

PRO TIPS:
Infantry Tactics

Lesson 1: The Rifle Squad

References: FM 7-5; FM 7-10.

Study assignment: Read FM 7-10 The Rifle Company, Chapter 6.

The rifle squad is the smallest tactical element of the infantry configured to perform an independent tactical mission. Most living history units can form at least a squad—by a "squad" I mean a tactical squad of 10-12 men and a squad leader, whatever their designation for public events might be. Mastery of the school of the squad and squad tactics is a reasonable goal for any unit, so this is where we will start.

Organization of the rifle squad

The rifle squad changes in several ways between 1940 and 1944, but the three most important modifications were: *a.* the integration of the BAR teams into the three squads in a rifle platoon (replacing the prewar AR squad); *b.* the removal of a two-man scout team, the previously designated scouts being combined with the riflemen and scouting changed from an assignment to a duty that could be performed by any rifleman; and *c.* a "bump" in grade for the squad leader and the assistant squad leader (to S/Sgt and Sgt).

By early 1944, the rifle squad comprised:

- a squad leader
- an assistant squad leader
- an automatic rifle team (BAR gunner and assistant gunner)
- eight riflemen, one designated and equipped as an antitank grenadier

Duties and responsibilities

The **squad leader's** increase in rank to S/Sgt reflected lessons learned in combat early in the war. Before the adventures in North Africa, the platoon leader's duties included a great deal of close coordination and supervision of his rifle squads. Bitter experience demonstrated that platoon leaders (particularly because losses at this level were so heavy that many platoons saw a series of lieutenants taking over head first and being carried out feet first) that a new and inexperienced platoon leader was all too common, and the prewar workload combined with learning a critical job on the required the officer to rely on squad leaders' experience and judgment. Field Manual 7-10 paragraph 134 *a.* informs us that

The squad leader is responsible for the discipline, appearance, training, control, and conduct of his squad. He leads it in combat. Under the platoon leader's direction, the squad leader arranges for feeding his men, enforces Proper observance of rules of personal hygiene and sanitation, requires

that weapons and equipment be kept clean and in serviceable condition, and checks and reports on the ammunition supply within the squad. His squad must be trained to use and care for its weapons, to move and fight efficiently as individuals, and function effectively as a part of the military team.



Figure 1: The Rifle Squad. This shows scouts designated separately, as of 1942.

Because the squad leader's responsibilities had increased, his authority was also boosted by a grade. It is a sad fact that during peacetime the responsibility of commissioned officers increases, incorporating many nit-picking details best left to trusted NCO's; with the loss of responsibility came diminished authority. When the shooting starts, everybody has to cowboy up, and suddenly NCOs start pulling more weight.

The **assistant squad leader** (previously a corporal) is assigned by Army policy the following responsibilities:

The assistant squad leader performs duties assigned by the squad leader and takes command of the squad in his absence. He carries the antitank rifle and, during a tank attack, engages with antitank rifle grenades any hostile tanks within range. (See par. 2b(5).) The squad leader may designate him to command a portion of the squad, to act as observer, or to supervise replenishment of ammunition.

This description (FM 7-10 1942, **135 b.**) was true until late 1943, when the grenadier duties were assigned to a rifleman. I find no reference to the reasoning behind this change, but the likeliest explanation is that the assistant squad leader had serious leadership duties in combat, and these conflicted with the need to be a specialist in shooting harmless rifle grenades at German tanks.

Target designation

Paragraph 135 of FM 7-10 lists "target designation" as a primary duty of infantry soldiers in the rifle squad. A target in this sense is basically "something worth engaging." Usually it is an enemy position, and the enemy is trained to make their positions inconspicuous. US infantry in the early Pacific campaigns in the Solomons and New Guinea were initially surprised by the exceptional camouflage discipline displayed by Imperial Japanese forces, and the German infantry learned the art by necessity, adapting to months of dealing with numerically larger enemy forces.

Reenactors are generally careless about cover and concealment, and about careful target designation. The only way to fix this is to create a payoff—for example, issuing one live round for every 500 blanks! Since this won't happen, we must rely on leadership and example.

