

THREE LECTURES UPON THE RIFLE

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Three Lectures upon the Rifle by E. C. Wilford

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THREE LECTURES

OR

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UPON

THE RIFLE.



BY

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HYTHE.

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THREE LECTURES
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THE RIFLE

LECTURE I.

On the Rifle, showing the necessity for its introduction as a Universal Infantry Weapon. Delivered at the United Service Institution on the 10th of July, 1857.

MR. CHAIRMAN, GENTLEMEN, AND SOLDIERS,—

I am permitted to address you on the subject of musketry, and I shall,—

1st. Endeavour to show the necessity for the introduction of the rifle, as a universal infantry weapon.

2nd. The mode by which it is now being introduced into the British army.

3rd. The advantages which must ensue therefrom.

4th. I shall advert to some objections urged against it.

Before proceeding, I must pay a tribute to "Brown Bess," and willingly admit that it was a very formidable weapon at very short ranges. Its deadly fire is

close combat, in the Peninsula, at Waterloo, in India and elsewhere, is patent to the world, and honourable testimony has been borne to its merits by those against whom it was directed; nevertheless, partiality must not be suffered to blind us to the defects of our old friend; for with the bayonet fixed, it was the *shortest* gun carried by any European army—the *heaviest*,—fired the *largest* ball and charge of powder,—had the *greatest* recoil,—the *shortest* range,—and, worse than all, the *least accuracy!*

It was folly to attempt to fire with it against small, or at all distant objects; and the British soldier found himself almost powerless when contending against *half-clad savages* or *semi-civilised* enemies. How, then, I may be asked, were our former victories gained? The answer is, so far as British infantry contributed to these glorious results, most nobly did they perform their part, by vanquishing opponents who were armed with muskets *nearly* as bad as their own; they certainly conquered *with* "Brown Bess," not *through* "Brown Bess;" but rather, they earned laurels in spite of it, and I have no doubt whatever but that equal success would have been attained in many instances, had our infantry been armed with a pike, supported by non-combatants in rear, furnished with means to produce a reasonable amount of noise. In fact, the imperturbable steadiness and coolness of the English soldier when under fire, and the calmness with which he waited until the enemy's column approached to within a *very short range*, must have occasioned fearful destruction, and the work was completed by the bayonet and cavalry.

The shooting powers of the English musket, pattern 1842, were tested in a series of experiments undertaken at Chatham in 1846, under Lieut.-Colonel M'Kerlie, Royal Engineers, by order of the Government, whose clear and able report concludes as follows :—“ It appears that musketry fire should never be opened beyond 150 yards, and certainly not exceeding 200 yards. At this distance (200 yards) *half* the shots *missed a target eleven feet six inches*, and at 150 yards a *very large* proportion also *missed*. At 75 and 100 every shot struck the target only two feet wide, and had the deviation increased simply as the distance, every shot ought to have struck the target six feet wide at 200 yards; instead of this, however, some were observed to pass several yards to the right and left, some to fall 30 yards short, and others to pass as much beyond, and this deviation increased in a still greater degree, as the range increased. It is only then under peculiar circumstances, such as when it may be desirable to bring fire upon field artillery, *when there are no other means of replying to it*, that it ought ever to be thought of using the musket at such distances as 400 yards.” It is an undoubted truth, that the comparative worthlessness of infantry fire was deplored by intelligent officers of all armies. The following extract from “Decker's Three Arms, translated by Major Inigo Jones, Prince Albert's Hussars” (page 14), will show how lowly it was estimated :—“The fire of the line decides *nothing*, and is generally kept up to *employ* the men in the front line, till other troops are brought into *play*.” How significant! Had the word “also” been introduced, it would have read thus, “till other troops are ~~also~~

brought into *play*." Mr. Decker adds, "To make the fire of the line effective, it ought not to commence further than 200 yards at the *outside*, when only *one* shot in *ten* will hit on an average. It is even now and then employed to keep young or bad soldiers *employed*, and to *blunt the ideas of danger*. The reason is pitiful; however, a soldier remains with his feelings as a man, but forgets his human weakness in the heat of battle." "Suwarrow, also, knowing the inefficiency of line fire, used to tell his soldiers that three cartridges were enough for each; with one he was to shoot an enemy 30 yards off; the second man he was to bayonet; and all the rest would run away."

Hence it seems to be admitted, beyond 80 yards it lost all certainty of hitting a *single* man; at 200 yards it was uncertain even at large bodies; at 300 yards you might shoot all day, at a target eighteen feet square, and *never* strike it *once*; so that a man would be in *perfect security* although fired at from sunrise to sunset, at even a shorter distance than 300 yards provided the firer made a faithful promise *always to aim at him*; but should he take the liberty of aiming 50 yards right or left, above or below, I should then be sorry to answer for the *possible* consequences.

The following extract from "The Rifle and How to Use it," by Hans Busk, M.A., Lieutenant Victoria Rifles, will tend to throw light upon the point in hand (page 18):—"Nothing indeed could have been worse than the weapons supplied to every branch of the service during the Peninsular War, unless it were the want of skill displayed in their use. To give an idea of the miserable deficiencies in both particulars, I may mention,

upon the authority of Colonel Schlimmbach, of the Prussian Artillery, an officer of great experience, whose statistical calculations extend over a long series of engagements during the wars of the First Napoleon, the indisputable fact, that, on the average, a man's own *weight in lead* and *ten times his weight in iron* were consumed for each individual placed *hors de combat*!

“At Vittoria, on the morning of the 21st of June, 1813, each British infantry soldier had in his cartouch-box 60 ball-cartridges, altogether 3,000,000 rounds; besides which 1,350,000 rounds more were issued by the field-train to the troops. We will assume that only 3,675,000 were altogether consumed. Now, it is known that, on the side of the enemy, 8,000 out of 90,000 men were killed and wounded; consequently only one musket-shot in 459 took effect; and this calculation excludes entirely from account the injury inflicted by 90 pieces of artillery, each firing 73 shot or shell, or a total of 6,570 rounds. Taking this into consideration, we may readily believe that there was not on that occasion about one musket-ball in 800 which was not utterly thrown away. To show that our infantry of the line so lately as 1851 had not made much progress in the use of ‘Brown Bess,’ I may add that a patrolling party at the Cape, in the month of August of that year, expended 80,000 ball-cartridges in killing or disabling twenty-five naked savages; just 3,200 rounds to each Caffre!

“General Gassendi estimates that 3,000 cartridges are expended to every man disabled, and which is stated as the proportion at the battle of Salamanca. ~~De~~