Storming Fortified Beaches

Decentralized control is not a distinguishing feature of an amphibious assault. Personal reconnaissance and use of supporting fire are more vital.

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OUR field manuals explain that the battalion is the basic tactical unit of infantry. Furthermore, it is the smallest tactical unit which has liaison with all three of the supporting arms, air, naval gunfire, and artillery and can thus control their combined fires. For these reasons, it is logical to take the battalion as representative of all higher units in any discussion of the technique of assault on a fortified position and its special application in an amphibious operation. Even though portions of the air and naval gunfire support are from the fire plans of higher commanders, the ultimate controlling agency is the battalion. Companies, platoons, and squads carry on their attack within the broad framework of the fire support plan controlled by the battalion and within the scheme of maneuver of the battalion.

The plans for any attack fall logically into two categories: the *plan of fires* and the *plan of maneuver*. Each of these, plans in an attack on a fortified position, must be particularly complete and contain exactness of detail. In an amphibious operation, the supporting weapons available vary with the progress of the assault, and the scheme of maneuver for a battalion is extremely restricted in most cases. An amphibious operation involving an assault on a fortified position includes techniques that are more specialized than those normally used in land warfare. Both will be examined, with emphasis on the former.

THE first problem confronting the battalion is that personal reconnaisance cannot be made prior to the landing as a general rule. Knowledge of the objective must be based, therefore, on an exhaustive study of available G-2 summaries, aerial photos and situation maps. This study will indicate that an assault on a fortified position may be necessary; it will show the more important targets; it will form the basis for an estimate of the situation in the battalion zone of action; and it will provide the facts from which a scheme of maneuver may be constructed.

This scheme of maneuver should be based upon an analysis of the targets in the zone of action and the mission assigned to the battalion by regiment. Companies are assigned objectives which are designed to penetrate the enemy's weakest point. The final decision as to what constitutes the weakest point is based on a study of enemy installations, terrain, and their influence on his plan of defensive fires. Thus it is made clear again that the scheme of maneuver of a battalion in a landing is limited. The battalion must move by water directly to and over a designated beach. In most cases, it must move inland and seek to throw its main weight against a weakness deduced from photographs. Flanking movements by companies will be rare for these elements must clear the beach promptly, invariably necessitating a movement straight inland by all units for a considerable distance, usually as far as the division's first objective.

THE second problem to be solved is the utilization of supporting fires. In the early stages of a landing operation, artillery will be lacking as well as the direct fire weapons of tanks and self-propelled artillery. Air and naval gunfire will be present in great strength, however. It must be noted, though, that the fire plan for these two weapons are made by the naval attack force acting upon the request submitted by the landing force and that this plan is designed to further the mission of the entire landing force as a whole. This means that the air and naval gunfire plan of the battalion is almost entirely one of opportunity—fires of opportunity after the battalion lands and targets present themselves. Direct fire weapons, bazookas and anti-tank grenades, are limited to those organic within the battalion. Although their use cannot be planned in detail, this contingency is met by decentralization of weapons to subordinate units for the landing.

The newest techniques, however, do provide direct fire for targets in the immediate vicinity of the beach by two methods. One is that of placing fire support ships in the boat lanes and controlling their fire, or that of other ships, from an amphibian tractor-borne control party; the second is the use of armored amphibian tractors as direct fire weapons from hull defilade positions in rear of a control line restricting them to a zone near the beach.

In summary, the battalion fire plan in the landing is characterized by the following factors: (1) Artillery, tanks, and self-propelled weapons are not available. (2) Air and naval gunfire are available in great strength but preparatory fires by these weapons are designed to further the main effort of the landing force as a whole, not the main effort of a particular battalion. Nevertheless, great reliance must be placed in these two arms. (3) Organic weapons, which will assist a battalion in assaulting a fortified position, must be decentralized for the landing. (4) The fires of all weapons must be rapidly laid on targets of opportunity rather than fired on a schedule or plan.

No scheme of maneuver is possible unless the units involved can be controlled; no fire plan, particularly one dependent upon targets of opportunity, can be adequate unless communications between the gun and a spotter or forward observer can be maintained and the fires thus controlled. In the early days of amphibious operations, this meant that fire support was inadequate to push an attack and that command had to be relegated to squads for hours after a landing because of faulty communications.