The point here is that the enemy is out there and the supply of bullets is finite. If we're going to shoot (and real soldiers do not worry about getting trigger time as an end in itself), we need to shoot at something that needs to be shot—presumably the enemy—and not at a general area.

Fire control and fire discipline

The squad leader is the one who starts, directs, and stops the fire of his squad, not the individual soldiers. The squad is not a collection of muzzles unleashed on the environment; it is (at best) a coordinated team whose fire and movement are directed at a requirement, and that requires teamwork and discipline.

Aimed fire is not an appropriate goal in reenacting, for safety reasons; however, rate of fire is an important factor. Making sure every round counts helps bring combat power on the target and prevents waste of ammunition (few moments on the battlefield are quite as annoying as facing a determined enemy and being out of ammo).

Tactical movement

"Tactical movement" describes the movement of units forward of the support zone; it does not, for example, cover the route march of units from rear areas to positions beyond the observation of the enemy. Tactical movement begins at the *approach march*: for example, a unit ordered to attack enemy positions will move by expeditious means to an *assembly area*; on order, it leaves the assembly area and crosses the *line of departure*. Beyond the line of departure (LD), the unit is deployed in tactical formations, and moves as possible from cover to cover.

Unless the objective is very close, the approach march takes to unit to an attack position, usually the last covered and concealed position before the objective, where it shifts from tactical movement to assault formations to press home the final stroke.

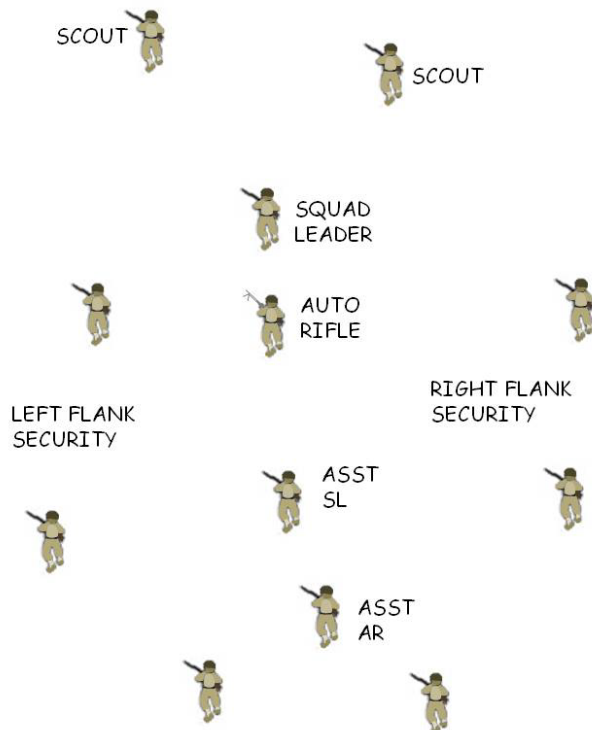
Unfortunately, reenactors generally do not use any tactical formation moving into enemy contact more complicated than a single file. Unfortunately, this is an amazingly stupid way to approach an enemy. The problem is that in moving in a file towards an enemy position sets up an *enfilade* situation: if the enemy engages, only the first man in the squad can return fire.

Nothing diminishes teamwork and trust more than shooting your buddy in the back.



Here a rifle squad approaches an enemy position based on two MG42's in a single file. The problem with the file formation is that all fire from squad members 2 through 12 is to some extent masked by men in front. This is a good way to lose an entire squad—yet I see reenactors do this again and again.

The basic squad tactical formation for approach march is the squad column. This is not a file, but a dispersed arrangement of key squad members, dispersed to prevent too many positions to be knocked out in the first seconds of engagement by enemy direct or indirect fire. Interval between soldiers is *generally no less than 15 meters*, which is the burst radius of a light mortar HE shell.



