

Infantry in Action



CHARGE!

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We scoff at the mob rushes of the Japanese and deride the mass assaults of the Germans, with their wildly spraying sub-machineguns.* Time and again our Doughboys have mowed down these masses of men by the hundreds. Yet, is our conception of the classic bayonet charge any great improvement?

What really does happen when the Infantry rifleman comes face to face with his foe and closes in for the kill? Does anyone who has been in battle recently believe that the fight ends with a charge, a loud "hurrah," and cold steel in the gizzard? This might have been true in the days of single-shot weapons and massed formations, but with the coming of the semi-automatic rifle, and with the vastly increased number of automatic weapons in the squad and platoon, the classic bayonet charge must soon take its place in history beside the cavalry charge.

How, then, does the assault really take place?

Speaking generally, the commander of any unit, regardless of size, goes through the following steps in order to deliver a coordinated assault with his outfit. He first maneuvers his troops as close to the enemy position as possible under the cover of smoke, darkness, natural cover and concealment, and supporting fires of other units.

Next he deploys his rifle units and organic weapons in preparation to support their own further advance by fire and movement.

He must, of course, coordinate the time that his rifle units are to continue movement with the time that his own supporting weapons are to open fire and with the time that supporting fires of other units are to lift.

Next, on command, signal, or time schedule, he starts a simultaneous, coordinated movement of all subordinate units toward the objective. Having brought his troops into close con-

tact with the enemy; having assured a simultaneous effort by all assaulting units; and having prescribed a point of departure and an objective for each unit, the commander has done about all he can do to insure success. Thereafter, he will have little control of his assaulting rifle units until the attack is over and reorganization is completed. His only further influence of the action is by shifting the supporting fire, by personally accompanying and supervising one of his subordinate units, and by his personal example and encouragement.

After the battalion commander has launched his companies in the assault, each of the company commanders may still be able to retain control of his company, moving it to an intermediate objective farther forward under cover of artillery fire, heavy weapons fire, smoke, and natural concealment. During this "close approach" phase, it is desirable for each commander to retain control of his unit as long as possible, for it can be plainly seen that one uncontrolled squad, straying some distance in advance of the formation, might prematurely mask the supporting fires which are protecting the advance of the entire company.

Thus the company commander retains control of his platoons as long as possible before launching the coordinated company assault on the final objective. He can keep this control until the company reaches the last natural covered position.

In the same way, after the company assault is launched, the platoon leader retains control of the movement of his squads as long as possible. The platoon phase of movement will usually start within a few hundred yards of the enemy position, and will often have to be made across ground entirely exposed to enemy observation. Therefore the platoon will usually advance to its assault position covered only by supporting artillery, mortar and machinegun fire, and smoke. The closest point to the enemy which the platoon can reach before launching squads into the final assault will be the point at which supporting fires

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First, the commander maneuvers his troops as close to the enemy position as possible under the cover of smoke, darkness, natural cover and concealment, and supporting fires of other units.

of other units are masked. This may be any distance from 75 to 300 yards, depending upon the terrain, the type of supporting fires, and the mental conditioning of the troops.

Having arrived at this point, the platoon leader makes sure that his squads are ready to move forward together before he launches the assault. Some men and groups will arrive at the assault position before others. Some casualties have usually occurred, and a key man here and there may have to be replaced within the squads. An enemy machinegun may be covering the ground immediately in front of the platoon, necessitating a delay until it can be knocked out with a mortar, bazooka, or grenade, or until it can be neutralized with rifle fire and smoke. A wire obstacle may have to be cut. The men may be momentarily winded from crawling and rushing forward. At any rate, the platoon leader notes all these things, takes the necessary action to overcome the various obstacles, and selects the best psychological moment when all squads are ready to launch the platoon assault.

Before lifting supporting fires, the platoon leader must increase the rate of fire of his own weapons in order to maintain fire superiority. He commands or signals to the squad leaders and men near him to fire faster. He may emphasize his order by firing several rounds rapidly himself. All other members of the platoon should promptly take up the rapid rate of fire in order to completely neutralize the enemy to the front. At this time rifle grenadiers and rocket-launcher teams should *blind* and neutralize located enemy automatic weapons to the flanks by firing smoke grenades at them. Supporting units, hearing the increase of fire, must also fire faster in order to

completely neutralize dangerous areas to the flanks of the assaulting platoon.

Thus, if everybody has done his job properly and at the correct time, conditions should now be ideal for the "kill." No one will sense this more clearly than the leading riflemen, and the beneficial morale effect of this overwhelming mass of supporting fire upon our own riflemen is at least as important as its opposite effect on the enemy.

Now let us think, for a moment, in terms of economy of ammunition. This intense volume of fire cannot be maintained for long and is limited by the amount the troops can carry when they move forward in the attack. It cannot be maintained at all if we expand our ammunition prematurely at a time when it is not absolutely essential. That is why each commander moves as close to the enemy as possible before resorting to fire of his own organic weapons for support.

