

6. Battle Tested

You are the platoon leader for 40 soldiers deployed to a combat zone, where you have lived and trained with your platoon for 18 months. You know them as soldiers and people. Every day you trust them with your life — as they do you. Because you are the platoon leader, they depend on your professional skill and judgment to accomplish the mission while keeping them as safe as possible. Infantry combat is inherently dangerous, and all of the soldiers in the platoon knew they would be risking life and limb when they volunteered. They trust that you and the commanders above you will not risk their lives needlessly.

You are leading a foot patrol and must cross an open field to get to a village. In that village you are to meet with the local leaders, who are supportive of your mission. Your patrol is halfway across the field when you start receiving rifle and mortar fire from the village. One of your soldiers is wounded and needs to get to the field hospital right away. The field is flat, offering no cover from either the rifle or the mortar fire. The longer you stay where you are, the more likely your soldiers will be killed or wounded. Going back will also expose your soldiers to lethal fire and likely result in further casualties.

Your training says that in this situation you should call in for artillery fire while you direct your machine guns at the source of the rifle fire, and that you should direct your soldiers to attack the enemy location to defeat the ambush. This approach is battle tested. It provides the least risk to your soldiers.

You know, however, there are civilians in the village. Among them are the local leaders that you are going to meet. You also know from experience that the “Laws of Land Warfare” are neither respected nor followed — it is likely the enemy is deliberately fighting from positions near or surrounded by civilians.

So, what should you do? The “means” you have at your disposal are:

The rifles that your soldiers carry. They are accurate. They are also unlikely to penetrate the walls of the village buildings.

The machine guns in your platoon. They are accurate and effective. They will penetrate the walls of the village buildings.

Artillery support. The high explosive shells have bursting radius of 25 meters and a direct hit will destroy a house, killing anyone in the house. Artillery is initially inaccurate.

The first rounds would likely miss by up to 200 meters, becoming more accurate with each shot.

Artillery Smoke. The smoke is created by white phosphorus, which burns at a very high temperature and cannot be extinguished. Using artillery smoke to cover your withdrawal risks setting the field or the nearest buildings on fire.