The Infantry Squad Part 1: How Did We Get Here?

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Technology and changes in strategy have continually shaped the development of rifle squad doctrine. For noncommissioned officers, the infantry squad is where many of them first begin learning the art of leadership.

Since World War II, the squad has been the fundamental building block of U.S. infantry platoons; an outgrowth of improvements in weapon technologies and changing strategies during World War I that created an opportunity to develop infantry tactics into a combined weapons team. Today, as emerging technologies influence the physical and virtual worlds, the infantry squad is evolving to meet the changing battlefield landscape.

World War I: Shaping the Force

Before WWI, Army doctrine taught battlefield superiority through overwhelming firepower and outmaneuvering the enemy. To achieve this, the Army used an infantry regiment's massed rifles to attain dominance. During this period, the infantry regiment was the basic element of

Army formations with the responsibility for fire and maneuver residing with the regiment.[1]

As the American Expeditionary Force gained experience on the battlefields of France, Army leadership adapted infantry doctrine to meet the technological growth of weapons and tactics. The invention of machine guns, grenades, tanks, and aircraft helped convince leadership to redefine the role of the infantry squad.

During WWI, a regiment's companies and platoons carried the same weapons to achieve enough massed firepower to overwhelm the enemy. The only deviation in doctrine was in the machine gun battalions equipped with 16 **Browning M1917** heavy machine guns. These early machine guns were heavy and required a team of soldiers to man and service them.

Army leaders learned valuable lessons in the mud-filled trenches which dominated the battlefields around the Argonne, Belleau Wood, and Saint-Mihiel, and they adapted to meet the changes in warfare. Rather than focusing combat power on the regiment, the Army moved it down to the company level as weapon effectiveness improved.[2]

When the U.S. entered WWI, the U.S. Army infantry platoon was composed of four sections: hand bombers (also known as grenadiers), rifle grenadiers, riflemen, and automatic riflemen.[3] At first glance, this platoon order of battle closely resembled a modern infantry squad.

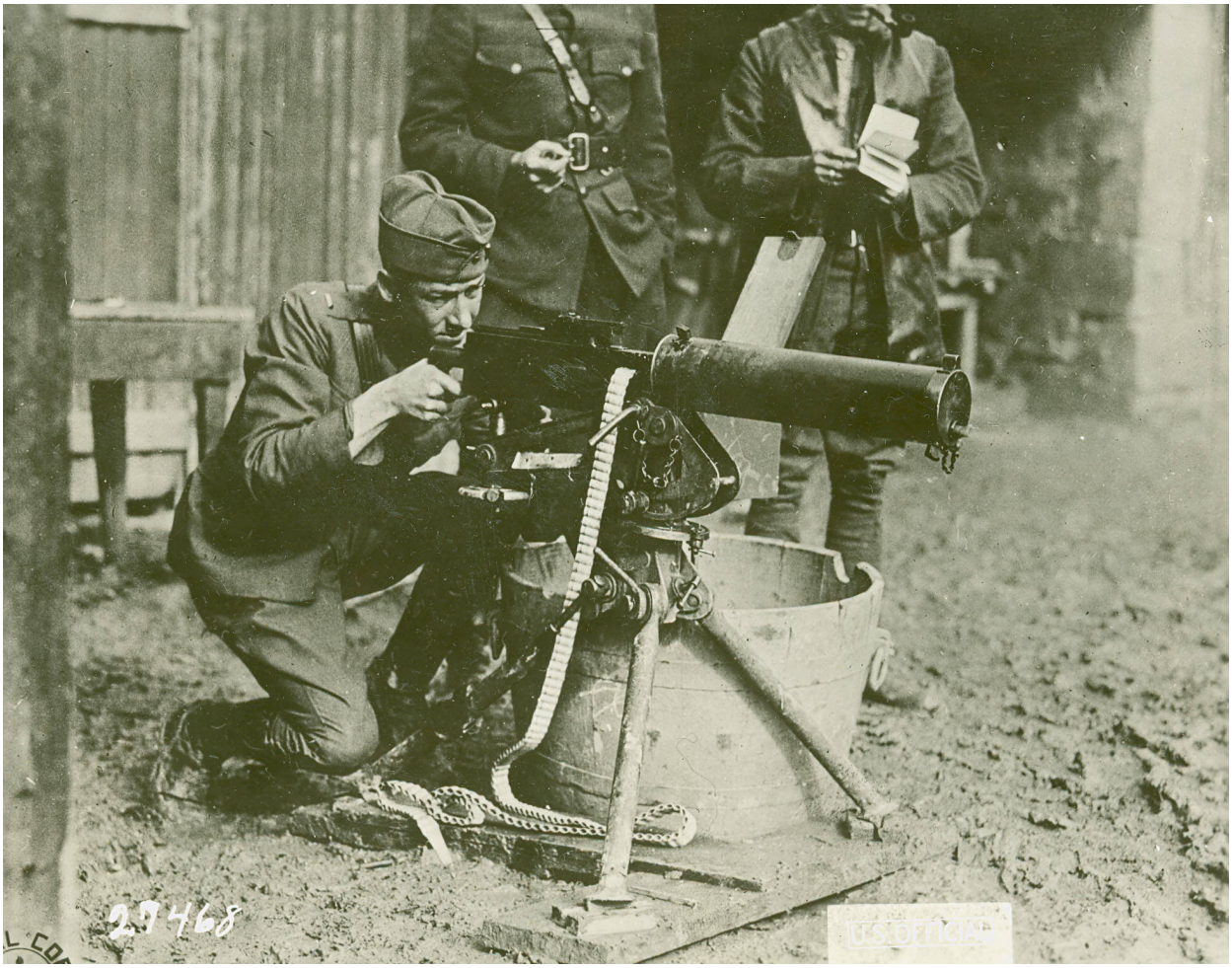
Although technology had altered the shape of warfare, nations involved were slow to update their doctrine to meet these changes. Artillery technology and principles of indirect fire had evolved to a point where accurate and reliable artillery could fire over the heads of friendly infantry. This meant artillery pieces no longer needed to be placed on the battlefield; instead, they could be placed well behind the front lines. The invention of better rifles and cartridges meant that infantry was effective at longer ranges. Meanwhile, the machine gun and its capability to lay down rapid and accurate firepower overcame the doctrine of dominating through mass infantry fire.

