

# Infantry Combat

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*The remarks below were extracted from a much longer address delivered by Gen DePuy to the Infantry Officers Advance Course at Fort Benning in Oct 1989 and published in the March-April 1990 issue of Infantry.*

Before I talk about infantry tactics and their evolution, I want to put my remarks in an operational context, because I think that if you just do a bottoms up look at it there's always something missing. I'm going to start with a proposition that will run through my comments. It's a little above your present rank level, but it's going to affect your lives and I want you to grasp its significance.

That proposition is this: that the purpose of offensive operations—tactical offensive operations—is to achieve freedom of operational maneuver toward strategically important operational objectives. That's a big mouthful. What it means, though, is that just attacking isn't the objective of the exercise. The object of the attack is to break through the defense or go around it so you can move to important objectives. Conversely, then, and obviously, the purpose of the defense is to prevent the enemy from doing that to you—to prevent him from breaking or circumventing your defense, achieving operational freedom of maneuver, and moving toward the objectives you don't want him to have. (In NATO, that is not too difficult to visualize.) All else is secondary. Raids, special operations, and so on, are all important, but they're all secondary.

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There's a long history with respect to direct fire suppression, and not all of it in the U.S. Army. I know you have solved a lot of these problems, but I doubt that you have solved all of them.

I suppose most of you have read General Erwin Rommel's book *Infantry Attacks*, and you may remember that he had the same problem with the Italians and the Rumanians, in the Carpathians and the Alps. He was in that unusual battalion that had three, four, five machinegun companies and a lot of rifle

companies, and he personally positioned all the machineguns and gave them targets. After shutting down all enemy fire, he then penetrated on about a one-squad front—brought his reserves through personally and operated in the enemy's rear. That is probably the most difficult task—tactical technique or task—that one could devise. But it's just about the only way you can get through a linear defense frontally with acceptable casualties (acceptable means very low).

I know you practice that some of the time. That means that instead of two up and one back, you've got one up and five back, or one up and three back. In other words, the bulk of the force is shooting. The greatest part of the force is involved in firepower and the smallest part is involved in maneuver in that particular technique. I know that is counter-intuitive in an Army that favors *maneuver*—but think about it.

The Israelis solve the problem by dropping into a base of fire position any element that initially receives fire from an enemy trench line or a bunker or an air-field defense, and bringing armored vehicles up to augment the base of fire. Then they go around the flank and work down the trench line with rifles and hand grenades.

About halfway through World War II, the U.S. Army began to learn how to do that. The first signs of wisdom are enshrined in a statement that became popular: "Pin 'em down and go around 'em." That is good sound tactics.

Armored combat commanders, much like you have in your mech and tank task forces, from the very beginning learned how to suppress with all the firepower of the armored task force. The first time I ever saw that happen I was awestruck. I saw a tank-infantry task force of the 4th Armored Division going by the edge of a forest. On the way by, they turned

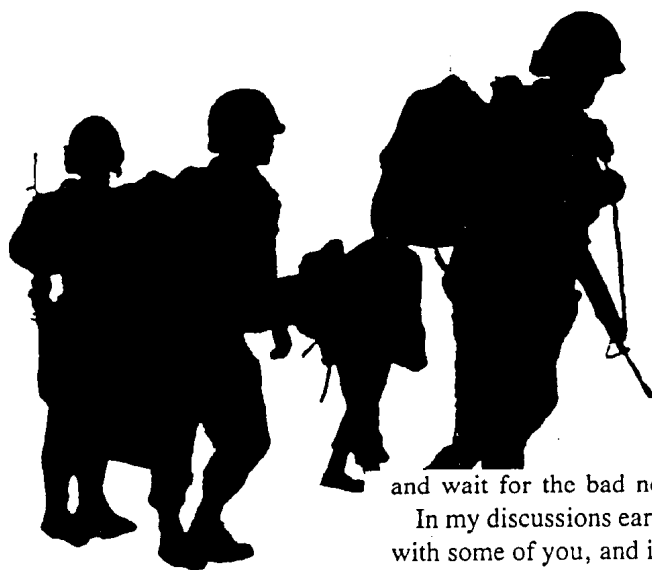
every gun they had toward the woods. They called it reconnaissance by fire in those days, but what it was was suppression. They put so much fire on the woodline no one ever knew if there was anything in the woods.