Although communications can fail or be knocked out, improved equipment and methods of waterproofing have lessened this danger. As a consequence, control of units can be maintained by battalions during the entire water-borne movement to the beach. Likewise, control of naval gunfire has been established on the way to the beach and maintained throughout, while air strikes have been controlled within 30 minutes of landing.

These facts are brought out to make it clear that decentralized control is not the vital factor it once was in a landing. Except for a very short time in isolated instances where undestroyed enemy fortifications are met at the water's edge, decentralized control is not nearly as distinguishing a feature of amphibious assault as compared to normal assault on a fortified position.

Methods of Attack

First and foremost in this consideration is that reconnaissance is made personally by the battalion commander to accurately determine the strong and weak points in the enemy defensive position, avenues of approach into the enemy position, suitable objectives, and suitable positions for supporting weapons. He can vary the directions of attack of his companies to suit the terrain; in short, he can prepare a scheme of maneuver.

Contrast this with the preparation of the plan of maneuver for assaulting a fortified beach and it is evident that this latter has inherent disadvantages. These disadvantages can only be overcome by prior training of small units in rapid reconnaissance, aggressive maneuvering, and assault tactics so that the battalion can move forward through the schemes of maneuver of its small elements, thus making up for the incompleteness of its own scheme of maneuver.

Likewise, in his fire plan for a normal attack, a battalion commander can prepare a very detailed schedule of fires against definite targets. He can very intelligently and definitely further his main effort with these fires. He has available direct fire weapons which are particularly destructive and valuable in attacking a fortified position. Since these fires are his to plan and control, and since he has reconnoitered and located specific targets, the battalion commander is not forced to rely upon targets of opportunity to provide his fire plan. Targets of opportunity now become simply the final bits of information which fills in the plan to completeness as the assault progresses. Close-in assault weapons such as bazookas, flame throwers, and demolitions can also be concentrated and their control centralized. This permits them to be used to further the main effort.

Just as in any assault, the battalion commander influences the action in an amphibious assault of a fortified beach, by the use of his reserves and by shifting his supporting fires. It is evident that in assaulting a fortified beach the commander's influence is less than normal. He has fewer supporting weapons at his disposal to shift and his maneuver room is greatly restricted because his reserve is restricted to the battalion boat lane while water-borne and because his beachhead will be small until considerable progress inland has been made.

From this examination of the assault of a fortified beach by a battalion, it is possible to deduce certain precepts and principles, namely:

1. The technique of assaulting a fortified position is not fundamentally changed by reason of an amphibious character; it is only modified.

2. These modifications are in the nature of restrictions—restricted fire power particularly in direct fire weapons, and a restricted scheme of maneuver due to lack of on the ground personal reconnaissance and planning and a lack of maneuver room for the reserve—therefore, the task of assaulting a fortified position from the water is more difficult than on land.

3. These difficulties are overcome by intensive training of small units and by aggressive assault on their part. It is further compensated for by a decentralization of available organic weapons so that these small units can make an aggressive assault.

4. The technique used by smaller units does not change either in an amphibious assault, as will be shown in more detail later, but is merely modified and made more difficult. These smaller units still have indirect supporting fire in the form of naval gunfire instead of artillery; they have direct fire in the form of bazookas instead of tanks.

5. Finally, it is believed to be a fundamental principle that the basic unit to be trained and taught to reduce a pillbox should be the squad. The success of the battalion is dependent upon squad action, particularly in an amphibious assault on a fortified position.

Having discussed the battalion so fully, it will be necessary only to touch briefly upon the techniques of the company. This is because its function in an asault on a fortified position parallels that of the battalion. The battalion provides a framework of fires and maneuver, and within this framework the company constructs its own plans of fire and maneuver. The company, with its mortars, its machine guns, and its bazookas, implements the larger fire plan of the battalion. Its problems are exactly the same as the battalion's problems but on a smaller

scale, hence the points drawn from that discussion need not be repeated.

