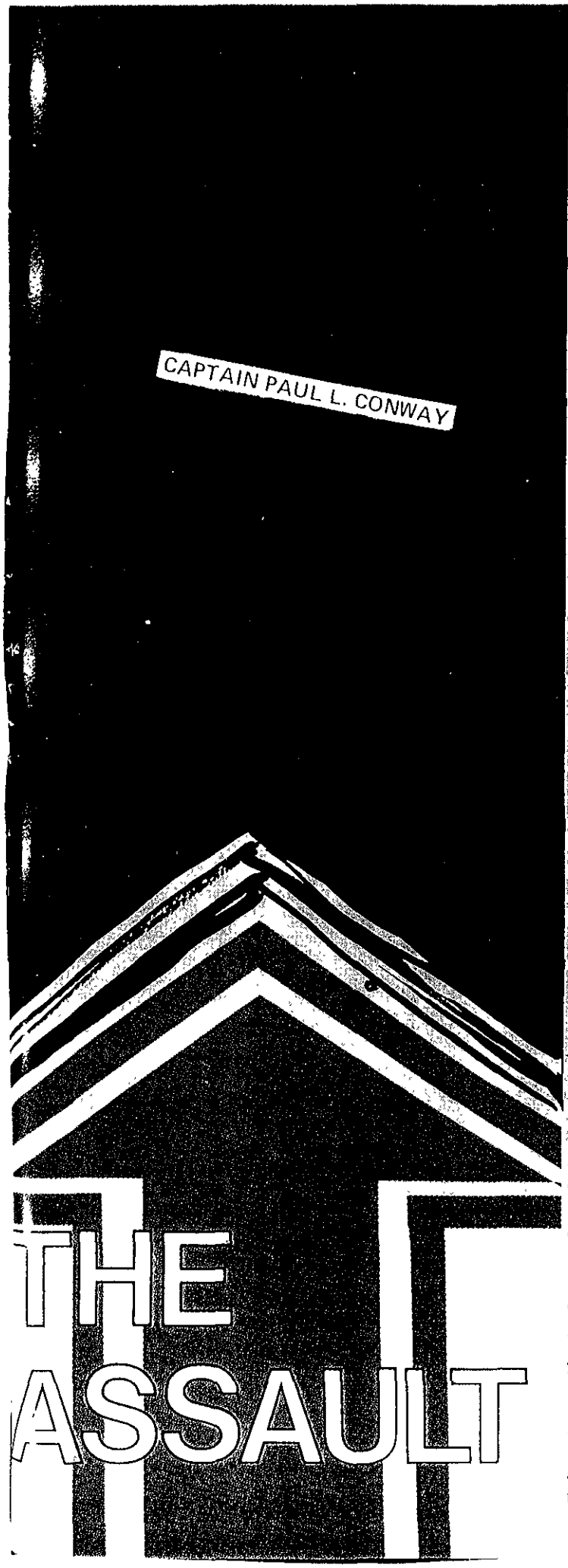


THE ASSAULT

CAPTAIN PAUL L. CONWAY

The infantryman's primary mission is to close with the enemy and either destroy or capture him. But this is easier said than done, because the assault — actually closing with the enemy — may be the most difficult task an infantryman is called on to do. He must leave whatever protective cover he has had, expose himself to the enemy's fire, and move directly against his foe's position, often a stoutly defended position. Mechanized infantry units have the additional problem of deciding whether the situation calls for them to dismount, and if it does, when and where they should do it. It takes a lot of courage, discipline, teamwork, and leadership to do all these things and do them right.

Unfortunately, though, too many of our infantry squads and platoons are not given the kind of assault training they will need to carry out this most difficult of all missions. In fact, far too many of our infantry leaders neglect the small details that can greatly influence their soldiers' chances of surviving an assault. As a step toward remedying this situation, these leaders must first understand the tactics of an assault, and then they must see that their units receive adequate training in carrying out these tactics.

In Europe, the average Soviet-style defensive position consists of a series of mutually supporting strongpoints. These have both individual and crew-served weapon positions linked by communication trenches, and they usually have dug-out places behind the forward trench lines in which armored carriers and tanks can be positioned. Often, the defensive positions are protected by minefields, barbed wire obstacles, and antiarmor ditches designed to channel an assaulting force into defensive fire zones.

