

atomic battalion
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Marine Corps Gazette (pre-1994); Jan 1958; 42, 1;
Marine Corps Gazette & Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines
pg. 8



for the nuclear battlefield.

Will they differ greatly from conventional tactics?

atomic battalion

By Maj Nicholas M. Seminoff

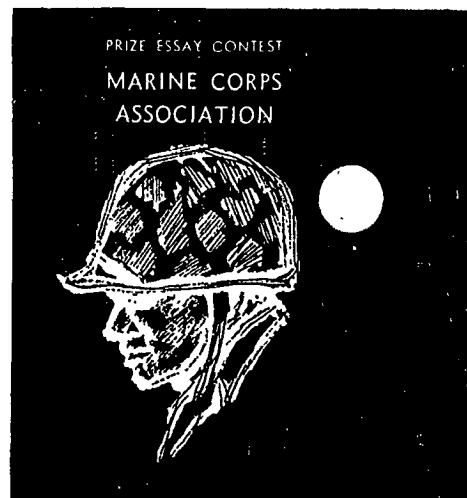
✱ BATTALION TACTICS IN UNIT separation are not so much concerned with the problem of mass at a critical time and place, as with the problems of when to trigger the atomic bomb and how best to combine with it the maneuvers of the battalion. The assumption is, of course, that the battalion commander will be authorized to select targets and to call the time of the shot. Whether he gets the weapon he wants is another matter, but one which is intimately connected with the movements the battalion must make preliminary to the expected time of any nuclear strike.

Unit separation fosters a freedom of operation which commanders have never known before. This freedom is based upon reconnaissance and upon greater opportunities and space for maneuver. It is contingent upon the capability of the battalion and the skill of the commander to produce a unity of effort which ties together the action of widely separated companies and smaller task organizations. The degree of separation and consequently the amount of operating freedom, depend upon the character of the terrain in the battalion's assigned zone of action;

the strength and composition of each subordinate task organization; the effective range of supporting weapons; and the ability of the separated units to support one another by fire and reinforcement.

The situation at higher echelon will dictate whether the battalion commander may trigger atomic weapons. Higher commanders will be concerned with the principle of concentration to a much greater degree than the battalion commander. The idea of mass is fully as applicable to atomic firepower as to men and conventional firepower. Atomic superiority will play a decisive role in future warfare, and it will be necessary for the higher commander to carefully calculate the relative strength of atomic force before he feels free to release nuclear weapons to battalion control. First priority will have to go to the destruction of the enemy's atomic capability.

Skill is fully as important in the exercise of the principle of mass as is the factor of superiority of force. It may be, therefore, that the higher commander will consider the allocation of atomic weapons to those battalions making the main effort as the most skilful application of his



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superiority of force, despite the fact that the battalions are not jammed together in the old shoulder-to-shoulder style. The term "decisive area" may be more appropriate to the skilful application of mass than the old "decisive point." If warfare is to assume a new fluidity in width and in depth, the area of decision will be correspondingly wider and deeper than we are accustomed to.

Battalion commanders may also be charged with calling for atomic strikes when the main dispositions of the enemy have not been definitely located. The attacking battalions may find the enemy much sooner than the other information gathering agencies of the higher commander, and under such circumstances as to require immediate nuclear treatment. This is particularly possible in the amphibious assault. Plans for the assault must be made on the basis of intelligence which is sketchy in comparison with that gathered and collated as a result of direct contact with the enemy.

In order to properly relate the battalion to the atomic battlefield, and to determine just where direct contact is first likely to take place, it is necessary to discard old notions of front lines. The combat area has deepened in proportion to its new width. The helicopter assault is responsible for this, together with the new ability to spread out. Formerly the attack began from a strength of zero at the water's edge and, like a thin line of fire moving through damp, dead grass, moved slowly inland, leaving behind isolated patches of resistance which were fairly easily overcome. Now the attack is delivered simultaneously throughout an area miles in depth and in width. The dispositions of both forces are arranged checkerboard style according to the dictates of the terrain and the degree of unit separation. It may well be that first contact will take place between the units in the deeper dispositions; for example, between the foremost helicopter assault units and the rearmost enemy defensive units. Each battalion finds itself with organized enemy units on either flank and to the rear. This is no overriding disadvantage, for the assaulting battalion is itself in the rear of the enemy. The prize, as it always does, will go to the fighting

organization possessing the greater moral strength.

It is certainly possible that units assaulting by helicopter may be cut off from the parent organization. If such a unit sees nothing before it but defeat in detail and no hope of regaining contact as a regular unit, it must be trained to exchange the principles of regular warfare for those of the guerrilla—clandestinely attacking the materiel, the men, the communications and the morale of the enemy as the guerrilla would attack them.

