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"Marching Fire"

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PREFACE

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"The point of view expressed in this paper is that of the author --not necessarily that of the Infantry School or the Department of the Army".



SAMUEL B. STROMAN

INTRODUCTION

In far too numerous cases during World War II and also during the Korean conflict, units have failed to effect maximum utilization of organic weapons in the attack on and seizure of an objective. M1 rifles, light machine guns, carbines, rocket launchers, and other organic rifle platoon weapons were not used to the fullest extent, which resulted in many unnecessary casualties and excessive time in the capturing of an objective.

"In the course of holding post-combat mass interviews with approximately four hundred infantry companies in the Central Pacific and European Theaters, Col. S.L.A. Marshall was unable to find one battalion, company, or platoon commander who had made the slightest effort to determine how many of his men had actually engaged the enemy with a weapon. But there were many who, on being asked the preliminary question, made the automatic reply: "I believe that every man used his weapon at one time or another". Some added that where ever they had moved and viewed, it had seemed that all hands were taking an active part in the fighting.

Later when the companies were interviewed at a full assembly and their men spoke as witnesses in the presence of the commander and their junior leaders, it was found that an average of not more than 15 per cent of them had actually fired at enemy positions or personnel with rifles, carbines, grenades, bazookas, BARs, or machine guns during the course of an entire engagement. Even allowing for the dead and wounded, and assuming that in their numbers there would be the same proportion of active firers as

among the living, the figures did not rise above 20 to 25 per cent of the total for any action. The best showing that could be made by the most spirited and aggressive companies was that one in four had made at least some use of fire power".(1)

These and other similar facts tend to prove that the infantry soldier, for the most part, did not make adequate use of his individual weapon during past conflicts.

This monograph deals primarily with the importance of marching fire on squad, platoon and company levels. This subject is of extreme value to small unit leaders because it is they who must close with and capture or destroy the enemy by the use of small arms fire and hand to hand combat. The vital role played by higher supporting weapons prior to the assault on an objective is very important in the accomplishment of a small unit mission, however, the men of the rifle squads, platoons, and companies must move on to and seize the objective. It is during this phase that marching fire is most important.

The late General George S. Patton had this to say in reference to the use of marching fire.

"Infantry must move in order to close with the enemy. it must shoot in order to move. When physical targets are not visible the fire of all infantry weapons must search the area occupied by the enemy. Use marching fire, it reduces the accuracy of the enemy fire and increases our confidence. To halt under fire is folly. To halt under fire and not fire back is suicide".(2)
"Our goal in the attack is to take the objective with the least possible casualties. The casualties in a unit are in direct proportion to the intensity of fire received and the length of time under fire. When under fire keep advancing and keep shooting. Use marching fire". (3)

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- (1) Marshall, S.L.A., Col., "Men Against Fire", p. 53 & 54, Williams Morrow & Co., New York, 1947, TIS Library.
 - (2) Whittington, George P. Jr., Major, "The Miracle of Marching Fire", p. 6, Infantry Journal, September 1949, TIS Library.
 - (3) Kelley, John E., Lt Col., "Shoot, Soldier, Shoot", p. 47, Infantry Journal, January 1946, TIS Library.

The author intends to relate combat examples to substantiate the indispensability of the proper application of small arms fire in the timely and economical seizure of an objective. In planning an attack we consider, among other things, the selection of an attack position, line of departure, routes of advance, initial positions & targets for organic supporting weapons, the assault position, and plans for re-organization and consolidation on the objective. However, this monograph will discuss primarily the assault phase on platoon level.

The author intends to prove that the shock produced by organic fire power of the rifle platoon can keep the enemy "pinned down" and consequently, prevent him from delivering accurate counterfire; that by the application of a continuous volume of fire and continuous movement from the assault position, casualties can be greatly reduced among friendly units while inflicting heavy casualties upon the enemy.

DISCUSSION

"Marching fire" and "assault fire" are synonymous terms with the exception that in marching fire movement is continuous and concurrent with the application of a great volume of fire. In marching fire the individual soldier does not halt momentarily every two or three paces to fire an aimed shot from the shoulder. Volume, violence and continuous movement are used to keep the enemy pinned down and to minimize the time necessary to seize the objective.

"Assault fire is the violent and heavy fire by assault elements as they close on the enemy at close range. The men fire from the hip or shoulder, walking forward steadily and rapidly as the terrain permits.

