TOO MANY MEN

By Colonel Branner P. Purdue

In World War II our infantry used too many men in an attack. Fewer men committed means fewer casualties without much loss of firepower.

I asked fourteen friends, all former regimental commanders, to comment upon the first draft of this article because I wished to avoid criticism of tactical employment based only upon my own observations. These officers include eleven infantrymen, two marines, and one cavalryman who commanded an armored infantry regiment. Their combined experiences were acquired in nearly every area in which American ground forces fought. Ten of the fourteen agreed with the thesis, three disagreed, and one was noncommittal. Officers who served in Europe both agreed and disagreed, as did those who were in the Pacific. In other words, there was no unanimity among the members of any one group. Several gave excellent suggestions which were incorporated in the final draft.

WE INFANTRYMEN OFTEN USE TOO MANY MEN IN THE attack. The truth is we use too many more often than we use too few.

As an example let's briefly examine a limited-objective attack made by a reinforced battalion of a well trained, battlewise division. Let the objective be what it may: village, hill, fortified area. Conditions and the situation are ideal—both favor the attacking troops. Artillery, mortar and direct-fire plans are well prepared and perfectly coordinated. The attacking soldiers know the details of the assault: what, where, when, how and why. Because all the members of the team have gained facility by the experience of several battles, little time is required for determining the tactical maneuver and preparing the fire plans. There's plenty of time to disseminate all needed information.

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After all men have been briefed, direct-fire supporting weapons are sneaked into position and the riflemen arrive at the line of departure, all undetected by the enemy. At H-hour, artillery, mortars, machine and antitank guns, and overwatching tanks saturate the enemy positions, while smoke blankets critical observation points. The riflemen move out confidently, being used to victory. Accompanying tanks, which had halted temporarily well in rear of the line of departure, start forward, overtake the riflemen, and both move near the objective.

When the most forward attackers reach a general line seventy-five to 150 yards from the near edge of the objective, the supporting fires shift deeper into the enemy's area. Our riflemen and tanks move in at a fast walk, firing rifle grenades, bazooka projectiles and tank-cannon shells to fool the enemy into the belief the artillery and mortar concentrations are yet falling. Marching fire from rifles and tank machine guns are added. Most of the enemy troops have been driven deep into their holes and therefore do not see our approaching infantrymen and tanks.

When the attackers first reach the objective, a critical moment, some of the enemy get their heads up to open with machine-gun and other small-arms fire which our troops at once beat down with fire from all weapons: rifles, rifle and hand grenades, automatic rifles, bazookas, tank cannon and machine guns. But as in nearly all such attacks only a small percentage of our attacking riflemen are needed in these local fire fights. The objective is captured before the majority reach positions from which they can add their fires.

The attackers know that the enemy soon will throw artillery and mortar shells on the position. The battalion and company commanders realize that every minute saved in occupying and preparing positions from which to meet the possible counterattack is apt to save a soldier from being hit. Therefore, leaders had designated in advance the area to be occupied by each squad, and as the result, no time is lost. But, before the squad leaders can assign individual positions and before the men can dig their foxholes, the shells come down. Fifteen or twenty men are hit before they can dig in.

In the meantime, the reserve rifle company and the

We could cut the numbers of attacking infantrymen from twenty-five to fifty per cent.

heavy weapons company move up ten or fifteen minutes behind the assault companies, using routes which are the least obvious and which afford the best protection from artillery and mortar fires. But, skillful as they are, several men are hit by shell fragments during the march to the objective. And this is not the end of casualties in the reserve and heavy weapons companies—a few more soldiers are killed or wounded while digging in.

Later, the enemy counterattacks. Our men cut loose with rifles, automatic rifles, machine guns, antitank guns, and tank cannon. But by far the heaviest and most effective of our fires come from artillery and mortars which are adjusted by a few forward observers. These indirect fires separate the enemy infantry from their tanks; a lucky round disables a tank; the enemy tankers, seeing their infantry stopped, do not dare continue the advance alone. The counterattack stops and the enemy is hurt badly. Our infantrymen did their share of stopping the enemy, but most of the casualties inflicted upon the hostile troops came from our artillery and mortars.

The score? Very much in our favor: the objective taken, a counterattack beaten back, many enemy killed or captured, more wounded. But on the debit side: ten of our infantrymen killed, forty or more wounded. Of these fifty or more casualties, approximately thirty, or sixty per cent, were from shell fragments.[1]

Casualties caused by shell fragments average in proportion to the numbers of men in the target area, other factors such as cover and avoidance of massing being equal. Suppose there had been half the number of attackers, the score probably would have been even better in our favor, because instead of thirty shell-fragment casualties, there well could have been only fifteen.