The order of atomic burst which the battalion commander can call shall be compatible with the ability of the battalion to locate the enemy. The battalion must be close enough to the enemy to exploit effectively on foot, if necessary, without itself being endangered by the bomb's effects. Its targets will be fleeting targets, possibly closing at the time of discovery. Delivery of the strike will have to be made before the target disappears if it happens to be withdrawing, or before it closes to a range which makes the risk of damage to the battalion unacceptable for employment of a friendly atomic bomb.

There should be no doubt that the battalion commander will be able to locate targets worthy of the atomic bomb. Front-line commanders frequently found targets for long-range artillery and deep air strikes even in the fast-moving battles of WWII and the mountainous campaigns of Korea. This, however, is not the usual way of combat. The enemy does not willingly disclose his strength and his dispositions, and he is less likely to do so if he is attacked by a force which has atomic superiority. For this reason the battalion normally attacks terrain, but without substituting the idea of posses-

sion of the ground for its primary mission which continues to be to close with and to capture or destroy the enemy. The terrain is a guide to the direction in which the battalion should bend its efforts in intelligence as well as in maneuver. If the directions of the ridges, the rivers and streams, the woods and the roads are known, so are the most probable routes the enemy will use in moving to or through the battalion's zone of action, whether that enemy is regular or guerrilla.

The problem of intelligent placement of the atomic weapon is only half solved when the general location of the enemy is known. Artillery-type preparatory fires, using atomic weapons, would be quite definitely contrary to the principle of economy of force. Atomic strikes will be delivered against targets which are definitely located. At least, the commander will believe them to be so located.

Target "profitability" is an additional problem related to the economical use of the weapon. There will never be enough nuclear weapons to permit their use against every enemy position. Which positions, then, will be targets worthy of the bomb? The determination cannot be restricted to mere size, nor to placement alone. Time and place and the commander's judgment in view of the existing situation will determine whether a target should receive the atomic bomb. An enemy platoon may be so situated that it may not be destroyed or bypassed without risking a considerable number of casualties. The problem of the evacuation of these casualties and the replacement of themselves, their know-how and their weapons, together with the magnitude of combat which lies at the objective beyond, may make such a target ex-



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tremely profitable in the commander's opinion. And those terrain features from which the enemy, for great distances, can control, direct or deliver atomic fires; are not these also profitable?

In order that the commander may accurately hurl his combinations of atomic devastation and troop maneuver at the core of the enemy's strength, he will need high quality reconnaissance when and where he wants it. Ground patrols from his own unit will gather much of his information, but reconnaissance aviation must also be available more often and for longer periods. If it cannot be assigned on such a basis for every battalion, then it should be assigned as the atomic weapons are allocated — to those battalions making the main effort. Wherever possible the commander must be spared the casualties which deprive him of fighting power. Patrols mean casualties which might better be saved for more decisive actions.

Modern methods of detailed aerial photography, together with observation aircraft, will allow the commander to see the full length and width of his zone of operations as one picture. The laborious efforts of numerous ground patrols presented a jigsaw puzzle which had to be painstakingly fitted together piece by piece before the commander could relate one end of his zone of action to the other. The faster methods of aviation will permit him to maintain the momentum of his attack. There will be less need to stop periodically and feel blindly through the fog for the enemy. Aviation's information will be particularly useful during the battalion's exploitation of an atomic strike. The enemy, too, will be rushing reserves from concealment to the stricken area.

The key to the entire reconnaissance picture is the continuous stream of information which should flow from the subordinate commanders. There is always the risk that they will become so engrossed in their immediate problems as to neglect the larger duty of contributing to the success of the entire battalion, not only by the determined action of their own units, but by the



information which locks together the pieces gathered by the patrols and the larger not quite complete picture presented by reconnaissance aviation. The commander's estimate of the situation is a continuing thing. No attack progresses exactly as planned. This is not to say that vacillation in decision making is the better course. The commander has reached a decision as to a plan of action. During the course of the action, he will have to arrive at numerous decisions each of which contributes to the evolution of his plan. The subordinate commanders provide him with the materials he needs to guide the evolution.

Once the target has been found, there is the problem of coordinating

the maneuver of the troops with the strike. Additional forward air controllers and air support radar teams in the reorganized Marine Division increase its atomic delivery potential and speed the time of delivery. These additional means for control of supporting fires are a valuable asset when the battalion is too closely engaged to use the atomic weapon. Conventional strafing, napalm, rockets and bombs can be controlled on all sides at the same time, making the flanks and rear less vulnerable. However, a thought to be kept in mind is that it is doubtful if, in the atomic era, the enemy could deliver an attack of equal strength on all sides of the battalion. He will not in every case, if at all, be able to

advance on all sides with overwhelming power any more than our own forces will.