A squad in column formation. In the actual case, the squad members would be somewhat more widely spaced. Note that the squad leader is near the front where he can assess a contact quickly (as long as he is not shot outright, which is why the scouts are out there). He is accompanied by the BAR man, who will provide covering fire if the squad has to respond under fire and find cover. Left and right security, two riflemen each, is on the flanks.

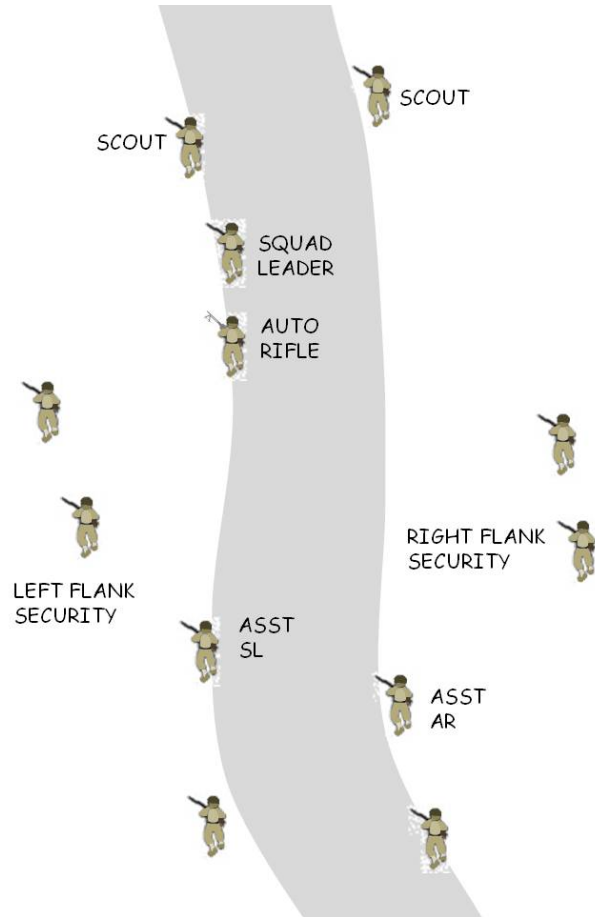
The assistant squad leader is farther to the rear, next to the assistant AR gunner (who can pick up the BAR if the gunner is down); he is not next to the squad leader because it is important that at least one survive first contact with the enemy. Cheerful thought.

Advantage: easy to control.

Disadvantage: requires rearrangement to meet heavy fire from the front.

A squad may also move in column along a road, using much the same formation.

A squad on approach march doesn't just march straight down a road, even on both sides. Reason: it's an invitation to enfilade fire, and it's too easy to miss the enemy and get ambushed. Machinegun fire straight down the road exposes the squad to a risk of losing both NCO's and the BAR in one fell swoop. In this example we see that scouts are out front (*always* when your squad has no friendlies to the front) and teams are on the flanks. As with the last illustration the actual distances are greater—DON'T BUNCH UP!



Other approach march options

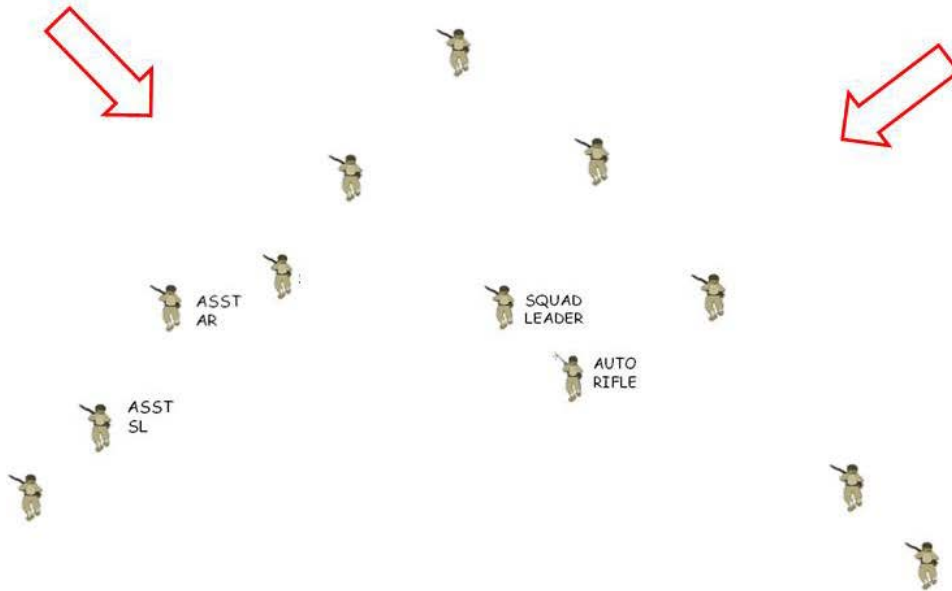
The exact formation used in approach march will vary with the situation. For example, if the enemy is known to be to the front and there are no threats to the flanks, the SL may choose to advance as skirmishers.



