

Twitter Thread by Dr Matthew Ford



Dr Matthew Ford

@warmatters

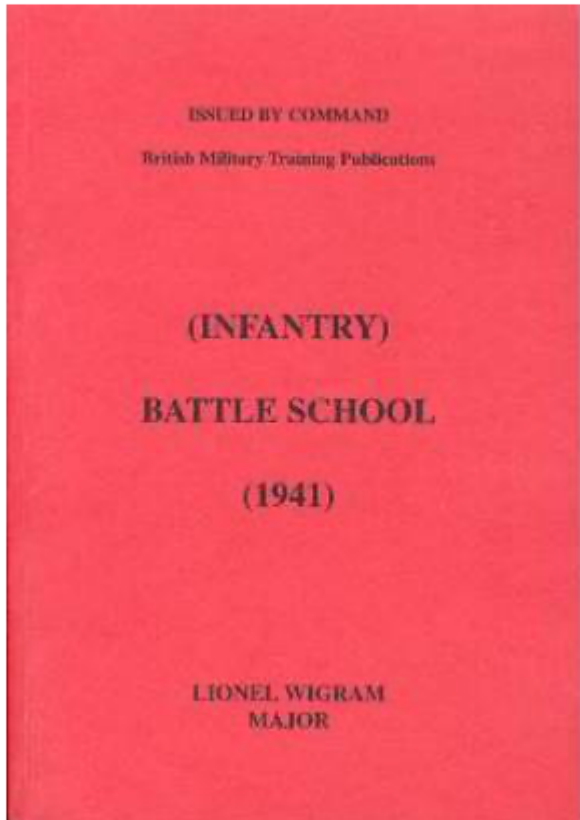


A thread outlining my thoughts on Second World War tactics.

For me tactics only makes sense when looked at as a socio-technical system. This thread reflects that way of thinking.

Again I'll be using British examples but there are some US crossovers later on.

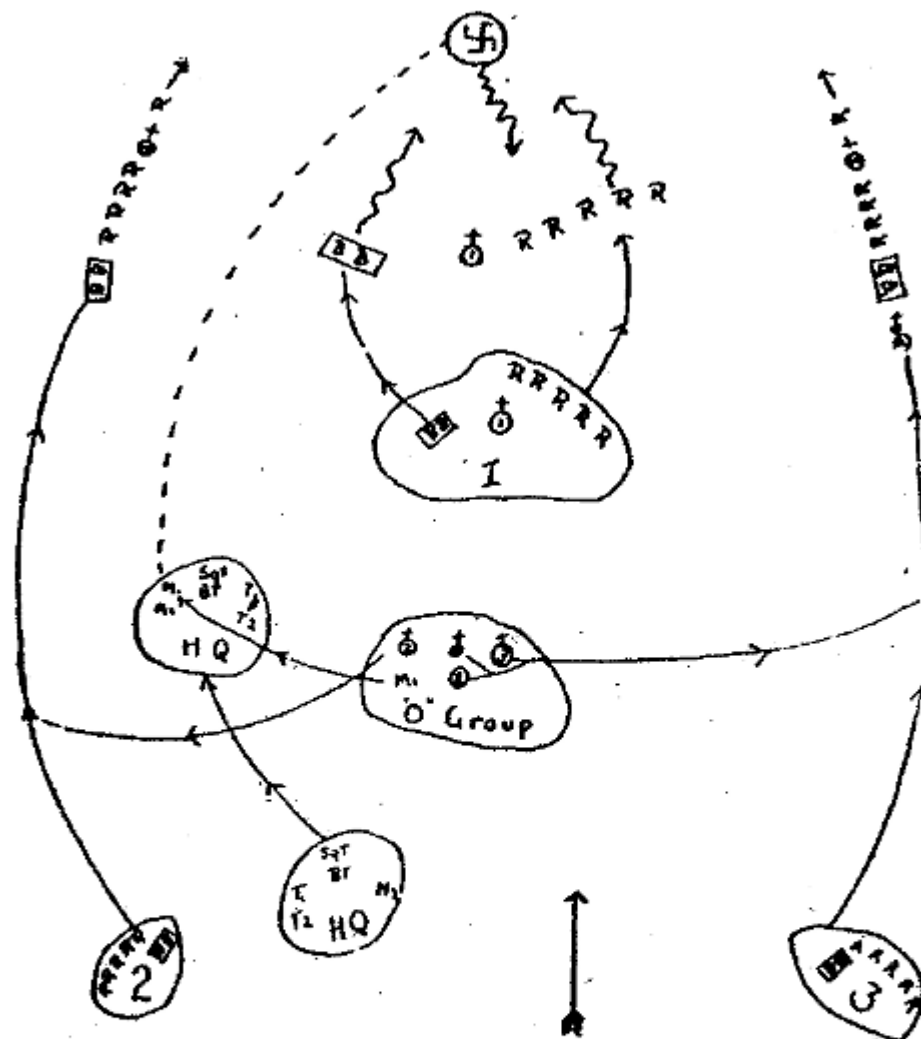
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My starting place is Lionel Wigram and the Battle School Movement.

The principle objectives were concerned with training a mass of newly conscripted infantry in how to fight. There were precedents from the FWW. This movement though was set up by a Territorial Army officer.

Under cover of fire 2 and 3 sections execute a pincer movement. 2 and 3 sections DO NOT split up into groups until compelled to do so by the enemy's fire.