Controllers of supporting fires, despite the increase in their numbers, continue to be faced with a problem which demands their closest attention and utmost skill. As infantry moves forward in the attack, the increasing distances between it and the supporting weapons, and its changing relationship with fire control reference points, make it more and more difficult to coordinate the fire with its movement. Shorts in conventional fires are no rarity. Atomic shorts will be disastrous.

A further complication lies in the location and direction of attack of friendly neighboring units. The battalion commander is always obliged to know where they are, or he must have a certain and rapid means for identifying friend from foe. If he cannot make such an identification, his ability to control atomic fires is severely restricted. Firefights between friendly units within small arms range of one another and attacks by friendly aircraft have occurred in the past. The system in which higher echelon may negate an atomic mission for a battalion provides the higher commander with the measure of control necessary to prevent annihilation of one of his battalions by another.

The atomic strike has lasting value only when it may be exploited on the ground. Troop units will have to be well trained in all phases of atomic exploitation. There will be times when movement in exploitation will be made aboard armored carriers, trucks or helicopters. There will also be times when no mechanical mode of transportation is available. The battalion cannot halt an attack simply because vehicles are lacking. If the troops have been trained to take cover to escape the effects of a close-in friendly weapon; to emerge from that cover after the strike; and to move as a cohesive unit on foot and with speed across rugged terrain to make a coordinated attack upon the devastated area; there is no need either to halt or slow the attack for vehicles to be brought up.

Troops in exploitation must be prepared to overcome obstacles which the nuclear weapon itself will place in their way. In addition to

the obstacles the enemy will lay, there will be fallen and burning timbers to block the roads and trails leading through woods; debris to choke the routes through highland defiles; and rubble littered roads through towns and cities. There will be radioactive areas to traverse. Marines have been trained to fight across mined areas and gas-contaminated areas. The obstacle of radioactivity must be dealt with in the same way.

Maneuver in exploitation will be a far cry from the old cautious movements of the battalion. The concept of a tightly knit perimeter defense feeling its way toward the enemy does not appear to be quite congruous. Not only will the battalion have to apply its force to the objective set for it, but it will have to destroy the enemy as it moves toward its objective. This will include the prepared enemy positions on terrain guarding the avenues of movement and the small tank and infantry ambushes lying in wait to take the battalion or its components in the flank.

Flexible formations utilizing thrust lines, phase lines and check points to designate the direction of attack and the zones of action will be more appropriate to a fluid kind of war. These are only devices and not ends in themselves. The end is the ability to fight in separation, yet with the action of each unit contributing to the whole, and the efforts of all converging to execute the mission of the battalion. Thrust lines, phase lines and check points merely provide the commander with the control tools he needs to generate a convergence of effort out of the actions of his subordinate units. Instead of assigning a main attack, he will very likely select a direction in which to project the effort of his battalion. The effect will be that of multiple attacks delivered on a broad front and converging in the designated direction.

The thrust line will mark the axis of the battalion's broad advance and will serve as a simple and rapid means of orientation. The direction of the line may be changed as the situation requires, while the need for encoding coordinates based upon it is measured only by the time it is planned to use the line and the exigencies of the situation. The axis

of advance may coincide with the thrust line, or it may lie along a definable terrain feature parallel to it. The thrust line should lie in the direction of movement so that coordinates on either side of it may be used during the entire movement. It would be well, also, if the line followed some fairly-well defined terrain feature, or features, itself to permit subordinate unit commanders to identify key locales with a minimum of effort. Security is certainly necessary, but speed in today's wars of movement and nuclear weapons will be more important.

Phase lines are a means for coordinating infantry maneuver very closely with atomic strikes. The timing of the strike is one of the battalion commander's chief problems. If he waits until the battalion has reached the limit of safe distance from planned ground zero before calling for the strike, technical difficulties at the source of delivery or sudden changes in the plans of higher echelon may delay the strike. The battalion will have to sit dangerously motionless, or call off the strike and resort to conventional support before the advantages which made the attack the best course of action in the first place disappear altogether. If, by some accident, the bomb is delivered after the commander makes the decision to continue the attack despite the delay, the effects could be fatal to the battalion.