The skirmish line maximizes responding to fire from the front. However, it is harder to control. We generally advance across open spaces as skirmishers because it takes less time to clear the exposed area. Front should not exceed 60 paces.

The squad wedge is a good all-around formation, since it offers protection (quick response to fire) from left, right, or front and is fairly easy to control. Since it is a good way to proceed if you

have not had an opportunity to look at the ground and threat to your front—emerging from a wood line, for example, or passing through a defile—the wedge is useful.



The "wedge" is most useful when you are crossing broken ground or emerging from areas where your view of the front is obscured. The wedge gives the ability to return fire from the front or from either side (red arrows).

The scout

Any rifleman should be able to perform the duties of scout as the situation requires. Since a squad almost always operates as part of its platoon (except in dimwitted TV shows), a squad's scouts are generally deployed only when the squad is in the lead, with no friendly elements to the front.

Though scout duties are described in **FM 7-10**, the scouts' bible is **FM 21-75**, *Scouting* Patrolling and sniping. The manual says this about the necessary skills of a scout (paragraph 3):

Although all soldiers should be able to act as scouts, some are better suited than others for this work. Men selected to be scouts should be reliable, persevering, intelligent, patient, and should be able to read and write clearly. They should be physically and mentally hard, have unimpaired vision and hearing, and be able to swim. Scouts must be resourceful and possess courage and initiative. They must be good shots and good close-in fighters. Men with hay fever, night blindness and impaired sense of smell should not be given duty as scouts, for they will betray their own and others' presence.

This is a pretty demanding job qualification, and it probably applies to about one out of six hundred reenactors (other than a few veterans). But it is so important that any serious infantry unit in the hobby should be on the lookout for this kind of talent.

Master of cover, concealment, and camouflage are vital. The scouts are out there by themselves, uncomfortably ahead of the main formation, and they will routinely have to depend on their own skills to succeed and not fall into misfortune (getting killed isn't usually an option for a reenactor). For detailed discussions and tips on scouting, see **FM 21-75** in the reference

library. This is a 1944 manual, and contains a lot of lessons learned from combat in North Africa, Italy, and the Pacific; it is also well written and illustrated—a sort of graphic novel of mayhem.

FM 7-10 is not as detailed, but the prose is entertaining:

The scouts operate under control of the platoon leader . . . Deployed in pairs at wide and irregular intervals, they move out boldly to the front to reconnoiter successive positions (objectives) along the route of advance, and seek to force enemy riflemen and machine guns to disclose their position. One member of each pair watches for signals from the platoon leader. They take advantage of cover without delaying their advance, and cross exposed ground at a run. Their distance in front of the platoon is governed by orders of the platoon leader and varies with the ground and with the probable position of the enemy. One moment they may be 500 yards ahead: at another time they may be absorbed within their units. In approaching houses, natural defiles, and villages, one scout of each pair covers the movement and reconnaissance of the other.

The Guardians of the Galaxy could do no more.

