in companies with a total depth of twenty-

four men or in divisions with the depth of twelve men. In the Peninsular War, the French generals apparently preferred to use no more than a rifle company for the skirmishing line, which amounted to about one-tenth of the unit employed.⁵ This method was successful against generals of the old school, who insisted on covering every point in the line. Their armies were thereby extended over a long distance but in a very thin and vulnerable line.⁶

Napoleon's favorite infantry formation appears to have been a mixed order that alternated battalions in line with battalions in column where he wished to hold and to contain the enemy. This gave him the advantage of both column and line. Where he wished to penetrate a line, he used columns with heavy artillery preparing the way instead of skirmishers.⁷

The French method worked effectively enough against an enemy who could be frightened by swarms of men, but its impact upon troops who preferred to stand their ground and fire at such a huge target was another matter. Upon his arrival in Portugal, Wellington surmised that the line could beat the column; moreover, the British army had had some battle experience which confirmed his belief. At the battle of Maida in Italy in 1806, four French battalions in column of divisions had been defeated by three British battalions in a line two deep. Losses for the French were 1,080 against only 320 for the British. Some of the British officers present at that battle were to become aides of Wellington.⁸

It was the British opinion that the column was clumsy and wasteful. The important considerations for infantry tactics were rapid and accurate fire and use of every musket in the line. In fact, the line was reduced from three ranks to two because the third rank had difficulty in firing. In short, the British answer to the column was more men in the firing line.⁹

Wellington's use of the line involved more than just two ranks of infantry facing the enemy, however. There were three requisites to the employment of the line.

First, the line must not be exposed before actually getting into the fight. This usually meant taking up a position where the main firing line could be hidden, while only the skirmishers and artillery were presented to view. Wellington's favorite places were rising ground with a plateau or dip above where the infantry could be hidden. Wellington used this strategy to good effect during the Peninsular War when he wanted to bluff the French. The French always suspected that he had his main line hidden somewhere, and they refused to do battle with him on occasion when, had they done so, they would have found that he would have had to retreat because of insufficient forces.

Second, until Wellington's line actually came into contact with the enemy, it had to be covered with a screening force of skirmishers that the enemy skirmishers could not penetrate. In this way, the skirmishers would hold off the French until their columns had been committed and before Wellington's own line was in action. The French columns, under fire for some time and no longer fresh and without their protective skirmishers, would have to attack the British main line, which would still be intact.

Third, the line of two ranks had to be protected on the flanks by rough terrain, by cavalry and artillery, or by infantry. This would extend the line, thereby outflanking the enemy and limiting him to only a frontal assault.¹⁰

The advantages in firepower of the line over the column can be shown by the following illustration. Normally, the French formed in columns of divisions, which resulted in seven-ninths of the column being screened by two-ninths. Thus, if a battalion containing nine hundred men were arranged in columns of divisions, only two hundred men would be in a position to fire, whereas the other seven hundred would be in a position to be fired upon. Similarly, if this same French battalion were to face a British battalion of equal strength arranged in a line of two ranks, they would face the firepower of nine

hundred muskets.¹¹ All of which helps to explain how Wellington could hold his own with only eight divisions against five French armies for five years.

But why, then, did not Napoleon change his tactics? First, Napoleon was a strategist and not a tactician. It was his practice to determine which troops had to be where at what time, but he left the details of carrying out the overall plan to his generals. The battle at Waterloo is perhaps a good example of Napoleon's ability as a tactician. No changes could be expected from the Emperor.¹²

Another suggestion is that the French were actually convinced that the column was the only proper force to penetrate a given point, and therefore they continued to press not the whole British line but only those points where they wished to break through. Sometimes the French did try to deploy their forces after they had broken the British skirmishing line, but by that time the men were already under heavy fire, and the deployed forces would run back to the protection of their columns. Deployment, when tried, was attempted too late in the action and was unsuccessful.¹³

Then there was the elementary fact that the French generals simply were not able to perceive what the trouble was. Apparently one commander, Marshal Bugeaud, was able to analyze the situation correctly; but this was only years later, during his reminiscences.

Why did we engage in so many general actions during the seven years that I was in the Peninsula and never get the better of the English save in an insignificant number? The reason was plain enough. We attacked them, without bearing in mind that tactics which answered well enough against the Spaniards and others, failed with an English force in front. The usual matter-of-fact cannonade would commence the operation, and then hurriedly, without reconnoitering

the ground, we marched against the enemy, "taking the bull by the horns," as men say.

As soon as we got about 1000 metres from the English line, the men would begin to get restless and excited. They exchanged ideas with each other, the march began to get somewhat precipitate. Meanwhile the English, silent and impassive, with ported arms loomed like a long red wall—an imposing attitude which impressed novices a good deal. Soon the distance diminishes; cries of "Vive l'Empereur!" "En Avant." "À la baïonnette." broke from the mass. Some men hoisted their shakos on the top of their muskets. The march turned into a run. The ranks began to get mixed up. The men's agitation became a tumult; some discharged their weapons without halting and without aim. And all the while the red line in front silent and motionless, though we had got within 300 metres, seemed unaffected by the gathering storm.

The contrast was striking; more than one among us began to think that when the enemy's long-reserved fire did begin it might be inconvenient presently. Our ardour began to cool. The moral influence of apparently unshakable calm is irresistible, in action against disorder which strives to make up by noise what it lacks in firmness. It used to sit heavy on our hearts. Then at the time of most painful expectancy, the English muskets would come down—they were "making ready." An undefinable impression nailed to the spot a good many of our men, who would halt and open a desultory fire. Then came that of the enemy, volleyed with precision and dead-

ly effect, crashing upon us like thunder. Decimated, we turned half round, staggering under the blow and trying to regain our balance, when the long-pent-up silence of the enemy was broken by cheers. Then came a second volley and perhaps a third and with the third they were down upon us, pressing us into a disorderly retreat.¹⁴

There was talk about the discipline and accuracy of the British soldier under fire, and there were complaints about the high ratio of officers being hit (about one officer to every eight men). Sometimes the generals blamed their defeats on superior British numbers, when in actuality they had outnumbered the British.¹⁵

The French marshals did not seem able to get to the heart of the matter, which was the problem of column versus line, and they continued to use the column even at Waterloo. In a later issue, we shall consider the relationship between Napoleon and his marshals as a cause for his defeat in the Iberian Peninsula.

Footnotes

1. Charles Oman, *Studies in the Napoleonic Wars* (London: Methuen and Company, Limited, 1929), 85.

2. *Ibid.*, 86-87.

3. *Ibid.*, 90.

4. *Ibid.*, 87.

5. *Ibid.*, 92-93.

6. *Ibid.*, 88-89.

7. *Ibid.*, 93.

8. *Ibid.*, 97-98.

9. *Ibid.*, 96-97.

10. *Ibid.*, 98-103.

11. *Ibid.*, 105-106.

12. *Ibid.*, 91.

13. *Ibid.*, 103-104.

14. Note of Marshal Bugeaud taken from Trochu's *Armée Française en 1867*, and quoted in Oman, *Studies*, 55-56.

15. *Ibid.*, 107-108. See also Charles Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902-1930, 7 Vols.), VII, 518-519.