

As the German Army prepared for the anticipated 1918 spring offensive, its main problem was how to apply storm trooper trench assault tactics to achieve a penetration and decisive breakthrough. In the fall of 1917, these tactics were applied in two offensive operations with excellent results: at Caporetto on the Italian Front, and at Cambrai in the counterattack following the British offensive.

The war on the Italian Front between Italy and Austria-Hungary was, like the war on the Western Front, one of position. Neither side could break through and gain a decisive victory; two years of combat resulted in stalemate. However, the situation changed in the summer of 1917 when Italy's strategy of attrition showed signs of success. The Austrians were on the verge of collapse, and doubt lingered whether they could halt the next Italian offensive. To support the Austrians, the Germans sent six divisions to the Italian Front. These divisions, along with eight Austrian divisions, would preempt any Italian offensive with a spoiling attack in the fall.

The site chosen for the attack was near Caporetto on the Isonzo River. At 0200 on October 24th, the German 14th Army's artillery opened up with the preliminary bombardment. At 0800, the bombardment on Italian front lines ceased, and the infantry, preceded by a creeping barrage, advanced on the Italians.

The infantry tactics used by the Germans and Austrians were remarkably similar to storm trooper tactics. The infantry advanced in small columns in the mountainous terrain. Strongpoints were located and pinned down, so squads could get around and reduce them from the rear. The goal was for all units to push through Italian positions as deep as possible; columns halted by heavy resistance were aided by adjoining columns swinging around into the enemy's rear.⁴⁹ The battle became a series of company and battalion-size engagements as the Germans and Austrians pushed rapidly through Italian positions. Some Italian positions resisted initially but quickly surrendered when enveloped. By the end of the first day, the Italians were in disarray. Germans and Austrians appeared everywhere, thrusting into Italian rear areas and leaving stragglers and isolated units behind.⁵⁰ Within three days, the forward elements of the 14th Army left the mountains and were pursuing the retreating Italians across the Venetian Plain. Although the Italians finally halted the 14th Army's advance at the Piave River, the magnitude of the German victory was incredible: between 800,000 and 1,000,000 Italian soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured by the Germans and Austrians. The Italian Army's precarious situation compelled both France and Britain to send large expeditionary forces to bolster their ally. Most importantly, the threat of Austria-Hungary's collapse was no longer a worry.⁵¹

The German counterattack at Cambrai showed many of the same characteristics. The first wave of storm troopers quickly overran the first trench system and pushed on, leaving bypassed enemy positions to be reduced by a follow-on infantry. Artillery guns accompanied infantry in the assault and provided direct fire against such targets as machinegun nests. The main difference between the tactics of the trench raid and the Cambrai counterattack was the degree of preparation: In the trench raid, the leader usually had time for detailed planning and preparation due to the limited nature of the operation. However, in the counterattack, detailed preparation was not possible after clearing the first trench. The unit leader had to make a hasty estimate of the situation, improvise techniques, and act quickly and decisively.⁵²

As the Caporetto offensive and Cambrai counteroffensive were drawing to their conclusions, officers on the German General Staff began preparing two doctrinal publications that significantly affected the 1918 spring offensive. The first of these was the *Training Manual For Foot Troops*, published on 1 January, 1918. This manual summarized many of the storm trooper tactics developed since Rohr's assault unit formed two and one-half years earlier. It was the first publication to recognize clearly the squad as a tactical entity in its own right, and it expressed Ludendorff's command that every German infantryman be trained as a storm trooper. It included much information on using machineguns, especially the use of heavy machineguns in the attack, and recognized the light machinegun as the infantry's primary organic suppressive fire weapon. The *Training Manual for Foot Troops in War* made storm trooper tactics doctrine in the German Army.

The second publication, *Attack in Position Warfare*, was also published on 1 January 1918. Written by Captain Hermann Geyer, it addressed the issue of how to break through the trench system and resume operational maneuver, what Geyer termed the **attack battle**. As Geyer saw it, the problem was how to combine the practice of detailed planning and preparation in trench warfare with the need for quick rupture and rapid exploitation to succeed in the attack battle. Based on successes at Caporetto and Cambrai, Geyer believed he had the answer: The key was knowing what needed to be centrally controlled and what should be left to subordinate commanders. Geyer felt that supporting arms needed to be closely coordinated and the goals of the attack clearly designated. However, he believed that subordinate commanders should determine the specific direction of the attack based on the location of enemy weaknesses. Each attack offered opportunities for initiative down to the level of the individual soldier.⁵³

