

THE PLATOON

Since few living history units have the numbers to form regularly as more than a squad, it's hard to master the school of the platoon. For details, serious readers should consult FM 22-5 Infantry Drill Regulations (now Drill and Ceremonies), edition of 1941 and changes 1-3. For the moment, here is a quick introduction.

What is a platoon?

The platoon is a unit of small size, between a company and a squad or section, and in the combat arms is the smallest unit commanded by an officer. In a rifle company, there are three platoons, each led by a lieutenant. During WWII, a rifle platoon comprised the following:

A command section, including the platoon leader (LT), a platoon sergeant (T/Sgt – now a SFC or PSG, grade E-7), and a platoon guide (S/Sgt).

Three rifle squads, nominally of 12 men, including:

A squad leader (as of 1942 a S/SgT), an assistant squad leader (Sgt), AR gunner, AR assistant gunner, and eight rifleman (one of whom was equipped with a rifle grenade launcher and designated grenadier).

Aside from a bump in NCO grade in the table of organization and equipment, the changes that occurred in 1941 included the disappearance of the automatic rifle squad (a fourth squad); the AR teams were simply added to the three rifle squads. In addition, the designated scouts disappeared; from 1942 on, every rifleman was expected to perform as a scout when necessary. Reason: Scouts tend to be more exposed to enemy observation and fire, and get used up. The change spread the fun a bit.

Why three rifle squads? A look at the organization of combat units shows that it is common to have three maneuver units (in a company, three rifle platoons; in a battalion, three rifle companies, etc.) This supported the shift from trench warfare doctrine that emerged in WWI as armies started looking at a more mobile, flexible doctrine. The change reflects the basic principle of “two up, one back” (that is, two combat elements forward with a reserve right behind to exploit success or as a hedge against the unexpected).

A platoon is a tactical unit only – that is, administration, supply, and other overhead functions are carried by the company.

DUTIES

The platoon leader

The military historian S. L. A. Marshall informs us (based on a monumental and depressing study by the Human Resources Research Office (HumRRO)) that the life expectancy of a platoon leader under fire in WWII was about fifteen minutes. A platoon leader leads from the front, and the enemy can usually spot a leader by his actions and finds it hard to resist the temptation to pop him before he does much damage.

The natural result of this gloomy situation was that there was a high turnover in junior officers in the infantry. (This was less so in the tank branch, since a tank is a tank and casualties tend to come in groups of 4-5). The Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Pearl of the Chattahoochee, was doing a land office business turning out infantry second lieutenants. (I was a Tac Officer at the Armor and Ordnance OCS brigades during Viet Nam – at the speed candidates go by, you had a hard time remembering names and faces).

Therefore, the dogfaces in the platoon usually didn't bother to inquire much about their lieutenant until he had been around for long enough to demonstrate high skill and good luck. But the sad fact is, most PL's didn't have enough luck to find time to develop skills. They arrived green as grass and were too often just as green when they were carried off to the field hospital or feet first to graves registration.

The platoon sergeant

The fallback was the platoon sergeant, a nominally senior NCO. In movies, he is often a grizzled, experienced, salt-of-the-earth character formed in the Regular Army. In practice, PSG's tended to be young in WWII because the competent pre-war regulars and experienced National Guard NCOs tended to be promoted quickly during mobilization to cadre forming divisions – unless they were over a minimum age as of Pearl Harbor and got discharged.

The platoon sergeants that fielded to ETO and the Pacific tended to be younger than tradition has it, and less experienced than war movies suggest. What they were was good. A PSG was generally promoted to that position because he performed well. Because of somewhat longer experience, he was usually a few steps ahead of the PL, and he knew the men in the platoon a lot better because he had been with them, often from training.

