

U.S. Army Rifle Company (1917-1921)

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When the U.S. Army deployed to Europe during World War I, it adopted a new organization for its Rifle Company. Units deployed to with the American Expeditionary Force look markedly different from those that remained in the states, taking notes from the British and French and fielding new, specialized weaponry. This article includes the theoretical organization of the rifle company, discussion with notes on the practical task organization, and sources.

Organization (1917 to 1921)

- Type: Infantry Company
- Origin: U.S. Army (United States)
- Personnel: 6 Officers and 250 Enlisted

Company Headquarters (2 Officers and 18 Enlisted)

→ Captain's Group

- 1× Commanding Officer, Captain, armed with 1 pistol/revolver
- 1× First Sergeant, First Sergeant, armed with 1 pistol/revolver
- 2× Buglers, Private, armed with 1 pistol/revolver each
- 4× Agents and Signalmen, Private First Class, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle [A] each

→ Service Group

- 1× Executive Officer, Lieutenant, armed with 1 pistol
- 1× Mess Sergeant, Mess Sergeant (Sgt. equiv), armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle
- 1× Supply Sergeant, Sergeant, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle
- 1× Company Clerk, Corporal, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle
- 4× Cooks, Private, armed with 1 pistol/revolver each
- 4× Mechanics, Private, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle each

→ **Additional Equipment:** Each company headquarters was allotted 2 bicycles. Six rifles were available for automatic riflemen if they didn't take out their automatic rifles. Forty trench knives and 6 extra rifle grenade launchers were also available.

4x Rifle Platoons (1 Officer and 58 Enlisted each)

→ **Platoon Headquarters:**

Company L HEADQUARTER PLATOON

- 1x Platoon Commander, Lieutenant, armed with 1 pistol/revolver
- 1x Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle and 1 pistol or revolver
- 4x Runners, Private, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle

→ **1x Hand Bomber Section:**

Company L FIRST PLATOON

- **3x Hand Bomber Teams** of:
 - 1x Team Leader, Corporal (2 teams) or Private First Class (1 team), armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle and, for Corporal team leaders, 1 pistol/revolver
 - 1x Thrower, Private First Class, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle and 1 pistol/revolver
 - 1x Scout, Private, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle
 - 1x Ammo Man, Private, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle

→ **1x Rifle Grenadier Section:**

Company L SECOND PLATOON

- **3x Rifle Grenadier Teams** of:
 - 1x Team Leader, Corporal (2 teams) or Private First Class (1 team), armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle, 1 VB grenade launcher and, for Corporal team leaders, 1 pistol/revolver
 - 1x Gunner, Private First Class, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle and VB grenade launcher
 - 1x Ammo Man, Private, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle

→ 1× Automatic Rifle Section:

Company L THIRD PLATOON

- 1× Section Leader, Sergeant, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle and 1 pistol/revolver
- 2× **Automatic Rifle Squads** of:
 - 1× Squad Leader, Corporal, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle and 1 pistol/revolver
 - 2× Automatic Riflemen [B], Private First Class, armed with 1 M1915 Chauchat automatic rifle [C] and 1 pistol/revolver each
 - 4× Ammo Man, Private, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle each

→ 1× Rifle Section:

Company L FOURTH PLATOON

- 1× Section Leader, Sergeant, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle
- 2× **Rifle Squads** of:
 - 1× Squad Leader, Corporal, armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle
 - 7× Riflemen, Private First Class (3 men) or Private (4 men), armed with 1 M1903/M1917 rifle each

[A] - The M1917 Enfield was the primary service rifle, especially later in the war, but the M1903 Springfield would have been common for initial deployments.

[B] - In theory, each automatic rifle squad would only field one of its automatic rifles at a time in combat. In practice, sections would field the full complement that were available.

[C] - The French-made M1915 Chauchat was the standard automatic rifle for the U.S. Army during World War I. Units that served with British regiments sometimes used the Lewis gun, which the British were fielding as a platoon-level automatic rifle. Beginning in September 1918, units began receiving M1918 BARs, although they were relatively rare.

Discussion

Overview

The organization of the U.S. Army's American Expeditionary Force

(AEF) rifle companies differed greatly from that of non-AEF rifle companies. Doing away with "everyman a rifleman" and adopting an organization similar to what the British and French were fielding when the U.S. entered the war, the biggest changes came at the platoon level where new specialized weapons were introduced.

Prior to World War I, rifle companies were homogenous, composed entirely of riflemen. Their squads and platoons would be assigned by lining up the men in parade formation and counting them off 8 per squad and forming platoons out of what they had. The new rifle platoons would have 5 basic elements that would be task organized by the platoon commander.

The combat elements of the rifle platoon were the hand bomber section, rifle grenade section, rifle section, and automatic rifle section. It should be noted that at this time, the British and Americans referred to hand grenades as "bombs" and rifle grenades as "grenades." In the field, these sections would ideally be reorganized by the platoon commander.

The platoon commander was the platoon's one officer, either a First or Second Lieutenant. There were 3 sergeants. The most senior sergeant was the platoon sergeant and was located in the Platoon Headquarters. The other 2 were the section leaders of the automatic rifle and rifle section. Each of these sections were further broken down into 2 squads, each led by a corporal. When a platoon was formed into half platoons (the elementary unit where fire and maneuver could realistically occur) the rifle and automatic rifle sections would cross attach their squads across the half platoons so one half platoon wouldn't be lacking. Meanwhile, the hand bomber and rifle grenade sections did not have section commanders. This is because these 2 sections would have each of their 3 teams combined with teams from the other section to create combination hand bomber/rifle grenade squads.

An example task organization for the rifle platoon would be as follows:

- 1× Platoon Headquarters
- 2× Half Platoons (commanded by the Automatic Rifle or Rifle Section Leader)
 - 1× Automatic Rifle Squad
 - 1× Rifle Squad
 - 1-2× Rifle Grenade/Hand Bomber Squads (made by combining 1 Hand Bomber and 1 Rifle Grenade Team)

In reality, rifle platoons operated at well below 58 enlisted personnel. By late 1918, the average rifle platoon strength was about 40 men. Hand Bombers would often be used as riflemen as the utility of having personnel whose only speciality was throwing hand bombs was dubious. Thus, a more realistic organization would be as follows:

- 1× Platoon Headquarters
- 2× Half Platoons
 - 1× Automatic Rifle Squad (maintained at full strength if possible)
 - 1× Rifle Squad
 - 1× Rifle Grenade/Rifle Squad (made by reorganizing the rifle grenade section from 3 teams to 2 larger teams and adding extra riflemen to each team to create a new squad)

Summary of Changes

- The company strength was increased from 153/103 (max/min) to 256 personnel.
- In the non-AEF company organization, all men in rifle platoons were riflemen armed exclusively with rifles and pistols/revolvers. The AEF rifle platoons introduced the concept of the hand bomber, rifle grenade, and automatic rifle sections with their own specialized weapons.
- The M1917 Enfield would become the most common service rifle available to the U.S. Army during World War I, whereas the M1903 Springfield was the standard rifle before its entry.

Sources

- Sayen, John. (2001) "Battalion: An Organizational Study of the United

States Infantry.” Working paper, Marine Corps Combat Development Command

<https://www.battleorder.org/us-rifle-co-ww1>