

## Standardization of USV Infantry Officer Sword Drill

### GETTING THE 'POINT' ACROSS:

~Instruction for Infantry Officers in the correct use of swords~

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(November 2002)

No progressive re-enactor would allow the arms drill to be executed incorrectly, so why have inaccuracies been permitted to remain unchallenged in regards to the sword manual for so long? It takes but a brief glance at the officers of the re-enactment community to see that there is some need for clarification upon the subject of how swords should be used. Indeed, the only other work to be found concerning this subject is the concise and instructive articles by Geoff Walden. As with most subjects regarding drill, myths and re-enactorisms have built up and have been prolonged by word of mouth, films, copying of those officers that have been replaced, but mainly due to a lack of knowledge. This article looks to reverse this, thus allowing officers to learn how to become proficient in the sword manual whilst perhaps also dispelling some common misconceptions. (i)

#### On the sources

Immediately, we are hit by a problem. None of the civil war manuals actually give concise, explanatory or comprehensive instruction for infantry officers in sword drill. Most manuals have some mention of it, but they always leave gaps. Scott's manuals, as the basis or blue-print of the later civil war manuals is very useful indeed, including some positions which are later omitted. In Scott's manuals we can also see some degree of evolution of the sword manual from his 1830 manual to his 1861 revised edition. There are other more obscure manuals such as Ellsworth's 1861 Zouave manual and Berriman's 1861 Militia Manual. G. Walden's articles raise their significance, and whilst one should be wary of relying heavily on these manuals, they are useful for comparisons and do no doubt, reflect the sword drill in common use at the time of the civil war, as observed by their authors. (ii) One equally obscure manual rarely quoted is Henry C. Wayne's manual for 'Sword Exercise' published in 1850 and taught at the U.S. Military Academy. Sword exercise, or fencing, for both officers and enlisted men was deemed "a healthy and manly amusement, improving both the *morale and physique* of the soldier." (iii) This is useful as Wayne wrote the manual to conform with the tactics of the day, also, it reflects how military men prior to, and then subsequently during the war, regarded how the sword should be used. To get inside the mindset of the officers is particularly important here when considering the gaps in the manuals. If there are so many gaps then why do we see such conformity in the execution of sword drill in the many photographs of the period? We must conclude, as G. Walden does, that it was remembered by professional soldiers from formal instruction before the war, passed on in a colonel's instruction of his officers, but above all, the fact that the common manuals of the day omit comprehensive instruction shows that it was taken for granted that officers would already know how to use that thing which hung at their side.

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This article looks to pull together the information which civil war officers were deprived of in one concise manual.

### The Sword – General Observations:

It is perhaps prudent to start by giving an answer to one very simple question: *Why wear a sword in a supposedly 'modern' war dominated by firepower?* Although there are undoubtedly undertones of a distant chivalric age connected with such a potentially brutal implement, it is *not* primarily a weapon, rather it is above all else, an insignia of rank – a sign of authority bestowed upon the officer by the State. As such, it is important to remember that the sword is part of an officer's uniform and should be treated as an object of respect by the rank and file, but more importantly, by the individual wearing it.

Not enough re-enactor's portraying officers are comfortable wearing their sword – *they should be*. Time should be taken to practice. There is no time generally at events for officers to be trained in the sword manual, so this should be done by the individual beforehand. A good indication of being sufficiently comfortable with a sword and proficient in the manual, is if one can execute all the actions without looking! As with all drill, practice is key.

### When should an officer draw his sword?

This is an area that seems particularly cloudy. Should it be when he gives the command 'Fix bayonets', when he is about to lead a charge, or simply whenever he feels like it and wants to look important? None of the above. A drawn sword is an indication that an officer is directly commanding the men under his authority. A company officer should only draw his sword after his first sergeant has formed the company and has reported that the company is formed and ready. The officer should return the sergeant's salutes with his hand, and only once he has ordered the sergeant to take post should the officer draw his sword, thus signifying that command has passed from the sergeant to himself.

