

European Infantry Since 1914

MAJOR R. McC. PATE, U.S.M.C.

INFANTRY, since the beginning of time, has been the basic arm, and probably always will be. The French speak of Infantry as "The Queen of the Battlefield," and rightly so, for who can deny the fact that the man on the ground, capable of holding that ground, is the deciding factor with regard to that particular ground. There has never yet been devised a weapon capable of driving man from ground when the man has had an opportunity to prepare that ground, and who has the necessary will to hold that which he has, be it airplane, gun, or gas. As weapons become more horrible, amateur tacticians decide that this is the end of all war, as man can no longer face the weapons which the enemy will present. When gunpowder was first introduced into Europe it was decided that war was at an end, as no human could, or would, stand such destruction. It was not realized that there were a good many elements which entered into the employment of gunpowder besides its explosive force. There was the matter of aim of the weapon, which had not occurred to the skeptic, or should we say hopeful people. It was soon discovered that this terrible weapon was not nearly so bad as pictured and that man not only could, but would stand up to such destruction, and that the destruction was not so terrible as first imagined.

During the World War the Infantry was first subjected to the airplane, and while it was only in a small way at that time, it made no appreciable difference in the employment of the Infantry. Just what will be the case in the present war is a matter of conjecture and one which will be closely watched by all the powers. It is believed, however, that the plane will not take over the burden of the Infantry and that the Infantry will remain the basic arm.

At the outbreak of the World War the Germans were believed to have the finest military machine the world had ever seen, and possibly such was the case. Their Infantry was certainly just as good if not better than that of any other power in the world at that time, but they did not realize that the automatic weapon, i.e., the machine gun, was such a capable weapon. Their Infantry made the attack in accordance with the latest doctrine, which gave very little interval between the skirmishers. It was simple to shoot them down. The British and the French did the same and all soon learned the value of the overwhelming power of the machine gun. It did not take the powers long to learn this lesson and in a short time the number of machine guns in the Infantry units was progressively increased. The material was improved at the same time, which, of course, only increased the fire power as the weapons became more reliable. This increase in fire power by the Infantry made the opposing Infantry change its formations in the attack to compensate for the increased defensive fire

power. It will be remembered that it was not until about 1917 that the interval between skirmishers was changed from *one* pace to *five* paces in the United States.

During the World War it was soon discovered that attacking Infantry must have automatic weapons with it in order to hold that which has been gained. The solution, of course was a light weapon, as the machine gun was too heavy and required a gun crew. The answer was the automatic rifle. The adoption of the automatic rifle brought about the reorganization of the company so that the elementary unit was the half platoon, or section, which, grouped around the automatic rifle, served to protect and to exploit its fire effect.

The value of the automatic weapon was soon recognized for the defense, as they were certainly a formidable weapon when properly emplaced and protected by wire. The same situation did not, however, apply in the attack. Flat trajectory weapons had no great effect on sheltered defenders and the security of the attacking troops did not permit the firing of machine guns too close to the leading echelons. In short order it was realized that the Infantry armament was essentially defensive. As a result, an offensive doctrine was developed about 1915-16 which was expressed by one of the contestants as "The Artillery conquers and the Infantry occupies." Experience soon showed the weakness of this doctrine, as the attack, carefully and powerfully prepared, reinforced by a heavy rolling barrage, started usually brilliantly enough, but often very quickly was stopped by isolated resistance which had escaped the hammering effects of the barrage. As regular as clockwork the barrage rolled on in accordance with the time schedule and the Infantry found itself alone, faced by enemy machine guns. The enemy, one moment overwhelmed by a storm of shells, reappeared everywhere. The Artillery did not conquer, because the Infantry did not occupy. It was then necessary to bring the Artillery back to fire on the new enemy front, at a cost of considerable delay and with great difficulty.

At this point in the war it was found necessary to provide the Infantry with a means of reducing isolated sheltered resistance, impossible of accomplishment with the automatic weapons. It was then that a curved fire weapon was evolved, first the hand grenade, which was an old weapon revived, and then the V. B. rifle grenade, which was something new, with a range of almost 200 yards. The rifle grenade was soon found to lack the power required and it became necessary to develop something even more powerful. The answer to the requirement of a more powerful weapon was the Stokes Mortar, developed by the British. Here was a weapon which was easy to transport, fairly accurate, and quite powerful. Faith in the flat trajectory weapons of the Infantry still remained, however, and such weapons as the 37-mm. gun were retained for employment against automatic weapons.

