

PRO TIPS:
The Infantry

Lesson 3: The Weapons Platoon

References: FM 7-5; FM 7-10

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

The weapons platoon is in some ways the most important part of a rifle company, but most reenactors have no idea why. The company's crew-served weapons (light machine guns and 60mm mortars) are represented in the field, but generally used randomly and almost as an after-thought. This is a luxury we enjoy because we fire blanks; the real infantry, which deals in bullets, has to take the employment of the weapons platoon seriously.

Where the weapons platoon fits

The weapons platoon is a company asset, but it has to be understood as part of a wider mechanism of mayhem. The machine guns and mortars within the company are useful only as a part of the firepower resources at battalion and regiment. The battalion's heavy weapons company, for example, is really a scaled-up version of the company's weapons platoon. It has machine guns and mortars just like the company's version, but the machineguns are heavies—M1917A1 cal. .30 water cooled weapons that have a much higher sustained rate of fire, plus the capability to be fired from long range like artillery to create "plunging fire" that rains down on enemy troops in a selected target area. But the plunging fire is much more effective if it is coordinated with the grazing fire of the light machineguns of the company weapons platoon. The battalion's mortar platoon fires the 81mm version, with a longer range and the ability to create more unhappiness per square meter than the light 60's.

All these assets are combined with AT guns of the battalion antitank platoon and the regimental antitank company, as well as the regiment's own cannon company of M3 105mm howitzers; Finally, a regiment is typically supported by 105mm direct support and 155mm general support artillery.

A company is seldom on its own.

Organization of the weapons platoon

The weapons platoon of the rifle company had a *command section*, a *light machine gun section* of two squads (one LMG per squad), and a *mortar section* of three squads, each squad servicing a single 60mm mortar. Crew-served weapons were carried, at least on route march, in organic¹ weapons carriers.

¹ The term organic does not mean that the weapons were grown without pesticides; if something is organic to an organization, it means that it is a permanent part, not temporarily attached or under operational control only.

The weapons platoon must be employed with fine technical skill or it will be useless in combat. These skills are not cheaply earned, and must be employed and coordinated by leaders who have some idea what they are doing. It was the case as early as the Korean War that weapons platoons were often led by officers who had been successful rifle platoon leaders; it is very likely that this was the practice in WW II as well.

The command section

The *platoon leader* is responsible for the performance of his platoon in all ways—technically, tactically, and for purposes of discipline. The platoon leader has direct control of his platoon during route march and, usually, approach march; often, however (particularly after crossing the line of departure) the elements of the platoon, machine gun and mortar teams, are detached at the discretion of the company commander. The machine guns in particular are usually placed to support the company in general, frequently on the flanks in defense and supporting the lead rifle platoons in the attack. Based on the amount of frontage to be covered, the mortar squads may be fired from one location (in battery) or split up to support rifle platoons. The weapons platoon leader may be given responsibility for their placement, or the company commander may do so.

The great challenge for the platoon leader, then, is not technical mastery (though this is certainly necessary) so much as maintaining his sanity when his assets are scattered across a kilometer or so of terrain. What does he do? Well, he has to be in close contact with the company CP so he can respond quickly to changing conditions on the battlefield, keep a wary eye on other weapons assets affecting the company front (mostly from the battalion heavy weapons company and AT platoon), and know exactly where MG's and mortars are so he can snatch them and shift their positions as needed. He is responsible for them even if they are strictly speaking serving other elements of the company.

With an eye on the CP, he is advised to stick close to the most critical weapon placement—usually one of the MG's—making sure it is properly positioned, its sector of fire correct, and its range card properly prepared. For night defense, he checks on the limit of fire stakes (pegs hammered into the ground on each side of the MG's barrel to make sure the gunner doesn't fire out of sector). The platoon sergeant can supervise the other MG.

The *platoon sergeant* performs the duties of second in command of the platoon. On the march he is generally to the rear of the column. (Remember that on a route march the weapons and ammo are often separated from the crews, bouncing along in the WC's as part of the company's vehicle column.) The platoon leader and the platoon sergeant typically split supervisory duties in combat, one watching each section.

There is also a *transport corporal*, who is in charge of the weapons carriers—no simple task, as he must oversee storing and securing cargo as well as vehicle maintenance.

