

Flexibility and the fire team

by Capt James H. Webb

The proposed six-man fire team would provide a more viable maneuver unit, capable of fulfilling its mission while sustaining casualties.



Students of Marine Corps tactics are taught that the smallest tactical and maneuver element in the Corps is the fire team. Many combat-tested squad leaders, however, might regularly dispute this contention. As a newly-arrived platoon commander in Vietnam, I ordered fire team rushes during the heat of one of my first contacts. I was subsequently amazed to watch a lone figure burst forth from the squad on my left, and I rushed to query the squad leader concerning his understanding of my orders.

"That," he answered, "was my first fire team."

This experience, although humorous in retrospect, was by no means unique. It probably was more common than being blessed with a continual full complement of Marines. In fact, its very frequency serves to cast aspersions upon the effectiveness of the fire team. If a fire team sustains only two casualties, or even one in some instances, it simply ceases to exist as a tactical or maneuver *unit*. Thus it seems that this vital link, which provides the foundation for our entire

tactical and administrative structure, lacks the flexibility to function properly at less than full strength.

At the outset of World War II, the Marine rifle squad was composed of 12 men, with no particular internal organization. This setup literally came under fire early in that war, as it proved immensely difficult for a squad leader to maintain control over as many as 11 men at one time. Therefore, after a number of attempts to rectify the situation, our present fire team organization was instituted in 1944. It has a number of advantages over the former system, and has been widely heralded due to its "triangular concept" which offers maximum control, maneuverability, and firepower. Indeed, when compared to the "12-man mob" its advantages in these areas are striking:

- **Control.** This was perhaps the greatest advantage of the new system as the squad leader had three subordinate leaders in his span of control instead of 11 men. This produced more effective supervision.

- **Maneuverability.** With the creation of a four-man fire team, a smaller tactical unit capable of independent maneuver evolved. This served to eliminate the spur of the moment "you take Smith and Jones and go over there" approach and ostensibly brought into existence a bonafide maneuver element below the squad level.

- **Firepower.** The fire team was created to gain maximum employment of the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR). In fact, the whole fire team concept was built around the BAR, which provided the nucleus of the team's firepower. Fire team formations were designed to protect the automatic rifleman, and one rifleman was assigned a secondary mission of aiding the automatic rifleman in finding targets and re-loading magazines.

This arrangement was highly successful in exploiting the BAR (and later the M-14 automatic) to full advantage; the maximum use and



protection of the automatic rifle seems to be the main justification behind the present fire team concept. With the advent of the M-16, however, this nucleus of the fire team has disappeared. Now there may be justification for reorganiza-



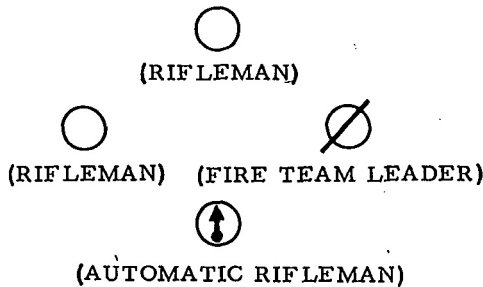
Capt Webb graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1968, where he received a letter of commendation for leadership contributions. He was Class Honorman of BC 3-69, and also received the military skills award. He served as platoon commander and company commander, D/1/5, and with regimental S-3 in Vietnam.

tion. In this regard, it is recognized that Marine Corps planners are searching for a heavy automatic weapon which would provide the fire team with the same type of firepower that the BAR and M-14 automatic did; however, two points must necessarily be made concerning this. First, there is currently no such weapon in use, and no positive guarantee that one will be found, while the M-16 is currently being used. And secondly, instead of finding a new automatic rifle of this type, perhaps a better solution would be to retain the M-16 and reorganize the fire team.

Before discussing any recommended changes let's take a closer look at the present fire team concept.

- **Control.** Three fire teams work to the advantage of the squad leader. However, a fire team leader with a maximum of three subordinates creates another problem: the fire team leader is *underchallenged*. The 1967 edition of *Taking Command*, edited by Col Samuel H. Hays, USA, which has been used as a leadership textbook in at least two service academies, points out that a unit leader needs a *minimum* of three subordinates to keep him busy. Since few units are afforded the luxury of a full T/O, especially in a combat zone, and we are now giving fire team leader a *maximum* of three people, it would seem that we must often underchallenge a young Marine in his first leadership experience. This is admittedly the lesser of two evils when compared with the problems encountered in the earlier systems by the squad leader; however, it is readily solvable, as will be seen later in this article.

An equally important point is worth mentioning concerning control at the fire team level. From the squad level upward, the unit leader is responsible for positioning himself where he can best control his men in all combat formations. The fire team, however, is built around the automatic rifleman, who occupies the most sensitive position in every formation, and the fire team leader is subsequently relegated to a fixed, less sensitive position in each formation. A good example of the control problems inherent in this practice may be seen by examining the fire team wedge formation.



The automatic rifleman occupies the center of the formation, and the fire team leader is at one end. When this formation is used to cross a large open area, where great dispersion is necessary, the fire team leader is often placed in a most difficult control situation.

A final control consideration is command of the unit in the team leader's absence. This responsibility is currently held by the automatic rifleman, who must wear two hats if his team leader is hit during contact; he is responsible for the entire team plus his all-important automatic weapon.