The same is true of larger formations. In a battalion formation all line officers should have their swords drawn, signifying their authority over their men, as should the field officers, signifying their authority over the divisions of the line. The colonel only draws his sword when he is personally commanding the battalion. If for example one looks at the procedure of *Dress* or *Morning Parade*, initially the command of the parade rests in the hands of the adjutant – hence, he has his sword drawn. Once the adjutant reports to the colonel, "*Sir, the parade is formed.*", the colonel (having returned the adjutant's sword salute with his hand) must draw his sword before exercising the battalion in arms drill. It is then once again returned to the scabbard once he has commanded the adjutant to receive the first sergeants' reports. The same is true once the parade is dismissed – the line and field officers in front of their commands advance to receive orders from the colonel, but first they must return their swords to their scabbards to

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indicate that command of their companies has passed to their respective sergeants. (iv)  
C.S. regulations highlight this point further:

**"323. Officers on all duties under arms are to have their swords drawn, without having any words of command for that purpose." (v)**

How to carry a sword:

**SHEATHED:** When the sword is being carried in the scabbard and is attached to the sword belt, it is possible to carry it in a number of ways. If mounted, the officer should allow the sword to hang at the full extent of the sword straps. When dismounted, an officer should carry the sheathed sword in his left hand (still at the full extension of the straps) with the hilt facing to the rear (See Plate 1). This affords the officer the best freedom of movement and ensures that he does not become entangled, especially when walking backwards! The support hook on the sword belt should be used when the officer needs both hands free, and can be useful to keep the scabbard out the way once the sword is drawn.

It is clear in some images that officers do not attach the sword to the sword belt at all, rather they carry it loose in their left hand or cradled in the crook of their arm. This is particularly useful on long marches, when the sword in its scabbard can be carried over the shoulder either by holding the wrist loop, or more commonly, by holding the bottom of the scabbard with the hilt to the rear.

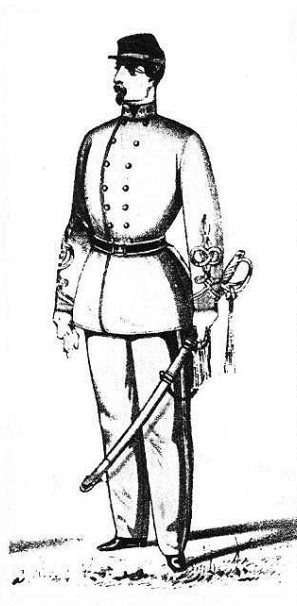


PLATE 1

*This officer is carrying the sheathed sword in the correct manner – unhooked, hilt to the rear. (vi)*

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'**THE CARRY**': This is the position at which the sword should be held once drawn, or 'under arms'. Few re-enactment officers carry their swords correctly. The most common re-enactment is to bend the elbow, have a full grasp of the hilt, ensuring that the blade slants heavily over the right shoulder (the same as the British Army position for the sword when standing at ease). This is entirely incorrect. Both Scott's Manual and U.S. Infantry Tactics describe the correct position thus;

**"The Carry. The gripe is in the right hand, which will be supported against the right hip, the back of the blade against the shoulder." (vii)**

Perhaps the best advice here is that one should ensure that the right arm in which the sword is being carried is extended to almost its full length, the hand and hilt resting against the side of the hip. The blade should be vertical and should not be at an angle. (See Plates 2 & 3).