My first platoon sergeant was Joe Gustin, who had been a private at the very end of WWII; by 1967 he was on the edge of retirement. He knew what he was doing; it took me a long time to get up to speed as a lieutenant. This is how the system is supposed to work. But by the later Sixties, old NCOs were getting out because of age or frustration; platoon sergeants by 1970 (my last combat tour in Viet Nam), PSG's tended to be younger S/Sgt's, often "shake and bake" NCO's who were promoted out of training for being smart and steady. The result was that the PL had more work to do, and required a steeper learning curve. It showed. In eight months in 1970 I lost four platoon leaders – two to wounds, one I relieved for an ethical lapse (lied about the position of his patrol) and one because he was simply too scared to function under fire.

The platoon guide

Most reenactors have never heard of the platoon guide, but they were critical players in the rifle platoon. They are 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 that later), but he also functioned as an assistant platoon sergeant (he was a S/Sgt), 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).

Note that parades and formations as described in FM 22-5 require guides. (See Chapter 4, Section II; Chapter 8, Section II)

The squad leader

Squad leaders are nominally S/Sgts. They are responsible for the proficiency and performance of the soldiers in their squads, and they are expected to maneuver their squads independently in battle drill. A squad leader is expected to know the condition of every man – blisters, pay status, marksmanship proficiency, how long since the last letter from his worthless girl friend. He also knows where every man in his squad is – present, AWOL, on detail, on sick call – at all times. At every platoon or company formation he formally reports the status of his squad.

The assistant squad leader

It's easy to say "the assistant squad leader assists the squad leader." However, it's more complicated than that.

First, standard battle drill for the squad calls for using two teams in the attack – a base of fire (with the BAR) and a maneuver team. One is led by the SL, the other by the ASL. So two good NCO's are needed.

The other reason for the second Sgt in the rifle squad is that a squad without a qualified, trusted NCO in charge is basically a school of stunned mullets. The ASL is a squad leader in the making, and he should be able to take the squad leader's job when necessary (which, combat being what it is, comes sooner and oftener than we would prefer).

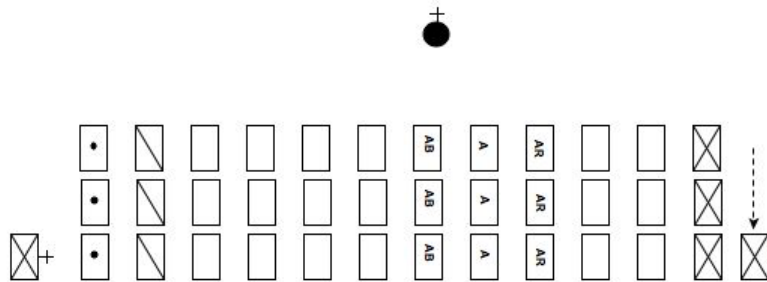
Other platoon points

(Above, top) Platoon sergeant has formed the platoon, turns it over to the PL. (Below) PSG in his post, far left rear.

Marching the platoon

To march the platoon as a separate element, we generally first change the face to march to the right (right because the platoon falls in from right to left, and a left face to march would put the guide and squad leaders at the rear of the formation).

The PL commands “right, FACE”; at this command, all members of the platoon face to the right except the guide, who faces about, steps to the front of the rightmost squad, then faces left. (The guide unless otherwise instructed is on the right, which explains this dance.) The PL faces left, facing in the same direction as the platoon.



(Above) The platoon faces right to march in column.

NOTE: There is no such command as “counter march” for close order drill in FM 22-5 (it is sometimes used to change direction in a band). To change direction front to rear while keeping the guide in front, use successive commands of “column left” or ”column right, MARCH.” The command “right (or left) turn, MARCH” is used only in company mass formation (see FM 22-5, para. 155).

NOTE: The platoon may fall in at regular interval (“FALL IN”) or close interval (“at close interval, FALL IN”). Close interval is used when space is limited. A problem with falling in at close interval is that when you face right or left, cover is reduced (ranks are compressed front to rear), which makes it difficult to march.