Light Infantry Weapons Squads

CAPTAIN ROBERT THORNTON

A light infantry company's medium machineguns, 60mm mortars, and antiarmor weapons are key to its ability to succeed in combat. The machineguns and mortars allow it to achieve fire superiority and provide a base of suppressive fire for maneuver elements to close with the enemy by reaching positions in defilade with high explosive, obscuring enemy fires with white phosphorus, or desynchronizing the enemy's ability to fight by well-placed indirect fire. The Dragon or Javelin will provide the company's only organic antiarmor capability. When positioned properly, these weapons can initiate a well-placed antiarmor ambush or defense of an obstacle. To reach their full potential, however, these squads must have training that goes beyond qualification and sustainment.

Weapons squads are a part of the task organization of the rifle platoon. Generally, this translates into a weapons squad leader (staff sergeant) and two gun teams, each consisting of a gunner (corporal), an assistant gunner (private first class), and an ammunition bearer. These are the same soldiers who often wind up as the antiarmor teams, because dedicated personnel for the teams are not available.

The training of the weapons squad is the primary responsibility of the weapons squad leader, the platoon sergeant, and the platoon leader. They provide the platoon with its base of fire and constitute a sizable amount of its firepower. But they do not reach their potential because operating tempo and lack of experience at the junior officer level make it hard just to maintain qualifications and support maneuver exercises.

The second lieutenant usually takes a rifle platoon as his first assignment. In the best cases, he has three rifle squads, a weapons squad, and a headquarters, consisting of the platoon sergeant, a medic, a radiotelephone operator, and himself. He probably gets about 12 months in this job, but not always.

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In a garrison environment, he and the platoon sergeant manage all the administrative aspects of the platoon, from awards, physical training, equipment accountability and serviceability, weapons qualification, and a host of other things to get ready for a readiness cycle or a training deployment. He is also involved in planning training for his squads during upcoming tactical environments if the training exercise permits.

In a tactical or field environment, he supervises squad training (both force-on-force and maneuver live-fire exercises) and executes platoon training as part of a company or battalion directed event. Most of what the platoon does consists of battle drills at the squad and platoon level. The average second lieutenant is leaving his first job about the time he really begins to understand what needs to be done. The thinking is that he can rely on the real constants in a company—the NCOs—to help him ensure that things are done to standard. But what about time to take that training to a level beyond qualification, to a higher standard?

On the other hand, the rifle company executive officer (XO) probably has had a specialty platoon that gave him an appreciation of mobility and countermobility, integration of an assortment of direct and indirect fire weapons into the fight, and most of all, experience. The average XO has about two years of experience in the battalion. He understands the commander's intent better, can formulate a solid training plan within the commander's guidance, and can conceptualize nonstandard training

events. He understands relationships between time available for training due to battalion driven events, how to obtain training areas and ammunition, and how the battalion functions. He is one step away from a company command. What better officer to put in charge of training the soldiers who constitute the company's organic firepower?

The platoons will still be task organized with two machinegun teams if the mission requires it. I am not advocating removing the platoon's base of fire, but not every mission requires two machinegun teams, or an antiarmor capability at platoon level. Often the mission is better served with the company's firepower concentrated and directed to best support the momentum of the attack.

As many times as we practice a platoon mission, it does not require many casualties to make a platoon ineffective. A company stands a much greater chance of succeeding than a platoon, no matter what the odds might be. Platoons seize parts of an objective or allow another portion of the platoon or company to move forward. A habitual relationship should be formed between platoons and weapons squads, but they should be consolidated at the company level for training and tasked out as directed in the commander's order.

Consolidating the weapons squads under the XO has other benefits as well. The company mortars and machineguns can be synchronized by the XO from a consolidated support-by-fire (SBF) position. An appropriate weapons mix within the SBF has a better chance of suppressing or destroying key aspects of the enemy's defenses. Four M240 machineguns and two Javelins initiating the direct-fire portion of an attack—while 60mm fires harass enemy positions, or screen the maneuver element attempting to gain a foothold—stand a better chance if they are well coordinated.