NCO In Action:

Cpl. Raymond Buma, Machine Gun Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment, 4th Division, American Expeditionary Force, was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism in action while serving near Cuisy, France, Sept. 26, 1918.

After all his squad members were killed, Buma continued to operate his **M1917 Browning machine gun** and, after his ammunition was exhausted, ran from shell hole to shell hole picking up ammunition and carrying it back to his gun where he resumed fire on the enemy. Though he was killed in action shortly after, he was very instrumental in the success of the attack.[4]

Shortly after Buma's death, his commander, Col. F.C. Bolles, wrote his parents stating, "He was a true American Soldier of unusual courage and at all times proved himself worthy of every trust. He served his gun after the entire crew except himself had been killed. When killed he was far beyond the infantry lines firing on the enemy. Corporal Buma was admired and loved by all who knew him, both officers and men, and was recommended for a Distinguished



Service Cross for his brave and gallant work."[5]

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Towards the end of WWI, German generals modified their doctrine to reflect the changes in technology and tactics. Realizing they were losing too many men to massed charges, which rarely achieved their goals, they redefined how infantry soldiers fought. Using the technological advantages the German arms industry provided by producing a lightweight two-man machine gun, the generals rewrote their doctrine and reshaped the focus of their fighting force. Rather than using massed weapons in large, unwieldy units, they created smaller, flexible units equipped with a mix of rifles, light machine guns, automatic rifles, and grenadiers. These smaller units were able to adapt to changing conditions on the battleground and exploit weaknesses in the Allied lines while maintaining enough firepower to suppress any opposition encountered.[6]

To answer the Germans' deployment of the lightweight machine guns, the U.S. Army started a parallel development with an automatic rifle. The **M1918 Browning Automatic Rifle** provided maneuverable firepower for American Soldiers on the battlefield.[7] The Army continued to use the BAR weapons platform to support the infantry throughout WWII, Korea and into Vietnam.

The Inter-War Years: Defining the Force

The U.S. Army rewrote their infantry doctrine to include the new weapons and tactics developed from the lessons they learned from WWI. This rewrite included the redefinition of the infantry platoon. Rather than having separate sections of the platoon responsible for specialized weapons, those sections became specialties and reformed as squads within the platoons. The squads were assigned a mix of weapons and specialties previously assigned at the platoon level.