Each man fires at least one shot every two or three paces. He holds his fire in the general direction of his advance, shooting at every little rise in the ground, bush, tree, or point which possibly might conceal an enemy. Assault fire is characterized by violence and volume rather than by accuracy". (4)

Our present method of attack visualizes a rapid movement from the line of departure to the assault position under the cover of both direct and indirect supporting fires. These fires are planned to neutralize the enemy positions while we move into the assault position and prepare for the assault. The assault position is somewhere along the route of advance between the line of departure and the objective, usually 100 to 150 yards from the objective. A tentative assault position is selected prior to the attack, however, the exact assault position will be determined by how close we can get to our supporting fires without taking

(4) FM 7-10, "Rifle Company, Infantry Regiment", October 1949, p. 78, TIS Library.

excessive casualties from these fires. We want to get as near to the enemy as possible before the indirect supporting fires lift. The closer we get, the shorter distance our assault will be, and the enemy will have less time to recover from the shock and disorganization caused by our supporting fires. We must be prepared to initiate our assault at any distance within the effective range of the M1 rifle, and to place a continuous volume of fire coupled with continuous movement on to the objective. By so doing, we will be able to keep the enemy pinned down throughout our assault.

"Company "I", 329th Infantry Regiment, on one occasion used marching fire against an enemy force which was dug in 500 yards away behind a stone wall. These troops had to cross a wide open field. The attack was started by a flare signal. On this signal every man came up and fired a full clip and continued to fire as he advanced. This unit did not suffer a single casualty and took 400 prisoners whom they found crouched down in their holes, some of them crying. On being asked questions they said they could not get their heads up to fire". (5)

This is a very excellent example of the use of marching fire from a distance of 500 yards. Success in this case was achieved due to continuous movement and the application of a heavy volume of fire throughout the assault on the objective. The enemy, not being able to get his head up, was unable to apply direct counterfire on the assaulting force because he was pinned down by the continuous fire of the friendly force.

(5) "Battle Experience" Nr. 4, 1 December 1944, ETO, TIS Library.

This attack would not have been quite so successful if the enemy had been allowed the opportunity to place accurate fire on the assaulting unit. Without the use of marching fire, which gained time and facilitated the application of a heavy volume of fire by the attacking unit, the enemy would have had adequate time and conditions under which to employ effective counterfire. Had the forward movement been halted, it is very likely that this objective would not have been taken, and certainly not without some casualties.

The use of marching fire alone is not enough to assure the accomplishment an objective type mission. Necessary planning, reconnaissance, fire support, and control are vital prerequisites to any assault on an objective. There are many situations where detailed planning can not be made, however, it is always desired.

"When an attack is to be made reconnoiter so that you know what you are up against. Having made your plans, make a very thorough reconnaissance to assure yourself that your plans can be effective in light of the current and prospective enemy situation. Make every man start shooting when the assault starts. Keep shooting as you move and move fast. This applies in wooded and open terrain equally. The commanding officer of the 12th Infantry Regiment found, during the second world war, that the Germans were very much afraid of our fire power, however, we did not make sufficient use of it. When you close in rapidly it is difficult for the enemy to adjust artillery and mortar fires on you, especially as you approach his infantry. During one engagement a company commander of this regiment neglected the reconnaissance phase and walked into an ambush. The company commander ordered and led a bayonet charge and the

men moved forward rapidly with fixed bayonets, firing everything they had. The ambush resulted in casualties but they took the position and killed or captured more enemy than their own losses. Rapid movement and heavy fire saved them. Had the company hit the ground and stayed in its exposed position, it would have been annihilated". (6)

In order to assure that the reader understands the mission, method of employment in the offense, capabilities and limitations of organic weapons of the platoon, and the methods of control, these things will be covered here.

The mission of the rifle platoon in the offense is to close with the enemy and kill or capture him by fire, maneuver, and shock action. Normally the platoon is employed as part of the attacking echelon of the company. In accomplishing its mission, the platoon uses fires of organic weapons and any attached or supporting weapons to neutralize the enemy. It is under the protection of these supporting fires that the platoon maneuvers to the best position from which to close with the enemy. This position is ofcourse the assault position.

As the platoon approaches the assault position the platoon leader keeps the company commander informed as to the progress of the attack. He anticipates his platoon's readiness for the assault and tells the company commander, in order that artillery and heavy mortar fires can be lifted at the proper time. The usual means of communication is by radio, however, in some situations voice or wire may be used. The platoon leader must have an emergency signal with which to inform the company commander in the event the above means should fail.