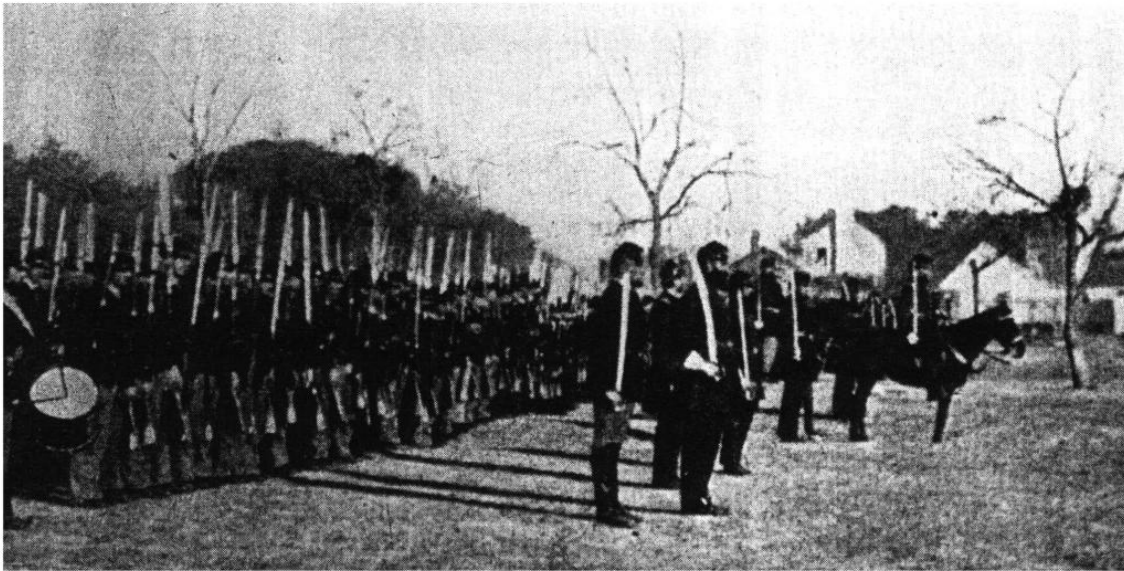


PLATE 2

*This fine image of a battalion at shoulder arms illustrates excellently the line and field officers at the 'Carry' – note the blades are all vertical and not slanted across the shoulder. (viii)*

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PLATE 3

*Again one can observe the textbook 'Carry' – an almost straight arm ensuring a vertical blade. (ix)*

G. Walden points out that the Kentucky State Guard Manual instructs that the 'Carry' position should change when at the 'Double Quick Time'. The elbow should be bent slightly raising the hilt to the height of the waist, thus allowing the hand to grasp the hilt fully. The flat of the sword should be slanted across the chest, the edge to the left and the point by the left shoulder. (x) It is advisable that the officer grasps the scabbard with his left hand while at the Double Quick thus preventing it from becoming entangled in his legs.

Drawing a sword:

Drawing a sword in an extravagant Shakespearean manner suitable for a Hollywood film should be avoided. By far the best way to draw a sword (especially when in place in the line) is to turn the sword and scabbard around so that the hilt faces backwards and the gripe is exposed (indeed, if hung correctly, the sword should already be in this position). One should then draw it straight up and not out in front (thus avoiding hitting the sergeant standing behind in the shins with the scabbard!). It is best to divide the

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action of drawing a sword into two motions – although officers are never given the order to ‘draw swords’ the motions are conveniently described in Wayne’s manual;

**"15. At the command DRAW, pass the right wrist through the loop... seize the gripe and draw the blade six inches out of the scabbard, pressing the scabbard against the thigh with the left hand [thus ensuring the motion is carried out vertically and not at an angle], which seizes it just below the ring or hook by which it is supported.**

**16. At the command SWORDS, draw the sword quickly, raising the arm [upwards] to its full extent, pause slightly, and then carry the blade to the right shoulder, the back of it against the shoulder, the right hand supported against the hip, the little finger on the outside of the gripe [the ‘carry’ – see above]." (xi)**

The last detail describing the little finger outside the gripe at the ‘carry’ position is not mentioned in most manuals. Nonetheless, if held correctly this is the natural position, particularly given the uncomfortable design of some hilts, and helps ensure the blade is kept vertical and not at an angle. (See Plate 4)



PLATE 4

*‘The Carry’*: Note the almost straight arm, hand and hilt supported against the hip, and the little finger outside the guard. (xii)

