



Photo courtesy of the author

A Doughboy aims his Model 1911 Colt pistol on the edge of a German trench in France. Notice the magazine of the Chauchat automatic rifle is detached but partially full of cartridges with the fired empty cartridges on the ground.

Fire and Maneuver:

The U.S. Infantry Revolution of 1918

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The greatest revolution in U.S. Infantry tactics and organization occurred in 1918 in preparation for combat on the Western Front during World War I. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps finally transformed from an earlier reliance on linear and skirmishing tactics into the tactics and weapons for fire and maneuver that Infantrymen would recognize today.

When the United States declared war upon the Central Powers and joined the Allies on 6 April 1917, its Army numbered only 126,000 men on active duty. That strength was backed up by the entire National Guard (almost 100,000 troops), which had been originally federalized for serving on the Mexican border during the Punitive Expedition of 1916. At that time, the size and leadership structure of the Infantry company was the same as it was when first formally organized by Major General Wilhelm von Steuben at Valley Forge in 1778. In 1917, a full strength Infantry company consisted of 99 privates, corporals, sergeants, and lieutenants armed with rifles and bayonets and a captain as company commander armed with a pistol.

After the U.S. declaration of war, the War Department sent two information collection teams to tour the front and observe French and British forces in both training and combat. The teams recommended that the Army reorganize the entire field army and logistics to support the anticipated trench warfare and return to open warfare after a breakthrough. Taking the best formations, tactics, and even weapons from our Allies, the result completely changed the role and use of the Infantry for the modern machine war.

On 13 January 1918, the U.S. Army Infantry company was enlarged from 100 to 256 Soldiers. For the first time, permanent numbered platoons were created within the company as units that could maneuver and fight separately. Each company now had four rifle platoons of 59 men and a headquarters platoon of 20. The assigned lieutenants were formally named platoon leaders, and the senior sergeant assistant eventually was called the platoon sergeant. While the rifle squads of eight men in each rifle platoon were led by a corporal, there were only two of these pure "rifle and bayonet" squads of Soldiers totaling 16 men in each line platoon. The other troops were considered specialists in teams or groups and trained to

become automatic riflemen, rifle grenadiers, and hand bombers. The U.S. 4th Marine Brigade that was attached to the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) was also organized in this fashion.

Each NCO and lieutenant carried a pistol in addition to a rifle; the privates also received trench knives. All Doughboys carried two types of gas masks anywhere near the trenches and wore steel helmets. Soldiers also received entrenching tools and first aid dressings, and each squad or team carried barbed wire cutters. With the support weapons specialists concentrated in the 1st Half-Platoon on the right and the pure rifle squads on the left in the 2nd Half-Platoon, these units were now organized as "machine gun-killing machines."

Each platoon was expected to maneuver using cover through fire towards a flank of an enemy machine gun or strongpoint. When advancing, the 1st Half-Platoon would keep the enemy position busy with supporting weapons fire while the 2nd Half-Platoon would maneuver to a flank, or rear, and roll up the threat. The Doughboy Infantryman of 1918 would immediately grasp the role of a modern team, squad, and platoon.

After the first AEF battles of 1918 at Cantigny, Chateau-Thierry, Belleau Wood, the Marne, and the reduction of the St. Mihiel salient, the half-platoon structure was modified.