As the platoon moves into the assault position, the platoon leader

(6) "Battle Experience" Nr. 76, 10 March 1945, ETO, TIS Library.

points out to the base squad leader his exact assault position and the direction of the assault. He must insure that the remaining squads move rapidly into their positions. He may designate the flanks for each squad. He should utilize any available time prior to the assault to indicate each squad's zone of responsibility on the objective. As the base squad moves into the assault position, the squad leader must position his base man and give him the direction of the assault. The squad leader must assure the proper interval between men (usually from 5 to 10 yards) and insure bayonets are fixed and that each man is firing on the objective. This fire builds up as each man and squad closes into the assault position; thus overlapping the supporting fires. During this build up riflemen and AR gunners will fire well aimed shots at known and suspected enemy positions and at a moderate rate.

The platoon leader must coordinate the fires of his attached weapons with the company fire support plan. His plan for attached weapons include: initial employment; displacement along the route of advance; employment during the assault phase; and reorganization and consolidation on the objective. If positions are available on or near the line of departure, which afford observation and fields of fire over a part or all of the route to the initial objective, the attached weapons occupy firing positions just prior to H-hour. Otherwise, a part or all of the weapons must accompany the maneuver element initially. Plans must be made for the weapons to displace during the maneuver as their fires are masked by the advance of friendly elements or control becomes difficult. All supporting weapons must be in position to cover the movement of rifle squads into the assault position. They provide fire support during the assault affording

fire until friendly troops approach the safety limits of the fire during the assault. Position areas are designated for each weapon on the objective. Routes for displacement to the objective must permit rapid displacement and early occupation of positions covering dangerous avenues of counterattack.

During the assault the rocket launcher team moves behind the assaulting riflemen and engages targets of opportunity, however, this weapon may be used to augment the volume of fire of the assaulting riflemen. This will depend, to a great extent, upon available ammunition, the availability of personnel to transport ammunition, and enemy armor, pillboxes and other appropriate targets in the area.

Normally one 57mm rifle is attached to the platoon during offensive actions. The squadleader of this squad selects the exact firing position for this weapon under the direction of the rifle platoon leader. Appropriate targets for the 57mm rifle are point targets such as crew served weapons, small groups of enemy personnel, lightly armored vehicles, and pillbox embrasures. This weapon normally fires only on definitely located and suspected targets hindering the advance of the maneuvering element, however, it may be used to increase the volume of fire on the objective. If there are no definitely located or suspected targets especially suited for this weapon it should be used to increase the volume of fire during the assault. Availability of ammunition and means of ammunition resupply will limit the use of this weapon for this purpose.

Rifle grenaders can be most effectively used by placing them on exposed flanks of the assaulting squads. These personnel will contribute to the volume of fire placed on the objective, however, they will be given instructions to engage enemy weapons appearing on the flanks.

The light machine guns of the weapons squad of the rifle platoon can be used to cover the assault by fire from a stationary position or they may move along with the assaulting elements. The nature of the terrain, distance to the objective, and availability of ammunition and ammunition resupply facilities will determine how these weapons are employed. These weapons, when moving as a part of the assaulting element, may be fired from the hip.

The important thing is to assure that the fire power of the light machine guns are used to add to the volume of fire placed on the objective during the assault. Placing them in a position on the flanks where they can fire on the objective throughout the assault is ideal, however, in some cases it will be necessary to have them displace during the assault when their fires are masked with the assaulting troops. In such a case, one gun should displace while the second gun remain in position to continuously support the assault.

"As a matter of SOP training, automatic-rifle unit teams and rifle grenaders of a squad on an exposed flank should observe constantly to the flank and engage promptly any enemy weapons which appear there. as individuals or small groups of assaulting riflemen get close enough to see individual enemy soldiers, they finish them off with point-blank rifle fire or grenades. When enemy emplacements become visible, their firing ports and openings are kept under point-blank fire until someone gets close enough to shoot or throw a grenade into the position. On close approach additional fragmentation and incendiary grenades are dropped in for good measure. All buildings, caves, or thickets are given

the same treatment. Enemy personnel that do not surrender found hiding in holes are promptly shot or bayoneted. Leading riflemen arriving close to the enemy position may fire from the hip for additional fire coverage as they move on to the objective". (7)

"The 3d Battalion, 302d Infantry Regiment, attacking across open flat ground against a slightly higher ridge near Kesslingen, Germany, with two companies abreast supported by Heavy Weapons Company, artillery, and 50 caliber machine guns, used marching fire very effectively in the seizure of an objective. Marching fire began right at the start of the attack and it was continued for 1000 yards to the objective. The enemy suffered far more casualties than the attacking unit. Enemy prisoners captured amounted to more than the attacking force. These prisoners later stated that they were helpless because the attacking force threw so much lead at them.