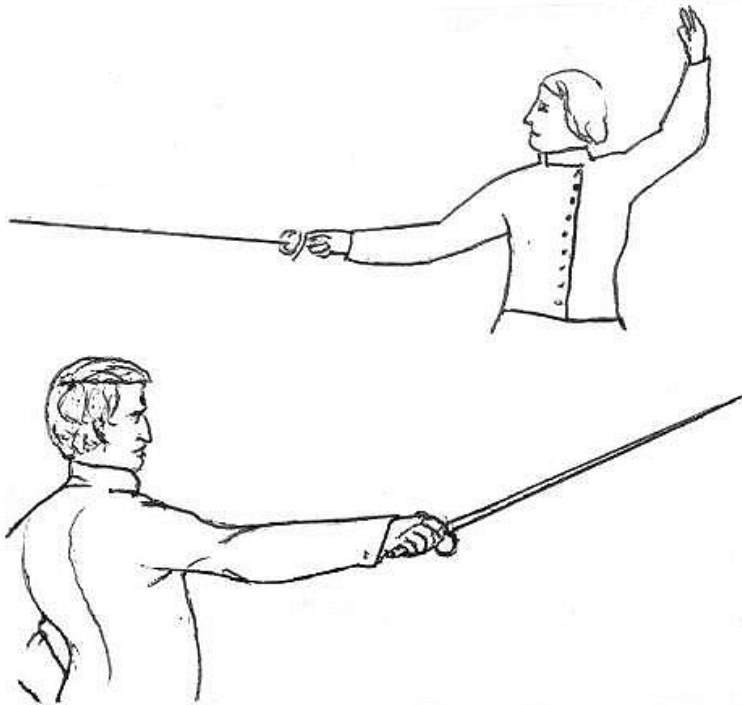
When it comes to replacing the sword in the scabbard it is best to repeat the above actions simply in reverse. Ideally an officer should be able to sheath his sword in an elegant and controlled fashion without looking – the best tip here is to stroke the back of the left hand, which is holding the scabbard, with the flat of the blade in order to guide

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the point into the scabbard. Again, one should ensure that this is carried out 'vertically' and with a slight pause halfway through sheathing the blade, before smartly and quickly finishing the action. Again, the key: practice!

Charge Bayonet: - **Per USV Policy the blades may not leave the scabbard on the field.**

Wayne's *Sword Exercise for Military Instruction* was arranged "in conformity with the principles of the Cavalry and Infantry Tactics in use by our Army", which it was "designed to assist." Other manuals fail to instruct the officer (line officers at least) what to do with their sword when ordered to charge bayonet, thus we must extrapolate from Wayne's manual. Having stressed the point that the sword was not primarily a weapon, this is one manoeuvre where we must forget this rhetoric, for having charged bayonets it is conceivable that the officer may have to use his insignia of rank in aggression – despite its probably inappropriate design! Judging from Wayne's instruction for fencing, the logical position for an officer to adopt would be something approaching the 'On-guard' or 'Guard of tierce' positions. The arm should be extended to the front, slightly bent at the elbow, the point of the blade levelled at the height of the chest, (obviously, we must disregard the foot work and position of the left arm, being inappropriate for an officer in the line). This position seems most plausible, for it is the position from which an individual could both defend and attack, thus constituting the equivalent position to charge bayonet. (xiii) (See Plate 5 showing two plates taken from Wayne's manual)



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### PLATE 5

*'positions, allowing both defence and On Guard' and 'Guard of tierce'. The likely position to adopt at 'Charge-Bayonet' resembling something between these two attack.*  
(xiv)

#### Changing the Direction of March – the sword as an indicator

For many years now, officers have used their swords to direct a column of march. As far as the author can make out however, this seems to be merely an invention of the re-enacting world. Admittedly, the sword is useful for pointing, guiding an alignment and for explanation, however the fact remains that manuals do not appear to give formal instruction to officers to use their swords as an indicator for a change of direction. This largely seems redundant anyway (particularly for line officers) for a Captain only needs his company to hear his command, and failing that, it is only necessary for the First Sergeant as the company guide to hear the instruction to change direction, and he is marching next to the Captain anyway.

#### Order arms

Conceivably an officer may choose to sheath his sword while his men are at the order or resting (if he needs his hands free), providing he draws it before issuing any further words of command. If not however, and particularly if on parade, an officer should conform to Scott's instructions in the 1830 manual; (See Plate 6)

**"778. When the ranks order arms, the officers will drop the blade of the sword by the right side, the point a little advanced, and about two inches from the ground."**  
(xv)



PLATE 6



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*Although his men are adopting various positions for the photographer, the officer stands with his sword at the order as prescribed by Scott's 1830 manual. (xvi)*

### Out of the Ranks

Scott also gives an interesting description of how to carry the sword when out of the ranks. Presumably the officer is still in command of his men for the sword is still drawn, otherwise, it would be carried in its scabbard. Common sense would dictate that an officer with his sword drawn when out of the ranks would normally adopt the 'Carry', nonetheless it is plausible that this alternative position was adopted when speaking to other officers or simply for posing for the photographer. (See Plate 7) Scott describes the position thus;

