Looking for a Frontal Assault?

Suppress the Enemy, the Right Way

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Consider a situation where an infantry combat platoon is involved in an offensive action in some corner of the world. The platoon has engaged a company-sized enemy element which is defending from a fixed position. In this action, some enemy are killed and some are wounded; the larger force has decided to withdraw while a few surrendered. The platoon was engaged in a fierce firefight, forcing them to fire several rounds including medium ordnances such as under-barrel grenades. Out of several thousand rounds fired, only some of them managed to hit the enemy. From this engagement, we can conclude that the fire maneuver employed by the platoon was ineffective and inefficient. There is, however, one more element missing in this situation, and that element needs to be further understood. The platoon's inability to understand this missing element resulted in its failure to employ fire maneuver tactics effectively. This missing element is suppression. The objective of this article is to discuss and analyze the importance of suppressive fire and provide tactical solutions to fire team leaders to carry it out effectively.

Offensive Action and Defensive Maneuver

Since the Anglo-Afghan War dates (or even before), foot soldiers faced numerous challenges in initiating frontal assaults against a well-fortified/heavily defended enemy equipped with high-caliber weapons. The casualties were simply too great for commanders to accept and so frontal assault remained a last resort. Interestingly, the requirements for a decent defensive weapon were simple: large and small caliber rifled weapons with high muzzle velocity cylindro-conoidal bullets, fired from a short distance using single or double barrel quick-loading rifles. Any weapon other than that (such as the Gatling with multiple barrels and a magazine emplacement at the top) would make frontal attack difficult to resist. To overcome this challenge, different militaries came up with different plans in the latter half of the 20th century.

An Infantryman with A Company, 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, fires at enemy forces during a live-fire exercise at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, LA, on 27 October 2020. (Photo by SPC Demi Jones)

Some armies advised supplementing frontal assault groups with artillery, while others later suggested tanks. Some restructured weapons allocation to grenadiers, while some deployed mortars. Whereas most recalibrated their strategy by restructuring operational requirements and supplementing them with new tactics, some restructured small arms fire and maneuver to effectively suppress the enemy. This brought some success to the attackers as they successfully came close enough to a point where hand-to-hand combat was feasible. At this range, they could fix bayonets, throw grenades, and use small arms at a very short range (ranges were limited to very few feet) to eliminate any active defender. Ironically though, there was never a logical explanation or a straightforward assessment to identify the probable reason behind its success.

However, numerous studies carried out on this issue do suggest some interesting points. To best examine this, it is important to revisit the relevant ranges of engagement. At the range, the ability of soldiers to hit a designated target falls steeply when they are tasked to move from a static firing range to a field range where they are required to perform cover, duck, shoot, and reload while underway. Their performance further falls steeply when they are in a firefight with the enemy. Their ability is even further compromised when the enemy possesses superior fire power such as light machine guns (LMGs), mortars, artillery, or tanks and even completely diminishes when the same enemy is numerically superior.[1] This may be the reason as to why attacking forces are unable to effectively hit the enemy even after firing at least a thousand rounds.

However, other research suggests a theory contradicting the earlier analysis. It gives special emphasis to the military's shock-and-awe tactics and concludes that covert action employed by attackers can inflict shock on the enemy, especially from a position the defender least expects. This tactic may be more successful than employing aggressive action in large numbers or using heavy weaponry of any kind.[2] On tactical terms, if the attacking platoon is able to identify vulnerabilities in the enemy flank or its rear and maintain constant pressure by concentrating fire to these points, the enemy will not be in a position to fight on all fronts. It will then be either forced to retreat (if the odds are in favor of the attacker) or maybe even surrender. However, a few challenges emerge through this action.[3] Undoubtedly, taking a covert route and flanking the enemy from a position it least expects is an effective approach, and employing indirect action such as mortars or artillery could reduce a defender's resistance, but the successful suppression depends on the ability of the attacking force to suppress the enemy's fires. This is the driving push that decides how far the attacker will go: either to a close proximity of the defender, enabling the former to employ bayonets or under-barrel grenade launchers, or flank the enemy from the rear and attack from an unexpected position.

Furthermore, exceedingly small portions of the enemy force receive casualties from small arms; their location, position, and topography too add valuable support to their tactics. One such example is the case of trench warfare. By clearing one trench, the attacker can often maneuver behind many more trenches and slowly move ahead from his position.

In my opinion, suppression is an art involving synchronization of effective firepower delivered from small/large caliber weapons or heavy ordnance onto a specific location, temporarily compromising the enemy's ability to initiate retaliatory fire. In non-tactical terms, the enemy will not raise his head or move from his location. This is of utmost significance in combat. If employed in an offensive action, it will allow the attacker to move swiftly, identify and assess vulnerabilities of the enemy's position, and deal with them. If employed in a defensive action, it temporarily halts enemy fire and movement, making the enemy subject to counteroffensive action. In both scenarios, the enemy's firepower is temporarily incapacitated and he is tactically pinned.

The Man and His Machine

For the last century or so, weapons manufacturers have focused on producing more accurate small arms in an effort to improve shooter performance. A rifle (semi-auto or bolt action) will form a tight shot group on a target from a distance of 40 meters or at least better at 100 meters when fired with a fixed mount. If well-trained soldiers are equipped with the same weapon and sent to the range, they can form a tight shot group at 100 meters. Not every military establishment keeps its focus on training its soldiers to this standard regularly. This is a huge flaw, which not every instructor agrees with. Since most small arms manufactured for modern warfare have higher accuracy, it is no longer a deciding factor for the latter on choosing the right weapon. Numerous factors such as weight, reliability, operational control, rate of fire, ergonomic design, and handling are critical. So, the question of a weapon's accuracy is largely a matter of training as most modern weapons are fairly accurate.

