

Notes on Charge - BAYONET

Written by [Dom Dal Bello](#)

1. Charge-Bayonet - Reenacting Practice It is a common practice in some reenacting companies that during a Charge, the rear rank comes to Right Shoulder Shift while the front rank comes to Charge Bayonet. Why this is the case is a bit of a mystery, as no where is it prescribed in the manuals. In both Hardee's and Casey's Infantry Tactics, instructions for Charge Bayonet are only found in the "School of the Soldier;" neither manual gives any practical instruction for when a company or battalion is to actually Charge. Another questionable procedure on the reenacting battlefield is giving the command "Charge - Bayonet" when the unit is at a halt; this may be true when instructing the men, but makes no sense in "combat." In short, these procedures are questionable.

2. Charge-Bayonet - Theoretical Instruction The "School of the Soldier" (and higher schools), are just that, instructional manuals to give the officers and men the basic understanding of moving troops on the field and developing discipline. If and when the time comes for actual service, practical movements may be made using the drill that should ideally be second nature. This is where the military science becomes art. Since the "School of the Soldier" is instructional, Hardee teaches his recruits in one rank (Paras. 193-4); nothing is ever said of the rear rank in either of Hardee's two volumes. As for instructing the men in two or more ranks, Scott says: Charge - BAYONET. One time and two motions. 188. (Second motion.) Bring down the piece with the right hand into the left, the latter seizing it a little in advance of the tail-band, the barrel up, the left elbow near the body, the right hand supported against the hip the point of the bayonet at the height of the eye. The recruits of the centre and rear ranks will take care not to touch their file leaders with the points of their bayonets. Also, referring to the smaller The Soldier's Guide, we again find that the "School of the Soldier" instructs: The men in the rear rank will take care to avoid touching the men in the rank before them with their bayonets. Again, it should be emphasized that these are INSTRUCTIONAL manuals. When instructing the men, they all perform the same movement - they are learning the basic principles of drill, and are taught in a stationary line. Scott even includes a plate of the three ranks, all at Charge Bayonet. If drilling the men in two ranks, both should likewise Charge Bayonet. But do all the ranks come to "Charge-Bayonet" in an actual charge? Moving rapidly (charging) would likely hurt more of the attackers than anyone else.

3. Charge-Bayonet - Practical Instruction One wants instruction on how to conduct a proper BAYONET CHARGE. As is often the case, we must look to the old warrior, Winfield Scott, this time in the 1830 Abstract of Infantry Tactics. The work was an abridgment of the 2-volume 1825 Infantry Tactics so that the Militia and Volunteers would be able to more readily learn the basics; it was reprinted as late as 1861. The Abstract instructs:

Remarks on Arms Port, Charge Bayonet and Trail Arms 466. When a battalion or line is to charge bayonet, the whole are, in the first instance, to come to Arms-port, and advance

at a firm, quick step, but in the most perfect order possible, until they reach the enemy. (See No. 545.) 467. It is at that instant [reaching the enemy] that the front rank are necessarily to bring their firelocks down to the charging position, and the whole are to press forward with the utmost energy. The enemy being routed, it will depend on the officer commanding to give the word Halt; when the front rank will resume the position of Arms-port, and proceed as may be afterwards directed. But the word Halt is on no account to be given during a charge, or as preparatory to the front rank bringing the firelock to the charge position. It is, therefore, to be understood, that, in the charge, or quick attack upon the enemy with fixed bayonets, either previous to, or after firing, (which usually commences at a distance of one hundred or one hundred and fifty yards, as the ground may permit,) the charging position of the front rank is to be assumed only at the instant of attack or defense.

So, here it is - PRACTICAL INSTRUCTION on how to make a Charge. In short:

1. a line moves forward at Arms-Port, and
2. only when the line reaches the enemy does the front rank, and only the front rank, come to Charge Bayonet. Note that the attackers do not assume the position of Charge Bayonet from a halted line. Common sense tells us that when we close with the enemy, we want as much "shock" as possible, so it is at that time that the front rank comes to Charge Bayonet; you do not want to expend that sudden high-energy push before you even move. The rear rank should be ready to assist the front with their bayonets, and this is best done from the position Arms-Port.
3. The command of "Charge-Bayonet" does not even have to be given in an actual Charge - the front rank coming to Charge Bayonet when they meet the enemy (not necessarily all at the same time). In practice, could the men here the command anyway?
4. Rear Rank at Right Shoulder Shift - Why? Why, in the reenacting world, has the rear rank come to Right Shoulder Shift? To this author's knowledge, few War-time images or paintings show this method; pictures of charges do show BOTH ranks at an Arms-Port-type position, or the weapons at Charge Bayonet at the lines close. Two parads suggested a possible source: Confederate General John B. Gordon description of the action at Antietam.