In examining the technique of the squad and the platoon, there are several reasons why we lump these two units together and separate them from the company and battalion. First, below the company we find that there are no organic supporting weapons; only basic armament of the squad and nothing more. Second, and most important, it is the squad, or combination of squads which actually comes to grips with the enemy. It is the squad or platoon which must organize an assault group and a support group to carry out the technique of assault on a pillbox. The platoon or the squad, in most cases the latter, is the unit which destroys the pillbox.

The one notable characteristic of the squad and platoon is that they have no supporting weapons. This very fact is characteristic of amphibious operations, proving again that the squad or platoon (which is esentially a combination of three squads) is the basic unit in pillbox warfare, particularly in an amphibious operation.

THE squad has certain special techniques which it must learn before it can take part in an amphibious assault on a fortified beach. First, it must become proficient in reducing a bunker by its own efforts. Second ,it must learn to use the technique for assaulting a pillbox as shown in "The Marine Ribe Squad in Combat—MSC-3-26." It must be able to divide into an assault group and a support group. It must be able to cover its activities by small-arms fire, by smoke, by flame and by the high explosive of the anti-tank grenade. It must be able to breach the pillbox by demolitions under cover of these supporting fires. Third, the squad must be able to incorporate this technique into the technique of assaulting a pillbox when support from the battalion assault platoon is available to assist it. This must not differ in important fundamentals from the assault of the squad by itself. Fourth, it must also be able to integrate its method of assault into that used when supporting weapons are available, whether naval gunfire, artillery, tanks or self-propelled guns.

In accordance with the tactical principles for taking a pillbox, the squad is divided into an assault group and a support group. Usually one fire team makes the assault and the other two form the support. Now by the inherent nature of their mission each of the two groups will have certain weapons to accomplish that mission. Thus the assault group will have a certain amount of small-arms fire for close-in support, but must rely mainly upon smoke to conceal its actions, flame in the form of incendiary grenades to blind the pillbox and cover their close approach, demolitions to breach the pillbox, and grenades and bayonets to assault it.

The support group will have small-arms fire with emphasis on automatic weapons in order to drive all supporting enemy inside the pillbox and to pin them inside; it will have weapons which deliver high explosive against the target for shocking effect, to further pin down the enemy inside the pillbox, to isolate the pillbox from others which may be supporting it, and to cover the approach of the assault group to close range. It is admittedly highly inadvisable for a squad to assault a pillbox without any other support than what it carries with it, nevertheless, as pointed out, it may, and often has, become necessary; it is possible and can be done, therefore it must be taught.

Practice and training having made the squad proficient in the above tactical operation, it becomes simple to integrate this system with any available supporting weapons or units. The weapons of other units are classified to aid the support group or to aid the assault group. They are then worked into their proper relation with the appropriate group of the squad or vice versa. In this way, when squads from the assault platoon of the battalion are present they join with the assault group and their flame throwers and demolitions form the nucleus of that group. When rocket launchers from company headquarters or the assault platoon are present, they join the support group and deliver high explosives against the objective. Finally, when tanks and direct fire assault guns are attached, they also become part of the support group and add their fire to that of the bazookas and the anti-tank grenadiers. In a similar way, the new recoiless rifles, if adopted by the Corps, can be employed.

One final point remains to be covered on the technique of the squad. It has been pointed out that the efficacy of the battalion supporting fires in an amphibian operation is primarily dependent upon the prompt spotting of targets of opportunity and the placing of these fires on those targets. Similarly, that maneuver is primarily restricted to squads and platoons, and that reconnaissance in detail cannot be made except by these small units as they hit the beach and proceed inland.

IT is, therefore, necessary that squad and platoon leaders have the highest qualities of leadership; they must be aggressive, they must make rapid and thorough reconnaissance, they must make rapid and sound decisions and press the issue, taking advantage instantly of any weak spot revealed in the enemy position, and they must be prompt in spotting targets of opportunity and requesting and making the maximum use of supporting fires. The assault of a fortified beach tests the qualities and leadership of junior leaders as does no other military task, and success or failure of entire battalions and regiments may sometimes rest on the shoulders of one squad or platoon leader who is confronted by a pillbox in his zone of action which is sweeping several beaches with fire. END