

SHANGHAI 1937

Did riot duty in Shanghai presage the modern four-man fire team? The evidence points that way.



By Gen W. M. Greene, Jr.

THE 4th Marines had been stationed in China and garrisoned in Shanghai since February 1928. My tour of duty with the regiment began on 1 August 1927, and in February 1938 I was assigned to the 2d battalion as commander of Company E. The mission of the 4th Marines was pretty much the same in 1937 as it had been 10 years earlier—the protection of American lives and property within the International Settlement of Shanghai. On 13 August, fighting broke out around the city between Chinese and Japanese forces and by that time,

the 4th Marines had already occupied positions in Sector C to support the Settlement Police, who were controlling all movement into the Settlement, with the mission of maintaining the neutrality of the international enclave. By the end of the second day of fighting, both belligerents had given assurances that this neutrality would be respected.

There was a step up in the fighting on 14 August, and that afternoon Adm Yarnell ordered the commander of the 4th Marines, Col Charles F. B. Price, to execute Plan "A"—man the Soochow Creek defenses and prohibit the entry of armed Chinese and Japanese troops into the American sector of the Settlement. Only as a last resort were we to open fire.

Under the provisions of Plan "A," the 4th Marines area was divided into two battalion sectors. The entire 7,200-yard main line of resistance on the south bank of the creek was protected by a continuous band of wire. There were 58 sandbagged strongpoints, all providing frontal and overhead fire. Twenty-nine heavy machine guns were emplaced to give interlocking bands of fire in front of the MLR, and both battalion and regimental reserve lines were designated for occupation if necessary.

The 4th Marines and the military units of the other foreign governments in the Settlement were prepared to meet all possible conditions that could conceivably arise.

One of these was the real threat that street riots might erupt in the Settlement, and if the Municipal Police were unable to control the turmoil, the 4th Marines would have to step in to aid in ending the fighting and looting. We developed a method to meet just such a situation.

Formulated in 1937 and 1938, this system was responsive to the organizational, equipment, and training requirements of a Marine rifle company in order to make it an effective instrument in dealing with street riots. The riot company of 90 Marines consisted of three platoons, each of which was composed of six fighting teams of four men

each. Each team was led by a senior private or junior NCO, and could be employed flexibly in independent action as well as in performing its primary mission as an integral part of the riot company as a whole.

The equipment of each man in the 1st and 3d Platoons was a rifle, bayonet, cartridge belt with 100 rounds of ammunition, gas mask, and steel helmet. Two men of the 1st and 6th Teams in the 2d Platoon carried BARs; the other two men in each of these teams were armed with Thompson sub-machine guns.

Marines in the 2d and 5th Teams carried rifles with bayonets fixed, and they too had 100 rounds of ammunition in their cartridge belts. Rifle grenadiers comprised the strength of the 3d and 4th Teams, and they each wore a grenade carrier holding eight tear gas grenades. Company officers, the company gunnery sergeant, and the platoon sergeants were armed with pistols, and carried 21 rounds of ammunition, a gas mask and a steel helmet.

The riot truck and its crew—consisting of the gunnery sergeant as the NCO-in-charge, a driver, and three machine gunners—were placed between the 2d and 3d Platoons. The machine gun was mounted on the back of the truck, where there also were a BAR and a sub-machine gun together with extra loaded magazines for these weapons and the others in the company, boxes of .30 and .45 cal ammunition, boxes of tear gas and fragmentation grenades, and other equipment which might be needed in the course of the action.

If the riot company received a call to quell a disturbance, the commander would employ a compact formation in the approach to the scene of trouble. The company would advance in a column of platoons, each platoon deployed in a line of fighting teams. Before the mob was contacted, but close to these scene of action, the commander would halt his company, and place it into a riot formation.

In the vanguard with the company commander would be a runner carrying a riot flag on which a warning to disperse was printed in large Chinese characters. The Marines would adjust their gas masks, and the 2d and 3d Teams of the 2d Platoon would move to the front of the company around the right flank of the 1st Platoon, while the 4th and 5th Teams were moving around the left flank to the front. The riflemen would then take position on line in front of the grenadiers, deployed in a similar formation. The leader of the 2d Platoon would go to the front with his four teams, and his platoon sergeant would remain in the rear with the two automatic weapons teams.

When the line of grenadiers and riflemen had been established, the men of the 1st Platoon would form a skirmish line across the width of the street, standing as close together as possible, but maintaining a sufficient interval to permit the use of rifle butts, if necessary. The company commander

and his runners would then take positions behind the rifle grenadiers so that he could draw from the concentrated strength of that portion of his company remaining in the rear and could employ it effectively. Once in riot formation, the company would advance slowly but steadily.

All of this time, the warning banner was being prominently displayed from behind the line of grenadiers by the runner carrying it. If the mob did not disperse, the grenadiers would go into action, firing their gas grenades and dropping back around the left and right flanks of the 1st Platoon skirmishers, who would then charge the mob and use their rifle butts in an attempt to break it up. If the mob failed to disperse despite the press of the oncoming Marines and if some in the crowd began to throw rocks or started to shoot at the armed troops, the automatic weapons teams of the 2d Platoon would be ordered forward and formed into a line between the skirmishers of the 1st and 2d Platoons and the company commander. As the skirmishers pulled back around the flanks of the automatic weapons line, the latter would open fire. If the company commander determined that this fire had not deterred the mob, he would order the riot truck to turn around and the machine gunners to open fire to cover the withdrawal of his company until strong reinforcements could be called up.

The heart of the riot company was the four-man fighting team. Although the company commander and the platoon leaders would retain control for as long as the situation warranted, the fighting team could have been quickly detached on independent assignments such as search missions or the establishment of a strong point at a street intersection. In any case, the team could be detached without destroying the basic riot formation or the unit integrity of the company. The success of the riot company would result from its simple line formations and signals, and more importantly, from the emphasis on the decentralized control of the four-man fighting teams.

It is probable that one of the precursors of the fire team appeared in the organization and employment of the fighting teams of the special riot company. We certainly were headed in the right direction. The concept leading to the formation and deployment of small independent units in Nicaragua was clearly paralleled and refined to reflect local requirements in Shanghai. The decentralization of command and independent coordinated action by small units were as necessary in the crowded streets of the International Settlement as they were in the jungles of Nicaragua and the Pacific islands, and as they are today in the steaming tropical growth of South Viet-Nam. The ability and willingness of Marines to study the experiences of the past and to adapt them to the needs of contemporary tactics continues the tradition of the Marine Corps as a true force-in-readiness.

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