As with the rifle platoon, the weapons platoon command group includes 2-3 *messengers*. This is especially important because of the need for constant ammo with the company CP (the weapons sections are company assets, and comprise most of the actual firepower of a rifle company).

Finally, the specified *drivers* of the WC's are part of the command group.

Weapons platoon in the attack

The weapons platoon has some special challenges that have to be considered.

First, the weapons are heavy and the ammo required for them to function in combat is heavier still. Mortars and light machine guns can be carried by the crews, but not efficiently. The crews will wear out, and they will have problems keeping up with the rifle units. This means that the WCs will have to be deployed with the crews as long as possible consistent with the terrain, the mission, and the degree of exposure to enemy fire (the WCs are unarmored, so even enemy light machine gun fire will shred them if they can be seen within effective range). Managing this trick is not easy—none of the tradeoffs are very appetizing.

During the approach march, the first decision is whether the WCs will remain close to the crews or move with the battalion vehicle column (known in the trade as "battalion trains"). Staying with the trains is more efficient, faster, and easier to control. Unfortunately, the carriers will have to break loose and rejoin the crews at some point before the assault. This means the platoon leader, and platoon sergeant will always be worrying about whether the vehicles can find the crews, which means the transport corporal is worrying even more, since he has to have some idea where to send the vehicles when they approach the attack position. Nothing is quite as useless as machine gun and mortar crews in the attack without machine guns, mortars, or ammo.

Second, the difficulties of coordinating separate sections and squads across at company front is a headache. The MG's are generally forward with the lead rifle platoons in the attack, which means the two squads are probably at least 100-300 meters apart. This requires the platoon leader and the platoon sergeant to split their duties, and makes it even harder for the section leaders who are supposed to be supervising. The mortar section is a little easier, but not much. If the front is small enough to permit the mortars to fire in battery (from one position) it's easily manageable; but range to likely targets around the objective may be too long, and the mortar squads will have to separate.

The answer is simple (but, as Clausewitz warns us, "the simple things are always hard"). The squad and section leaders must be on the ball—responsibility must be delegated, and technical and tactical skills down to squad level must be very high. Since heavy weapons positions are naturally high-priority targets for the enemy, leader turnover may be high.

Weapons platoon in the defense

In the defense, we focus on the Main Line of Resistance (MLR)—the "front line."²

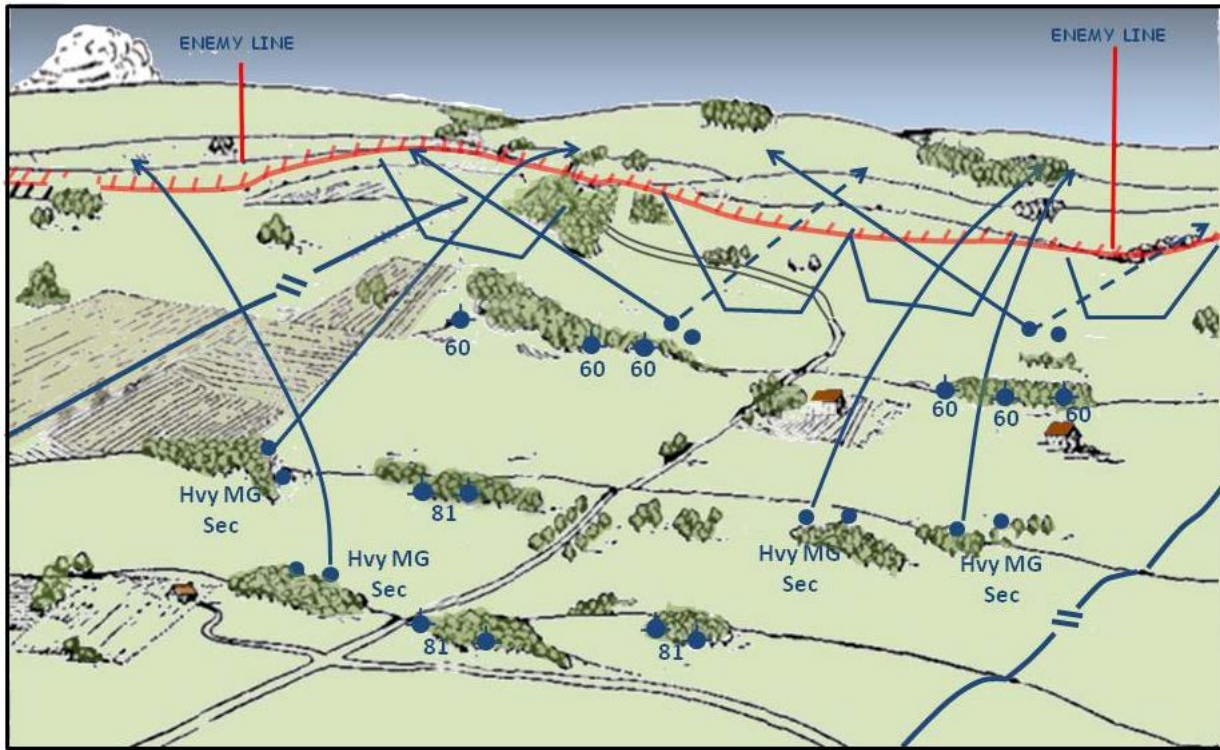
A ground defense has four zones we need to consider (even, now and then, as reenactors). The first is the *security zone*, which is in front of the MLR and extends to the view from the outpost line (OPL), and may extend much farther forward is, for example, the armored cavalry has established a screen forward of the OPL. The MLR and immediate rear comprise the zone where we will do the actual. Behind that is the reserve zone, and behind that the support zone. Farthest to the rear was the communication zone.


