



World War II Infantry Tactics: Squad and Platoon (Elite)

By Stephen Bull

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Osprey's study of infantry tactics of the squads and platoons of World War II (1939-1945). Despite all technological advances, final mastery of any battlefield depends upon the tight-knit group of footsoldiers trained to manoeuvre, shoot and dig in. This first of a two-part study examines the methods by which the Western infantry of World War II - the German, British and US armies - actually brought their firepower to bear. Drawing upon period training manuals for the evolving theory, and on personal memoirs for the individual practice, this first book covers the organization and tactics of the squad of ten or a dozen men, and the platoon of three or four squads. The text is illustrated with contemporary photographs and diagrams, and with colour plates bringing to life the movement of soldiers on the battlefield.

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Editorial Review

From the Publisher

An unrivalled illustrated reference source on fighting men and commanders, past and present. Each volume is packed with full colour artwork, making military history uniquely accessible to enthusiasts of all ages.

About the Author

Dr Stephen Bull is the Curator of the Museum of Lancashire in Preston, which incorporates the collections of several local regiments. Born in 1960, he graduated from the University of Wales with a BA (Hons) in history and obtained his doctorate from University College, Swansea. For several years he worked at the National Army Museum. He has written numerous articles for specialist journals, including a number on the weapons and tactics of World War I.

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An extract from 'Squad Tactics – Offensive'

Basic American squad formations as described in the Rifle Company manual of 1942 were remarkably similar to the German equivalents. The US 'squad column' saw the squad strung out, with the leader and BAR man to the fore, and the remainder in file to the rear to a length of roughly 60 paces. Such a formation was 'easily controlled and manoeuvred', and 'suitable for crossing areas exposed to artillery fire, for utilising narrow covered routes, and for movement in woods, fog, smoke, and darkness'.

The 'skirmish line' was similar to the Schützenkette. The squad was deployed in a rough line about 60 paces long; the skirmish line was of benefit in bringing all weapons to bear, and useful for short rapid dashes, but not so easy to control. An alternative was the 'squad wedge', suitable for ready movement in any direction and when emerging from cover or a defile. More vulnerable than a skirmish line, wedges were best used beyond the range of effective rifle fire. Once under fire the US squad was taught to advance either by short rushes, or by 'creep' and 'crawl', taking advantage of cover. Although it may only rarely have been practicable, a detailed scheme of 'fire distribution' formed part of squad training for the fire fight:

'Each member of the squad fires his first shot on that portion of the target corresponding generally to his position in the squad. He then distributes his next shots right and left of his first shots, covering that part of the target on which he can deliver accurate fire without having to change position. The amount of the target which one man can cover will depend upon the range and position of the firer. Frequently each man will be able to cover the target with accurate fire; this should be done whenever possible. Fire is not limited to points within the target known to contain an enemy; on the contrary, all men space their shots so that no portion of the target remains unhit. Automatic riflemen fire bursts of about five rounds at the slow cyclic rate (in about one second). This method of fire distribution is employed without command. The squad leader observes the fire to insure that the entire target is kept under fire. If other targets appear, he announces such changes in fire distribution as are necessary.'

Even if the niceties were ignored, the implication is inescapable: the US infantryman was taught to treat the enemy position as an area target, to be evenly filled with lead whether or not specific individuals could be seen and hit. Frequently this is exactly what was done; it was definitely no mere 'theory'. A letter of instruction issued in April 1944 by Gen Patton to his unit commanders in US Third Army specifically stated that 'If you cannot see the enemy, you can at least shoot the place where he is apt to be.' According to

Patton's opinion fire was better aimed short than long in cases of doubt, since 'ricochets make nastier sounds and wounds'.

For the textbook attack, US squad leaders were enjoined to give specific orders to individuals and as much information as possible about what was intended. The squad would then move forward, 'fire and movement' being employed when 'fire action' became necessary to cover the advance. At the first firing position the squad attempted to gain superiority of fire over the enemy – this being achieved 'by subjecting the enemy to fire of such accuracy and intensity that his fire becomes inaccurate or so reduced in volume as to be ineffective'. In order to maintain this superiority it would often be necessary for some squad members to remain in position, putting down large volumes of fire, while others moved forward to new positions, from which they in turn would take up the fire fight. Suitable cover, including rises and depressions, could allow short moves at small hazard, but open areas would need longer rushes prepared by commensurately greater applications of fire. The BAR man was best placed to support the advance from a flank, husbanding his fire to the needs of the situation so as not to exhaust his ammunition prematurely.

Again, Patton's Third Army instructions of 1944 had an even more aggressive tone, and encouraged even heavier use of fire. It was to be seen as integral to movement: 'Infantry must move in order to close with the enemy. It must shoot in order to move.' Moreover, 'marching fire' was to be encouraged as the infantry went in, since it increased confidence and unsettled the enemy. 'To halt under fire is folly. To halt under fire and not fire back is suicide. Move forward under fire.'

Users Review

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