Like the defensive doctrine, the new offensive doctrine added depth to the attack: units attacked on small frontages to penetrate and push deep into the enemy. In the assault, enemy forces were not destroyed completely; instead, the goal was disruption of enemy units and their communications.⁵⁴ The new doctrine emphasized speed, pressing the attack, and retaining the initiative. Artillery complemented infantry maneuver through preparatory fires, isolating the objective, and leading the infantry forward with a creeping barrage. The principle of gaining **security through speed** was an important part of the doctrine. Although Geyer recognized that units advancing in column exposed vulnerable flanks to the enemy, he felt that speed and suppressive fire kept the enemy off balance long enough for the unit to pass or maneuver onto the enemy's flank. Follow-on units cleared bypassed strong points so that the attack's momentum continued.⁵⁵

The Germans launched their offensive on the Western Front with the 2d, 17th, and 18th Armies attacking on 21 March 1918. 6,000 artillery pieces began firing at 0440 in a seven-phase, five hour bombardment. Then the infantry attacked. A typical attack proceeded as follows:

Established storm battalions assaulted with additional infantry from an accompanying division. The first wave was an infantry probe (from the accompanying division) whose purpose was to identify enemy positions for the next wave, about 250 meters behind. The second wave consisted of the elite storm companies and the flamethrower section, with additional infantry support from the division. This second

*wave attempted to penetrate the enemy zones by pushing through weak areas to envelop enemy positions. Supporting these efforts was the third wave, about 150 meters behind, which contained the storm battalion's heavy weapons and similar additional support from the division. This third wave provided fire to support the forward movement of the storm companies and to protect the flanks of penetrations. Behind these three waves followed the remainder of the accompanying division, which reduced pockets of resistance bypassed by the storm units, provided reinforcements, and maintained the momentum of the attack. In sectors where established storm units were not available, infantry divisions used their own ad hoc storm units and imitated storm unit techniques.*⁵⁶

The main effort of the German attack was directed at British forces East of Amiens. German progress on the first day was startling: In 24 hours, they secured 140 square miles from the British. At the Somme in 1916, the French and British secured only 90 square miles in 140 days at a cost of more than 500,000 casualties. The Germans made good progress on both the second and third days, however, by the fourth day the momentum slowed, and the advance halted on day nine. The Germans created an 80 kilometer breach in British lines, but their artillery and logistics could not keep pace with the advancing infantry. French reinforcements helped the British restore the front. Although the offensive made impressive tactical gains, the Germans failed to attain a strategic breakthrough. Germany attacked several more times during 1918 but the results were the same; the new German tactics worked, but the defender's superior operational mobility prevented a decisive breakthrough.⁵⁷

Summary

German tactics changed enormously during World War I. At the beginning of the war, armies attacked and defended in extended linear formations. Trench warfare, along with machineguns and quick-firing artillery, soon made these tactics obsolete. In the defense, the series of forward, heavily-manned trench lines became impractical--artillery fire caused unacceptable casualties. Instead, German forces spread out both laterally and in depth in a series of zones. Each zone had a series of mutually-supporting strongpoints and was fluid; rather than repel the enemy's assault by fire from a massed, front line trench, the new defense let the enemy *walk right in* while machineguns plastered him with flanking fire. The attack lost momentum as it continued and became susceptible to counterattack. The new doctrine had a highly flexible, mobile character. Defenders in the forward zone were not required to hold ground; they resisted and then retired in any direction they chose. The defense in depth proved very successful. By the end of the war, all armies on the Western Front adopted it as doctrine.

In the attack, the Germans pioneered the development of new offensive tactics, first in the trench assault with limited objectives, and later in the infiltration attack that pushed as deep as possible into the enemy position. The new tactics departed from the broad, linear assault. Instead, small columns of storm troopers used terrain to infiltrate the enemy's defense and either bypass strongpoints or reduce them

from the rear. Exploitation forces, arranged in depth, quickly advanced through gaps to maintain the attack's momentum. Success depended upon **speed**--the goal was to disrupt and paralyze the defense, not completely destroy it. These tactics worked.

These tactics were the second major revolution in infantry tactics. The first revolution occurred during first generation warfare when light infantry tactics became decisive in close terrain. By 1918, light infantry tactics replaced line infantry tactics in all types of terrain.⁵⁸

Supporting arms were also used in new ways. In the defense in depth, German artillery fired **behind** the Allied infantry to isolate it for counterattack. Ideally, the counterattack occurred on terrain favorable to German artillery observation but hidden from Allied observation. In the attack, fire support was used primarily to **suppress** defensive positions for maneuver, not **destroy** them. Also, artillery bombardments **isolated** German objectives and **disrupted** communications.⁵⁹ Allied preliminary bombardments, although long and sometimes costly to the Germans, were used primarily for random attrition. The French maxim, "The artillery conquers, the infantry occupies," dominated Allied thinking. Although the French and British expended huge amounts of ordnance prior to major attacks, their fire support methods did not work.