A few tips for handling scouts:

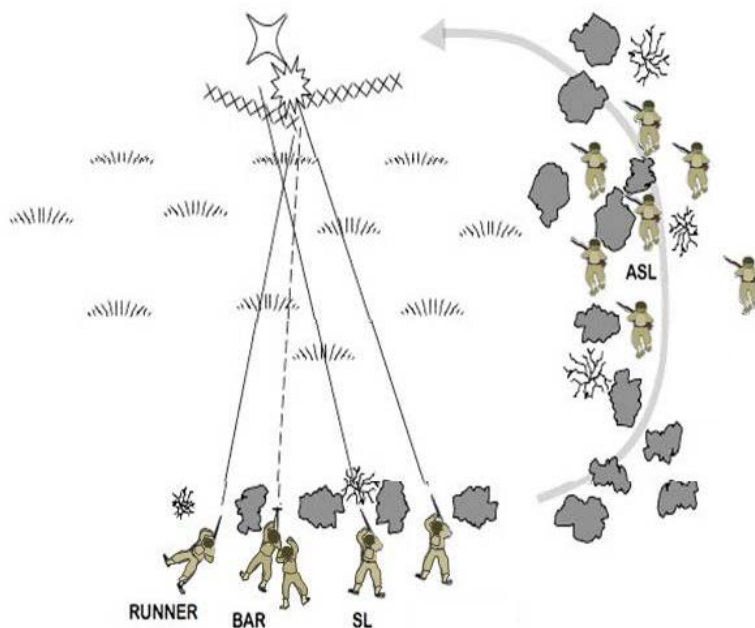
—Remember to have one scout keep visual contact whenever possible with the squad leader or (more often) with the platoon leader.

—Don't get so focused on your two-man mission that you lose contact with the main body.

—If you come to a difficult place—a patch of woods, a road, a stream, rough ground—it is sometimes necessary to send one scout ahead to check the ground while the other keeps contact with the following units and covers the forward scout.

Squad in the attack

A squad may attack by itself or as part of a platoon attack. In the case of a rifle squad assigned to assault and secure an enemy position, the procedure is simple:



A full strength squad (admittedly a rarity after some time in combat) assaults an enemy position, dug in and protected by wire. The squad could attempt a frontal assault, but this would probably fail disastrously. The squad leader wisely chooses to use fire and maneuver.

He places the command group (SL and a runner, plus the NAR team and the grenadier) as a fire support element. These keep the German position amused while the rest of the squad, led by the ASL, maneuver using cover and concealment to engage the enemy from the flank.

That's the good news. The bad news: the German manual is pretty much the same as our squad leader's, and his opponent probably expects him to attack in just this way. While there are limits to how prepared a position this small can be to deal with heavy fire from the front plus a flank attack, the enemy usually places defensive positions like this in depth, with interlocking fires. So there is no perfect answer.

To pull this off, the maneuver team should move by bounds, or low crawl if the distance is not too far, taking advantage of cover and concealment—that is, not go whooping and loping like horseless cowboys through enemy fire. And a wise SL may send that runner to platoon to request some help from the mortars.

But even that doesn't make the task easy. Time to man up. This is why we call it "war."

When you have secured an area, don't forget to tell the enemy.

And always, always, remember to consolidate on the objective. The enemy loves to counterattack quickly, while you're still disorganized and itching to celebrate.

Reenactors usually forget this. (I almost wrote "always" instead of "usually", but as a rigorous logician I'm wary of having to prove a negative.)

Squad attack as part of a platoon attack

The squad will usually be part of a larger attack, but as a squad leader you will generally be attending to what's happening in your platoon.

In a deliberate platoon attack (which is usually part of a company attack) the squad is most often employed as one of two maneuver elements (the third squad generally being in reserve—see Lesson 2 the Rifle Platoon). The platoon, if is conducting an assault, will usually have the support of at least one of the company's machine gun squads as well as a mortar or two; sometimes, if the objective is critical, you may be backed up by 81's and heavy MGs from the battalion heavy weapons company.

But the problem is pretty much the same: *find them, fix them, fight them, finish them* (the four F's). If company and battalion fire support is sufficiently heavy, the whole squad can be used as the assault element—if the enemy position is getting pasted by enough firepower, one NAR won't matter that much, and it can be used in the final close assault.