**"779. The gripe in the right hand, which shall be placed in front at the right haunch; the blade in the left hand, the point a little above the hand [palm of the hand]; the thumb extended on the blade, the left elbow bent, the fore-arm a little in front, the left hand opposite to, and four inches lower than, the left shoulder."**  
(xvii)



PLATE 7

## Standardization of USV Infantry Officer Sword Drill

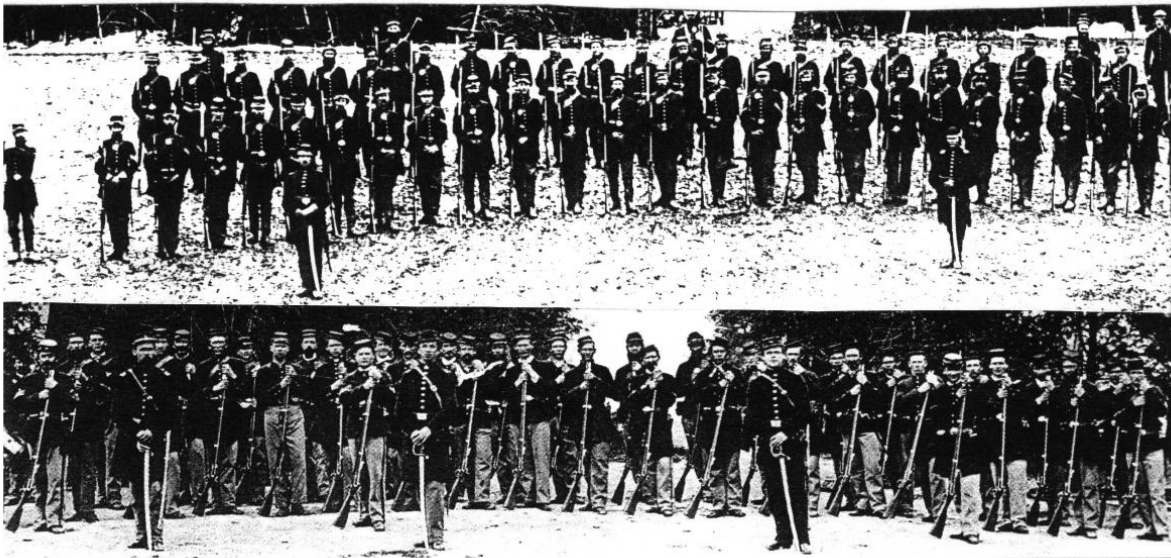
*As Scott directs for officers out of the ranks, this officer stands holding the blade in his left hand, although it should really be a little higher (the left hand four inches below the left shoulder). (xviii)*

### Parade Rest

There is a mass of photographs depicting the correct position for officers to adopt when at 'Parade Rest'. The right foot should be placed to the rear in the usual manner, the left foot remaining on the alignment. The point of the sword should rest upon the toe of the left foot, or on the ground directly in front. The edge of the blade should be turned to the right, the right hand resting on the hilt and the left hand placed over it. (See Plate 8)

### PLATE 8 (Below)

*These companies adopt the different positions of 'Parade Rest' yet the officers use the same sword position. (xix)*



### Reverse Arms

Used primarily for funerals, executions and 'drumming out' ceremonies, the officer should, according to the Kentucky State Guard Manual carry the sword by the hilt, the blade edge upwards under his right arm. (xx)

### To Present Arms or Salute with a Sword

Perhaps one of the most important movements of the sword – and perhaps the most incorrectly executed. All the manuals instruct essentially the same actions for the first two motions (the following is the authors amalgamation of numerous descriptions);

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**FIRST MOTION.** *At the distance of six paces from the person to be saluted, raise the sword perpendicularly, the point up, the flat of the blade opposite the right eye, sharp edge facing to one's left, the guard at the height of the shoulder slightly below the chin, the elbow supported against the body.*

**SECOND MOTION.** *Drop the point of the sword smartly to the front (not the side) to within six or eight inches of the ground by extending the arm forwards; the sharp edge of the blade should remain facing to the left; the right hand should be brought to the side of the right thigh, and should rest in that position until the person to be saluted shall have passed, or be passed, six paces; or until the men are ordered back to the shoulder.*

The manuals disagree as to the next movement. Scott's 1830 manual, states;

**"782. THIRD MOTION.** Raise the sword again smartly, holding it as prescribed at the first motion."

Then...