Rifle squads and platoons advance without firing until they are forced by effective hostile small-arms fire to advance by fire and movement; or until they arrive within effective small-arms range (200-400 yards) of the enemy, and are exposed to enemy observation. Thereafter, the rate of fire should be moderate—just enough to support the advance—and the advance must be as rapid as possible to reduce the time of supporting fires to a minimum. As a general rule, rifles, automatic weapons, grenadiers, and bazooka teams, within the platoon, do not engage any target during the earlier phases of the attack, which can be engaged by other supporting weapons.

The platoon must arrive, then, in the final assault position with the maximum of ammunition of all types still in the hands

of the troops. Furthermore, once the rate of fire is increased to the maximum rate, the assault must be completed as rapidly as possible before too much ammunition is expended.

Bayonets will be fixed for the final assault—yes. But when we think of killing, we must think of bullets fired at point-blank range. The bayonet is the final threat and the last reserve. It may be used in emergency, but precious few enemy soldiers survive long enough to be killed with a bayonet.

The platoon leader, then, at the crucial moment shifts supporting fires from in front of the platoon and signals his squads to move forward in the assault. Fires may be shifted on signal (colored smoke, rocket, tracers fired vertically), on time schedule (previously arranged with supporting units), upon increasing the rate of fire by the platoon (which can be heard by supporting units), upon passing a predesignated spot on the ground, or they may be shifted at the discretion of supporting weapon observers whenever they see that fire is masked by the advance of leading riflemen. A signal should be specified only as an emergency means, and one or more of the alternate methods above should always be provided for.

There are several ways in which the platoon leader may start the forward movement of the squads. Again, he may use a signal—but it cannot be relied upon and is an emergency means only. If he can get the attention of his squad leaders, he will simply signal, or command *forward*. If he cannot, he may be able to relay the order down the line by word of mouth to the squad leaders. If the enemy is obviously wavering, is weak, and is making no effort to fire back, squads or groups of individuals will probably start forward without waiting for orders. In an emergency, if squad leaders cannot be contacted, the platoon leader will take personal charge of individuals nearest him and lead them forward, thus showing the rest of the platoon, by personal example, what he wants them to do.

The platoon assault must not be thought of as a conventional mob rush where an entire platoon stampedes forward at a run, shooting and yelling, with gleaming bayonets. That is exactly what we must avoid, as the Japanese and Germans have learned to their sorrow time and again.

No. The movement is still under control except that the initiative had been decentralized to squads and squad leaders. Squad leaders move their squads into the objective aggressively, regardless of the progress of other squads to the right and left. But they move their squads through the enemy position by small group rushes, with every move covered by fire of the rest of the squad and platoon. The more enemy resistance encountered, the shorter the rushes, and the smaller the groups. If resistance is very heavy or if there are serious natural and artificial obstacles, groups have to crawl forward instead of walking or running. Squad leaders direct and control the movement of their men as closely as possible. The platoon leader joins in the assault at whatever point he can best influence the action of his squads. He takes charge of groups and individuals whenever necessary and directs or leads them forward onto the objective.

As a matter of SOP training, automatic-rifle teams and rifle grenadiers 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 make each forward rush.

During the closing phase of the assault, when the enemy are surrendering and resistance is at an end, and when enemy observation from adjacent areas is blanketed by smoke or reduced visibility, an entire unit may rise and move forward at a walk or run in order to occupy its objective fast, mop up, and reorganize. But this is exceptional. However, troops must be trained to avoid rushes of over thirty to forty yards, when close to the enemy, unless specifically ordered otherwise by the unit leader. When enemy fire stops, for any reason, the instinctive tendency of civilized man is to stop shooting, to get up and look around, and if nothing happens, to start moving forward.

If all members of a squad or platoon do this at the same time, there is nothing to prevent hostile machinegunners from rising up and reopening fire, with tragic results for our side. *This may sound ridiculous, but it is exactly what has happened and continues to happen to green units in combat, time and again.* The platoon and squad leader must control the advance as closely as possible in order to prevent just such an occurrence.

So far, we have pictured the situation in which separate battalion, company, and platoon assaults are launched at different times and locations. Let us consider, briefly, the situation where all three are simultaneous. Under cover of fog, smoke, darkness, or woods, it is sometimes possible to deploy an entire company or battalion secretly within a hundred yards or so of a known enemy position. This might occur when another unit is in close contact with the enemy and is covering the deployment. Under such circumstances, the platoon and company assault and possibly the battalion assault are simultaneous. The final assault might then be launched on order or signal of the company or battalion commander. Here, the platoon leader's job is much simpler, but the final platoon assault is still delivered in the same manner. If the flanks are covered by reduced visibility and by the presence of friendly troops the entire unit might move forward as a group, using assault fire. But this should be tried only when enemy resistance is known to be weak, or when complete surprise is assured.

After the first few bitter experiences, our soldiers in combat learn to do these things as a matter of habit, but the price of learning is often measured in blood. In combat, however, as in rifle marksmanship, experts are made or lost in preliminary instruction, not during record firing. There is no reason why we cannot overcome in training the preconceived idea of the classic bayonet charge and produce expert fighters before we play the game for keeps.