This kind of defensive position can be adapted to fit almost any kind of terrain and it can be a tough nut to crack. But mechanized infantry units can crack it if they use some common sense and follow the principles laid down in such field manuals as 71-1, 71-2, and 7-7.

For example, we teach our mechanized infantry units to remain mounted during an assault, unless the terrain prohibits it or the defender's antiarmor fire cannot be suppressed. But common sense tells the commander that the absence or presence of mines probably will be the most important factor he will have to consider in deciding whether his unit should dismount. Certainly it would be a suicidal gesture on his part to order his vehicles into an enemy minefield that was covered by fire.

Even a suspicion that a minefield might be present undoubtedly will slow a mounted assault. And because a minefield cannot be suppressed by fire, most mechanized infantry final assaults against defended positions will be dismounted ones. In these cases, the infantrymen will have to dismount a considerable distance from their objective and remain there until the defensive minefield can be breached. If the situation develops favorably, the carriers might be used to move the infantrymen up to the minefield gaps.

At the same time, the defending force's fires must be suppressed; if its members are too stunned or frightened to shoot back accurately they will lose the edge their

prepared positions have given them. Keeping the opposing force down until the assault platoon gets into the defensive trenches is especially crucial.

Artillery fire is particularly useful in this regard. It can drive the defenders into their dug-outs, kill or wound those above ground, cut through some of the wire obstacles, and use smoke to give the assault force some concealment. Unfortunately, artillery fires must be lifted when the assault unit gets within 200 to 300 meters of the first enemy trenches.

Mortars can be used to thicken artillery fires, to lay smoke, and to hinder enemy movement in areas that the artillery units cannot easily reach. They can also be used to cover the assault troops when the artillery fires must be lifted; mortar fires do not have to be lifted until the first troops get to within 100 meters of the enemy's trenches.

Tank guns and other armor-protected weapons, firing directly on the point where the assault troops will enter the strongpoint, may constitute the most important part of a fire suppression plan. TOWs may be useful for knocking out bunkers and dug-in armored vehicles when the firing starts, but the smoke, dust, and haze raised by the fires of the other weapons may reduce their accuracy, at least with the current equipment. They may be better used in overwatch positions to protect the flanks of the assault unit, or as reinforcements once the strongpoint has been taken.

ASSAULT FORCE

The assault force should be no larger than a platoon. Thus, if a company team of two rifle platoons and a tank platoon is sent against a strongpoint, the tank platoon can be the direct fire suppression force; one rifle platoon can breach the obstacles and minefields while its carrier

weapons help the tanks with suppressive fire; and the other rifle platoon can act as the assault force. Once it has completed its mission, the breaching platoon should be prepared to reinforce the assault platoon.

