

**PRO TIPS:**  
The Infantry

## Lesson 1: The Rifle Platoon

**References:** FM 7-5; FM 7-10; *Officer's Guide*.

**Study assignment:** Read FM 7-10 *The Rifle Company*, Chapter 5

The platoon is the smallest tactical unit commanded by an officer. We should note that only an officer can command; NCOs lead. This is an important distinction. An officer has statutory authority under military law to issue a direct order; NCOs lead by carrying out the orders of an officer (called "direct orders"). An NCO's orders to a subordinate are legally "indirect" and must derive from some direct order. A lot can be made of this by guardhouse lawyers (know-it-all soldiers full of good advice), but the distinction seldom has any practical effect. An order is an order; ignore it, as the Articles of War suggest, "at your peril."

Every rifle company has three rifle platoons and a weapons platoon. Note for future reference that all line combat units from platoon through division have the same general structure: a command organization, a "base", and three maneuver units. There are doctrinal reasons for this "triangular" organization that emerged from the change from a philosophy of positional warfare that strangles armies in 1914-17 and modern ideas of mobile warfare that governed ground combat in the 1940's. For more details, see the **Training Circular** on Army Doctrine in WW II.

### Organization of the rifle platoon

A rifle platoon in WW II was somewhat smaller than today, and had fewer heavy weapons assets. The platoon consisted of a *command group* and three rifle squads.

We examined the rifle squad in Lesson 1. Now we need to look at the platoon's command group, which consists of:

—the *platoon leader*. A platoon is led by a lieutenant—there is no specification for first or second lieutenant, but platoon leaders in the infantry did not last indefinitely in the position. Some were promoted out, more were casualties (the reason for the high casualties will be clear later in this lesson). In fact, a large proportion of rifle platoons in sustained combat were often led by tech sergeants or staff sergeants or lower because leading from the front takes a toll, and the output from OCS, ROTC, and West Point cannot always keep up.

**Rank among lieutenants is like virtue among whores.**

—Anonymous wise ass

Platoon leaders were and are the butt of the occasional joke. A new lieutenant fresh from OCS probably had some enlisted combat experience (as do all battlefield commissions, obviously); ROTC and West Point products, not so much (though the latter have absorbed a couple of years of intense summer field training and lots of entertaining theory). The test of a new platoon

leader is how long he lasts. Like enlisted replacements, the first obstacle to overcome is ignorance. (I leave out stupidity because that can't be overcome; ignorance can be fixed, but stupid is forever.) Experience weeds out most bad battlefield commissions; West Point does all it can to find the stupid and send them on to the Marines. ROTC—well, we hope for the best. If a platoon leader makes it through his first few rough spots and stays alive long enough to pin on his CIB, he will probably just grow in the job and earn respect, or at least your guys will bother to learn your name. If not: well, there are more where he came from, bless his heart.

—The *platoon sergeant* is the senior NCO in the rifle platoon, a technical sergeant slot. The title tech sergeant is confusing—it has nothing to do with the technician grades (there is no little "T" below the chevrons). It was a prewar grade that was specified for senior staff NCOs. When leader grades were bumped in 1942, the grade was expanded to critical combat leader slots, most especially platoon sergeants. In 1948 the grade was redesignated sergeant first class (SFC). But underlying all this is one important point: a tech sergeant is officially a *serious* NCO grade.

Movie lore insists that the T/Sgt was a grizzled veteran. That would have been helpful, but an army that expands from six hundred thousand or so peacetime soldiers to millions quickly runs out of grizzled veterans—it promotes the better ones, musters out the ones who were too old for the trade in 1941, and makes do with younger soldiers who perform exceptionally well in combat. In the real world of combat, we would often find platoon sergeants who were not much older than their platoon leaders, but had practical experience lieutenants didn't get in college or wherever they were when the shooting started.

**Experience is something you don't get until just after you need it.**

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A wise new lieutenant—well, that's an oxymoron of sorts, since wisdom is acquired, often the hard way—let's say, a *humble and realistic* lieutenant, relies on his platoon sergeant to get him clued in about things they didn't teach at Fort Benning. Doctrine and practices change between the printing of a field manual and its use in combat. In addition, theory looks different when you're actually sailing through a shit storm: understanding what to do, what decisions to make and what orders to give, when theory seems a long way away and a long time ago. What the lieutenant must acquire is a mental playbook; there is no time to practice complex logic. That the platoon sergeant is still alive to give advice is indicative of either skill or luck. If the lieutenant needs skill; the platoon sergeant can try to pass it on; if the lieutenant needs luck, maybe some of it will rub off on him.

