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TITLE: 60-MM MORTAR PLATOON

SCOPE: To relate from experience in combat the difficulties encountered in getting effective fire from the 60-mm mortars of an infantry battalion and to offer the 60-mm mortar platoon as a solution.

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## FOREWARD

This article deals with a problem and the solution of this problem that confronted the 2nd Battalion, 309th Infantry, in the early months of 1945. I was fortunate in being both a heavy weapons company commander and later battalion commander in this fine battalion. My rifle company commanders, Lt Douglas A. Moore, Captain Richey V. Graham, and Captain Joe B. Cloud were the finest any commander could ever want. Any reference I make to their ability is in no way to be construed that they were not efficient and capable of performing the most difficult and trying job of any commander in combat, that of a rifle company commander. Mere words cannot express the feeling I hold for these officers. Captain Allyn Van Dyke, my heavy weapons company commander, and Lt Harry L. Winand, the platoon leader of the 60-mm mortar platoon, are the men who made it possible to carry out the solution that we deemed necessary to enable our battalion to overcome this problem.

  
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## 60-MM MORTAR PLATOON

In World War II, a number of field expedients were used to enable our fighting forces to gain victory. Many of these have been recorded in writing, others into our present day teaching, and still others are in the minds of only the few who used them. It is into this later category that the 60-mm mortar platoon as used in our battalion during the last months of combat in Europe falls.

In the early months of 1945, we experienced a great deal of difficulty in getting effective fire from the 60-mm mortar sections of our rifle companies. Actually, the 60-mm mortar was being used very little. This resulted in an excessive use of the 81-mm mortar platoon. This situation at first was not alarming because it was felt that by bringing this deficiency to the attention of the company commanders and showing them the necessity for correction that this problem would be solved. This approach to the problem was made by the battalion commander and all the staff officers were instructed that in their visits to the companies they would check this problem. These checks made by the battalion commander and his staff over a period of approximately a month revealed that the problem was more serious than had originally been anticipated. We found that:

1. The turnover in the weapons platoon had been approximately 70% and in numerous instances, the replacements were not qualified as mortarmen.

2. Company commanders became so involved in employing their three rifle platoons that they often forgot completely the use of

their own company's support weapons. It is well to note that the company commanders at this time were either former enlisted men or junior officers from the battalion.

3. Company commanders were reluctant to fire their mortars because of the problem of resupply of ammunition.

We fully realized that if we were to get any effective use from the 60-mm mortars, we must make some radical changes and as time is a vital factor in combat, we knew that we must select a method that would give almost instant results. In our opinion, there were two possible solutions to this problem:

1. To take the sections out of the rifle companies and train them for a short period and then return them to the companies.

2. To take the mortar sections from the rifle companies and form them into a platoon under the best qualified officer available.

In the first of these solutions, it is obvious that we could correct the deficiency concerning the replacements, but as for improving the ability of the company commanders and their employment of the sections, this would accomplish very little. The second solution would accomplish the training of the replacements, ease the supply problem of ammunition and would put the sections in the hands of an officer whose chief concern would be the employment and control of the 60-mm mortar. The only objection to this solution was that we were taking away one of the tools with which a company commander had to fight. This objection was overruled because, as has been previously stated, our company commanders with

all our possible help and supervision were not exploiting this tool to its fullest use. Therefore, it was decided to form a 60-mm mortar platoon in the battalion.

We were fortunate at this time to have a young lieutenant, Lt Harry L. Winand, who had formerly been a mortar section leader in the 81-mm mortar platoon and had had considerable experience working with the 60-mm mortars during the period our battalion was training for overseas. Because of these qualifications, he was selected as the platoon leader.

In forming the platoon, we decided that it would be sufficient to combine the three sections and add a platoon headquarters to complete the platoon. Thus the composition of the platoon was decided as follows:

1. Platoon headquarters:
  - a. One officer.
  - b. One platoon sergeant.
  - c. Two runners.
  - d. Two drivers.
2. Three sections, each consisting of:
  - a. One sergeant section leader.
  - b. Three mortar squads, each consisting of:
    - (1) One squad leader.
    - (2) Number one gunner.
    - (3) Numbers two, three and four ammunition bearers.

Thus, the total strength of the platoon was one officer and fifty-three enlisted men. We realized that we might experience difficulty in maintaining the platoon at this strength, so plans were made to drop one

squad from each section if the necessity ever arose. Two one-quarter ton trucks were assigned to the platoon for transportation, principally to be used for the supply of ammunition. These trucks were taken from the heavy weapons company which, over the past months of combat, had added a few extra vehicles to their normal table of equipment.

