

Trust as a Control Measure: *Platoon Leaders and their Weapons Squad*

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“Under the quickly organized fire support of a heavy machine-gun platoon, it was possible to regain the last line of the combat outposts without suffering much in the way of casualties. The fire and movement of the assault squads were in complete unison...”

— Irwin Rommel on the storming of Mount Cosna,
11 August 1917¹

As a cadet in ROTC and a lieutenant progressing through my initial infantry training, one concept was repeatedly hammered into me: the importance of the platoon leader’s relationship with the platoon sergeant. It seemed that every piece of advice offered by a visiting senior leader included some version of “when you take a platoon, trust your platoon sergeant.” While this is an extremely important relationship and all of that advice is correct, one thing rarely, if ever, touched on is the platoon leader’s relationship with the third key leader in the platoon — the weapons squad leader. More broadly, the theory of how suppression enables maneuver was presented to me in a limited and piecemeal fashion. Because the weapons squad leader-platoon leader relationship is uniquely intertwined with the tactical implementation of the weapons squad, I feel that both should be discussed. This article discusses what I wish I had understood earlier as a platoon leader about the use of machine guns and the relationship with the leader in charge of their implementation. But first, it is helpful to understand the historical background of the weapons squad.

A Brief History of the Weapons Squad

To appreciate the function of the contemporary weapons squad, it is important to understand the history of the Army’s use of machine guns. The Army first used the machine gun in World War I when its primary fighting infantry formation was the regiment. Under this system that emphasized overwhelming firepower and mass, Browning M1917 heavy machine-gun teams were organized within a weapons battalion. A weapons battalion fielded 16 machine guns, each requiring a crew to maintain and operate. By World War II, the Army modified tactics to enable fire and maneuver at lower tactical levels. Infantry Field Manual (FM) 7-10, *Rifle Company, Rifle Regiment*, codified this shift and also coincided with the fielding of the Browning M1918 automatic rifle to each rifle squad.² FM 7-10 prescribed the use of a weapons platoon within each company equipped with two Browning M1919 .30 caliber machine guns and company mortars.³



An assistant gunner helps feed ammunition into his gunner’s M240B machine gun from a support-by-fire position during a combined arms live-fire exercise at Fort Drum, NY, on 19 October 2018. (Photo by SSG James Avery)

While this configuration was effective in WWII combat, a capabilities gap remained in the ability of a rifle platoon to adequately suppress and fix enemy forces and enable maneuver. In 1961, the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, GA, conducted a study called the Rifle Squad and Platoon Evaluation Program (RSPEP). RSPEP identified that the new M60 machine gun was too unwieldy to be issued to a rifle squad because it needed a three-man crew to operate.⁴ The study recommended creating a weapons squad within each rifle platoon. This platoon reorganization remains, with the M240 series replacing the M60.

Although the implementation of machine guns has evolved along with technology and tactics, this history is helpful to review. It shows that the machine gun has reigned supreme in its role of suppressing, fixing, and isolating the enemy since its introduction to the battlefield.

The Weapons Squad in Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO)

The 2018 National Defense Strategy clearly outlined the Army's role in the future fight: conducting Unified Land Operations against a near-peer or peer threat in LSCO. While the scale of such operations are vast, there are three key assumptions that percolate down to the company and platoon level. These assumptions are grounded in FM 3-0, *Operations*. First among them is that in a large-scale fight the only enablers platoons should expect are at the company level. The layers of air assets and artillery support that have defined the counterinsurgency (COIN) fight of the last 20 years will no longer be at a platoon leader's fingertips, due to enemy area denial capabilities or asset allocation requirements. The next assumption must be that in such combat operations there will be very limited opportunities for surprise at the platoon level. In LSCO a platoon will usually not be at the point of first contact, and the enemy will most likely know the general location and time of an attack. The third assumption is that command, control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C2ISR) assets will be unavailable or degraded by enemy systems. The result is that intelligence and a common operating picture will often have to be developed at the point of contact. For platoon leaders, this means that they can assume they will have nothing more than operational graphics and a 1:50,000 map to plan with. This results in little to no understanding of micro-terrain and vegetation on the objective.