Mechanized infantry today has the same opportunity. Ninety percent of the firepower of the mechanized platoon is in its armored vehicles and others of the task force, and only a small amount with the dismounted infantry. Obviously, you're not going to put the 15 to 20 men in the rifle platoon in a killing zone unsupported. So you're going to have to shut the enemy down.

That is a short story of the evolution of infantry tactics. It connects what you're doing with what people learned the hard way a long time ago.

I want to talk to you now about another dimension of these problems that I call the baleful influence of boundaries. In World War I, such great men as George Marshall, who was then G-3 of the 1st Division and then G-3 of an army, became famous for moving masses of troops around and squeezing them into very narrow zones of attack. For example, in the Meuse-Argonne some of the American division sectors or zones were only three kilometers wide, and these were divisions of 27,000 men. Now that, gentlemen, is why the whole idea of two up and one back became ingrained—embedded in the doctrine and the consciousness of western armies. It was the way to crowd a lot of troops into a very small area. But, obviously, the effect of that was that they all attacked straight ahead.

Unfortunately, the two up and one back technique—which was invented for control purposes, a way to squeeze a lot of people into a small area—was adopted by our World War II amateur army (that was what it was) as a concept of operations.



I would say that half of our battalion commanders in World War II thought that two up and one back was a concept of operation instead of just a formation. The very first attack I participated in in Normandy as a battalion S-3, we did exactly that—two up and one back right into the killing zone. It accounted for the kinds of casualties we suffered.

It has also been devastating at the operational level. When you look back and wonder why, for example, the U.S. Army ever attacked in the Huertgen Forest, the answer is obvious. The forest was straight in front of the VII Corps of the First Army—and everybody just went straight ahead.

Now, in most cases, it's not just a formation, but two up and one back is, of course, the worst possible thing to do. I know none of you would do that, but there are plenty of people who still do it. If you know where the enemy is, then you certainly won't put two of your three combat elements in his killing zone. And if you *don't* know where the enemy is, you aren't going to put two of your elements forward where they might stumble into his killing zone.

## LEADERSHIP COP-OUT

Anyhow, using formations instead of concepts of operation is simply a leadership cop-out. The Russians call them corridor commanders—commanders who simply take their mission, divide it up among their subordinates, and sit back

and wait for the bad news.

In my discussions earlier this morning with some of you, and in the read-ahead material I was sent earlier, I found and we discussed some questions about decentralized versus centralized control, and we talked about attrition versus maneuver. I want to say to you that none of these theological debates get you very far. The fact of the matter is that when you get in your companies and battalions you're going to be executing concepts of operation cooked up by your next higher commander, and it will inhibit you to some extent. His concept—his order—will tell you exactly what to do, where to do it, and when to do it. You can look on that as being restrictive and counterproductive, but let me tell you that if your superior commanders do not have a concept of operation and if that concept is not dominating the battle you are in, your side is losing. You may have all the freedom you want, but you're also going to have the freedom to lose. You need to put yourself in that context.

What is left for you to do, and how do you do it? There's often a discussion of whether synchronization is incompatible with maneuver, but that's a dumb way to look at it. Synchronization is not just a complicated word. Synchronization is combining the arms within some kind of operational concept in a particular engagement or battle. You should be horrified, each of you, if your battalion staff, brigade staff, and division and corps staffs are not synchronizing all the combat support they can get their hands on in behalf of their concept and your lesser included role within it.

Synchronization is not a bad word. The name of the game, the formula to be

followed, is that you should get all the synchronization that time and good judgement will allow.

I want to end up by saying that although we don't like rules, we do like principles. But it seems to me that there's a rule we learned in World War I, in World War II, in Korea, and in Vietnam that really ought to be elevated to the status of a principle. That rule or principle is "Never fight a battle—any battle, in the offense or defense—the way the other guy wants you to fight it." He wants you in his killing zones. He wants you to get mousetrapped, and then destroyed by a counterattack. He wants you to be two up and one back.