It is critical for leaders to train soldiers in small arms handling and firing maneuver in an effort to maximize their weapons' capabilities in any environment. In most militaries, soldiers are trained to engage targets from 600 meters or more. But in combat, the enemy will not be generous enough to let the attacker choose the engagement range. Some militaries' trainees, on certain occasions if they are lucky, receive training on elements that are of vital importance, such as learning the art of suppressing enemy fire. Numerous studies conducted on the Korean and Vietnam Wars provide vital information on combat troops' ability to employ suppression, which supplements recent research.[4-5] For further clarity, let us take three cases into account: the need to suppress the enemy, the volume of fire to sustain the suppression, and the necessity to provide enough suppression to deny the enemy any possibility of a counteroffensive. Generally, for small arms the attacker must fire from an area enabling the rounds to deliver effective grazing fire over the target in an effort to maximize their advantage. Significant rounds passing through that position (roughly five to seven rounds in some seconds) will effectively suppress the enemy and maintain that rate in case the firing momentum is lost, whereas roughly two rounds in six seconds will keep the enemy completely pinned. This mechanism suggests 100-percent success.

Should We Bring the Heavy Machine Guns (HMGs)?

On enquiring with automatic weapons instructors about employing LMG/HMG for suppression, many were convinced that the enemy could easily be suppressed with superior firepower, while some even gave historical accounts of battles regarding its effectiveness. One particular research study analyzing the effectiveness of superior firepower for suppression found no evidence to support the instructors' claims.[6] According to the research, the 5.56x45mm NATO fed L86 LSW (Light Support Weapon), equipped with a quick release bipod, is highly effective in suppressing the enemy at 500 meters and more if retrofitted with the SUSAT (Sight Unit, Small Arm, Trilux) optic kit. This is precisely possible because it is able to provide accurate fire for almost all rounds fired.

On the other hand, the FN Minimi/M249 SAW performs far worse in such trials.[7] At most, the first round from a quick burst would fall close to suppression; however, shots fired from the subsequent bursts would yield greater dispersion at greater ranges on the battlefield. As three to six rounds in three to six seconds can successfully suppress, even experienced LMG gunners could not perform this maneuver effectively. They would have to fire three to six rounds for many seconds. Since the rounds from the first burst could nearly make it to the area, they would have to fire three to six rounds in so many seconds in an effort to keep the target suppressed. Training is critical here; this maneuver will consume more ammunition than the LSW and SAW combined until weapons crews gain experience.

The Reason to Suppress Fire

In this section, we need to discuss the biggest source of wastage of small arms ammunition in combat and understand the reasons for suppression. In numerous accounts, we have seen firers wasting thousands of rounds for an unclear idea of suppressing the enemy. Even if it is by some miracle successful, we do not intend to speculate on the reasons behind its success: That it should be carried out to prevent the enemy from employing any maneuver and forcing them to hug the ground; the attacker can then break enemy lines and force them to submit. Military leaders have been using such a maneuver because according to them: "The combat platoon can do it." Instead of "get some heavy fire down there," team leaders must demand suppressing fire, which is an effective approach. The platoon must suppress the enemy before enabling an attack from the rear; this maneuver is still productive. Providing suppressive fire with no proper plan of action is a waste of effort.

Conclusion

To summarize, small arms engagement will kill and incapacitate very few actors in direct action. To achieve a 100-percent result, it is vital for platoon leaders to know the location and estimated number of enemy combatants before the assault. Nonetheless, the impact of small arms fire in pinning the enemy down remains vital. Suppression restricts any future maneuver from the enemy, pins them down, and denies any chance of a quick counteroffensive action. It is of utmost criticality but must not be exercised by troops ineffectively and without knowledge. Devising new tactics and equipping combat teams with appropriate weapons will further prevent wastage of ammunition. Sadly, some weapons remain highly ineffective during suppression but by procurement are some of the most preferred weapons of choice for the infantry. This is possible because the procurement criteria cannot predict a weapon's effectiveness in the field.

Undoubtedly, small arms should have effective fire power. Most are effective and have been proving their effectiveness for decades. Other factors to consider in weapons procurement include design, weight, and customization options to name a few. But these weapons should be procured on the basis of their effectiveness and utility, a deadly combination which is rare. Suppression is a critical maneuver for combat platoons, especially as it may dictate the outcome of a battle.

Notes

[1] John France, "Close Order and Close Quarter: The Culture of Combat in the West," *The International History Review* 27 (2005, 3): 498-517.
[2] Edward N. Luttwak, "Attrition, Relational Maneuver, and the Military Balance," *International Security* 8 (1983, 2): 176-179.
[3] James C. Crowley, Bryan W. Hallmark, Michael G. Shanley, and Jerry M. Sollinger, "Improving Small-Arms Training Strategies" in Changing the Army's Weapon Training Strategies to Meet Operational Requirements More Efficiently and Effectively, RAND Corporation, 2014, 41-52.
[4] George Raudzens, "Firepower Limitations in Modern Military History," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 67 (1989, 271): 130-153.
[5] Wayne P. Hughes, "Two Effects of Firepower: Attrition and Suppression," *Military Operations Research* 1 (1995, 3): 27-35.
[6] D. Rowland, "The Effect of Combat Degradation on the Urban Battle," *The Journal of the Operational Research Society* 42 (7, 1991): 543-553.
[7] Crowley et al, "Improving Small-Arms Training Strategies," 41-52.

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