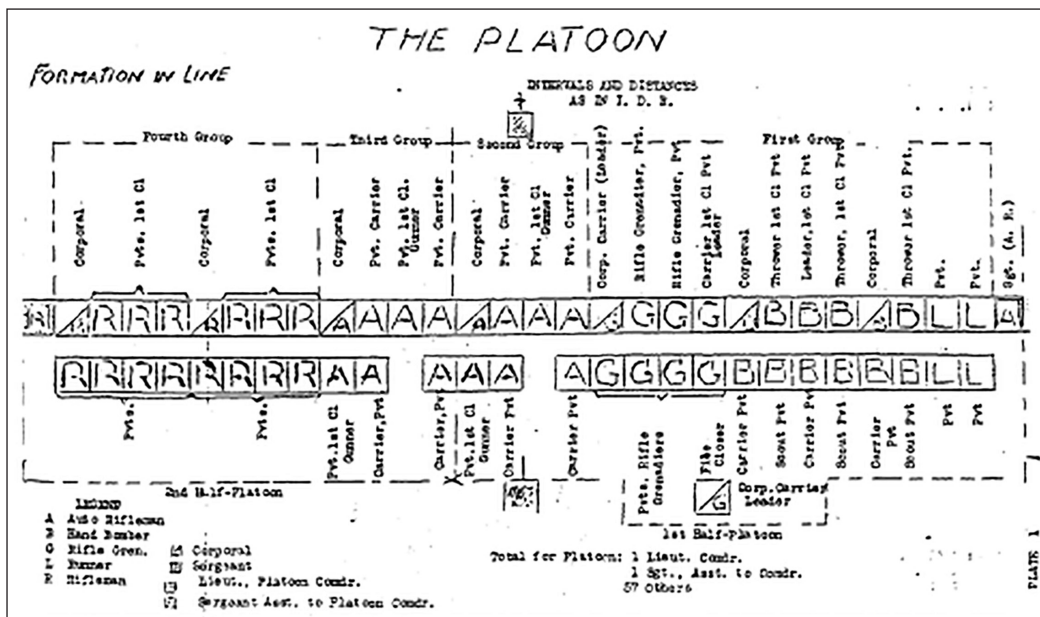


Figure 1 — Infantry Platoon Circa April 1918 (This original hand-drawn illustration from a training circular was discovered in an Infantry sergeant's footlocker in 1993.)

Casualties and other losses lowered the numbers of the average rifle companies from 256 to 200 and the rifle platoons from 59 to 50. In some divisions, the half-platoons were reorganized into identical formations with the same numbers of weapons and specialties assigned to each. It had proven difficult for inexperienced Soldiers in the first battles to maneuver as two uniquely organized half-platoons. As fresh divisions filled with inexperienced Doughboys arrived in France each month, training was shortened. The hand bomber, or hand grenade, group was omitted entirely from the new platoon organization as each member of the rifle platoon was issued



Signal Corps photo

Doughboys from the 6th Marines, 2nd Division, American Expeditionary Forces, complete platoon training in an extended order formation near Harmonville, France, on 23 August 1918. The close pairs are the automatic riflemen and their first assistants.

at least two grenades for close combat. Each half-platoon was composed of three unique seven- or eight-man squads — rifle grenadiers, automatic riflemen, or riflemen. Both half-platoons were now equally capable of support by fire or maneuver. A rifle battalion commander in the 80th Division, MAJ Henry H. Burdick, published an article in the *Infantry Journal* in early 1919 titled “Development of the Half-Platoon as an Elementary Unit,” and described the evolution of the half-platoon:

*Waves were too close together and individuals therein had too little interval, columns were too long, formations were lacking in elasticity and little attempt was made to maneuver. A close study of the best means to correct these faults led to greater emphasis being placed on the half-platoon as an elementary unit. Experiments conducted in rear areas developed the formations illustrated which were utilized in the last Argonne offensive and thoroughly justified their adoption and demonstrated their efficacy by greater maneuver power, better control, rapidity of deployment and conservation of life.*¹

Taking advantage of the experience gained during recent operations, on 4 September 1918, the 42nd Division headquarters distributed a secret memorandum to all leaders with instructions for ongoing combat:

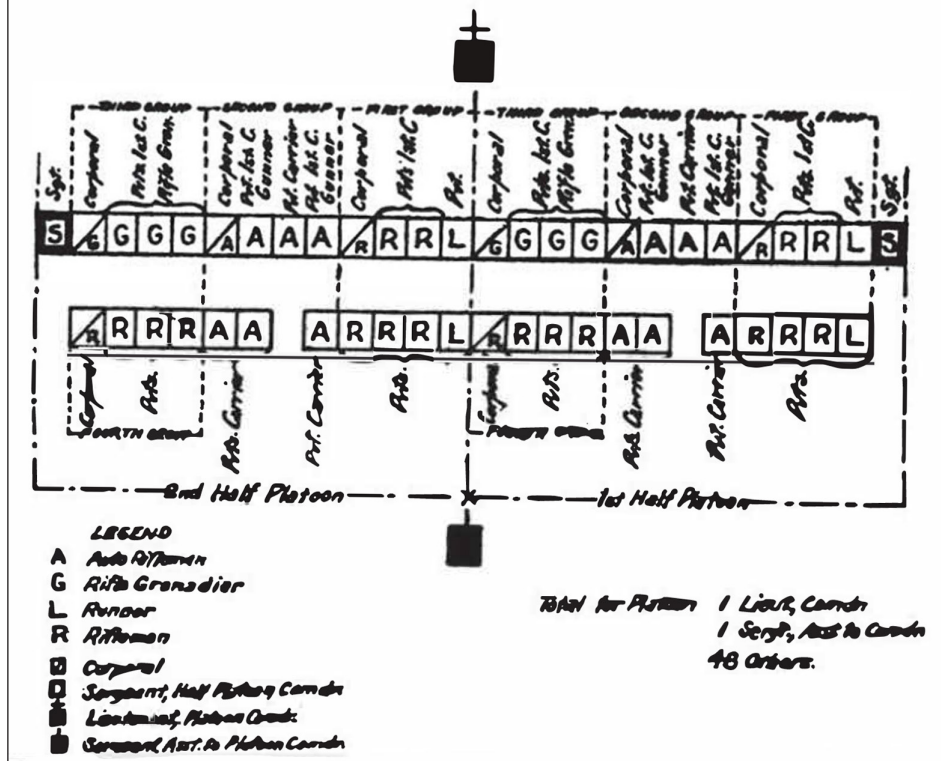
The foregoing phase of the operation [“2. PENETRATION OF FORWARD ZONE (Trench Warfare)”] which depends upon individual initiative, rapidity of decision, resolute daring and driving power, should afford the American officer and soldier the opportunity to display his best known national characteristics to their greatest advantage; provided he does not blindly rush against hostile strong points, ignoring the weak points and the tactical application of fire superiority combined with manoeuvre (sic).

