

Weapons Squad?

Topics in rifle platoon organization

by Capt John “Jack” J. Spang, USMC(Ret)

Given the many recent actions and discussions on evolving the rifle platoon’s weapons and organization, I propose a series of relevant discussion points. My 30-year-old experience as an artillery and infantry officer is too anachronistic to be relevant at a detailed level, but the principles act as a solid base for discussion and decision making. The reader will see that the topics are inter-related, and there are so many variables that it is difficult to isolate a specific topic without considering its impact on other topics; however, I tried to arrange them in a “principle to decision” sequence. My goal is to see these options “wargamed” to determine the best options.

Capability Escalation

Whether dealing with weaponry, communications, sensor/target acquisition, or any other capability, there should be an increase in the scope and capability at each higher level of organization. Using weaponry as the easiest example, and limiting ourselves to rifle company resources, consider that there are four types of firepower (some terms are my own):

- Aimed fire: single bullets aimed at a specific target.
- Suppressive fire: rapid fire (bullets) designed to hinder action (e.g., machine gun).
- Direct fire: explosive weapon aimed at a specific target.
- Indirect fire: explosive weapons capable of reaching distant and/or unseen/defilade targets.

Type of Fire	Rifle Squad	Rifle Platoon	Rifle Company
Aimed fire	M16/M27	DMR	Sniper Team(?)
Suppressive Fire	M27	SAW	M240B
Direct Fire	M203	MAAWS	Upgrade to Javelin(?)
Indirect fire	M203	Handheld 60 Mortar	Full 60/81 Mortar

Figure 1.

Each of these types of fire needs to be available to an infantry Marine or unit. As the scope of the unit increases, the range and capability of the weapons available should increase. The following chart serves as an example of a proposed “escalation of capabilities” within the rifle company. (See Figure 1.)

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Weapons Squad

At every level above the rifle platoon, the more capable weapons are combined into a single unit to be task organized for either direct or general support of the component units. With the emphasis on distributed operations (e.g., the company-level independent activities), it might be worthwhile to consider this model for the rifle platoon as well. By keeping the rifle squads with their in-

herent weapons (M27/M16/M203), the enhanced weapons can be held together for concentration when appropriate, and task organized to rifle squads when appropriate. The platoon commander can tailor his capabilities to fit the situation. Squads are not burdened with the heavier weapons when not needed, and critical mass is more easily attained where needed.

The weapons squad makeup might consist of two or three 2-Marine SAW teams, two or three 2-Marine MAAWS teams, and one 3-4 Marine handheld 60mm mortar team. It could also act as the coordination point for attached resources, such as enhanced, communications, UAVs, or engineers which the platoon commander would hold or distribute as the situation demands.

The senior squad leader should be assigned to this squad and attachments could also be under his immediate control, freeing the platoon commander from any needed micro-management of such attachments and letting him manage the platoon as a whole.

The key concept here is that a squad can be assigned either none or multiple instances of the weapons depending on the immediate mission. Typically, such task organization allows a unit to require fewer of any resource, since the flexibility in deployment is more efficient than pre-determined “direct

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support,” whether needed or not. So we might suffice with two rather than three SAW/recoilless rifle teams, and actually provide better availability than the pre-ordained one-per-squad model.

Platoon Mortar Capability

As noted earlier, the existence of a platoon-controlled indirect fire capability is certainly worth the discussion. By limiting the mortar system to the handheld setup, the three- to four-man team could optimize their ability to carry sufficient ammunition for the weapon in order to provide an initial level of indirect fire support. Assuming this team would typically stay collocated with the platoon commander, it might also serve as the basis for a small reaction force, defense force, etc. This provides the platoon commander the internal ability to extend his indirect fire capability beyond that of the squad-based M203.

Fire Team Complementary Weapon Pairings

The combination of the M27 and M203 provide the lowest level of all four weapon capabilities. There is a natural symbiotic relationship between the flat-firing suppressive automatic weapon (causing enemy to seek direct cover), and the indirect fire ability—such as is available to the M203—to reach into defilade positions. As such, I propose that fire teams be made up of two pairings of Marines with these complementary weapons. Each pairing would possess the complementary weapons that meet all four capabilities and training would emphasize this teamwork.

Squad Size

While one’s first choice might be to add the weapons squad to the existing three thirteen-man rifle squads, that might not be possible, certainly not

immediately. Alternatively, reducing infantry fire teams to three Marines would hinder concept 4. The most viable options might be to just convert one infantry squad to the weapons squad, or to have each of the three infantry squads contribute a fire team to the new weapons squad. This latter might be the most flexible because it would be easier to re-add a third fire team in the future, but this should be wargamed for the best option.

Closing

While all of these ideas are defensible in an academic discussion, the concepts should be vetted by training operations to determine which truly enhance platoon capabilities and flexibility, and which might have unforeseen negative impacts.



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