One-half As Many Men Could Have Done It

Could the battalion have been successful with only one-half the number of attackers? In answering this question, let us consider the reasons for the quick and efficient capture of the objective. These reasons were: complete and accurate briefing had given the men knowledge of the situation and of what they were to do; surprise gained by the fast, smooth movements of the riflemen and tankers from the line of departure to the objective; and well planned, accurate fires, direct and indirect, which saturated all points that could have been occupied by the enemy. The only one of the above factors which was dependent upon the numbers of attacking troops was the fire power placed upon the enemy immediately after our artillery lifted. One-half the numbers of infantrymen could have laid down ample bazooka and rifle-grenade bluffing fires. Of course, there must be enough riflemen, together with tankers, for cleaning out the enemy. That we usually use far too many is shown by the fact that seldom are all the riflemen committed to clean-up missions. Unless the conditions—such as cover afforded by houses, woods or fortifications—strongly favor the defenders, a comparatively few attacking riflemen and tankers can do the mop-up job. In the heavy weapons company most of the men are used to carry ammunition. If the terrain permits the use of jeep carriers, the number of soldiers manhandling ammunition can be cut way down, and therefore unless full use is first made of available vehicles, the number of men moved forward with the heavy weapons companies is likely to be excessive. In

[1] "Examples of percentages (of total casualties) caused by fragments are: *Wounded:* Saipan (27th Infantry Division), 50.7; Leyte (XXIV Corps), 43.4; Okinawa (XXIV Corps), 69.6; Anzio (VI Corps), 80.4; ETO (Third Army, Aug.-Dec. 44), 61.3; ETO Fifth Army, Jan.-Dec. 44), 75.3; ETO (Ninth Army, Jan.-Apr. 45), 64.8. *Killed:* The only known study of the percentage of those killed by fragments was made in Italy. This single study showed that 85 per cent of deaths resulted from fragments."—*Study of Battle Casualties,* Headquarters, Army Ground Forces, September 25, 1946.

my opinion, judging from actions I have seen, a consideration of all these points in the analysis of successful battalion attacks during World War II will show that the numbers of attacking infantrymen at times could have been cut fifty per cent. However, much more often, a decrease of only twenty-five per cent would have been feasible. Conversely, there were occasions when a reinforced company could have accomplished a mission assigned a battalion.

We have described a highly successful action—one where conditions favored the attacker and where everything went well. But what is the effect of numbers when an attack is not successful? Let us take another hypothetical action. This time, the outfit is not in good condition. Casualties have been heavy among officers and noncommissioned officers with the result that the unit has lost combat efficiency instead of having gained proficiency through experience in battle.

The two assault companies arrive at the line of departure on time but the men are not briefed; they don't know the score. The plans for the supporting fires are sketchy. The attached tankers are woefully handicapped by not having been given clear orders in time for the essential briefing of all crews.

At H-hour, the attacking troops move out hesitantly. They come within view of the enemy and are struck at once by machine guns, and a few minutes later by artillery and mortars. Why do these soldiers meet overwhelming fires, whereas those who went forward in the ideal attack escaped severe casualties when closing with the enemy? In the first attack, the heavy and perfectly coordinated supporting fires kept the enemy from bringing direct fire upon the advancing troops; the confident, fast-moving infantrymen closed with the enemy before he had time to fire effective artillery and mortar concentrations. The unfortunate soldiers in this second attack do not have supporting fires which keep the enemy from bringing down killing direct fire; furthermore, the hesitation of the attackers gives the enemy time for laying down his artillery and mortar fires. The enemy, virtually unopposed, increases the volume and accuracy of all of his fire power. Among our own troops, the timid hit the ground, crawl to cover, and lie there immovable and ineffective. The brave continue forward, darting from cover to cover, but continuing casualties soon pin them down, courageous though they are. Although the enemy machine guns then suspend fire, the shells keep coming down, getting a hit now and then. Our tanks slowly come up to the vicinity of the pinned-down infantrymen. When at last the hostile indirect fire stops, officers and noncommissioned officers, by brave and self-exposing actions, try to lead their men forward. The tanks also advance. But the alert enemy again brings down heavy artillery and machine-gun fires, together with accurate antitank fire from hidden weapons. Three struck tanks spout hot flames and heavy, black smoke. More infantrymen are killed or wounded. Once more the attack stops.

The battalion commander commits the reserve company, but doesn't arrange for increased supporting fires upon the enemy. As a result, the soldiers of the reserve company likewise come under superior fire power and they fail, too.

The entire battalion has been committed, a number of good soldiers have been killed, many more wounded, and nothing has been accomplished except gaining information of the enemy's position.