² Later soldiers will be more familiar with the term FEBA, or forward edge of the battlefield area. The reason for the change was a doctrinal shift to more dispersed defense in depth that followed the Korean War. The simplest reason for this was the possibility of a small nuke creating a gap in a front line too concentrated and shallow.

Defensive positions focus on the area to the front against which defensive fires can be directed, a distance determined by terrain (observation and fields of fire), weapons available and their range and lethality, and the enemy.

In the rifle company, the principal weapons employed are the light machineguns and the mortars—the weapons platoon. There is quite a lot of power that can be called upon to back them up—the battalion heavy MGs, 81mm mortars, and AT guns, plus regimental and divisional fire support. But the immediate dirty work is left to the weapons platoon.

Example



This illustration is adapted from **FM 7-15**, Figure 6, with some clarifications. The  figure is nonstandard, and represents the fields of fire for the four forward platoons in this battalion position. [Note that two companies are forward, with the third company in reserve (and not shown because it is in the rear and thus has no fields of fire); similarly, two platoons in each company are forward with a third (not shown) in reserve.]

Shown here are the company assets to be used in the attack, with the light cal. .30 sections forward to provide grazing fire and the heavy sections from the battalion heavy weapons company to the rear but with observation and fields of fire to provide sustained plunging fire on designated areas. Similarly, the company 60mm mortar sections are as far forward as terrain permits, while the 81mm sections from battalion are farther to the rear.