The attacking infantry used its fire power to enable it to advance, consequently, it was able to close with the enemy with fewer casualties. If an intense volume of fire is thrown out by the assault element, the shock of this fire will be such that it will pin the enemy down and protect the attacker while he moves forward. If the attacker uses assault fire aggressively he will not find himself pinned down by enemy fire".(8)

Units of the 120th Infantry Regiment utilized their rifle grenadiers when attacking by placing them in the leading wave to increase the volume of marching fire. They fired one white phosphorous grenade to each five fragmentation grenades. Bazookas were used to create the impression that artillery was still firing". (9)

(7) Walker, Fred L. Jr., Col., "Charge", p. 30, Infantry Journal, March 1945, TIS Library.

(8) Stein, Harold, Capt., "Assault Fire: Its Use and Combat Effectiveness in World War II and Korea", p. 8 Monograph TIS Library.

(9) "Battle Experience" Nr. 88, 31 March 1945, ETO, TIS Library.

The use of bazookas in this fashion causes the enemy to keep his head down for the fear of being struck by what he thinks to be our supporting artillery. Knowing that we can not advance to within 100-150 yards of his position under the cover of our artillery fires, the enemy, thinking that our bazooka rounds are supporting artillery, is unaware of the fact that we are actually within a few yards of his positions. By this time he is beginning to discover what is taking place but it is far too late for him to do very much about it. We are in a position to finish him off with our bayonets, shoot him in his hole, or accept his surrender.

"As a means for the individual rifleman to control and adjust his fire on known enemy locations when moving, a platoon leader of Co. "F", 40th Infantry Regiment found that two or three rounds of tracer ammunition per clip was very effective. According to the experiences of this platoon leader, men normally fire too low when using ball ammunition alone". (10)

"In Europe during World War II a battalion commanded by Lt Col. John E. Kelley, a part of General Patton's 3d Army, was first introduced to marching fire. They soon learned that it meant advancing on the enemy with all guns blazing. The idea is not to hit the dirt when fired on, but to keep moving, covering with a blanket of fire all possible or known enemy positions within range. The mechanics are simple and the advantages many. When men come under fire they never hesitated more than a moment but pushed on, shooting the works.

It kept the men moving. Once men stop to seek cover under heavy enemy fire, its tough to get them moving again. A man under fire usually

(10) "Battle Experience" Nr. 92, 12 April 1945, ETO, TIS Library.

feels safer staying where he is, even with inadequate cover, than in moving forward. Continuous moving kept this battalion from being pinned down. . . a condition which delights every enemy artilleryman, who will increase the intensity of his fire to take advantage of a static situation. This unit didn't stop; they kept moving.

By opening up on the source of enemy fire with every available weapon, this unit gained surprise, and the shock of their massed fire power generally reduced the enemy strength so that the continued advance was made through lessening defensive fires.

The greatest advantages of marching fire are psychological. Consider the defending soldier, confident of repelling the attack, he opens fire on order. However, instead of the attacker hitting the dirt-stopped -cold-the attacker lets go with a terrific hail of bullets. With lead splattering all about him, the defender ducks momentarily and then, sneaking a peak a few seconds later, finds the attacker advancing ruthlessly and relentlessly. The attacking forces usually outnumber the defense, and so marching fire, plus the artillery, makes the defensive position "Hot". The defender jerks off a few quick, unaimed shots and then ducks back in his hole. Then he realizes that nothing can stop the approaching wave, in fact the fires becomes more intense and accurate as it approaches. He is licked and knows it. His resistance weakens, sometimes to the point of mass flight or surrender. Many stick to their guns to the last, but they are usually present only for duty. . . their hearts are not in it.

A feeling of irresistible force surges through the attacker as he drives forward. He realizes that nothing can stop his outfit and, as the enemy opens fire, he lets him have it with both barrels. Tension is relieved and the fire smothers the enemy. an exultant urge speeds the attacker on

to close with and kill or capture the foe. . .he feels that he is unbeatable. He did not stop under fire, but rather attacked more vigorously". (11)

An assault, to be successful, must be made as violently and aggressively as possible. The attacker must gain the momentum of the attack and maintain that momentum until the enemy defense crumbles. The enemy must be killed, captured, or he must be made to flee from his position.