If he plans his strike with a phase line to coordinate maneuver, the commander may well call for the strike to coincide with the battalion's arrival at the limit of safety from recommended ground zero. He should know before he reaches the phase line whether the weapon will be delivered, and thus have the necessary time for adequate decision. In this way the momentum of the battalion's attack is preserved, and it operates on the basis of firm plans. It remains on the move during the period of waiting for its atomic strike, dealing in timely fashion with would-be ambushes and harassment, and presenting only a fleeting target for the enemy's atomic efforts. Certainly, movement for the sake of movement is fruitless, but once the maneuver has been planned and begun it is frustrating and dangerous to require the commander, his staff, and his subordinate commanders to

cease and begin again.

For optimum effect, phase lines should be at a distance slightly greater from ground zero than the limit of safety from ground zero; some protection should be provided by the terrain from the effects of the friendly strike; it should obstruct enemy observation; it should minimize the effects of any enemy atomic strike; and it should be close enough to the objective to allow timely exploitation on foot.

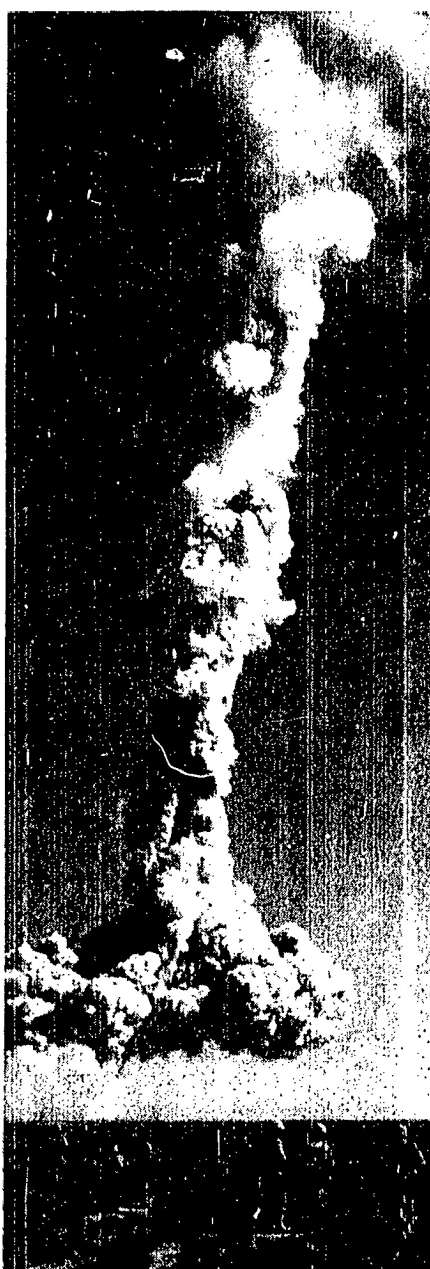
The movements of widely separated companies and smaller task forces sent on distant sweeps will be controlled by check points. Control over avenues of movement and denial to the enemy of those terrain features most valuable for purposes of ambush, should be among the criteria for the selection of check points. It will very likely be found that the check points chosen will correspond closely to the same type of terrain which has been chosen in the past as objectives for the battalion and the company.

Obstacles, too, will become increasingly important as offensive weapons — a part of the system for securing the flanks of separated units as they advance. They will not always be covered by fire, but in the fluid warfare of the atom who is to say that they will not prove effective for their purposes? The enemy may be able to bypass and breach those not covered by fire, but he may also suffer casualties nonetheless. In any event, exploding mines will indicate his position to the attacking battalion. Too, he will lose time, and minutes in the highly mobile type of warfare will be like the hours in the wars of yesterday. Two less attractive alternatives present themselves. Either lay no obstacles at all, or dissipate the battalion throughout the zone of action for the purpose of providing some covering fire at every obstacle.

Security is another problem to raise a specter head in this wide open type of war. The preservation of the battalion's freedom of action is no specter, but it will be a strong commander who can overcome the more fearful apprehensions raised by the lack of physical contact with other friendly forces. Once the commander succumbs to these apprehensions, the mobility of his command

will begin to degenerate. The battalion will draw in upon itself haunted by shadows and expending its ammunition upon ghosts. It will exchange its proper mission — destruction of the enemy — for that of self-preservation.

The same technique of utilizing thrust lines, phase lines, check points and obstacles will serve to promote speed of movement in attacks upon successive objectives. The companies will be able to begin their coordinated sweeps upon the next objective with a minimum of time for reorganization upon each objective. It may be that this system, so closely akin to infiltration and guerrilla war, will be the most effective



means for mobility in the frontless combat of atomic war.