More Men Wouldn't Have Guaranteed Success

Perhaps, because friendly troops to the right and left have been successful, the enemy in front of our beaten battalion is in danger of being encircled, and our battalion might be fortunate in seeing the enemy garrison withdraw. But there might not be such good luck, and the battalion will have to withdraw, re-form, and try again, or else another outfit will have to be assigned to take the objective. And the pity of it all is that this second attack also is likely to fail unless it is bolstered by much better supporting fires than were given the first assault.

Returning to the attack failure, what was the cause, or reason? Lack of numbers? No, twice the number of infantrymen would have furnished only a little more power, because the fire power of advancing foot soldiers is infinitesimal compared with that of the supporting arms. Lack of explanation and briefing? Yes, this was an important factor because the American soldier never does his best unless he understands what he is to do. Lack of fire power? Yes, infantrymen seldom are able to furnish all of the fire power needed for a successful advance—strong additional fire must come from supporting weapons. With better briefing, and above all with more fire power, the attack probably would have been effective. Given ample supporting fire power, any attack made by reasonable numbers of well trained infantrymen can be successful. On the other hand, massing many men to seize an objective does not assure success—the value gained by the small amount of added fire power is overbalanced by the disastrous casualties inflicted by enemy artillery and mortars. The more men we have in an attack zone, the more we have who are vulnerable.

We Win With Fire Power

We have described two types of attacks: the ideal and the casualty-producing failure. The effects of using too many men instead of taking full advantage of the great fire power available to infantrymen of today are the same in successful actions which fall short of being ideal. We win with fire power, and fire power is not dependent upon numbers of riflemen.

I came to the conclusion that my regiment—120th Infantry Regiment, 30th Infantry Division—had been using too many men in the attack after seeing how we continued being successful after casualties had severely cut our rifle strength. I could have filled up the rifle companies with replacements, but we had adopted a rigid policy never to permit replacements to join their new companies except during lulls between offensive actions when there was ample time and opportunity for orientation. Old men returning after recovering from wounds, yes; new men, no. It was not fair to commit these replacements to battle before they could learn the score because they all too often got themselves hit before they could be of any value except that dubious value of adding numbers. Daily fighting brought daily casualties, the rifle companies suffered a gradual, but all-too-apparent, shrinkage in size. But we continued taking all assigned objectives because casualties did not materially

lessen our fire power, the fire power of infantry heavy weapons and of field artillery. And our numerical decrease did not destroy our ability to stop counterattacks—we threw back many small enemy attacks, and one huge one, when we were depleted much in size but little in fire power.

Upon learning what we could accomplish with depleted rifle companies it became obvious that we often had been using too many men when we were at full strength. As the result, we looked for opportunities to use fewer men—and we profited thereby. We assigned much larger objectives to battalions than before, with a resultant dispersal of companies, and of men within the companies. At times, one or two companies, reinforced with tanks, took objectives which formerly had been considered battalion tasks. The most extreme assignment was the objective given the 2d Battalion when it led the regiment in our assault crossing of the Rhine south of Wesel. The division zone was divided into three natural zones by canals which formed obstacles to lateral communications. Division therefore wisely decided upon a formation of three regiments abreast, and by chance our zone was nearly as wide as the total assigned the other two regiments. We crossed in column of battalions, and the leading 2d Battalion was given the mission of seizing an area of over three square miles and which included three sprawling hamlets. A stupendous task, according to our former standards, but here we had unlimited artillery support,[2] and we had had recent experiences in using relatively small numbers for capturing large objectives. The result was way above all we had hoped for. The 2d Battalion, despite the handicap of having most of one of its two assault companies landed several hundred yards downstream from its zone, captured its assigned objective nearly on the optimistic schedule. The 3d Battalion crossed immediately after the 2d and, because of the large zone assigned the leading battalion, had for itself a much narrower zone. Depth gave it punch and it broke through the enemy defenses and drove six miles inland by 1800 of the crossing day. By 2100, the 1st Battalion had easily cleaned out all of the enemy who had been bypassed. Our casualties were small—in fact, they would have been infinitesimal had it not been for those caused by enemy artillery among the troops which were unavoidably massed on the near side of the river before, and during the crossing. By taking advantage of the record amount of fire power available, we were able to economize on the numbers of men first committed, leaving the maximum possible number available for maneuver and, as it turned out, for exploiting the breakthrough.

Fewer Men, Fewer Casualties

My own experience in using fewer men—and, far more important than my own limited observations, conclusions gained by talking with quite a number of other former regimental commanders—have convinced me that we should change our concept about the numbers of men needed to take objectives. However, in order to avoid misunderstanding, I wish to emphasize that I do not advocate decreasing the numbers of men in infantry companies, battalions or regiments. There are many times when all available infantry is needed to win battles. Some of these times occur when conditions prevent the effective use of supporting fires; such conditions frequently are found during fighting in woods, jungles and towns where attacking riflemen must laboriously annihilate the enemy. Another example where small numbers cannot perform their mission is when the quality of the enemy is such that none will run or surrender, when they must be sought out and killed one by one. A third example is defense at night or in woods—ample numbers of soldiers are needed to keep the enemy from bypassing, or infiltrating through, our forward defense areas. For these reasons, we cannot materially cut down the size of infantry units. But we should learn how to use less men in order to take full advantage of the many opportunities for saving lives.