**"783. FOURTH MOTION.** Carry the sword to the right shoulder [The 'carry']" (xxi)

Scott's 1861 revision, although less clear, seems to favour returning to the first motion before going to the *carry*. Indeed, this sequence conforms to British Army sword drill, (perhaps its point of origin). The other manuals including Wayne's and the 1861 U.S. Infantry Tactics however dictate that one should return straight to the *carry*;

**"[THIRD MOTION] Raise the sword or sabre smartly, and place the back of the blade against the right shoulder." (xxii)**

Whether or not the omission of Scott's third motion was intentional as a form of modernisation seems unclear, after all the British Army continue to include it. As for civil war officers, it seems to depend upon which manual they used, or which method their instructor favoured.

One other sticking point (if you excuse the pun!) is that many officers drop the point of the blade to the right, indeed G. Walden argues that this should be done. He draws upon the Kentucky State Guard manual and Morris' post-war manual which describes the finger nails as facing to the front. Far from throwing the blade to the right, this reference is merely a description of how the hand should grasp the hilt. If one throws the blade to the right, the hand cannot 'rest' against the right thigh as prescribed in Scott's and the later manuals – the position of the finger nails is only significant to keep the edge of the blade facing left. Wayne's manual specifically states that the point should be dropped to the front, and furthermore, throwing the blade to the right is entirely inappropriate if saluting when in the ranks. This area also seems to have been a grey area for civil war officers, with odd images depicting them dropping the point to the

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right (see Plate 9) It must be remembered however that often these are staged poses and the position slightly altered for a more extravagant pose.

So from where does the salute originate? Military tradition dates the first motion (the raising of the blade to the face) to the crusades – crusaders about to enter battle would kiss the cross formed by the hilt after drawing their swords. The second motion symbolises friendship – the point is dropped leaving the body open as a sign that no harm is intended.

So, points to remember when saluting with a sword;

- The blade should be raised perpendicularly.
- The hilt should not be lower than the height of the shoulder.
- Always drop the point to the FRONT and keep your hand in close to, or even touching your thigh.
- Remain at the position until you or the person being saluted has passed 6 paces, or until the troops are ordered back to the shoulder.
- Either raise the sword back to the first position and then to the carry, or go straight to the carry.
- PRACTICE – the movements should be SMOOTH and separated by pauses.



PLATE 9

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*The officer in the centre adopts the 'Carry' (although the hilt is too high which means his arm is bent) and the officer on the right is at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Motion of the Salute (although his hand should rest nearer his right thigh or hip, the blade is perhaps dropped too far to the right instead of straight ahead, however the bend in the blade may well exaggerate this) (xxiii)*

### Using the sword as a weapon

If this is necessary, then it is likely that the officer has already failed, unless of course he has led a charge into the very bowels of the enemy formation! In close combat the officer would either have to use his sword against another officers sword – in which case he would draw upon his knowledge of sword exercise in Wayne's manual – but much more likely he would face a bayonet. Wayne instructs that when opposing the bayonet...;

**"208. It will generally be best to parry the bayonet to your right, by dropping the blade across the musket, the back of the fort of the blade being applied close behind the elbow of the bayonet, springing in with the left foot, and either seizing the barrel with the left hand, which, if effected, places your adversary's life in your power, or simply delivering a thrust. If it is necessary to parry the bayonet to your left,...[apply] the fort of your blade to the hollow of the elbow of the bayonet, stepping off obliquely to the right with the right foot; return either a simple thrust, or seize the musket with the left hand passing it under the right.**

**209. Although parries themselves may not have force enough to beat the bayonet far out of the line of defence, yet by stepping with the left or right foot according to the parry used, the line of defence is changed, while your blade prevents your antagonist from withdrawing his weapon, or following your motion with his point." (xxiv)**

### Conclusion

Thus this article has looked to compile from all sources available a comprehensive explanation of the sword manual employed by civil war officers and dispel some common re-enactorisms, whilst illustrating it with period images. Above all, officers should be comfortable with their badge of rank – nothing looks worse than an officer fumbling around with his blade. Treating it with respect is imperative and is a matter of courtesy to the men under your command. Some times the sword could be a very real sign of authority indeed far beyond its ceremonial functions, as William Ray of the 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin describes;

