

INFANTRY PLATOON AND SQUAD ATP 3-21.8 (UNITED STATES ARMY)

March 27, 2018

As will surprise nobody who is paying any attention, I am preparing for war. Why hide it? Although only a fool or someone with a distorted moral sense would actually wish for war, what we wish has little to do with it. Intermittent war is the natural state of man, whatever Steven Pinker may say, and as Trotsky said, more or less, “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.” What follows today’s Age of Stupid will, we can be certain, not be endless tides of more stupidity, because that is impossible. And to get from here to there, whatever “there” is, will most likely require passing through what the Chinese call “interesting times,” in which hot, flying metal will play a prominent part.

“War,” perhaps, is not the correct noun. Individuals, or small groups of civilians, don’t fight wars proper, except as part of some larger organization, and I am not talking about the organized military here (although its presence in any future interesting times is highly relevant), or even a true militia in the Colonial sense. “Armed action by non-soldiers” is probably closer to what I am talking about. Such armed action could take many forms. At its narrowest, it is home defense against burglars or similar marauders. It could be response to localized social unrest, as in the neighborhood defenses organized after recent natural disasters. It could be dealing with a broader societal breakdown, as shown in any number of dystopian novels and films. And it potentially includes rebellion, as well as civil war, in the lighting of its fuse or in its prosecution.

I like to pose a riddle to my children. Question: Why is a man never lacking weapons? Answer: Because a man without weapons is not a man. This is because the role of a man, at its core, is to protect and defend, and without weapons, a man cannot adequately perform his role of defense (and offense when that constitutes defense). For that matter, women should have weapons, too—not for military use, since women should not, in ordinary circumstances, serve in the military as soldiers, in combat or not, but to enable them to fight as last-ditch family defense. Thus the family, and larger forms of community (of which families are the building blocks), cannot fulfil its function without contemplating a possible need for armed action. We forget this lesson today, or, more

accurately, some forget, and many people don't forget, but they usually don't talk about it, except in hushed whispers.

Of course, the farther one moves along the continuum from burglars to civil war, the greater the needed size of an armed action group. Aside from adequate numbers, what one needs for effective armed action, it seems to me, is three things: materiel, tactics, and training. For the time being, materiel in America is easy—one can now, in the free states, easily and legally equip a group with the majority of the accoutrement of an infantry platoon. Sure, no machine guns, and no explosives or man-portable artillery (such as what this book calls “close combat missile systems”). But many likely scenarios don't require use of even such moderately heavier infantry equipment, and for those that do, either such materiel will be available scattered in the street, or can be, um, “accessed” at need to complement the other items. This is demonstrable from recent history, such as the Balkan Wars.

Tactics and training, though, are a harder nut to crack, even if they seem easy on the surface. These things go together, of course—knowledge of tactics isn't much use without training, and most people aren't going to spend the time to train adequately unless they have some critical immediate need. Unless one already has military training (which I don't, although I have plenty of relatives and friends who do), or wants to spend the weekends playing soldier with fat men in camouflage living out fantasies of apocalyptic glory, there are limited options. The problem, of course, is that without tactics and training, having all the materiel in the world, even if you know basically how to use it, is of limited use in anything but static defense, and that only against other untrained people. But if you need something more in a hurry, you're unlikely to be granted the luxury of several weeks of peace and free time to train and embed tactics in your brain.

Nonetheless, imperfect as it is, I expect that is what most of the hushed whisperers intend—to learn on the fly, if necessary, by doing, if they have to. I endorse that plan as better than any alternative I can see. Really, though, I hope that if the balloon goes up, I can get some people with military experience who will do the training—one friend, in particular, comes to mind. In the meantime, though, it makes sense to lay in a few basic supplies. You know, a case of MREs, and some cheap

binoculars. And military training manuals, of which this one is the most basic in the Army's library, can't hurt, along with some review of them.

This is *Infantry Platoon and Squad*, ATP 3-21.8 (ATP stands for "Army Techniques Publications"; this used to be called FM 7-8, for "Field Manual"). The American military publishes a few hundred of these manuals; some focus on strategy; some on functions such as riot and crowd control; and many on individual skills, such as rifle marksmanship and using heavier infantry weapons such as Javelin missiles. Your tax dollars at work. All are in the public domain (and easy to find and download), except for a few which appear to be restricted. *Infantry Platoon and Squad* is, it seems, targeted at the smallest unit of Army operations, and is meant to cover the basic functions of an infantry platoon, typically composed of about forty men, each commonly divided into four squads and a small group of leaders, with each squad further divided into two teams. (You can see how this structure works in action by reading, for example, Clinton Romesha's recent *Red Platoon*.)

Reading *Infantry Platoon and Squad* gives the reader an effective overview of how this system works. Such knowledge is potentially useful both for training in tactics and their implementation, and for seeing how actions directed against you are unfolding. None of the information is startlingly new to anyone who pays some attention to war movies, YouTube combat videos, and the like, but it's all packaged together in a thick book, with the upside of lots of detail, and the downside of lots of acronyms and government-speak. A fair bit of the book, too, is taken up with describing actions of mechanized platoons and squads, using accompanying armor from Bradley Fighting Vehicles to Abrams tanks (not the operation of those, but their coordination with infantrymen).

Still, the book lays it all out competently, if drily. We get Organization, in which the granular composition from teams up is described, together with line drawings showing what the text means. We get Offense, from tasks to maneuver to formations to movement. We get Defense, from movement to obstacle creation to ambush execution. We get sections on larger-scale movement, in offense and defense, and we get very significant detail on patrols and patrolling, as well as various data on items of interest primarily to those contained within a larger chain of command. I think it a fair assumption that this covers all the basics, although frequent mention is also made of reading other specific Army

training manuals for more information. Presumably, since these manuals are iterated, the information is accurate and complete. Finally, in the Appendixes, we get what I think is some of the most interesting data, including using and defeating wire and other obstacles, detailed specifics on activities such as wall and door breaching with shotguns, the use of anti-armor missiles, and so forth, as well as, most potentially useful of all, a series of “battle drills,” which, I am guessing, are the sort of thing done in Basic Training.

There is pretty clearly an underserved market for the kind of training material I describe at the beginning of this review. A few such books exist, such as the decrepit *Light Infantry Tactics: For Small Teams*, by Christopher Larsen. I would think that a series of several books with the Army’s (and other service branches’) manuals stripped down, rewritten in clear and edited civilian-speak, properly illustrated and offering detailed and voluminous practical exercises that built on each other, would be something that a lot of people could find useful. Think of it as a home-schooling curriculum for killing. Not that I’m volunteering to write such a series—I have better things to do, and anyway, my background knowledge is grossly inadequate. But a good writer with a military background could do worse than spend his time on this, especially since most mass-market survival books avoid such topics like the plague (as do books like Lewis Dartnell’s *The Knowledge*, which purports to show how to rebuild civilization, but deliberately excludes any coverage at all of weapons and hunting gear). Market opportunity, anyone?