"This was illustrated when a composite platoon of Co. "I", 8th Infantry Regiment was counterattacking along a ridge line between Olzheim and Kleinlangenfeld, Germany, in February 1945. The platoon moved forward rapidly along the creast and deployed as skirmishers with the light machine guns on the left flank. When the platoon leader signaled the platoon to open fire, all weapons in the line immediately opened up. Some Germans fell while others scrambled for holes and dugouts. The platoon surged forward, snarling and yelling excitedly, firing every step. The machine gun crews leaped frogged their guns. They kept abreast of the platoon in this manner firing continuously.

This blanket of fire pinned the enemy down and made him hesitate before firing back. However, an enemy machine gun opened up followed by several rifles and a machine pistol. Although the fire was largely wild some of the men of the platoon hit the ground. Realizing that speed was highly important, NCOs got them up quickly. The platoon closed in on the enemy foxholes. The enemy jumped from their holes with frightened eyes and their hands raised. The result of the attack was six enemy dead and thirty two prisoners. The cost to the attacking platoon was one burned arm". (12)

(11) Kelley, John E. Lt Col., "Shoot, Soldier, Shoot", p. 47, Infantry Journal, January 1946, TIS Library.

(12) Stein, Harold, Capt., "Assault Fire: Its Use and Combat Effectiveness in World War II and Korea", p. 9, Monograph TIS Library.

"Smaller units of Lt Col. Kelley's battalion used the M1 rifle, carbine, BAR, light machine gun, M-3 submachine gun, bazooka, and even the pistol, at ranges varying from 25 yards to 700 yards, in a marching fire role.

This unit found that the best formation for marching fire is the platoon in a line of skirmishers, with the BARs and light machine guns scattered along the line. The leaders were kept behind the line to afford best control. The platoon leaders gave the order to fire by firing their weapons, and the men took up the fire as a group. They used the buddy system in which one man fired while his buddy reloaded. This assured continuous fire on the objective. Light machine guns were most effective when the terrain was not too rough for the heavily laden crews to keep up. To best employ this weapon they used a two man team, one to carry the weapon by the sling over his shoulder, firing from the hip, and the other to walk on the left to feed the gun. Ammunition bearers were necessary also. Tracers were used to demoralize the enemy and also to guide the platoon to the objective". (13)

"One assault platoon failed in its mission and suffered the heaviest casualties in the operation when it failed to make adequate use of continuous movement[&] volume of fire (marching fire) allowing the entire platoon to be pinned down. Another platoon given the most difficult objective in the whole operation, figuratively and literally marched up to its objective and over it because they fired all of their weapons, including the light machine guns from the hip. Enemy casualties were twice as heavy here as in any other sector. Men must be made to know that continuous fire on the enemy keeps him pinned down and makes the advance easier". (14)

(13) Kelley, John E. Lt Col., "Shoot, Soldier, Shoot", p. 47, Infantry Journal, January 1946, TIS Library.

(14) "Battle Experience" Nr. 76, 10 March 1945, ETO, TIS Library.

CONCLUSIONS

Continuous movement coupled with a heavy volume of fire during the assault will keep the enemy pinned down and prevent him from employing accurate counterfire against our attacking force. Marching fire will lessen the time necessary to take an objective and, by so doing, maintain the shock and fear placed on the enemy by a tremendous volume of fire on his position. A "pinned down" enemy, of comparable size, can be kept pinned down by a force of platoon size which employs all of its organic fire power and make use of marching fire to move to an objective.

The use of tracer rounds mixed with ball ammunition will enable the individual soldier to better adjust on known enemy targets as he moves to the objective. They will also have a definite psychological effect on the enemy because he will see these tracer rounds coming toward him.

With the use of marching fire a numerically inferior unit can defeat a unit of much larger size by gaining fire superiority at the beginning of the assault and maintaining it until the objective is taken. Marching fire exudes confidence in members of the attacking force. Seeing that the enemy has to keep his head down raises the esprit of the assaulting force and causes them to push harder.

Combat experiences have proven that far more casualties are sustained when an attacking force stop and hit the ground when fired on. Units which immediately return fire when fired on, or who continue to fire and move on to the objective when fired on, sustain far fewer casualties than those which stop and seek cover.

In an assault, volume of fire and speed in reaching the objective is more effective than momentary hesitations in order to place well aim-

ed rounds on known or suspected enemy locations. A complete coverage of the objective should be stressed in all appropriate training, however, the individual should be taught (as part of a team) to maintain a high volume of fire and keep moving until the objective is secured.

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