**Military genius is the ability to be average when everybody else is going crazy.**

In any case, he is second in command, and soldiers pray for a good one because lieutenants come and go.

—The *platoon guide* is a position almost unknown in reenacting. The platoon guide is a staff sergeant slot, generally senior to the squad leaders. His functions are clearly stated, but not well understood; but he was a critical player in the rifle platoon. The guide is descended from the general guides of rifle battalions in the Civil War, when their job was to be the point of reference for direction of march. By WWII the guide still performed that function in close order drill (more about in other Training Circulars), but he also functioned as an assistant platoon sergeant and he had specific tasks in combat: for example, when the platoon occupies a hasty defensive position the guide places the squads in their correct sectors while the PSG places the automatic weapons and generally kicks ass and the PL coordinates with the company.

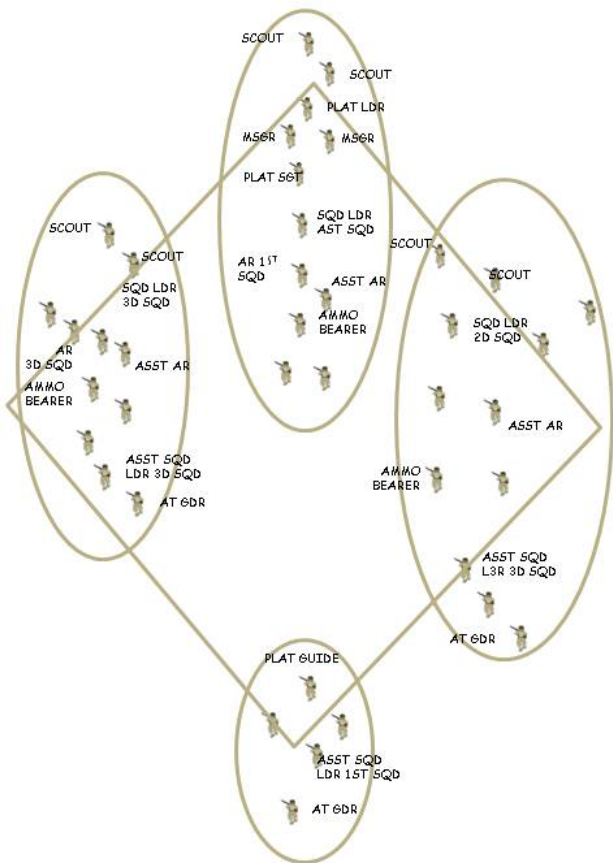
The platoon guide's position is in the rear of the platoon, where his principal duty is monitoring and replenishing ammunition.

—The platoon leader will also have a small and variable number of *messengers*, spare soldiers who provide backup to telephone or radio communications (which are often unreliable in combat), generally moving to and from the company CP. The usual SOP has platoon messengers divided, at least one with the company to carry messages to the platoon, and one with the platoon to carry messages to company. By 1944, BC-611 radios were issued at platoon level, and company maintained wire and telephones for installation of land lines when the company is stationary. Both communications media often had malfunctions and interruptions.

—There is an effort during combat to maintain an *overstrength* status whenever possible. *Basic privates* are assigned in such cases to company and platoon; they normally provide security and labor, and when casualties bring strength levels down the basic are sent down as replacements.

### Tactical movement of the platoon

Like the squad, the platoon uses tactical formations in the approach march. These will vary with the enemy threat, terrain considerations (observation and fields of fire, cover and concealment) and other factors. Here is a very common approach march formation, the "platoon diamond":



We will use the platoon diamond as our basic example.

Like the squad wedge, this formation is used when the enemy threat may be from the front or either flank (as when the ground ahead has not been reconnoitered, or the platoon has just emerged from cover). Because of the one squad forward, two back arrangement, fire can be effectively delivered left, right, or front to provide cover while the platoon shifts to meet a threat.

The platoon leader has to make very quick decisions, since at platoon level the situation can turn into a shit storm in mere seconds. This is why the platoon leader leads from the front; this is also why that position has a high turnover rate. The platoon sergeant is nearby, within sight and voice communication, but not close enough to go down with the lieutenant in the first burst of enemy fire (NO soldier wants to lose both at the start of a fight—all wolves and no shepherds is a bad thing—but this risk also encourages training soldiers to act on their initiative and take over leadership duties in a pinch.