A skilled weapons squad offers a platoon the best solution to address the tactical issues inherent to LSCO. First, with a lack of close air support or artillery to suppress and fix the enemy, the machine guns of the weapons squad are the only enabler a platoon leader has to achieve suppression and fixing. Second, because of a lack of surprise, the support by fire must be set quickly and without the assistance of the platoon leader or platoon sergeant. In LSCO, where time and tempo matter, this requires a flexible and empowered weapons squad leader who may have to fight into position. Third, as the first element with eyes on the objective, the weapons squad leader can be an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) asset for the platoon, feeding reports to the platoon leader. Because of these capabilities, the weapons squad and its leader are critical to the success of the infantry platoon in LSCO.

It should also be noted that the weapons squad offers other immensely important capabilities to a platoon in the form of additional weaponry and attachments. This includes the anti-armor assets organic to a weapons squad but can also be expanded to other attached elements that leverage the weapon squad's unique mission in the platoon or company fight. Because the support by fire is necessarily in a position with lines of sight onto the objective, it may be practical for attachments to be task organized with the weapons squad. This could include sniper or scout sections, forward observers, mortars, or anti-aircraft missile teams. This is especially pertinent in an LSCO environment where threats can come in many forms and in multiple domains.

Another consideration for the weapons squad in an LSCO environment is the fight to the support by fire. We can assume that any terrain that offers an advantageous position for our machine guns will also be advantageous for the enemy. With this in mind, it may be necessary for a platoon leader to task organize a rifle team or even a rifle squad to accompany the weapons squad and assist those Soldiers in fighting into their position. A contested support by fire is a very real possibility that must be taken into account in the planning process. These considerations are worthy of much further discussion; however, this article will focus on the core of the weapons squad — the machine guns.

Understanding How to Use the Weapons Squad

To understand why the weapons squad is the most useful tool platoon leaders have at their disposal, it's necessary



A Soldier with the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division helps secure a village during training at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, LA, on 18 August 2020. (Photo by SPC Justin W. Stafford)

to understand the concept of echelonment of fires. While this concept is usually associated with the use of indirect fires, it can be defined more broadly as the consecutive use of assets to set conditions for the decisive operation. It allows platoon leaders to preserve the combat power necessary to reach the decisive point — the point at which they have gained a marked advantage over the enemy, and the momentum is irreversibly in their favor. Let's say, for example, that you are a platoon leader tasked with seizing a piece of key terrain that is fortified by a trench system. You identify your decisive point as the moment that one fire team has established a foothold in the trench. How are you going to move from your assembly area to that decisive point and enable your decisive operation, the fire team in question, to establish its foothold? The answer is simple: echelonment of fires. Let's assume that battalion assets are directed elsewhere, and the only tools you have are company internal. The echelonment starts with the company 60mm mortars. The purpose of the mortars is to emplace your next enabler, your next echelon: the weapons squad. The mortars falling on and around the enemy in the trench keep their heads down and enable your weapons squad to move into position on terrain that overlooks the objective. Once the support by fire is set, the weapons squad takes over for the mortars and begins to suppress and fix the enemy on the objective. This allows your assault element to begin maneuvering towards the breach or the objective itself, covered by the weapons squad. Your weapons squad leader describes to you the situation on the objective over the radio.

At your last covered and concealed position, you set in a local support by fire, one of your assault squads. Once those Soldiers begin to fire on the objective, you give the order to shift fire, and the weapons squad conducts its battlefield handover: They increase their rate of fire for a short period of time to allow for the local support by fire to pick up the suppression before the weapons shift off the main objective and lift fire. The local support by fire is closer to your attack position, so they have a better angle to maintain suppression on the objective without risking fratricide. Your assault squad moves up, conducts a breach, and sends a team into the trench. The enemy, having been continuously suppressed and fixed, can't react until it is too late. Your fire team has gained a foothold in the trench; your decisive point has been reached. You can't lose.