The final protective line

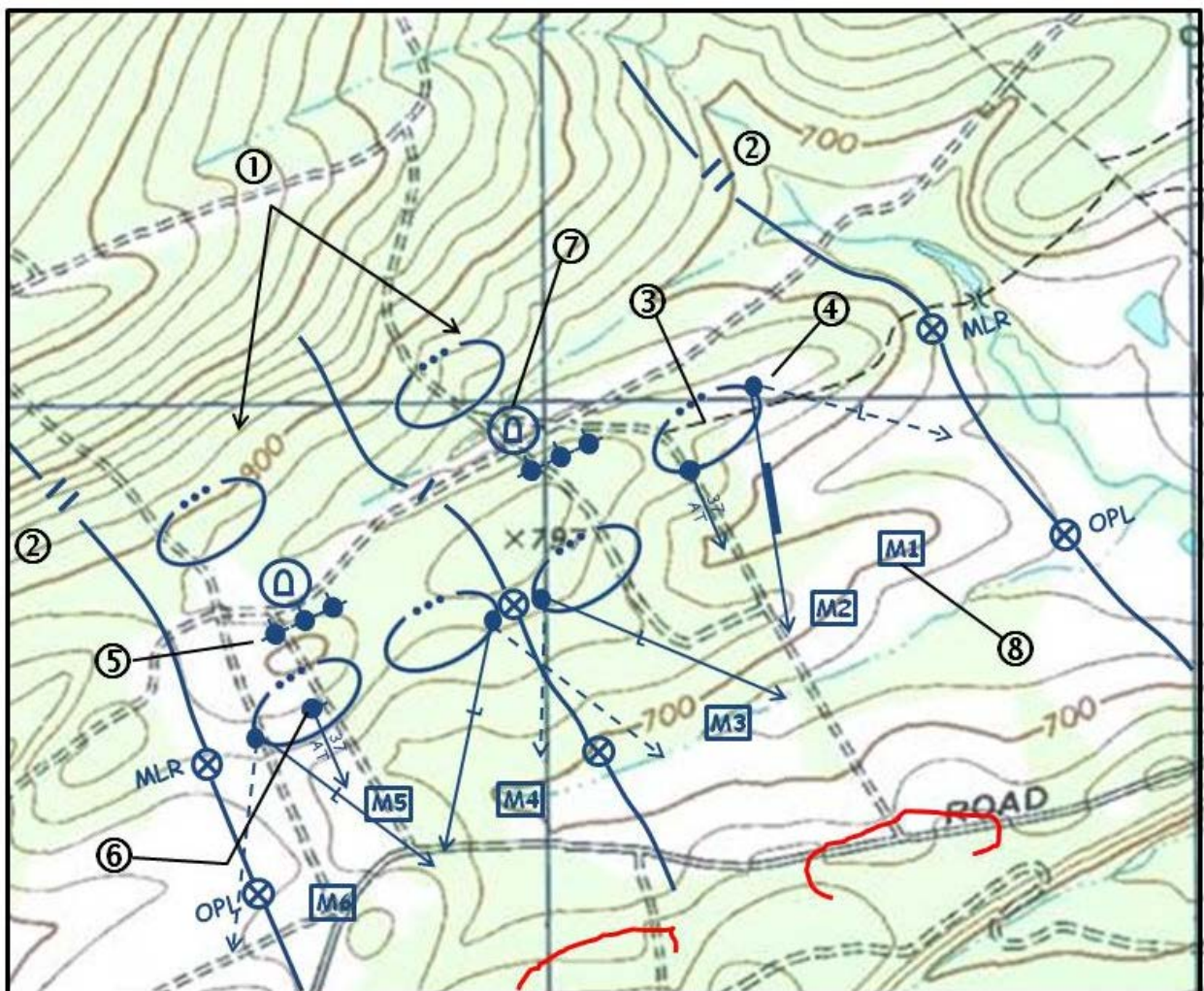
A critical consideration for infantry defense is the *final protective line* (FPL), an official-sounding way of saying "this is as far as the bastards get." The FPL guides planning for final

protective fires (FPF), which is the plan for using everything in the zone that can shoot, plus everything that can be called in from division artillery, the AAF, and the chaplain. The old XIX Century expression was *feu d'enfer*—the fires of Hell: everything concentrated on an attacking enemy, at maximum rate of fire, when it absolutely, positively has to be destroyed overnight.

The FPL has to be close enough to bring aimed fire with all weapons, but not so close that the enemy can make a devil-may-care dash through it. It's the last stop before the bayonets come out.

Therefore, it has to be *planned*. Sectors of fire must be specified for the automatic weapons (and staked out in case the FPF's are triggered at night), sketched on the range cards at each position. Mortar and artillery concentrations must be preplotted (that is, registered with the supporting artillery so they can just put the numbers in and shoot). Particular attention (especially with the mortars) must be given to dead spaces to the front where the enemy can shelter from grazing fire.

Example. Let's go back to familiar ground at Fort Indiantown Gap. (See **FM 21-30** and the lesson on military symbols to decode this overlay.)



Here, to provide context, we have shown a battalion front, assuming a standard "two up/one back" defense in which the battalion has a two-company front with one rifle company in reserve, and each company has two platoons on line and one in reserve. The MLR (main line of resistance, or "front line" runs along a low ridge line overlooking a stream draw; the dominant terrain feature is Hill 797 near the center of the map. The enemy is positioned to the south (red lines).

Note the following important features of this defense:

① Two company defensive zones.

② Battalion defensive zones right and left flanks—other battalions are assumed to be on the right and left. The ⊗ symbols represent coordination points, where the units on the ground must lock into friendly forces on the flanks.

③ The oval shapes with three dots show approximate center and width of platoon defensive positions.



④ This is one of four light machine gun positions (two per company), showing main direction of rise and the limit of traverse (dashed line).

