The History of Drill

PURPOSE

This lesson introduces you to the history of drill. You will learn how the Romans brought drill into the battlefield, and how the Continental Army enlisted the help of Baron von Steuben to improve the battle readiness of the troops.

Introduction

Military history reveals that armies throughout the world have participated in some form of drill. The primary value of drill historically has been to prepare troops for battle. For the most part, the drill procedures practiced have been identical to the tactical maneuvers employed on the battlefield. Drill has enabled commanders to quickly move their forces from one point to another, mass their forces into a battle formation that afforded maximum firepower, and maneuver those forces as the situation developed.

Every group of people that has carved out an empire has used organized armies to secure the lands and people they wanted to control. Babylonians, Egyptians, Mongols, Chinese, and Romans all brought a new twist to warfare. Egypt gave us the chariot, Babylon the bronze sword, and Mongols, mounted cavalry, with the invention of the stirrup. The stirrup allowed the rider to stay in control of the horse, stay in the saddle, and have both hands free for sword and shield, or lance control during close combat.

The Romans brought to the playing field three upgrades: the phalanx, standardization of equipment, and drill. The phalanx was a body of heavily armed infantry formed in close deep ranks and files. The concept of drill is to train troops over and over until a task is second nature and everyone knows how the whole formation moves at any given time. Standardization allowed the Roman soldiers the ability to lock their shields together and form a moving wall of swords and spears. Drill allowed the soldiers to move in unison forming a moving battle formation. For its day, the Roman phalanx was a dominant force, and Rome went on to conquer a major portion of the world.

In 1775, when this country was striving for independence, the nation’s leaders were confronted with the problem of not only establishing a government, but also organizing an army that was already engaged in active warfare. From the “shot heard around the world” on April 19, 1775, until Valley Forge in 1778, revolutionary forces were little more than a group of civilians fighting Indian-style, against well-trained, highly disciplined British forces.
For three years, General Washington’s troops endured many hardships, including lack of funds, rations, clothing, and equipment. Additionally, they suffered loss after loss to the superior British troops. These hardships and losses mostly stemmed from the lack of a military atmosphere in this country.

Recognizing the crisis, General Washington (through Benjamin Franklin, the American Ambassador to France) enlisted the aid of a Prussian officer, Baron Friedrich von Steuben. Upon his arrival at Valley Forge on February 23, 1778, Baron von Steuben, a former staff officer under Frederick the Great, met an army of several thousand half-starved, wretched men in rags. His first comment was, “No European army could be kept together in such a state.” To correct these conditions, he set to work immediately, writing drill movements and regulations at night and teaching a model company of 120 men during the day.

Discipline became a part of military life for these selected individuals, and they learned to respond to commands without hesitation. This new discipline instilled in these soldiers a sense of alertness, urgency, and attention to detail. Confidence in themselves and in their weapons grew as each man perfected the movements. As they mastered the art of drill, they began to work as a team, and they developed a sense of pride in their unit.

Observers were amazed to see how quickly and efficiently von Steuben could form and maneuver the troops into different battle formations. Officers observed that organization, chain of command, and control were improved as each man had a specific place and task within the formation.

Later, General Washington dispersed the members of the model company throughout the Army to teach drill. From this drill instruction, they improved the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the Army.

To ensure this uniformity and overall effectiveness continued, von Steuben wrote the first field manual for the U.S. Army in 1779: *The Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* (commonly referred to as the Blue Book). The Army did not change the drill procedures initiated at Valley Forge for 85 years, until the American Civil War. In fact, many of those original drill terms and procedures still remain in effect today.

Drill commands are about the same today as they were at the time of the War of 1812, except that then the officers and noncommissioned officers began them by saying, “Take care to face to the right, right, face.” Also, during the American revolutionary period, troops marched at a cadence of 76 steps a minute instead of the current cadence of 120 steps. Then, units performed precise movement on the battlefield, and the army that could perform them best was often able to get behind the enemy, or on his flank, and thus beat him. Speed spoiled the winning precision. Also, firearms did not shoot far or accurately in 1776, so troop formations could take more time to approach the enemy.
As armament and weaponry have improved, drill has had to adapt to new tactical concepts. Although the procedures taught in drill today are not normally employed on the battlefield, the objectives accomplished by drill are just as important to the modern Army as they were to the Continental Army.

Throughout history, armies have practiced drill. In times of war, leaders used drill to move troops and equipment quickly from one location to another in an orderly manner. Drills also show how troops can move as one in a flawlessly timed effort. These unison movements are still important on the battlefield where mistakes can cost lives. In peacetime, drill provides a means of enhancing morale, developing a spirit of cohesion, and presenting traditional and well-executed ceremonies.

When individuals react to commands rather than thought, the result is more than just a good-looking ceremony or parade. It is discipline! Drill has been and will continue to be the backbone of military discipline. In addition to discipline, military drill teaches and develops:

- Teamwork
- Confidence
- Pride
- Alertness
- Attention to detail
- Esprit de corps

**Conclusion**

Through hard work and discipline, you can learn and develop the leadership skills and abilities necessary to become an effective leader in drill as well as in many other situations. An individual with pride and discipline will respond on command to produce the finest drill maneuvers in all of MCJROTC.