The adoption of these weapons naturally reacted upon organization and the hand grenade became one of the

arms of the elementary unit, the section, and insured, with the rifle, the close defense of the automatic rifle. It was also employed in the trench warfare and in the final combat to give the necessary punch. The rifle grenade became the weapon of the platoon leader, who used it in concentrations. The mortars were joined with the 37-mm. guns and became a Regimental Accompanying Weapons Platoon, to be used by the Regimental Commander himself or parcelled out to the battalions.

The new weapons, imperfect and still in small numbers, did not suffice. The 37-mm. gun and the machine gun appeared to be relatively powerless in the attack, because they were heavy, too close to the ground, and because their fire was often blanketed by advancing infantry. It was believed that if these powerful weapons could be transported by motor and protected by armor they could destroy the enemy automatic weapons at practically point blank range. The result, the tank. The tank was not at first an Infantry weapon but was considered to be Artillery; however, it was not long before the conception of the armored Infantryman, working for the Infantry and in the ranks, became doctrine.

By 1918 the organization of the Infantry and the equipment was as outlined and remained so until the end of the war, i.e., three battalions to the regiment, three companies of four platoons, each of two sections, and a machine gun company of four platoons, four guns to the platoon, and of course the Regimental Accompanying Weapons, the 37-mm. and the Stokes Mortars.

In 1918 the nature of the operations began to change somewhat, first on the German side, and then by the French. During the offensives of March to July of that year the Germans tried to shake off the trench warfare and to utilize maneuver in the open, based on total employment of fire power and using the maximum of the advantages of terrain. The French followed the Germans in this movement and the results of these experiments by the Germans and French were closely studied after the Armistice and resulted in certain conclusions which have remained as doctrine until the present day. The conclusions reached were that Infantry action will be based upon the employment of all available fire, resulting in the adoption of the term "Base of Fire," which is a rather indefinite term, but meaning nothing more than all the fire you can produce, not only with the forward echelons in the attack, but with the weapons in reserve units. Having the "Base of Fire," the Infantry must then maneuver, taking advantage of the pockets in the terrain, soft places in the enemy defense, all in conjunction with the "Base of Fire."

The period from 1921 to 1929 was not marked by any great changes, being a period of detente. The general policy was oriented toward disarmament, the period of service with the colors being reduced and the financial situation did not permit of material expansion. During this period, however, improvements were made in the weapons, notably the automatic rifle. The automatic rifle being improved, liberated a part of the machine guns from their defensive missions and permitted the "Base of Fire" to be really furnished, as first conceived in 1918. This employment of machine guns as the "Base of Fire" exploits the use of the gun to the maximum. It enables

employment at extreme ranges, makes it possible to fire over troops, and through gaps in the line. It also provides fire concentrations. There was still a limitation to the use of the machine gun, due primarily to its flat trajectory. This flat trajectory limits the employment of these weapons to the zone of artillery protection and the fire concentrations which are employed when the attack opens cannot be employed during the course of the combat, due to the necessity for observation, adjustments, and liaison between units. Hence it was still necessary to have the curved fire weapons. The rifle grenade and the Stokes Mortars were found to be insufficient. It was about this time that the situation with regard to armament changed to a period of feverish activity, the German military power having put an end to any hopes of disarmament and pacifism.

At this time the 81-mm. Brant Mortar was developed. This was an excellent weapon in almost every respect, being comparatively light, accurate, and having a considerable range. Test indicated that the new mortar in sufficient numbers could replace artillery in immediate support of the Infantry, leaving the artillery for more distant missions. This was a comforting thought, but soon found to be false. Based on this false premise, the idea was to group a considerable number of these mortars under the Regimental Commander so that he would be independent of all artillery support. But it was soon found that the mortars were not artillery, as they had all of the limiting features of the artillery, ammunition supply, etc., and were lacking in some of the fine points. It was at this point that the mortars were placed in the Accompanying Weapons Company, and the organization so arranged that the mortars could be readily available to the attacking units. They were *not* artillery, but accompanying weapons and to be used as such. The mortar, instead of being the Regimental Commander's weapon, is now the Battalion Commander's weapon.