With technical innovations—such as the soldier intercom system, night vision devices (NVDs), better optics, and laser aiming devices—fires can be redirected quickly as maneuver elements become bogged down or other elements are passed through. This level of synchronization reduces the risk of fratricide because the less independent elements are firing into the objective. It reduces the loss of soldiers to enemy fire, because a heavy volume of well-placed fire is moved onto the enemy as necessary.

This level of synchronization does not automatically come from three weapons squads from three platoons task organized into a company SBF for a specific mission. Instead, it requires that the company base-of-fire train its individual parts as a whole all of the time. Every maneuver live-fire range I have seen has suffered from several problems. The surface danger zones (range fans) require that only certain positions be occupied as an SBF. These positions are too close to the objective because the closer the SBF, the narrower the fan. If it were farther away, the left and right limits would inhibit maneuver onto the objective. This is a part of maximizing safety while being able to integrate all of the company's organic direct-fire weapons.

This method of training does not train all aspects of providing a base of fire for a maneuver element. Like indirect fires, which are governed by a similar set of guidelines, it does exercise some of the coordination pieces, but not as many of the required skills—such as concentration of direct and indirect fires or shifting all weapons in the SBF to sustain momentum. It's not easy to achieve overlapping beaten zones in front of the element moving across the objective while simultaneously neutralizing bunkers and destroying vehicles with missiles or providing indirect fires that screen, mark targets, or isolate the objective. Units must train for this, and train hard. You can't just show up at the fight and hope to pull that off.

Since most maneuver ranges will not let you fire dud-producing munitions into a range that will be reoccupied the following day or week by another unit, or that do not have targets at longer ranges from which you can actually shift fires, you are forced to run a non-standard training program. This program should consist of individual training such as separate ranges, coordinated rehearsals such as rock drills, and integrated live-fire exercises.

The leaders within the consolidated weapons section should attend individual training on qualification ranges, as a minimum. For example, the mortar squad leaders and section sergeant should have an understanding of things like the fire control and distribution required of an M240 gunner. Conversely, the weapons squad leader should be thinking about such things as how a short round of white phosphorus could affect his part of the mission. This kind of appreciation can go a long way in preventing or quickly solving problems that are bound to occur when things are most critical. It will also make the most of training resources.

The capstone training event is an integrated live-fire exercise that would replicate in both intensity and duration the fire support of a maneuver element's movement onto and across the objective. Most impact areas have ranges or sections dedicated to indirect fire weapons and attack aviation, and these areas are usually target rich with old combat engineer vehicles, tanks, personnel carriers, and assorted other objects. The area selected should provide targets that require shifts laterally and in depth, and should also support range fans for all the weapons to be fired.

Since there is no actual maneuver element to force the shifts in fire, these should be designated by the fire plan, with the XO providing the cue. An audible signal that causes a change in the fire plan due to engagement criteria for the Dragon or Javelin gunners, such as a vehicle moving onto the objective, is an example of intentionally disrupting the fire plan to train the SBF to react, engage the target, then pick up where it left off, while continuing to maintain the momentum of the maneuver element.

What I noticed as a lieutenant in the light infantry was that it was difficult to make any real headway in training the weapons squad. As a second lieutenant rifle platoon leader, I had a full plate and did not understand the full value of my weapons squad. The only time I saw them receive the kind of attention and training that made them lethal was

the train-up provided by the live-fire branch at the Joint Readiness Training Center.

With training time divided among a number of tasks, I believe that consolidating the company's organic firepower for training and then cross-attaching those assets to meet specific mission requirements can raise the level of proficiency within a weapons squad. It can turn a marginally effective base of fire into an element that supports the scheme of maneuver and maintains momentum. Once you tie the weapons squad in with the company mortars and the company's second in command, you have a capable, flexible element controlled by an experienced leader who understands what the maneuver element needs to succeed in combat.

Captain Robert Thornton led rifle and anti-armor platoons in the 187th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, and is now assistant S-3, 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry. He is a 1996 ROTC graduate of Austin Peay State University.