**"The officer of the day... sent guards to quell and take the imposters and when they went to take 3 or 4 of them, their Co[mpany] pitched on to the guards and about whipped them out. Then the officer of the day come up and drew his sword...and bid the rascals walk off. Which they done through fear of being run through with the officers sword or the guards bayonet." (xxv)**

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- i Almost all that is said in this article is also true for senior NCOs when they have their swords drawn instead of carrying a long arm..
- ii See G. Walden 'A Manual of the Sword for Foot Officers' (Revision of April 1991 edition) Camp Chase Gazette
- iii H.C. Wayne (Brevet Major, U.S. Army) The Sword Exercise, Arranged for Military Instruction Washington 1850
- iv Revised U.S. Army Regulations of 1861 (with and appendix containing the changed laws affecting Army Regulations and Articles of War to June 25th 1863) Washington, 1863 pp.51-53
- v J.W. Randolph Regulations for the Army of the Confederate States Richmond 1863 quoted in G. Walden 'A Manual of the sword for foot officers' in Camp Chase Gazette April 1991 p23 [My thanks to Richard O'Sullivan and Tony MacKenna for helping me find this article.]
- vi Lithograph by E. Crechen from 'Uniform and Dress of the Army of the Confederate States' (Richmond: Chas. H. Wynne, Printer, 1861) featured in A Catalogue of Uniforms in the Collection of The Museum of the Confederacy Richmond 2000 p19
- vii See U.S. Infantry Tactics: for the instruction, exercise, and manoeuvres of the United States Infantry, including Infantry of the Line, Light Infantry, and Riflemen Philadelphia, 1861 p190 and also Scott's Manual, vol. I, Title III, Special Instructions, 'Manual of the sword or sabre for officers' New York 1861
- viii Image featured in The Photographic History of the Civil War (Two volumes in one) vol. 1 'The Opening Battles' Secaucus, NJ 1987 p355
- ix Image featured in W. Garrison Brady's Civil War London 2000 p101
- x J.W. Tompkins & Co. A Manual of the Piece. Adapted to the Rifle-Musket, the Rifle, and Other Infantry Arms Louisville KY 1861 No.196
- xi H.C. Wayne The Sword Exercise, Arranged for Military Instruction No.'s 15 & 16
- xii Image featured in W.C. Davis The Illustrated History of the Civil War Godalming, Surrey 1997 p70
- xiii H.C. Wayne The Sword Exercise, Arranged for Military Instruction See Plates 'On Guard' and 'Guard of Tierce', also No.208. 'Opposing the Bayonet'
- xiv Ibid. Plates 'On Guard' and 'Guard of Tierce'

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xv Scott Abstract of Infantry Tactics; Including Exercises and Manoeuvres of Light-Infantry and Riflemen; For the use of the Militia of the United States Boston 1830 No.778

xvi Image featured in Echoes of Glory: Arms and Equipment of the Union Richmond 1996 p29

xvii Scott Abstract of Infantry Tactics; Including Exercises and Manoeuvres of Light-Infantry and Riflemen; For the use of the Militia of the United States No.779

xviii Image featured in W.C. Davis The Illustrated History of the Civil War p208

xix Top image featured in W.C. Davis (Ed.) The Image of War: 1861-1865 vol. II The Guns of '62 New York 1982 p162, Bottom image featured in W. Garrison Brady's Civil War p43

xx J.W. Tompkins & Co. A Manual of the Piece. Adapted to the Rifle-Musket, the Rifle, and Other Infantry Arms No.200 in G. Walden 'A Manual of the sword for foot officers' p24

xxi Scott Abstract of Infantry Tactics; Including Exercises and Manoeuvres of Light-Infantry and Riflemen; For the use of the Militia of the United States No.'s 780 - 783

xxii U.S. Infantry Tactics: for the instruction, exercise, and manoeuvres of the United States Infantry, including Infantry of the Line, Light Infantry, and Riflemen p190

xxiii Image featured in The Photographic History of the Civil War (Two volumes in one) vol. 1 'The Opening Battles' p199

xxiv H.C. Wayne The Sword Exercise, Arranged for Military Instruction No.'s 208 & 209

xxv L. Herdegen & S. Murphy Four Years with the Iron Brigade: The Civil War Journal of William Ray, Company F, Seventh Wisconsin Volunteers Cambridge MA p101

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