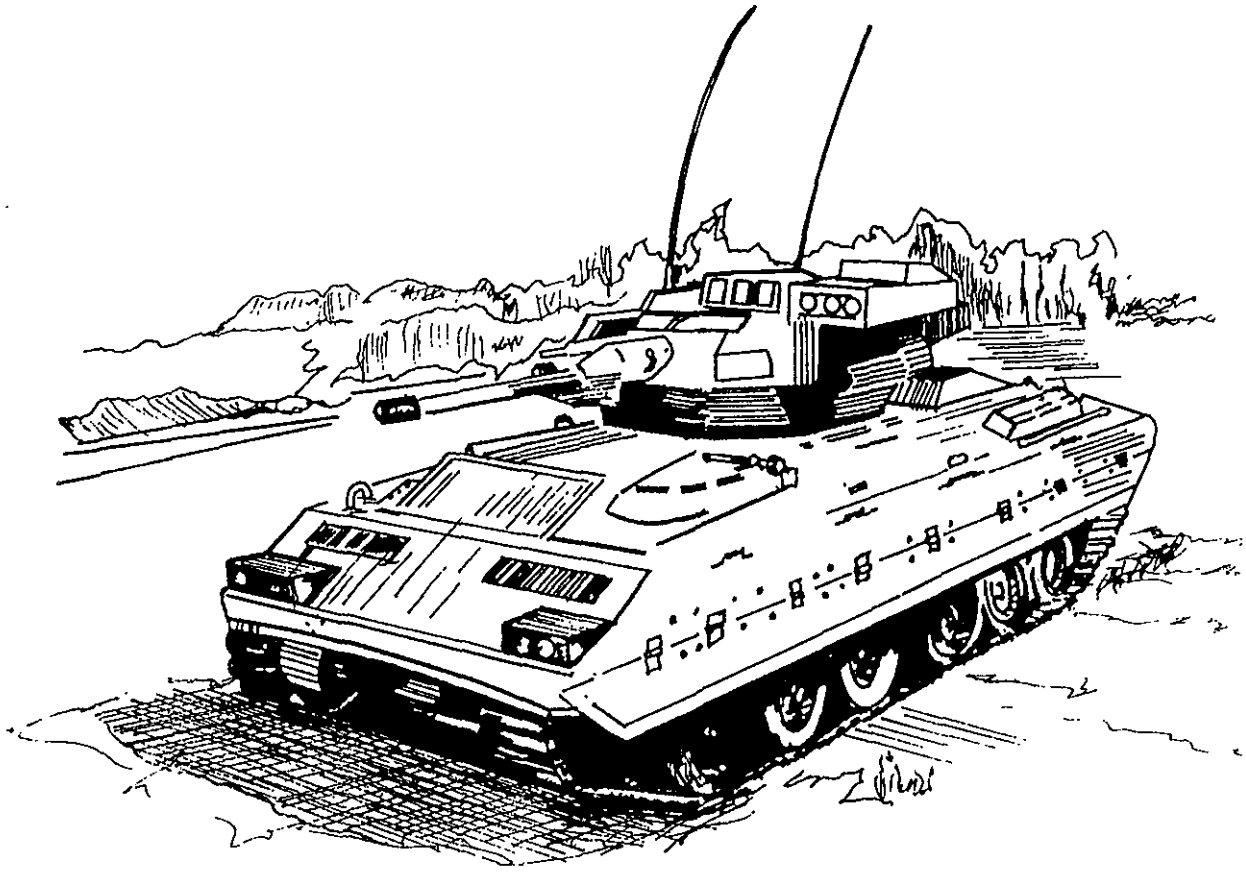
The assault platoon must get into the enemy's trench line as fast as possible. Every second it delays from the time the suppressive fires lift until the first man enters the trenches gives the defenders more time to recover from the shock of the fires.

The assault unit must move rapidly through the breach in the obstacles and then fan out to move against the defenders in the trench line. All the soldiers who are not rushing should fire at known or suspected enemy positions to their front. If the enemy's fire is light, a straightforward charge into the first trench line may be the best way to get the platoon into the enemy's position. Once inside the trench line, the platoon should use the standard trench-clearing procedures shown in Field Manuals 7-7 and 7-8.

The platoon leader may be able to position some of his M60 machineguns to cover his assault, but it is not likely that he will find many good machinegun positions close to the defender's trench line. Accordingly, he should send only one or two of his machineguns with the assault squads and keep the others on the carriers to be brought up later. Extra LAWs should be taken along to be used against bunkers. (The Dragons, which are not assault weapons, should remain on the carriers along with extra equipment such as tripods and field telephones.) Thus, each dismounted soldier in the assault squads should carry his individual weapon, some loaded rifle magazines, hand grenades or M203 rounds, possibly a LAW, an entrenching tool and some water, but little else.

Semi-automatic fire should be stressed, because clearing trenches can use up tremendous amounts of ammunition in a short time, and resupply may be slow.

Suppressive fire must be closely controlled during the assault. Although indirect fire will be shifted by the com-



pany team commander before the assault platoon gets inside the strongpoint, the assault platoon leader should also have a signal for lifting it. A flare is ideal for this purpose.

Control of direct fire is more difficult. Tank fire can be shifted or lifted altogether by flare signal, but the best way to control the supporting machineguns is by simple SOPs, such as the following:

- The assault platoon marks its position by throwing smoke grenades as it moves forward, and the machinegunners aim 50 to 100 meters on either side of the smoke.
- The assault platoon fires 40mm smoke rounds either to identify specific machinegun targets or to mark the platoon's safety limits.

Depending on the size of the strongpoint, the assault platoon may be able to secure only a small part of it, especially if it has to drop off teams to secure communication trenches. Other platoons will have to be sent in to keep the attack going and to completely reduce the strongpoint.

Meanwhile, the assault platoon should organize itself to defend its position. Squad and fire team leaders should redistribute ammunition and account for their men. The platoon's carriers should rejoin the platoon as soon as possible, bringing up more ammunition and other supplies and equipment.