Of course, we can learn how to use fewer men only by training. First, we should correct the tendency toward limiting our training to specialization. During the interval between World Wars I and II, The Infantry School did teach coordination of supporting fires but, as I remember the instruction during 1928-29, we spent only a very small part of our time in actually preparing plans for coordinating, and making the maximum use of, all available weapons —we did not get sufficient practical work to gain real proficiency. And as for practice in preparing complete and detailed fire plans during tactical exercises and maneuvers: I never saw such practice. Each one of us did our own job with our own weapons, practically disregarding the capabilities and use of the many other friendly weapons on the assumed battlefield. Our wartime training of officers was a miracle of mass-production education. But this great production was gained by specialization which kept officers and noncoms from having the opportunity of learning how to use the combined arms. The training of leaders generally was limited to acquiring knowledge of only their own weapons; they were given some instruction in the utilization of other arms, but not nearly enough to gain real facility in using them.

Three Reasons

A former regimental and later assistant division commander, in commenting on the first draft of this article, wrote on a buck slip,

> . . . training during mobilization is generally specialized for officers and sketchy for noncommissioned officers. Officers were trained as riflemen, or machine gunners, or communication men, etc. At schools such as Benning some attention was given to broadening the knowledge of officers to understand weapons other than those in which they were being trained; however, the only result was, on many occasions, initiation of what I used to call "rifle attacks" where rifle units tried to handle a job pretty much alone because the officers were not facile in combining the use of tools at hand. This resulted in my frequently requiring units to take time out while they prepared a well-coordinated attack under my supervision. I was amazed at the astonishment registered by some officers over the attacks where I required maximum use of weapons and minimum use of men. The most startling remark made to me, and one which I shall never forget, came from a battalion commander and it was to the effect, "Did we actually have to make all of the preparation that you required? We went in practically standing up." This

[2] Thirty-seven battalions of field artillery supported three regiments of infantry.

particular objective had stood off a battalion on the preceding day fighting a rifle war, and on the day of success fell to one company well supported and coordinated in all respects. The big point is that most men are too busy and too fatigued mentally and physically to have much original thought on the battlefield. Unless they have a fund of knowledge to draw on, they frequently fail to appreciate fully the tremendous power they have at their disposal.

Another commander wrote:

> Classroom, garrison and field training of ground forces should emphasize the employment of minimum forces necessary to accomplish the combat mission. In the heat of battle, combat leaders of all grades lose their flexibility—and frequently excessive numbers of soldiers, particularly infantrymen, are used to capture objectives.

A third regimental commander brought up an important factor:

> One of the reasons we have tended to use large numbers is for keeping the morale of the attacking forces high by giving them a feeling of superior power. There is no reason why this feeling of irresistibility cannot be instilled, through proper training, by the maximum effective use of supporting fires just as well as by large numbers of attacking forces.

These officers have pointed out three influential factors which cause commanders to commit too many men to the attack: leaders' lack of knowledge which keeps them from being able to use all of the fire power at their disposal; inflexibility of thought on the battlefield; and, the use of mass for inspiring confidence. Each of these adverse influences can be corrected by better prepared, more advanced training.

Training Is the Answer

The most difficult part of such training will be the teaching of soldiers to operate in small groups. The difficulty can be overcome by tactical exercises involving widely dispersed formations, the exercises being repeated and repeated until leaders learn how to control scattered units and until all infantrymen become accustomed to seeing few of their comrades in the attack zone; and, education in fire power by frequent explanations and demonstrations to teach infantrymen that they are not alone on the battlefield. At the same time, we should not slight rifle-squad and rifle-platoon fire and movement because, as we all know, there will be many times when supporting arms cannot be used—when infantrymen will be forced to depend upon rifle attacks. We cannot afford to lose the art of individual fighting.

During training in the use of fewer men, leaders should practice evaluation of the situation. Like all other principles and concepts, the employment of small numbers could be overdone on the battlefield, with resultant piecemeal attacks or even attack failures. Furthermore, the use of too few men could cause small groups to get out on a limb to be cut off by enemy counterattacks.

But, despite the hazards of not committing enough troops to do the job, teaching ourselves to properly employ fewer men when we fight again will produce two major results: a decrease in casualties; and, more opportunities for giving rest to tired, overfought infantrymen.