In 1942, The War Department issued Field Manual 7-10, *Rifle Company, Rifle Regiment*, which defined the infantry squad composition as 12 men: a sergeant as squad leader, a corporal as assistant squad leader, a three-man automatic rifle team, two scouts armed with rifles, and five riflemen.[8]

Driving this change was the effectiveness of the weapons. Much like the change from breach loading rifles in the 1880s such as the **Springfield 45-70 Trapdoor** to bolt action, **Krag-Jorgensen** rifles in the 1900s, the evolution from the **1903 Springfield rifle** to the self-loading, semi-automatic **M1 Garand rifle** as the primary infantry rifle improved the infantry platoon's ability to project firepower. In addition to the M1, the infantry platoons continued to use the **BAR,** incorporating it into the squad.[9]

NCO In Action:

On the morning of Sept. 24, 1944, Staff Sgt. Joseph E. Schaefer, Company I, 18th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, led a squad of the 2nd platoon in the vicinity of Stolberg, Germany, when two enemy companies supported by machine guns launched an attack to seize control of an important crossroads being defended by his platoon.

With one squad captured and another forced back, Schaefer decided to shift his men into a house for better cover. While under heavy small-arms and machine gun fire, he led by example and crawled to the house, safely guiding each Soldier to the building. As artillery pounded his position, Schaefer assigned his men to defensive positions and placed himself at the door.

He singlehandedly broke up two attacks with well-aimed fire, killing and wounding several of the enemy. Regrouped for a final assault, the Germans approached from two directions with grenades and flame-throwers. Recognizing the threat, Schaefer fired rapidly at the first group, killing or wounding them all. He then dashed to the hedgerow and poured deadly accurate shots into the second group, forcing the enemy to withdraw.

After repelling the German assault, he assisted in the counter-attack. Crawling and running in the face of heavy fire, Schaefer overtook the enemy and liberated the American squad captured earlier in the battle. In all, single-handed and armed only with his M1 Garand rifle, he killed between 15 and 20 Germans and took 10 prisoners.

Schaefer's indomitable courage and his determination to hold his position at all costs were responsible for stopping an enemy break-through.[10] His company commander, Capt. Robert E. Hess, would later comment, "His courage was responsible for stopping the enemy breakthrough that day."[11]

For his actions during the battle, Schaefer was awarded the Medal of Honor on Aug. 22, 1945.

Post-WWII: Redefining the Doctrine

After WWII, the infantry squad underwent another transformation, reducing its cadre of 12 Soldiers down to 10. Maj. Gen. David W. Gray, who commanded the 25th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, during the Korean Conflict, wrote that one reason for reducing the squad to two five-man fire teams was because "one man cannot effectively control eight or more fighters."[12] His viewpoint was not just a random thought; in 1946 infantry leaders gathered at Fort Benning, Georgia, to discuss lessons learned from the WWII battlefields and ended up shaping much of today's infantry doctrine.[13] At the conclusion of the conference, the attendees recommended four changes to the doctrine of the infantry squad:

Command and control

One of the changes that all infantry conference attendees agreed on was that a squad leader could not effectively control a 12-man squad, even with an assistant squad leader. During the conference, NCOs related their experiences in trying to control 12 men in combat and suggested to the attendees that the maximum squad size should be nine members.[14]

Continual 20% combat attrition

Combat attrition helped further shape the nine-man theory. Routinely, during the war, squads would operate at an 80% capacity, due to death, injuries, and illness. The reduced operational levels also helped to show NCOs could command nine-men while remaining large enough to be an effective fighting force.[15]

Lack of a squad light machine gun

The German Army doctrine of equipping a nine-man squad with a light machine gun and the squad tactics focused on this weapon strongly influenced the conference attendees. Equipping the squad with a lightweight machine gun added flexibility in attack and defense. This flexibility made a significant impression on the infantry conference attendees.[16]

Limitations of squad tactics

Attendees of the conference conceded that the pre-war doctrine of a squad conducting "fire and maneuver" was not possible. They found that achieving fire and maneuver required at least two squads: one to be the firebase, while another maneuvered. Even with a fully staffed squad of 12 men, there were too many moving parts for this doctrine to be effective.[17]

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Conference Results

While the Army quickly adopted the doctrinal changes recommended by the infantry conference, it wasn't until 1961, with the delivery of the **M-14 rifle** to frontline units that adequate weapons would start to be available to support the new doctrine.

In part 2 of this article, the *NCO Journal* will examine the redevelopment of the infantry squad in combat, methods of deploying infantry into battle, and key conflicts which helped to prove doctrine.

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