For communications, the platoon was given an SCR 300 radio, four SCR 536 radios, and six sound power telephones. This extra equipment, as the vehicles, had been acquired over a period of time in combat. The SCR 300 was put into the battalion command net. The SCR 536 radios were used by the forward observers, but were found to be unreliable. Frequently, it was necessary for the observers to use the SCR 300 radios of the rifle companies for the fire missions and subsequent adjustments. The sound power telephones were used for inter-platoon communication.

After the platoon was formed it was attached to the heavy weapons company for employment and control. The enlisted men were still carried by their respective companies on the morning reports and it was the duty of the heavy weapons company commander to notify them of any change of status on an individual.

The actual formation of this platoon took place in March of 1945 just as we were finishing our part in the establishment of the now famous Remagen Bridgehead. Lt Winand was given a period of approximately three or four days to organize the platoon and prepare them for combat. Fortunately, we were in a position where it was possible for them to fire a few problems and iron out some of their difficulties in procedure and fire control before they were actually committed in combat. Lt Allyn Van Dyke, later

Captain, who was the heavy weapons company commander, deserves a great deal of credit for the work and time he spent in helping Lt Winand organize the platoon and for the supervision and guidance that he gave the platoon throughout the next two months of combat.

Let us now examine the manner in which the platoon was employed. Before a discussion of the tactical employment, we will examine the manner in which the platoon itself operated.

The platoon, with few exceptions, fired from battery. This necessitates a small fire direction center which can compute the required data and give it to the mortars. The fire direction center in the platoon consisted of Lt Winand and two enlisted men. The fire direction center would call the necessary range and deflection changes to the mortars and would designate which section or sections would fire. In cases where the entire platoon was to fire, one section would be designated to adjust and the other sections would follow all of the subsequent commands and would cover their respective areas of the target in the fire for effect. Displacement of the platoon was accomplished by the sections. This is a necessity so that at least one or two sections will always be able to fire. The problem of forward observers was solved by a rotation system between the 81-mm mortar platoon and the 60-mm mortar platoon, thus eliminating a duplication of effort.

In the attack, when the battalion was attacking on what might be called a normal frontage, that is a frontage of 500 to 1000 yards, the platoon was used in direct support of the battalion, thus giving the attacking rifle company commanders two mortar platoons, the 60-mm mortar and

the 81-mm mortar, to call upon for fire. The forward observer with the rifle company would normally make the decision as to which platoon would fire the mission, his decision was usually based on the distance involved. Normally, targets of 1000 yards or less were fired by the 60-mm mortars and targets of a greater distance were fired by the 81-mm mortars. On some occasions, the fires of both platoons were converged on a target that was materially effecting the advance of the battalion.

When attacking on frontages of greater than 1000 yards, the platoon was used in direct support of or attached to the company making the secondary effort. This gave a tremendous amount of close support fire to this company which it normally would not have. This was used frequently during our operation in the Ruhr Pocket and proved very successful. A number of times during our operations in this pocket, we attacked with three companies abreast and had the 60-mm mortar platoon supporting one company and the 81-mm mortars supporting two companies.

In the defense, the platoon was used in the normal mission of the 60-mm mortar, that of filling in the gaps of the final protective lines or firing on small area targets. On some occasions, it was found necessary, due to the terrain and the frontage assigned, to attach one or more sections to the front line rifle companies to accomplish this mission.

Though the platoon was used for a relatively short period in combat, it was of tremendous help in the accomplishment of the missions assigned to the battalion during this period. Though I realize that the formation of a 60-mm mortar platoon is what might be termed a radical departure from



the normal use, I feel that the same problem that occurred in our battalion may easily occur in infantry battalions of the future. In conversation with other battalion and company commanders since the end of the war, I have found that this problem was not just peculiar to our battalion.

At this point, I wish to emphasize that I am in no way advocating that the table of organization of the infantry rifle company and battalion be changed, but merely that I am offering the use of the 60-mm mortar platoon as one method of obtaining effective fire from this excellent support weapon.

If we can assume that through proper training, the problems I have previously pointed out will never exist in infantry battalions of the future, there is still one condition which may favor the forming of a 60-mm mortar platoon. That is that the occasion may arise when the massing of fire by platoon may override the use of the mortars by sections.

Therefore, I deem it necessary that some training be given in the infantry battalion on the employment and operation of the 60-mm mortars as a platoon. In this increasingly technical age of warfare, it behooves all commanders to fully understand the tools with which they have to work. Coupled with this must be flexibility of thinking and the ability to exploit these tools to the fullest extent. During the heat of battle, most men are too fatigued, both mentally and physically, to exercise any great amount of original thought. But if they have a wealth of knowledge to draw from, they will be better able to utilize all the

weapons at their disposal. It is with this thought in mind that I have offered this solution to a problem that confronted our battalion in combat and may well confront a commander in the future.

This article has no footnotes and no references because it is the results of one battalion commander's experience and the solution used in solving a problem that arose during combat.