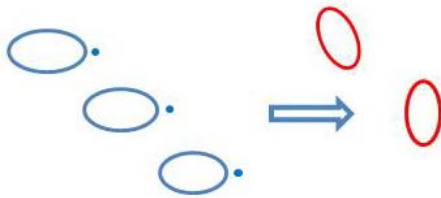
But a backup command group brings up the rear—the platoon guide and the assistant squad leader of the lead squad.

Each squad moves in a squad column formation, as described in Lesson 1.

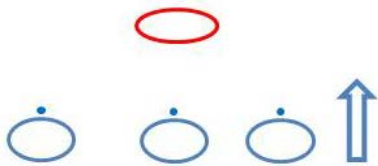
Like the squad, the platoon has other options on the approach march. Here are some examples:



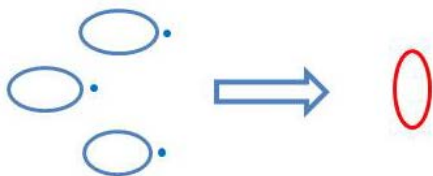
Platoon column: each squad is in squad column, one behind the other. This formation is easiest to control; however, it risks enfilade fire if the enemy is encountered to the front



Platoon echelon left: In this case, the platoon leader concludes the likely enemy threat is to the front and left. To guard against this, he arranges his squads in a line sloping to the left so that all three squads are "unmasked" (won't have to shoot into each other) if fire comes from that direction. If the threat is from the other flank, he can order echelon right.



Platoon in line: This can be used in a case when the enemy is to the front and there is no threat to either flank (be certain of this, because enfilade fire on a platoon in line can be disastrous) and there is a company reserve to help out if all three squads are pinned by enemy fire.



Platoon "vee": This is a common "two up/one back" formation when the threat is front but you want to maintain a reserve for flexibility. It is also easy to shift to an assault formation as needed when you reach the attack position.

### The platoon assault

The rifle platoon is not organized to execute wide flanking maneuvers with its squads. A whole platoon may flank the enemy as part of a company assault, but for the platoon's assault front, it's straight ahead with maximum firepower.

The trick is to reduce exposure time before actually reaching the occupied hostile area. This may involve crawling and/or rushing by bounds, under as much cover as possible, then moving swiftly to overrun the enemy position (where close-in flanking movements can be employed). Note that, while the preparation for the assault should be covered by supporting fires from company and battalion assets, those fires must be lifted when the platoon closes with the enemy.

In the assault, it is common for the lead platoons each to be reinforced with a machine gun team from the weapons platoon.

**Never forget:** As soon as your platoon has occupied an objective, make a quick check to make sure your platoon is still organized, still has ammunition, and has prepared for a counterattack or, of orders require, to continue the attack.

If the attack is to be continued, do so as soon as organized and supplied. Leave any mopping-up to follow-on units; continuing the attack is more likely to have success if you maintain momentum, keeping the process moving and not allowing the enemy to regroup. If there is a pause in the company's advance, use this as a chance to reconnoiter the ground to your front, as this will make further advance easier.

### Rifle platoon in the defense

A platoon will almost always be part of a company defense, not out on its own. The first helpful hint is this: don't forget there are people on either side of you, and the only way to have a successful defense is to coordinate with units on your flanks and rear.

Here is a typical platoon position, from **FM 7-10**:



- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Platoon leader.                                      | 10. 60-mm mortar with crew—gunner, assistant gunner, and ammunition bearer.                                      |
| 2. Platoon sergeant.                                    | 11. Automatic rifleman.  |
| 3. Sergeant squad leaders.                              | 12. Ditch used as a covered route to individual supplementary foxholes so as to provide for defense of the rear. |
| 4. Corporal assistant squad leaders.                    | 13. Adjacent defense areas.  |
| 5. Light machine gun sergeant, section leader.          | 14. Squad sector of fire   |
| 6. Light machine gun corporal, squad leaders.           | 15. Platoon guide  |
| 7. Light machine gun ammunition bearer.                 | 16. Cache dug for mortar ammunition  |
| 8. Messengers.  |  |
| 9. Observer, 60-mm mortar squad, beside platoon leader. |  |



Note that in this drawing only the two front squads are shown; the third is in reserve to the rear of the mortars (10) at some distance. One of the company's light machine guns is positioned near the right flank of the platoon (6).

### **Rifle platoon in support of the defense**

In a typical company defense, one platoon is in support as a maneuvering force; this is also true in a company attack, when the support platoon can be used as a maneuver element as the assault develops.

### **Rifle platoon in security missions**

As with the rifle squad, the platoon may be called upon to perform security tasks for the company or battalion. These most often include: advance party, rear party, flank guard, and march outpost.