Although these tactical concepts are neither new nor complex in design, they are not simple to do, and infantry platoons, to maintain their proficiency, must constantly practice fire and movement and trench-clearing drills.

To begin with, as a basis for these drills, the soldiers must be well trained in the individual skills they will need on the battlefield. They must know, for example, how to wear their load-bearing equipment properly, with everything tightly secured. (Follow almost any platoon during a live-fire exercise, and you will probably pick up dozens of items of individual equipment.)

Many soldiers do not know how to change their rifle magazines quickly. They need to work on this relatively simple skill every chance they get so that they need only a quick glance to make sure the magazines are properly inserted into their rifles. And they should not waste time trying to put their empty magazines back into their ammunition pouches; during live-fire exercises they can stuff their empty magazines in the pockets of their field pants or inside their shirts.

Above all else, each soldier must be taught to think for himself during an assault, because his squad leader cannot think for him. If a soldier is not well trained in the proper assault techniques, he will tend to lie still until his leaders tell him what to do.

Fire and movement training, also called battle drill, is probably the single most crucial element in assault training. It can be done either in garrison or in the field during collective training.

Initially, a platoon leader should pick a piece of open terrain — a parade field is ideal — close to his barracks area. He should review the individual skills and then have

his squads practice battle drill exercises, separately at first and then together, with the squad leaders moving their units on his command.

As the platoon improves, the platoon leader should move his unit to more difficult terrain and add blank ammunition and pyrotechnics to his exercises. Although the training should be done as often as possible, no one training period should last for more than three hours.

Trench clearing is another of the skills that a unit has to work on. As mentioned earlier, Field Manual 7-7 covers trench clearing in detail. And while units can build sand tables or outline mock trenches with engineer tape, these expedients are not as good as having a full-scale, Soviet-style strongpoint available. Although a strongpoint of this kind is expensive and takes time to build, once built it becomes a tremendously effective training aid. Squads and platoons can practice their trench-clearing techniques on it as well as their other assault exercises. The use of opposing forces and MILES can also do much to increase realism during the training exercises.

Field Manual 7-7 also describes methods that can be used to clear minefields and other obstacles. Here, again, platoons can practice these skills almost anywhere. For example, tin cans can be buried in minefield patterns, and clearing squads can be required to find and mark them. To make the best use of the available time, each squad can be given a lane to clear. This exercise is well worth doing at night. And, if possible, demolition ranges should be run jointly with engineer units.

Finally, live-fire assault exercises are necessary to give the platoons the "feel" of an actual assault. In most cases, some additional weapons training will probably be needed before the actual exercises take place.

For instance, a unit's caliber .50 machinegunners must know how to fire accurately at medium to long ranges — 500 to 1,000 meters — if they expect to be able to lay down any effective kind of suppressive fire when the time comes. Unfortunately, most posts do not have adequate machinegun ranges, and in peacetime our machinegunners rarely fire at ranges over 400 meters.

Tank gunnery ranges (especially those for Tables VI-VIII) are excellent for this kind of training. The APCs should be in hull-down positions when their guns are fired, and they should change positions frequently. If tank gunnery ranges are not available, mortar and artillery ranges can be used, but any movement forward of the firing points is usually forbidden. This type of firing might be combined with a mounted firing exercise to give the soldiers practice in firing from their carriers while they move along.

After the platoons have completed their additional weapons training and have mastered the battle drills, the live-fire assault exercises can be held. They can be as simple as or as elaborate as the senior commander wishes. All of them, though, should include two main features: They should emphasize fire and movement, and they should feature some kind of fire support. Thus, an excellent live-fire problem can be run with a unit's organic mortars as the only available fire support weapons. At the same time, they must not overdo fire support, because it can require the various unit commanders to spend most of their time planning for and controlling the fire support means instead of paying attention to the actual assault.

Leaders should not expect things to work well the first time they conduct assault live-fire exercises. Most platoons tend to move hesitatingly and with long pauses between firing. Some soldiers run out of ammunition before they reach their objective, while others fire only sporadically. A number of soldiers always seem to fumble with their magazines as they try to reload their rifles. But with appropriate attention to individual skills and with some practice in battle drills and trench clearing in advance, assault live-fire exercises can be executed successfully — and they *should* be.

The assault, in the past, has received less attention than it deserves, and all infantry commanders must do a better job in training their soldiers to carry out this most difficult of all infantry tasks. If they do not, their soldiers simply will not know how to do it when the time comes.

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