

Suppression is *the* Critical Infantry Task

by Major Brendan B. McBreen

The three keys for a successful attack against a prepared enemy position are:

- **A covered approach.** The assault element needs a covered approach to protect the force from enemy observation and enemy direct fire.
- **A vulnerable penetration point.** The commander must recognize and assault the enemy's most vulnerable position. Ideally, he recognizes where the enemy has poor mutual support, a point where subtle terrain features conspire against the enemy to isolate and weaken his position. This allows the suppression element to concentrate maximum suppressive fires against specific enemy defenses and not disperse fires across a wide front of multiple threats.
- **Overwhelming suppressive fire.** The assault element cannot exit their covered approach to assault the penetration point until enemy weapons have been destroyed, obscured or *effectively suppressed*. This is the critical task. Effective suppression is a prerequisite for the assault, and in turn, the entire attack.

Currently, Marine infantry units are not trained sufficiently on direct fire suppression. This represents a critical deficiency in the lethality and offensive combat power of our infantry.

World War I: 1917

In 1937, Erwin Rommel published *Infantry Attacks*, a tactical primer based on his combat experiences in World War I.¹ Of its many lessons

on small-unit combat, the book is especially clear on suppression in support of the assault. As a young combat leader, Rommel displayed a “masterful use of direct-fire weapons to gain nearly total fire superiority... in narrow sectors in order to effect a breakthrough...”²



Hawaii: 3d Marines M240B suppressive fire.

Infantry Attacks describes a series of attacks that Rommel led during 1917. See Table 1. He organized his forces into three elements: a suppression element, an assault element, and an exploitation element. **The assault element was small in relation to the suppression element.** As he gained experience, he further *decreased* the size of his assault element.³

His increasingly large suppression element placed overwhelming suppressive fire on *specific* enemy positions. Rommel closely supervised every detail of the suppression element, personally directing the emplacement and assignments of his soldiers and weapons. The assault element maintained a

covered approach and usually assaulted less than 100 meters from its last covered position to the penetration point.⁴ Once the penetration had been made, Rommel would lead the exploitation element into the enemy position.

Table 1. Size of Rommel's suppression element.⁵

Date	Location	Ratio of Suppression to Assault Elements
7 January 1917	Gagesti	2:1
10 August 1917	Carpathians	3:2
11 August 1917	Carpathians	3:1
19 August 1917	Carpathians	9:1
25 August 1917	NE Italy	4:1

U.S. Army: 1976

In 1976, the U.S. Army conducted a series of combat tests with the new Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES), which was then being developed to simulate small arms fire. Over seventy attacks, day and night, were made against a dug-in enemy. All soldiers and weapons were instrumented to record casualties. Analysts then examined the most successful tactics for small-unit assaults. See Table 2.

Table 2. Size of U.S. Army's suppression element.⁶

Suppression Element	Assault Element	Success
(1) Suppression	(2) Assault	25%
(0) Suppression	(3) Assault	33%
(1) Suppression (REIN)	(2) Assault	56%
(2) Suppression	(1) Assault	88%

Note the last line. Heavy suppression, with a small assault element was successful almost 9 out of 10 times. Two up and one back was successful only 25 percent of the time. These results paralleled Rommel's experience and tactics.

One of the strengths of mechanized infantry is that in addition to mobility, armored vehicles carry significant organic firepower and ammunition. A dismounted attack by a well-trained mechanized infantry unit should place a small assault element against a vulnerable penetration point, supported by the overwhelming firepower of a vehicle-mounted suppression element.

U.S. Marine Corps: 2001

Today, a number of factors interfere with our ability to effectively train on the techniques of overwhelming suppressive fire. Think of the answers to the following questions:

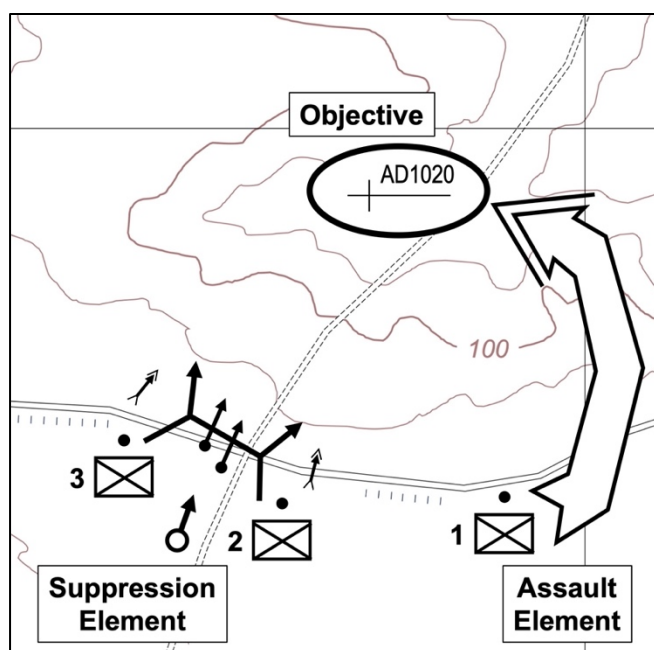
- What manuals clearly explain the details of suppressive fire techniques? What manuals explain the benefits or recommend weighting the suppression element with 60 to 70 percent of a unit's firepower?
- What training standards define effective suppressive fire? Does the new T&R manual establish a combat-focused standard?
- Where do NCOs and officers learn suppressive fire tactics? What schools teach it well?
- Do any units train to do suppressive fire well? Do units or schools mistakenly train Marines to assault across hundreds of meters of open ground using only fire and movement?
- How often do infantry units conduct live-fire supported attacks? How often does the new T&R manual require them to be done?
- What suppression techniques do we recommend for automatic rifles, without fixed tripods?
- How effective are our fire commands? Our sector assignments?
- What ranges and training infrastructure support suppressive fire training? What administrative obstacles prevent effective training?
- For night attacks, how do we assign and control weapons without fixed tripods? If not assigned,