It was at about this point in development that the 60-

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mm. mortar was created and furnished to the rifle company commander. The picture now was each command echelon with its own curved fire weapon—the company with the 60-mm. mortar—the battalion with the 81-mm. mortar—the regiment with supporting artillery. There is still, however, a problem in connection with these weapons which to date has not been satisfactorily answered—namely, the ammunition supply.

By this period the Infantry was well supplied with weapons of an offensive nature, but there was still no defense against the tank, except the 37-mm. gun, which was known to be quite limited in this field. The 75's were considered, but they were required for other missions, and the number necessary for a proper anti-tank defense would have employed entirely too many of these valuable weapons. The Spanish War demonstrated the need of a heavily armored tank, and likewise the need for a weapon to combat the tank. A great many types of anti-tank weapons were developed and while it is not known just which types or type have been adopted, it is generally agreed that the Infantry Regiment will require about ten to fifteen of these weapons to properly defend a front of about one mile. It may be assumed that they have been provided.

During this same period the development of the semiautomatic rifle made great strides. All of the powers made every effort to meet what was felt to be a real need for the Infantryman. Practically all of the powers have developed a semiautomatic weapon—the question now is to provide these weapons and in a fast moving engagement to supply them with ammunition. The development of the semiautomatic and its actual use will no doubt bring about changes in the organization of the Infantry units. It will relieve the machine gun of some missions and will permit the machine gun to become heavier and more efficient, and to its employment against aircraft.

With all of the improvement in weapons for the Infantry, both mortars and semiautomatic rifles, the problem of supply becomes more involved, particularly in the offensive, where large supplies of ammunition are required. It is certain that the tonnage for a one day attack will far exceed the World War figures. No doubt the Infantry will use the organic cross country supply vehicles, but they will not always be available for the transportation of ammunition, and are not numerous in most organizations.

The mobility of the Infantry since the World War has been greatly increased. During the World War troops were transported many times by truck, but they were separated from their trains. Since that time the trains in most countries have been motorized, as have parts of the forward echelons, thus permitting of greatly increased mobility.

Coming now to the present day, we find the Infantry of most European countries capable of greatly increased fire power in both the offense and the defense. It can solve through maneuver and by its own fire power, local and limited battlefield incidents. However, in spite of all the progress made since 1914, it still remains a heavy and slow moving arm. From the standpoint of organization, the Infantry Regiment has become a complex

group, with units differing greatly from one another. It might be said that complexity, specialization, and orientation toward a perfected mechanism have been the essential characteristics of the evolution of Infantry.

While the materiel and mobility of the Infantry have been greatly improved and it is a powerful war instrument, capable of fulfilling efficiently its battle role, it still depends upon the quality of the men who constitute the Infantry. The quality of the men is found to be based upon their training and morale. The question of training is becoming more and more involved with the specialization. They are no longer just men in ranks, but are specialists and must be trained accordingly.

Technical instruction, however, is not everything, and there have been many discussions, particularly in Germany, of morale opposed to material. The value of material has a great influence on morale in the same manner that morale plays a large part in the results obtained from material. It will be the duty of the Staff to keep close contact with morale, treating a lack of it as if it were a disease, watching individual battalions and larger units for any signs of a weakening morale.

From these few remarks it will be seen that Infantry in Europe has changed considerably in detail since the outbreak of the World War in 1914. The weapons have been greatly improved, the organizations modified, and the actual employment on the battlefield, i.e., deployment, changed to meet the newer weapons. All of this has happened to the oldest arm of the military establishment within the past twenty-five years. What will be the evolution of Infantry during the next twenty-five years? It will be interesting to behold.

LETTERS RE CAMP PERRY SHOOT

14 September, 1939.

Headquarters, Marine Corps,
Washington, D. C.

My dear General Marshall:

On behalf of the Marine Corps I wish to express to you our admiration for the excellent marksmanship displayed by the U. S. Infantry Rifle Team in winning the National Rifle Team Trophy at Camp Perry, Ohio, this year, and by the U. S. Cavalry Team in placing second in that match.

The conduct of the Matches as a whole, under the direction of the Executive Officer, Colonel Oliver S. Wood, U. S. Infantry, was the best of many years. Every competitor was afforded an opportunity to fire under equal conditions and with partiality to none. The War Department is to be congratulated upon the smooth operation of the range and the administration of Camp Perry as a whole during the National Matches of 1939.

Very truly yours,

T. HOLCOMB,
Major General Commandant.

General George C. Marshall,
Chief of Staff, U. S. Army,
War Department,
Washington, D. C.