

# The make up of WWII rifle companies

By Dave Fornell

Although we usually identify our re-enacting units as representatives of divisions, the basic units we actually portray are generally squads, platoons, and a few larger units sometimes field reduced companies. With this in mind it is helpful to know the basics of small unit formations.

The American and German armies were roughly the same composition at company level and below. The squad (or German Gruppe) was the basic building block of any unit. It was usually composed of 10 men, but some had 12 with extra ammo bearers or vehicle crew, as in panzer grenadier squads.

The squads are usually led by a sergeant (Unterofficier or Feldwebel). Corporals (Gefreiters) were assigned as assistant squad leaders, but due to casualties it was not uncommon for corporals to lead squads.

American squads were usually equipped with one Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR), and the rest of the squad carried semi-automatic M-1 Garands. However, variations were usually with some NCOs, who preferred to carry Thompson submachine guns or M-1 carbines. Early war units had a high percentage of M1903 Springfield rifles, and many were retained later in the war for use as grenade launchers. Three men served the BAR, one as the gunner, and two as ammunition bears. Prior to June 30, 1944, each man was supposed to carry a BAR belt for extra magazines, but afterwards only the gunner was issued one.

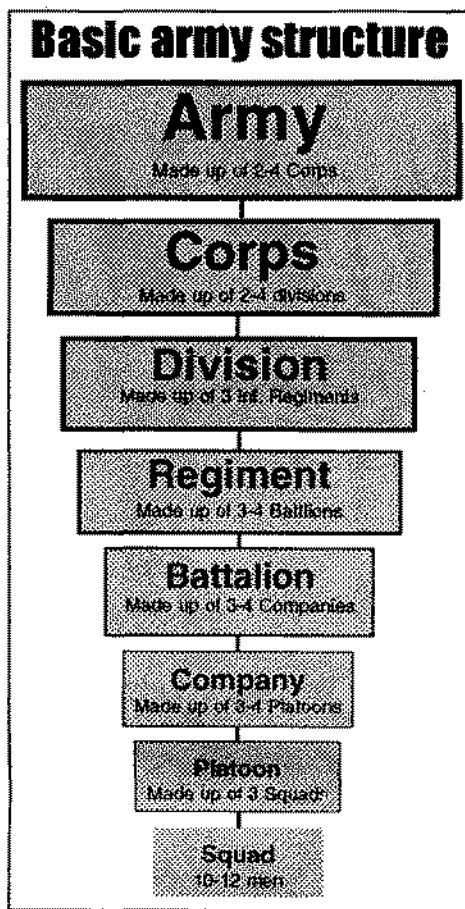
Additional table of organization issue for a squad included:

- 2 wrist compasses for squad leaders.
- 2 grenade launchers M-7
- 13 ammunition carrying bags. Increased to 20 per squad in January 1945.
- 12 goggles (cancelled in January 1945).
- 2 Thunder whistles, for squad leaders.

The squad remained in combat as long as there was someone to command it, another to fire rifle grenades, and a third of the squad left to serve the BAR. If not, it was disbanded and its men used as replacement for neighboring squads.

German squads were usually armed with one MG34 or MG42 light machine gun, one MP40 submachine gun for the squad leader, and the rest carried Mauser 98K bolt-action rifles. Three men served the MG, one as gunner and two others as ammunition bearers, each carrying one or two ammo cans and usually wrapping extra belts of ammo around their necks for more immediate use. They also carried at least one or two spare barrels in special metal carriers, as the MGs overheated quickly with the rapid rate of fire and needed to be changed out after periods of 1,200 rounds or more of sustained fire.

The rate of fire of the MG made it the main firepower of the squad, and the Germans built all



squad tactics around it. As a general rule the MG was kept near the rear of the squad, so when fired upon, the gunner could maneuver into a position on one flank or the other of the squad as it deployed into a line of battle (Kampfline). The MG was supposed to pin down and attempt to destroy enemy strong points. The rifle men protected the MG position, and/or attempted to move up and overrun the enemy position, or take control of a better firing position for the MG. The riflemen would then lay covering fire as the MG crew moved into the new position. The American BAR was used the way, but it had a much lower rate of fire and required more time to reload.

German units were issued grenade launchers for the 98K early in the war, and late in the war it was common to have squads equipped with two of them. As with the U.S. launchers, they were capable of firing anti-tank and anti-personnel grenades distances of 100 yards or more.

Late in the war, as German units were reduced through casualties and constantly stripped of troops as cadre for new units being formed, the number of automatic weapons increased. More MP40s were found at squad level, although the 98K remained the standard weapon. Some entire platoons were equipped with MP40s in 1944 and 1945 to be used as high-firepower reserves. In

1945, it was not unusual to find two MG34s or 42s per squad, using firepower to make up for a lack of troops.

Three squads usually make up a platoon (Zug) which was commanded by a lieutenant. American platoon commanders were assisted by a staff sergeant, and had another sergeant to act as a guide to keep the squads together and prevent straggling. The platoon also had two enlisted rank messengers. The commander appointed one of his best riflemen from his platoon to serve as a sharpshooter, armed with a modified Springfield M1903A4 sniper rifle, or a M-1C Garand sniper rifle after January 1945. Special equipment issue for the U.S. platoons included:

- 1 luminous dial compass
- 2 wrist compasses for messengers
- 2 binoculars
- 1 transparent map template M2
- 2 wristwatches
- 1 grenade launcher, with ammunition bag
- 1 hand-fired M7 pyrotechnic launcher for flares
- 3 flashlights
- 1 SCR-536 radio set
- 3 Thunderer whistles

The German platoons had similar organization and equipment issue.

Three platoons made up a rifle company (Kompanie), which was commanded by a captain (Hauptmann). He was assisted by a lieutenant, two sergeants, a private who was the bugler, three enlisted messengers, and 17 privates. One sergeant is devoted to communications, using flags and field phones, to maintain communications both inside the company, and with higher headquarters. The headquarters also had an administrative group made of one sergeant for mess; one for supply; a corporal as company clerk, a technician 5th grade as armorer; two each technician 4th and 5th grades as cooks; and two privates as cook's helpers. Among the things issued to American company HQs were: issued five bazookas, six .45 cal. submachine guns, six BARs, 11 packboards, two walkie talkie SCR-536 (three in 1945), air ID marker panels, and one demolition set, No. 5.

Companies in both armies had heavy weapons platoons. The U.S. equipped theirs with one .50 cal. heavy machine gun, two .30 cal. light machine gun, and three 60mm mortars. The only vehicles at company level are two jeeps and trailers issued for the heavy weapons platoon.

The Germans equipped their companies with a heavy machine gun section of 18 men with two MG34s or 42s on tripods.

Heavy mortars, anti-tank guns and bazookas, field phones, and engineer equipment was included with companies and platoons attached at battalion and regimental levels, and assigned as needed to the lower units.