So the name of the game is never to do that, but to use your head to figure out some way to handle the other guy in a way he doesn't want, doesn't like, doesn't expect, and can't handle.

I'll just give you a few of the things we discovered along the way, some of which are applicable to you and some of which may be chiefly of historical interest. The repertoire of alternatives to ploughing into the enemy's killing zones arise out of the conviction that almost anything is better than that.

The easiest solution, and the one that armored divisions in World War II used, was encapsulated in that somewhat rude statement—"Bypass, haul ass, and call for the frigging infantry." That is, just leave the problem behind. One problem is that we now have armored forces, but no infantry divisions following along to do the dishes. So just bypassing the enemy and leaving him there is not always permissible. But when you get to exploitation and operational maneuver, it's exactly the thing to do. Just let him stay back there hopelessly and uselessly behind.

The second best solution, we thought, was to find a gap and slip through it with a battalion (usually a whole battalion) often single file, often at night, and sit down on a piece of terrain behind the enemy that he couldn't afford to let us have—a piece of terrain that once we were on it he had to come after us or abandon the entire position.

Then the enemy has to attack you and you're down and waiting and he's up and moving and, gentlemen, no matter how romantic you may be about the attack be-

ing the preferred method, my preferred method is staying alive while killing the enemy. The aim is to get him up and moving while you're down and waiting. That doesn't mean you don't go on the offense. But if you can sit down on a piece of terrain right behind his front, in the middle of his airfield or whatever, and he has to come to you, that's what you constantly seek once you become a seasoned soldier.

If you can't find a flank or a gap, the third solution that we learned to prefer was simply to infiltrate through him, at night, using very small units (squads, maybe platoons) right to the final objective.

That is not the way the enemy wants to fight the war. He doesn't want somebody infiltrating through him. He wants them to come in by platoons and companies and issue orders and talk on the radio and call artillery and to keep trying it again and again. All of this, of course, he wants to take place on the terrain he has selected. Infiltration, then, is a superior solution.

The fourth is to pin him down with very heavy suppression and go around him and attack him on the flank or the rear. That is, I would say, sort of the classic solution, right? That's a sort of drill that we go through, and the drill the Israelis go through all the time.

And the fifth solution, the toughest of all, is to do a Rommel. You ought to be able to do a Rommel in your light infantry company or your battalion, but you won't be able to do one unless you practice it a lot.

I would say that if you become professional at your job, whether you're in a mechanized company or in a Ranger company, whether you're going on a raid, whether you're fighting in Europe or in a light battalion in Central America, you're going to come up against all of the problems I've been discussing. They are eternal infantry problems.

In other words, you will find yourself having to attack an enemy position to accomplish a mission. Wherever it may be, you're going to find out that the defender has a lot of advantages that you will have to avoid or overcome. The time to think about all those things is now.

When I commanded the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam, we received hundreds of lieutenants from Fort Benning and OCS, and I have to tell you that almost without exception—this was in 1966 or 1967—these platoon leaders would, if not otherwise instructed, almost automatically proceed in a column and deploy into a line when the first shots were fired and assault into the enemy position as a sort of puberty rite, a test of manhood.

Instead, a platoon leader should always think of the leading element as being on a reconnaissance mission for the company commander and the battalion commander so he's out there to find out where the enemy is, try to figure out the enemy strength so that the company and battalion commanders can make decisions. That's the professional way to fight a war.

It just so happens that the Viet Cong very often did it right. Our companies or battalions would be probed a few times by their reconnaissance elements and then sometimes nothing more would happen. We had to conclude that they took a look at us and decided it was a bad show and they would wait until another day. The U.S. Army seldom does that. There's some kind of an automatic exhilaration that takes place when the first rounds are fired. We have a very strong tendency then to charge.

I know that the lessons I have been talking about were primarily learned in World War I, learned again in World War II and Korea, and learned again the hard way in Vietnam, in Grenada, and probably in Panama. They have not gone away. They are classic infantry problems that you, too, will face. The thing to do now is to think them out ahead of time and practice ways to avoid repeating the U.S. Army's bloody initiation rites during almost all of its wars.

Good luck!