*Advance party:* On the march, one platoon generally provides an advance party to discover and engage any enemy units encountered. The platoon usually moves in a column or wedge, and maintains a point element of about a half-squad some distance ahead. Marching point is not a happy task, and commanders rotate the responsibility so everybody shares the risk.

On the road, the advance party moves in a column of twos, one file on each side of the road. In all cases, the platoon leader stations himself at the head of the main body so he can respond to trouble stirred up by the point element. The hardest task for the platoon leader is continuous assessment of the ground to the front and sides; if the point element is engaged, the platoon leader will have to use his playbook to respond quickly and without a lot of agonizing. (My personal experience is that most casualties occur in the first couple of minutes of engagement, and units have a natural tendency to go to ground immediately on receiving fire. This can be disastrous. Immediate action is the best response. Immediate *intelligent* action.

**The "playbook" is usually the tactical SOP, the standard guide in a unit for immediate response to a tactical challenge. This will change from time to time—updates are the key to responding to changes in the battlefield and the enemy's tricks.**

The platoon advance party is also tasked as needed to provide flank patrols of 2-3 men on each side, probing out 200-300 yards (probably less in reenactor field exercises) depending on the terrain.

*March outpost:* When the column halts, the advance party immediately forms a march outpost, taking all-around defensive positions and sending out OP's. We do this because a halt of the column gives the enemy time to plan and execute mischief while everybody is scarfing rations or doing crossword puzzles. In my youth, our response at a halt was to "hit a perimeter", setting up all around security.

*Rear party:* This is easy; a rear party is an advance party in reverse, with a rear point element. On the halt, it forms a march outpost just like the advance party. (In fact, elements of the main column will or should also put out OPs on the flanks.)

*Flank security:* In the case of a column on the march, it is generally the case (get ready for a blinding flash of the obvious) that the flanks are long, while the head and rear of the column are

narrow. It isn't practical to guard all the flank areas at once with enough outposts, particularly at the halt, so the flank platoons must maintain mobile patrols to cover threat areas. Yes, the flank guards won't get much rest but, as we used to say, "there it is." (Nowadays the popular expression accepting the unfairness of the world is "embrace the suck." Buy the tee shirt. In extreme cases of perceived unfairness and risk, we use the term "BOHICA", which I'm afraid stands for "bend over, here it comes again." There it is.)

### **Closing thoughts**

Being a platoon leader gives a reenactor some prestige, if he cares to earn it. Being a platoon leader in actual combat gives a lieutenant ample reason to embrace the suck. Some disadvantages:

1. You are learning as you go, and lessons come hard and fast. Experience, they say, is something you don't have until just after you need it. This accounts for the high casualty rate.
2. When things turn to shit at platoon level, time and space conspire to make them turn to shit *fast*. You don't have time to agonize. Everybody looks at you for orders, and even the best platoon leader may not be able to think of a really swell way to respond without reflection (often because there is no really swell response). Memorize the tac SOP; if you can't think of anything perfect, "call the play and pray, you can die either way." The platoon sergeant is close to you, and his eyes are on you. If he has advice, don't stand on pride: take it.
3. A platoon leader is much closer to his men than the Old Man or the battalion commander. You know them well, feel a strong bond (unless you're an ice-cold idiot). Watching them die is hard; getting them killed is harder; freezing and doing nothing in the hopes that everything will be better soon won't wash. At platoon level under fire there are no excuses.

*Welcome to Able Company, lieutenant. We won't bother learning your name for a while.*



### **LESSON SUMMARY**

- 1. The rifle platoon is the smallest line unit commanded by an officer.**
- 2. A rifle platoon has the standard combat unit organization: a command and support base and three maneuver units (rifle squads).**
- 3. Two senior NCO's assist the platoon leader: the platoon sergeant (second in command) and the platoon guide. Both have specific and essential roles, not least of which is taking over the platoon when the platoon leader is out of action.**
- 4. The platoon employs standard tactical formations in movement based on the mission, enemy, and terrain.**

5. A platoon assault is short and violent, launched from an attack position as close as possible to the objective.
6. In the defense, the platoon defends its own sector, usually with two squads on line and one in support, with designated squad sectors of fire, and coordination with flanks and with elements of the weapons platoon deployed forward.
7. The platoon may be called upon to provide advance/rear and flank guards and march outposts.
8. Crises come rapidly at platoon level; initial responses must be decisive and quick, and are usually guided by a unit tactical SOP.

Now take the lesson quiz.

**LESSON 3** will introduce you to the rifle company and weapons platoon.