This is a relatively detailed description of a simple concept. It is summed up best in the tactical principle from FM 3-21.8, *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, that states, "Fire without movement is indecisive. Exposed movement without fire is disastrous." Your company assets enable your weapons squad to emplace, suppress, and fix. Your weapons squad enables your assault squads to suppress and attack. Your attack gets you to your decisive point and you win. The implication of this is that at the platoon level the weapons squad is your primary enabler for mission success. Just understanding this concept isn't enough, however. The most important part of this process is the

relationship you have with your weapons squad leader prior to any triggers being pulled.

Trust as a Control Measure

Relationships are everything, and that principle is nowhere more important than with your weapons squad leader. Some platoon leaders will place their platoon sergeant with the support by fire during an operation. While there may be some limited circumstances where this makes sense, I would challenge any platoon leader to seriously reconsider that course of action. Weapons squad leaders are the second most experienced NCO in your formation and should be able to control their machine guns without the help of the platoon sergeant, who should be moving to points of friction and solving problems. This all starts with trust.

Trust, in this context, incorporates both interpersonal trust and tactical trust. Interpersonal trust is characterized by mutual confidence. This confidence that the platoon leader and weapons squad leader have in one another is built day-to-day in garrison and in the field through rigorous training and validation. As a platoon leader, this must be a core aspect of your leadership: ensuring that your competence and confidence is displayed to your subordinate leaders daily. Tactical trust is characterized by common understanding and the principles of mission command. To generate this, it is critical that the weapons squad leader be a key part of the planning process and the troop leading procedures. The platoon leader must ensure that the weapons squad leader understands the mission, the plan, and the commander's desired end state. Additionally, the weapons squad leader needs to understand the mission's priority intelligence requirements and friendly force information requirements. This allows the weapons squad leader to provide relevant information to the platoon leader once visual contact with the objective is made.

An example of these two measures of trust in action is the dialogue that should occur between the platoon leader and weapons squad leader during an operation. Platoons leaders should empower their weapons squad leaders to tell them, after a shift is called, that they can provide more suppression before shifting fire. This can be based on time or conditions: "I can give 15 more seconds of suppression," or "I have you for 40 more meters before I need to shift." In this scenario, the platoon leader has interpersonal trust in the talent and judgment of the weapons squad leader and tactical trust in his or her understanding of mission requirements. An effective technique for my platoon that enabled this flexibility was having the guns shoot cyclic for 3-5 seconds prior to shifting. This allowed for extra suppression and fixing as well as an audible confirmation of the shift.



Gun crews with 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, establish a support-by-fire position during a fire support coordination exercise on 18 November 2019 at Pohakuloa Training Area in Hawaii. (Photo by SGT Thomas Calvert)

As the leader forward with the assault elements, there is a tendency to be overconservative with the shift and lift fire call. If platoon leaders have the requisite trust in their weapons squad leaders, they will be able to maximize suppression and understand that no matter what happens, they will not be at risk of fratricide. Just as shift and lift signals are a control measure, trust is also a control measure. As long as the appropriate dialogue has occurred between the platoon leader and the weapons squad leader prior to the operation, the platoon leader will benefit from the best direct fire support possible. An empowered weapons squad leader is the most valuable asset that the weapons squad can have, and an effective weapons squad is the most valuable asset a platoon leader can have.

Notes

¹ Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier, Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford, UK: 2013), 132.

² Chris Raynor, "The Infantry Squad Part 1: How Did We Get Here?" *NCO Journal* (19 March 2018).

³ Field Manual 7-10, *Rifle Company, Rifle Regiment*, 1942.

⁴ MAJ Stephen E. Hughes, "The Evolution of the U.S. Army Infantry Squad: Where Do We Go From Here?" (Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 1994).

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