(c) Formations.

*For this phase of the combat the formations applicable to open warfare must be largely employed. Constantly seek to hold the men in formations which simplify control (i.e., column formations, lines or staggered lines of squad or platoon columns, etc.) without exposing them to heavy losses from artillery or machine gun fire.*²

By the time that the AEF pressed itself into a dedicated

THE PLATOON
FORMATION IN LINE
Intervals and Distances as in I.D.A.



From *Infantry Journal*, Vol. XV, April 1919, No. 10. Copyright 1919 by the Association of the U.S. Army. Reproduced by permission.

Figure 2 — Rifle Platoon Structure Used by the 318th Infantry Regiment During the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in Late 1918.

U.S. sector in the summer of 1918, the static trench warfare of the past three and a half years had ended, and the final phase of open warfare began. Advancing in huge divisions of 28,000 troops (three times the number of troops in veteran Allied divisions), the AEF Doughboys learned on the run how to conduct combined arms warfare as their numbers and morale helped make up for their inexperience. Starting in February 1918, about a quarter of a million fresh Americans arrived by troopship each month. After witnessing the mass arrivals and discovering the rookies' improvements in modern maneuver warfare, the Germans decided to ask for a ceasefire before they could be pushed all the way back to their national border. The money, factories, and fresh brawn of the American military made the difference across the battlefield and resulted in the Armistice of 11 November 1918.

After marching across the border to occupy a defeated Germany, AEF troops distilled the lessons they had learned the hard way along the Meuse River and deep in the Argonne Forest while they performed static occupation duty for a year. Each rifle platoon was reorganized into identical rifle squads of eight men with automatic rifle teams armed with the Browning



Signal Corps photo

Doughboys from the 6th Marines, 2nd Division, American Expeditionary Forces, demonstrate the placement of an automatic rifle squad with scouts near Harmonville, France, on 11 August 1918. The rest of the company watches the demonstration in the background.

Automatic Rifle (BAR) and a rifle grenadier; all other Soldiers became both riflemen and hand bombers with grenades. This identical squad approach served the U.S. Army Infantry well until a reorganization on the eve of entering combat in World War II. Today, the nine-Soldier Infantry squad is composed

of ground combat specialists with an “automatic rifleman” and rifle grenadier in each of the two fire teams that are still able to defeat an enemy through fire and maneuver. While the tools and skills of the trade have evolved with advances in technology, the overall mission of the Infantry squad — to close with the enemy to kill or capture them and to take and hold ground through fire and maneuver — dates back to the U.S. Infantry Revolution of 1918.

Notes

¹ MAJ Henry H. Burdick, “Development of the Half-Platoon as an Elementary Unit,” *Infantry Journal*, Vol. XV, April 1919, No. 10, 799.

² Headquarters 42nd Division, American Expeditionary Forces, 4 September 1918. Secret Memorandum No. 296. The following is published for the information and guidance of all concerned: “Headquarters First Army American Expeditionary Forces, France, Secret, 29 August 2018. Combat Instructions for Troops of First Army, 4.

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Signal Corps photo

A rifle platoon demonstrates the doctrine of deploying the two half-platoons upon contact. Note the 1st Half-Platoon on the left providing supporting fires with automatic rifle teams in front, with the rifle grenadier teams behind, backed up by the hand bomber teams still standing. The 2nd Half-Platoon's rifle squads are advancing to the right with bayonets fixed to assault the flank to take out the objective with violent maneuver. The entire platoon is organized, trained, and equipped for fire and maneuver. This photograph had been reversed for publication in August 1918 to ensure the flank movement matched the sketches in the training circulars.