The men in blue filed down the opposite slope, crossed the little stream (Antietam), and formed in my front, an assaulting column four lines deep. The front line came to a "charge bayonets," [Arms-Port?] and the other lines to a "right shoulder shift." The brave Union commander, superbly mounted, placed himself in front, while his band in rear cheered them with martial music. It was a thrilling spectacle. ... As we stood looking upon that brilliant pageant, I thought, if I did not say, "What a pity to spoil with bullets such a scene of martial beauty!" ...

To oppose man against man and strength against strength was impossible; for there were four lines of blue to my one of gray. Those who read this passage without a full understanding of its implications may assume it to mean that only the front rank came to a Charge, instead of the first line of battle. Gordon was in fact describing an attack

column - four lines deep, each line being of two ranks - attacking his one line of battle. A recent book by John Michael Priest, *Antietam, The Soldiers Battle*, unfortunately continues to perpetuate this myth in at least two cases. Where Priest gets his description from is unknown to this author; it is likely another misunderstanding of Gordon's narrative. No where in the primary or secondary sources that Priest cites in the two sections in which he describes the Charge does it talk about "ranks" at different arms positions. "Lines" of battle are discussed in the sources, but that is about all. It is the opinion of this correspondent, and others, that Priest has concluded much more than he can justify in describing the battle - taking one incident, likely mis-interpreted, and applying it to other sections.

5. Some Practical "Advice" for Reenactors In combat, carrying the piece at Right Shoulder Shift keeps it out of action until it is brought first to the front, and then forward. At Arms-Port, the rear rank is immediately ready to step into action should his file leader fall. Arms-Port is also a natural position to carry the piece when moving quickly. Right Shoulder Shift may be "justified" (wrongly) by some as a sort of "safety" feature. However, the position of Arms-Port is safer than either Charge Bayonet or Right Shoulder Shift. Trying to move across the field at Charge Bayonet is not as well balanced as at Arms-Port; and if you trip in the rear rank, you have better control of the piece at Arms-Port than if it were at Right Shoulder Shift. Safety is a paramount concern in reenacting. When the lines close, bringing the piece down to a Charge, even without bayonets, is very dangerous. It is recommended that, if and when the lines do close, the front rank should remain at Arms-Port so that hand-to-hand combat may be at least "safely" simulated. Perhaps this practice should be adopted throughout the hobby.

6. The Color Guard When marching in line of battle, the Color Rank and general guides are six paces in front of the battalion. However, when a line is to close with the enemy, the Color Rank retires to the front rank, as noted in Para. 1320 of Scott's *Abstract of Infantry Tactics*: 1320. When a battalion or line advances to the charge, at the distance of ___ paces from the enemy, the colors, general guides and staff, if in front, will be ordered to resume their places in line. (see Nos. 466, 467). The number of "paces from the enemy" is left blank in the *Abstract*; this distance will depend on the nature of the ground, the forces involved, weapons, &c. But when the command is to close with the enemy, there is no sense for the Color and general guides to be precariously out in front - the need for the line to remain straight now being secondary to striking hard and quickly.

FOOTNOTES

1. Scott, Winfield, *Infantry Tactics*, New York: Harper and Bros, 1840 (originally published 1835), Para. 188.
2. *The Soldier's Guide*, Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson and Bros., 1861.
3. Scott, Winfield, *Abstract of Infantry Tactics*, Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little and Wilkins, 1830; Philadelphia: Moss, Brother & Co., 1853; 1861, Paras. 466-7. In 1826, Scott's 1825 *Infantry Tactics* would be abridged for the Volunteers and Militia, resulting in the *Abstract*. The *Abstract* is essentially what one really needs to know as far as the 1825 *Tactics* are concerned. Paragraphs deemed non-essential (e.g., detailed explanations and complicated or higher evolutions) were eliminated, the *Abstract* being "about four-

sevenths of the prototype." Paragraph numbers were retained to refer to the original work, leaving gaps in the Abstract's numbering. In 1829, Congress ordered 60,000 of these printed for distribution. It was reprinted as late as 1861.

4. Gordon, John B., *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, New York: C. Scribener's Sons, 1903, pgs. 84-6. Bob Braun (33d Wisc.) and Jaime Bain (Texas Rifles) pointed me in this direction. Joe Walker (7th Tex.), in June, 1996's *Camp Chase Gazette*, informs us that he suggested this 10 years since in Jack King's 1st Confederate Brigade. At the time, however, how many attack columns were regularly seen on the reenacting field? Not many.

5. Priest, J.M, *Antietam, the Soldiers' Battle*, Shippenburg, PA: White Mane Publishing Co., 1992. The only primary source cited in the two descriptions of the charge is Rufus Dawes' (6th Wisc.) description, and the 6th is simply moving forward at Right Shoulder Shift. And, while the other sources are secondary, none describes a charge with the rear rank at Right Shoulder Shift.

6. Safety is built into the tactics. But how many times have some reenactors thought that removing the spent cap before loading was "safer" than following the prescribed methods? Experience then and now shows that air allowed into the barrel through the nipple keeps any embers burning, leading to a premature discharge of the weapon.

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