Squad in the defense

The squad usually assumes responsibility for a designated part of the trace of the platoon's front. The platoon leader will assign the sector for each squad and, if he has time, place the BAR team and assign them a sector of fire. The company weapons platoon leader is setting up the heavy weapons at the same time (MGs and mortars), machine guns first; his placement of the two company MG's overrides anything the platoon leaders or squad leaders do: first pick of position goes to the MG's.

In a hasty defense, the squad leader will place his people to provide immediate defensive fires, positions at least five yards apart; he assigns sectors of fire and supervises as the squad members start to dig in. The 1940 FM specifies one-man foxholes; forget that. By the time the bullets had been flying for a while, the Army had switched to no fewer than two soldiers to a

foxhole. (They keep each other company, which helps avoid anxiety, and during down time one can sleep while the other has watch.)

Every man in the squad, but especially those on the flanks, should know exactly where the adjacent squads fit in; they should know the nearest friendly positions. It helps to know there is somebody on each side of you, and your neighbors will be annoyed if you panic and light them up by accident.

This brings up the matter of range cards, an advanced infantry technique most reenactors who haven't served in the infantry are unlikely to know about. I'll bring it up anyway, even though its not as critical for a field full of reenactors firing blanks. Each position sketches a range card (and the cards are usually checked and adjusted by the platoon leader or the platoon sergeant). The range card is a sketch of the terrain to the front of the position with conspicuous features within the assigned sector of fire (a house, a tall tree, etc.) shown and their estimated ranges plotted from the firing position. This will assist the soldiers in engaging targets at the proper range. (Range can be estimated by eyeball, though it helps if you have played football and have a feel for yardage; or you can fire a tracer and observe its fall, adjusting your sights accordingly. But that's an option denied reenactors, sad to say.)

Tracers work both ways. You can see where they are going, but the enemy can see where they're coming from.

Squad in security missions

Security missions that may be performed by a rifle squad include:

- Advance guard, rear guard, flank guard in approach march
- Connecting files (small units placed between larger march units to maintain contact)
- Reconnaissance patrols
- Combat patrols (raid, ambush, etc.)
- Defense of obstacles (for example, covering a road block)

The squad is a natural choice for this kind of semi-independent mission because it already has combat balance, experienced command control, and established (we hope) methods of teamwork born of practice.

During movement on march security (advance, rear, or flank guard), the column formation or other arrangement as described earlier can be chosen to fit the situation and the terrain.

If you find yourself in a fair fight, you didn't define the mission properly.

—Dave Hackworth

Reconnaissance or small combat patrols can be handled by squads, who should have trained for such missions. A recon patrol is naturally small to assure stealth, and avoids combat; a combat patrol has an objective that requires fighting, and is composed in such a

way as to accomplish its mission without being overwhelmed. For an important mission such as a raid, a full platoon or even a company might be required; for most small actions, a squad is generally adequate.

Reenactor units should practice these skills (see **FM 21-75**) and temporary leaders of large reenactor formations should know how to use them and be willing to include them in planning for a tactical exercise.



LESSON SUMMARY

- 1. The rifle squad is a small (12-man) integrated team capable of undertaking combat missions alone or as part of a rifle platoon.**
- 2. The squad leader, a Staff Sergeant, is responsible in combat for target designation, fire control and fire discipline, choice of tactical formation, adequacy of supply, as well as training of all members of his squad.**
- 3. Squad tactical formations—column, skirmishers, wedge—are used as needed given the terrain and the enemy.**
- 4. Every member of the squad should be capable of performing the duties of a scout.**
- 5. The rifle squad acting alone uses fire and maneuver to conduct an assault, employing a maneuver team and a fire support team.**
- 6. In the defense, the squad is an integrated part of the company dispositions, and its positions must be coordinated to fit with the overall plan.**
- 7. The rifle squad is frequently used for security tasks: security of the march (advance, rear, and flank guards and connecting files) and for reconnaissance and appropriate combat patrols.**

Now take the lesson quiz.

LESSON 2 will introduce you to the rifle platoon