The new tactics resulted in the squad becoming a tactical unit in its own right. Comparing the pre-war and 1918 German Army squad organization is revealing: In 1914, the squad was simply an administrative element of the platoon. Every squad in the company was similarly organized and equipped--except for the officers, staff NCOs, and musicians, every soldier carried a rifle.⁶⁰ By 1918, the squad was organized and equipped much differently. The *gruppe* of 12 men included an NCO, eight rifleman, and a machine gun team. The machine gun was the backbone of the defense and the rifleman's job was to protect it. In the attack, the squad might also include a lightweight mortar and flamethrower. With the squad organized as an independently-acting combined arms team, the NCO's role became very significant.⁶¹

Another result of the new tactics was that *maneuver dominated firepower*. Between the Civil War and early World War I, firepower dominated. Massed formations of observed infantry were obliterated by fire. Third generation tactics relied on **ambiguity**, generated largely by multiple thrusts, for success. Forces were deployed in depth and hidden from the enemy to keep fire from being brought upon them. **Speed, surprise, and suppressive firepower** were the keys. In both the defense in depth and the infiltration attack, the Germans found ways to counter firepower's dominance.

Modern tactics are third generation tactics. In the modern area defense, defenders do not arbitrarily hold terrain. The defense is elastic--it allows the attacker to overextend before destroying him with a strong counterattack. Speed of action is important. When married with the tank, airplane, and motorized infantry, the infiltration attack of World War I became the German blitzkrieg of World War II. Blitzkrieg succeeded because tanks and motorized infantry gave the attacker an operational level advantage--the attacker retained the initiative due to armor's mobility. Infiltration tactics were used successfully by the Chinese in the Korean War, by the North Vietnamese in the Vietnam War, and by the British in the Falklands. The lethality of modern weapons make stealth, speed, and ambiguity even more important to today's infantryman.

V. Conclusions

Although neatly arranged in this chapter for educational purposes, you must remember that tactics did not evolve in orderly fashion. Elements of each generation were present throughout the modern era: Skirmisher tactics, popular at the beginning of World War I, were used decisively in close terrain against massed, close-order formations in the American Revolutionary War. British doctrine in the 1920's taught the infantry to **form square** against cavalry attacks, and, until recently, Marine Corps doctrine included second generation fire and movement tactics. As weapons and equipment improve, tactics will continue to change.

From this chapter, you should draw four conclusions:

First, you should note that *tactics and technology bear a close relationship*. The development of the infantryman's basic weapon, from the musket to the automatic rifle, had a profound effect on tactics. In general, technological developments create new tactical problems for the infantryman. As a leader of Marines, your job is to develop and test new tactics appropriate to modern weapons and equipment like night vision goggles and the remotely-piloted vehicle (RPV).

Second, you should note significant aspects of modern, third generation tactics:

- *Attacks by penetration, isolation, and envelopment.*
- *Decentralized tactical decisionmaking and combined arms.*
- *Characteristics: fast and disorderly.*

Third, in the evolution of battle, *some things change and some don't*. Equipment, weapons, and tactics will continue to change, and Marines must adapt accordingly. However, **good leadership** is an intangible quality whose tenets are immutable. Good leadership provides a cohesive, well-trained, and confident force. It instills courage, determination, and the will to assault, or stand fast against, the enemy. Good leadership will always be a prerequisite for success in battle.

Finally, you should note the *qualities required in the modern infantryman*. He is a **light** infantryman. He must be elusive, agile, and highly skilled in stalking, camouflage, and deception. He must be well-trained, aggressive, and capable of using initiative to act independently. Most of all, he must be an **intelligent, thinking Marine** imbued with **self-discipline**. The modern infantryman survives through stealth, brains, and ambiguity.⁶² You must develop these qualities in your subordinates, and in yourself.

Table 2-1 summarizes characteristics of first, second, and third generation infantry tactics.

7. Supported by suppressive fire from machine guns, flamethrowers, mortars, and artillery, small, independently-acting assault squads used terrain to work their way forward and into the enemy trenchline. Upon entering the trenchline, the assault squads cleared them using hand grenades. These new techniques had three significant results:

- a. The chief purpose of supporting arms became **suppression** not **destruction**.
- b. Supporting arms were coordinated at a lower level than before.
- c. The NCO became a tactical decisionmaker. (See page 46.)

8. Tactics must be appropriate to the level of technology. This is obvious when you look at how weapons developed from the smooth bore musket to the machine gun. When the rifled musket and breech-loading rifle replaced the smooth bore musket, close-order tactics became obsolete. Later, the development of the machine gun and quick-firing artillery made skirmisher tactics obsolete. As weapons and equipment continue to improve, appropriate tactics must develop also. (See page 51.)

9. In the defense, supporting arms not only destroyed forces but isolated them for counterattack. In the attack, fire support primarily **suppressed** enemy positions to permit maneuver, not **destroyed** them. Artillery bombardments isolated objectives and disrupted communications. (See page 50.)