• *Maneuverability* The fire team was created with the advantage of being an independent maneuver element. It is—when at full strength. Take away one man, and formations must be bastardized. Take away two men, and there is no operable fire team. This places severe limitations on maneuverability, especially during contact, when casualties of some dimensions must always be expected. A fire team without a full complement is sorely tasked to perform any maneuver assignment.

• *Firepower.* The original fire team was built around the automatic rifle, which was the focal point of fire team activity. With the advent of the M-16, fully automatic fire became universal. Doctrinal reaction to this innovation, expressed in Marine Corps tactics classes, was to assign one man to “play” automatic rifleman, placing the selector of his weapon in the appropriate position, while the other fire team members dutifully carried out their roles. In this manner, the fire team concept and resulting formations were “saved,” with the logic that one man per team firing on full automatic is adequate, especially considering ammunition consumption during sustained contact.

While this is true, the limitations in favor of doctrine are perhaps more damaging than contributory for at least two reasons:

► We are taking the initiative from the man “on the spot” and failing to recognize the potential of the M-16. Depending on the situation, the squad or fire team leader may desire all or none of his subordinates to fire their weapons on full automatic. It is recognized that a good unit leader will take this type of action on his own

initiative. However, why not *teach* him flexibility as doctrine, especially since his weapons have that capability? This would also serve to reinforce the sometimes shattered faith in the “book.”

► The second reason follows logically. If no one in the fire team is arbitrarily designated as the automatic rifleman, why should the automatic rifleman be the focal point of all formations? When every man in the team possesses the same firing capability, it is logical that the team leader should occupy the most sensitive positions in all fire team formations; he can control his team with greater proficiency from those spots. This is especially true with the wedge formation.

The key weakness of our present system is a lack of flexibility. The present fire team concept



cannot absorb casualties and continue to function adequately, does not properly use the team leader as a unit leader, and is poorly suited to the M-16 rifle. However, it is far superior to previously attempted concepts and there seems to be a question as to whether a better system could ever be found.

There is a better system which is easily adaptable to today's Marine Corps. It involves no changes in manning levels and has been combat-tested. It involves changing the fire team from its present four-man structure to a six-man team composed of a fire team leader, assistant fire team leader, and four riflemen. Let's examine

the advantages using the triangular concept as a reference point.

The most obvious advantage of a six-man fire team is its overall flexibility in every area of the triangular concept.

• **Control.** The team leader's ability to control his unit should not be affected by the addition of two men. Col Hays established the maximum limit for control at seven men. The newly or-



ganized fire team would provide its leader with a maximum of five men, well within the seven-man limit, and certainly more challenging than the present maximum of three.

Abolishing the automatic rifleman and the key positions he presently occupies, plus the addition of two more men, gives the fire team leader the advantage of placing himself where he can best control his unit.

The final control consideration is the creation of an assistant team leader who would be ready to take charge without hesitation. He would also occupy key positions in tactical formations.

• **Maneuverability.** A six-man fire team could sustain up to three casualties and still exist as an effective maneuver element, thus fulfilling its mission of being a tactical and maneuver unit. The six-man team has the flexibility necessary for combat since formations can be changed to accommodate smaller numbers with no loss in efficiency.

• **Firepower.** The team members may fire on semi-automatic or full automatic at the discretion of the team leader.

An additional point should be made at this point concerning the present search for a new, heavier automatic rifle to fill the gap left by the demise of the M-14A. While a heavier automatic rifle would undoubtedly provide the fire team with greater firepower, the sacrifice in overall flexibility negates its advantages. This is especially true when one considers that the M-60 machine gun is usually available at the platoon level, and that any contact made at ranges in ex-

cess of even 100 meters may be supplemented by external supporting arms of some sort. Therefore, the advantages gained in overall performance and flexibility by *not* implementing a different automatic weapon are greater than those derived from its use.

Granting that the six-man fire team is an advantage, then, the obvious question follows: with present and anticipated personnel cutbacks, where do we acquire people to provide the expansion? My proposal is this: Cannibalize the third squad in every rifle platoon and feed its members into the first two squads. This was often done among my contemporaries in combat, as personnel shortages precluded continuous operation with three rifle squads. Further, the all important triangular concept on the platoon level may be maintained by assigning machine gun squads permanently to the rifle platoons, thus giving the platoon commander three very potent squads.

Two 19-man squads, as suggested above, derived from three 14-man squads, provide an additional bonus of four extra men. This surplus could be dealt with in any of the following ways:

1) They could be completely eliminated from the platoon T/O. In view of current manpower requirements, four fewer men in every rifle platoon throughout the Marine Corps could ostensibly provide a realistic solution to cutback difficulties.

2) By assigning three assistant squad leaders, including one for the machine gun squad, and an additional platoon messenger to the recommended system. (This implementation is the solution recommended by the writer.) Assistant squad leaders would greatly enhance control and the smooth transition of command changes at the squad level. Further, the additional messenger at the platoon command post is considered a realistic necessity in view of recent advances in communications equipment which require more "grunts" to man radios within the platoon.

3) By assigning an additional platoon messenger, as described above, and a radioman for each squad leader. This may prove more desirable than the preferred suggestion if developments progress to the extent that each squad is allotted a PRC-25 or its equivalent.

The beauty of this entire proposed change is its flexibility, and the fact that it would have absolutely no ill effects on current manpower requirements within the Marine Corps, while increasing the overall effectiveness of the fire team and squad itself. Tactics of employment would not change, except that the fire team, perhaps for the first time, would actually become what it is purported to be by our instructors—a viable tactical and maneuver element, capable of sustaining casualties and still performing its assigned missions.

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