⑤ Three 60mm mortars emplaced in battery. The front is narrow enough to bring an attacking enemy easily within range, so the mortars don't need to be separate.



⑥ A 37mm AT gun from battalion emplaced to cover the secondary road; one is positioned to cover each approach.



⑦ The circled bullet symbol represents a generic ammunition supply point. These essential forward points are positioned as close as possible to the MLR, but in this case set in defilade—not observable or shootable by direct fire—behind the ridge line.



⑧ The 50-yard sided squares represent preplotted points for the 60mm mortars as part of FPF. Similar preplots for the 81mm mortars at battalion have a 100-yard square.



Fighting tips

Reenactors almost never *place machine guns correctly* in the defense. In combat they were generally placed on the flanks. The reason is simple when you consider it. We spent a lot of words discussing how to attack a position, and lesson one was "never attack in a file or column or you will be raked by fire from the front and unable to return it effectively without shooting your own people in the back." The enemy studies this bible, too. Placed on the flanks, the two company LMGs can provide grazing fire against an attacking enemy from two sides (which I can tell you from experience sort of sucks).

When you place crew served weapons, prepare three positions: the *primary position*, which is the best single spot by your judgment; then an *alternate* position for that annoying moment the enemy locates you and has your range; and a *supplementary* position if you have to cover enemy targets from a different direction (*the enemy always gets a vote*).

In the attack, the heavy weapons provide support to the infantry assault. *In the defense, the heavy weapons determine success or failure*, and their placement and employment take priority over rifle units.

For reenactors to consider

Let's get serious. We do not fire real bullets. it's all simulated. But we are now starting to employ umpires to keep some realism. To succeed in that environment, we need to keep it real; to keep it real, we have to understand what weapons do—not what we think they do or what the movies suggest they do. This theme will be repeated as the learning progresses. Reenactors need to learn the very basic infantry skills (which always seem to be ignored or discouraged. Things like:

—**Use cover and concealment.** Move from cover to cover when you can be observed by the enemy. "Read" the terrain, starting with that little patch of ground you're crossing. Try to remember that hiding behind a tree with a 3" trunk would not protect you. Look for real cover, which is usually dirt provided by the shape of the ground.

—**Use observation and fields of fire.** Combine this, please, with cover and concealment. Any fool can see the battlefield by standing up on a hilltop, but any fool can be shot. If you're part of a weapons crew, find a position that lets you put simulated fire over your position, and use concealment and defilade (expose only what's necessary to see and shoot). Be aware of dead space where the enemy can hide and plot mischief. **Look, think, decide.**

—**Don't bunch up.** Especially in the open. The enemy has crew served weapons, too. Reenactors would be slaughtered in actual combat because they ignore these basic rules.

—**Learn the use of tactical formations.** This includes placing the crew-served weapons where they can be brought to bear swiftly on contact, but not placed to they will be hit with the first shots.



LESSON SUMMARY

1. Ground combat units from rifle platoon through division have three maneuver units and a base that includes fire support and heavy weapons assets. Reenactors typically have no idea how to use them effectively.
2. The weapons platoon of the rifle company has two heavy weapons capabilities: a light machine gun section to provide grazing fire for suppression in the attack and for protective fires in the defense, and a mortar section to provide indirect fire against infantry and light vehicles, particularly suited to cover dead spaces and areas that cannot be taken under direct fire. The machine guns and mortars much be used in coordination to be fully effective.

3. Because of the necessity to position crew-served weapons based on the situation, mission, and terrain, weapons platoon assets are often separated, requiring the platoon leader and platoon sergeant to move frequently and maintain contact with sections deployed.
4. The command section also employs 2-3 messengers, a transport corporal in charge of vehicles, and drivers.
5. On route march and as far as possible in approach march, crew-served weapons are moved in weapons carriers, while crews remain on foot. This requires close coordination to assure that weapons and their crews are together in time to serve.
6. In the attack, the MGs are often attached to the lead platoons to provide grazing fire to cover and suppress defenders. The mortars support from the rear, positioned together or separately depending on the front to be covered and the terrain.
7. In the defense, the machine guns are usually placed on the flanks to provide final protective fires, and are coordinated with MGs of units to the left and right flanks. Mortars cover enemy approaches, with special attention to dead spaces to the front that cannot be covered by direct fire.

Now take the lesson quiz.

LESSON 4 will introduce you to the rifle company.