how does this weaken our suppression element?
What techniques does the Marine Corps recommend for night suppression?

- Do our AAVs train to suppress in support of infantry assaults? Do tanks or LAR? Will the suppressive capabilities of our new vehicles be exploited in training and combat?

Good suppressive fires training

The TTECG at Twentynine Palms teaches excellent suppressive fire techniques as part of their range 400 training package. Marine leaders are taught to establish their suppression element and then maneuver their assault element to within 250 meters of the objective while indirect fires suppress the enemy. From there, the direct fires of the suppression element permit the assault element to close to within fifty meters of the objective. The assault element conducts fire and movement for **no more than** fifty meters. The TTECG instructors do an excellent job of training Marine leaders never to expose their Marines by moving without suppression. They publish excellent handouts with numerous proven techniques for conducting attacks and coordinating direct-fire suppression.



Suppression requires *most* of the unit's firepower.

This excellent infantry training is particularly noteworthy because it is so unique. Ideally, units should train on these techniques with their own leaders prior to deployment, and then hone their skills on the combined arms ranges at Twentynine Palms. Why is our graduate-level TTECG training cadre reduced to training kindergarten-level units? Why do our tactical manuals not include the hard-learned lessons that the TTECG tries to teach? Are we maximizing the value of the TTECG? Some units do not or cannot train to suppress except at Twentynine Palms. This means infantry companies might receive this one-week training every third or fourth year. This is insufficient.

What is to be done?

- Update our infantry manuals. Our manuals are weak when describing the specific actions needed to establish and execute a support by fire position. *None* of our manuals explain the sort of detailed preparations that Lieutenant Rommel made in 1917. None of our manuals explain the *additional* work required to effectively suppress an enemy at night. Nowhere does the Marine Corps discuss or recommend using two-thirds of a unit's firepower for suppression.
- Update our infantry training standards. Well-written and enforced training standards should drive training priorities and training infrastructure. The new T&R manual should clearly define successful suppressive fire in support of the assault. The new T&R manual should recommend how often a supported attack is trained at the infantry company level.
- Update our schools. NCOs and officers train and lead their units in the attack. Good manuals and good training standards need to be tied together in the school environment so that our infantry leaders are well taught on the techniques of effective suppressive fire in support of the attack.

- Update our ranges. **Marine Corps range limitations have a direct correlation to our combat readiness.** If few ranges support suppressive fire, then few units will be trained. Ranges need to be configured to support training standards, not vice-versa. Infantry units need on-base ranges that permit training on all mission tasks, especially maneuver supported by suppressive fire. Range-related training obstacles need to be identified and eliminated.

The leaders of a Marine infantry rifle company, conducting an attack against a prepared enemy position, need to recognize and attack a *vulnerable penetration point*, find and exploit a *covered approach*, and concentrate *overwhelming suppressive fire* on the objective while the assault element closes and penetrates the enemy position. Infantry leaders at all levels need to train on analyzing ground, seeing covered approaches and recognizing those terrain features that isolate and weaken an enemy defensive position.

Overwhelming suppressive fire is critical to permit an assault element to close and penetrate an enemy position. Marine infantry leaders need to train their units on the skills of suppressive fire, day and night. As an organization, we need to publish and emphasize the basic tactics, techniques and procedures of effective, overwhelming suppressive fire, and then insure that our leaders and our infantry units are supported and trained well on this critical infantry task.

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Notes:

- ¹ Rommel, E. *Infantry Attacks*. Greenhill Books, 1990.
- ² DePuy, W.E. "One-Up and Two-Back?" *Selected Papers of General William E. DePuy*, compiled by R.M. Swain. Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1994, p 297.
- ³ DePuy, W.E. p 297.
- ⁴ DePuy, W.E. p 298.
- ⁵ DePuy, W.E. p 298.
- ⁶ DePuy, W.E., *Changing an Army: An Oral History*, eds., Brownlee, R.L., and Mullen, W.J., U.S. Military History Institute and U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988, pp 10, 86 as cited in P.F. Gorman, *The Secret of Future Victories*. Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1992, p III-28.



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