Legend

~~~~~ FIRE  
 → MOVEMENT  
 - - - MORTAR FIRE

⊕ PL. COMD.  
 ⊙ SEC. COMD.  
 R RIFLEMAN

⊙ RUNNER  
 M. H. MORTAR MEN  
 T. T. A. TK. MEN.  
 [B] BREN GROUP  
 S. PL. SGT.  
 B. BATMAN

58

I referenced Tim Harrison-Place's excellent book in an earlier thread on SWW small arms.

There's also this excellent article on Wigram and the Infantry Schools.

Wigram sought to inoculate new soldiers from the chaos of battle while training them in the basics of what might simplistically be called fire and movement.

4/

enemy only when they were being suppressed by infantry fire, or fire organic to the battalion.<sup>14</sup> Thus if two infantry sections (16–20 men) were to mount an attack on a defended position then one would be used to fire on the enemy while the other moved forward, taking advantage of ground and cover, to attack a flank. This practice known as ‘keeping one leg on the ground’, was designed to stop opposition troops from returning fire on the manoeuvring section.<sup>15</sup> If used properly

As I said in this earlier thread, there was a tension within the Army between those were part of the institution's professional ethos and the new conscripts that made up the mass of the infantry.

5/

<https://t.co/Lp9Ma7SnHN>

The ethos of the professional Army valued marksmanship as an indication of their professionalism.

More than this, I'd contend they did not entirely trust a conscript army to do what was necessary.

12/

— Dr Matthew Ford (@warmatters) December 23, 2020

This tension could be seen in surveys conducted by Ministry of Supply Weapon's Technical Staff who in 1942 noted that:

6a/

"It will be seen from the detailed answers... that opinions on quite elementary points are frequently conflicting, if not directly contradictory, as between different units and formations"

6b/

And...

"It will be seen from the detailed answers... that opinions on quite elementary points are frequently conflicting, if not directly contradictory, as between different units and formations"

6c/

At the same time, in Italy in 1943, Wigram noted that on average a British Army platoon would almost invariably be 25% "gutful," men who would go anywhere and do anything...

7a/

[cont.]

...50% "sheep," men who would follow closely behind if well led, and about 25% "cowards," who quickly ran or became ineffectual once the fighting started.

7b/

The problem was that the technology being used by the Infantry reinforced the problems that Wigram had identified.

A 9lb rifle & a 22lb LMG plus SAA & all the other accoutrements undermined movement.

8/

This had been noted by the Armament Design Establishment who had been working on weapons that would offer weight savings and help to generate firepower.

9/

But it had also been noted by Major-General T.N.F Wilson who was the first to be appointed to the new position of Director of Infantry.

Previously this position did not exist.

10/

With the Ministry of Supply & reps from commands Wilson set up the Standing Committee on Infantry Weapon Development.

The committee's terms of reference were to ensure that...

11/

Supply. The Committee's terms of reference were broad and included not only ensuring that, 'our Infantry weapons are superior in every way to those of any potential enemy' but also to, 'forecast our own Infantry tactics in relation to the enemy's in order to assess the battle conditions under which weapons may be required'.<sup>19</sup>

The goal to restore confidence in the equipment and weapons being used by the infantry AND to try and address the fact that the infantry and their battalion commanders didn't always know how to make best use of their weapons.

12/

In movement was going to be restored to the infantry platoon then soldiers would need technology that encouraged them to actually move.

That meant bringing "all available infantry weapons to bear upon the enemy... [cont.]

13/

[cont.] Not only in the initial stage of the advance but also up to the last possible moment so that the infantry can literally be shot into close quarters"

Wilson discussed this in the RUSI journal in Feb 1944.

14/

<https://t.co/uPlk05fPSN>

Wilson and the various technical branches on the SCIWD understood the tactical problem to be a socio-technical one.

Wilson wrote the infantry, "...must at all times be able to fight their way forward and to close with the enemy with the support of their own weapons [cont.]

15/

[cont.] It is to this end that the modern organisation and fire power of the infantry is designed. In this organization the balance must be held between fire power, assault power and manoeuvrability"

16/

As I said before though, the commands themselves were unwilling to mess about with infantry weapons.

Why? Monty understood that the battle was not won by the infantry but through a combination of arms that did the heavy lifting for the infantry.

17/

<https://t.co/N86QDbE4DC>

Would you change logistics infrastructure for a 10% advantage? Would you do that knowing there's not enough manpower? Need a standing army in Europe after the war & don't want to waste lives in infantry attacks when the result could be achieved with artillery?

Monty neither.

7/ [pic.twitter.com/4AGWxnEhxB](https://pic.twitter.com/4AGWxnEhxB)

— Dr Matthew Ford (@warmatters) [December 23, 2020](#)

If you want to read more about this and also the story of the EM-2 then check out my article on it here.

There's more to the EM-2 story though - some of it quite convoluted which I can talk through at some point over the next few days/weeks.

18/

<https://t.co/X6NOKj7LO2>

Addendum/

And here's the US cross over reference I alluded to at the head of this thread.

<https://t.co/9lVTQWGcnZ>

People who haven't studied guns tend to assume that the evolution of small arms towards an assault rifle was in some way inevitable.

I'm here to say that this doesn't follow.

In this thread, I'll pick up on the US crossovers I referenced but didn't cash out in my last thread

1/

— Dr Matthew Ford (@warmatters) [December 29, 2020](#)

Quote from 6c/ should be:

"... it would appear that many Battalion Commanders are not really qualified to comment usefully on their weapons."

I'll make more of this at a later point.