The idea of withdrawal in the face of the enemy in order to permit the safe delivery of a nuclear strike generates a particularly difficult problem. How do you move back without exposing the battalion to excessive damage by the enemy? There is risk, but no combat is without risk. Techniques must be devised to lessen the risk involved. The next war will require a highly developed capability to fight in every direction, including the one which takes the battalion temporarily away from the enemy. The premium will be on the commander who can make rapid estimates and decisions in fast changing situations.

Of course, if a unit only withdraws, it will be followed. The enemy will certainly recognize the advantage given him by the new, non-aggressive attitude of the battalion, and will hardly be so dense as to allow an unimpeded withdrawal. The system of check points and phase lines will be just as useful to coordinate and speed the withdrawal as it will be to converge the efforts of the battalion in attack. Ruses and stratagems will be needed to deceive the enemy as to the aim of the action being taken. Deception can be practiced by temporarily continuing forward movement against those check points most distant from recommended ground zero, while the remainder of the battalion begins the movements which will take it out of the zone of danger. Heavy conventional air attacks and ground supporting fires must be available to cover the withdrawal, to deceive the enemy as to intent, and to slow the movements of the enemy so that he can neither follow the withdrawal, nor escape the atomic target area.

It may not be possible, either to fool the enemy or to pin him down while the withdrawal and the atomic delivery are made. In that case, he might be allowed to follow the withdrawal into an ambush which might be just as decisive as the atomic weapon and its exploitation. The threat of delivery may thus be made to serve as effectively, if not as quickly, as the actual delivery.

Air reconnaissance must be available to inform the battalion commander if the enemy also withdraws. He may then direct conventional



supporting fires upon him and resume the advance. Again, these rapid shifts in movement will be facilitated by the use of thrust lines, phase lines and check points.

The freedom of operation inherent in unit separation suggests that the technique of breaking contact need not be confined to the withdrawal. If the terrain to the flanks is open, what is to prevent the battalion from slipping to the side to escape the effects of a friendly atomic weapon? The entire maneuver can be made to appear as an attempt upon the flank or rear of the enemy, and may cause him either to remain in position in anticipation of such an attack, or at least to hesitate while he tries to determine what the battalion is up to. This procedure has the added advantage of permitting the movements of the battalion to be made in directions more compatible with the execution of its mission, instead of requiring it to change direction twice — and moving in opposite directions each time it changes; that is, first forward, then back, then forward once more.

As rapid and unrestricted as the mobility of the battalion may be, it will not be protected altogether from enemy atomic attack. What will happen if the battalion happens to be struck by an enemy atomic bomb? It is possible that every living soul may be killed. It is more probable that there will be survivors.

Not many, perhaps, but enough to do considerable damage to any enemy exploitation force, if they have been properly trained. The first move they must make after such an attack is to rally. The rally should be a procedure outlined in the battalion SOP, and should consist of procedures for the designation of rally points from the squad on up, and for the measures to be taken to re-establish communications and control. The next move is to take every action possible to foil, or at least to slow down, any enemy attempt to exploit. The best "first aid" these survivors can give the many casualties still alive will be to deny the stricken area to the enemy until a replacement unit can be moved in. If the area cannot be held and withdrawal to friendly forces cannot be made, the remnants of the battalion must be prepared to turn to guerrilla warfare. They will be able neither to assist their wounded comrades, nor to contribute to the mission of the higher unit by allowing themselves to be taken.

The advent of the atomic weapon does indeed call for concepts which appear radical in the light of the old, slow-but-sure, close-knit tactics of yesterday. It would be wise for us to approach these new concepts from the viewpoint that the freedom of action made possible by unit separation and atomic support is a factor

of far more value than the passive defense aspects concerned with lessening the effects of the atomic bomb. Atomic weapons may mean that the commander is very likely to lose his battalion at a single stroke. They also mean that he has a weapon at his disposal which commanders of the past could only dream of.

It must be understood, however, that the new freedom of action does not mean that the war of tomorrow will be a guerrilla war. No matter how it borrows from the techniques of the guerrilla, it continues to seek a decision in combat whereas the way of the guerrilla is to avoid the decisive engagement, to deal destruction to the enemy at no cost to himself.

These steps we are taking, to realize the full potential of the atomic weapon, may not yet be radical enough. The next war may well begin with the battalion commander authorized to trigger nuclear strikes as he sees fit within the larger framework of the higher commander's plan. It is also possible that the war may not be very old before the authority to use the bomb is passed on down to the company commander.

It is our task, now, to examine the new concepts and the new techniques, and to discover, if we can, every "reason" why they will not work — so that we might overcome these "reasons" and make the new ideas work.

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