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Unit Cohesion: A Prerequisite for Combat Effectiveness

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UNIT COHESION:

A PREREQUISITE FOR COMBAT EFFECTIVENESS

by

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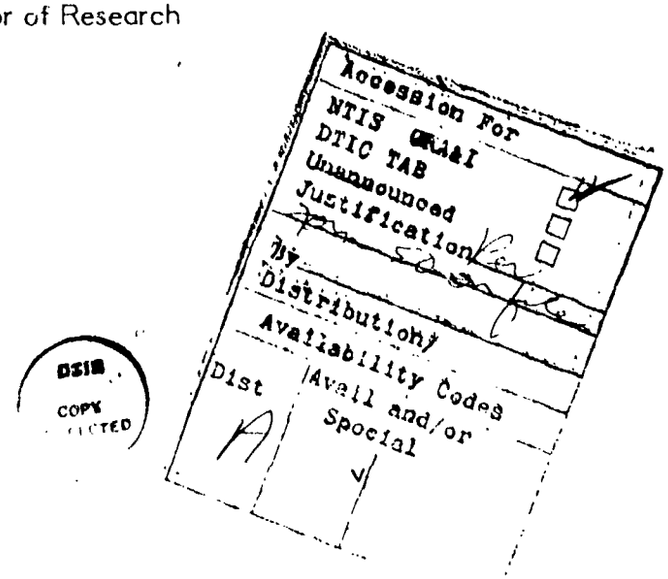
FOREWORD

As a contribution to our 1982 National Security Issue Paper Series, we are pleased to welcome the first Armed Forces Staff College (AFSC) research study published by our National Defense University (NDU) Press. In 1981, the AFSC became the third major component college of NDU, joining the National War College and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. As the three colleges pursue their missions of professional military education, we look forward to publishing more of their research products of interest to the national security community.

Lieutenant Colonel Jeremy J. J. Phipps, of the British Army, was graduated from the Armed Forces Staff College where he wrote this study as a student research paper. He addresses unit cohesion in US Army combat units as the important ingredient for victory in the "next major war." Excessive personnel movement which disrupts soldier stability and unit effectiveness is discussed as a major factor which reduces unit cohesiveness. The author examines the regimental system as a way of correcting the problem of personnel turbulence.

There are also broader implications for national security. Lack of cohesiveness could weaken the US Army, particularly the combat units. Strong, effective combat units are the cutting edge of any military establishment, and thus of vital concern for US national security. It is thus particularly gratifying to challenge our readers to consider these ideas developed by a fellow soldier attending the newest collegiate member of our NDU community.

FRANKLIN D. MARGIOTTA
Colonel, USAF
Director of Research



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Colonel Jeremy J. J. Phipps, British Army, is a graduate of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, and the US Armed Forces Staff College (1981). Commissioned into The Queen's Own Hussars in 1962, he has served in South Arabia (United Arab Emirates, South Yemen and Oman), the Far East (Singapore and Malaya), Europe, and Northern Ireland as a tank troop commander, a battalion S1 and S3, twice as a tank squadron commander, and most recently as battalion executive officer. Assignments away from The Queen's Own Hussars include two tours with 22d Special Air Service Regiment and as S3 to Headquarters, United Kingdom Land Forces. His next assignment is to command The Queen's Own Hussars, currently stationed in the British Army in the Rhine area.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is to examine unit cohesion in US Army combat units in light of the key elements of cohesiveness, the present personnel turbulence problems, and some of the regimental-style systems being proposed or implemented. The very nature of weaponry available to armies today can produce a firepower and shock effect hitherto unknown in the history of armed conflict. Combat will be psychologically terrifying. Strong group loyalty and discipline will enable a combat unit to stay and fight together effectively against heavy opposition. Group loyalty and discipline occur when soldiers have worked together for long periods and have faith in the proven ability of their leaders. The individual replacement system currently used by the US Army to place people in job on an individual basis tends to destroy unit stability and cohesiveness. The problem has been identified, numerous studies have been conducted, far-reaching proposals are being approved, and challenging concepts are being adopted. The intangible benefits to be gained are long-term and difficult to measure.

The conclusions drawn are that the next major war will be a severe test of the ability of the US Army's combat units to fight effectively against strong opposition. Combat unit cohesiveness is the critical factor, and today the individual replacement system is undermining stability and cohesion within combat units. Versions of the regimental system, such as Project Cohort, have been studied and experimentally implemented. The suggested changes will take considerable time and effort to implement. Lieutenant Colonel Phipps proposes that the key ingredient to success for the US Army will be soldiers who fight cohesively and that this can result from combat units organized regimentally. He urges the Army to continue its efforts toward adapting elements of the regimental system.

INTRODUCTION

The US Army is experiencing serious problems in battle readiness within combat arms units because of the high level of personnel turbulence. This undue amount of personnel movement is an ongoing problem that mitigates against effective training, unit cohesiveness, and the retention of the quality and quantity of combat arms personnel required to staff all units properly. The US Army identified a solution to the problem as one of its foremost objectives. Recently General Edward C. Meyer, the US Army Chief of Staff, indicated that the most modern equipment in the world is useless without motivated individuals drilled into cohesive units with sound leadership at all levels.[1]

The present individual replacement system requires alterations to reduce personnel turbulence. The changes suggested by various study groups are far-reaching and challenging. The intangible benefits to be gained are long-term and difficult to measure. The time is right for such changes because there will be insufficient time in war to establish the essential cohesion at the unit level required to withstand the shock of intensive warfare.

The aims of this paper are to highlight the key elements of cohesiveness, to examine the present turbulence problems confronting the US Army combat units (armor, infantry, and field artillery), and to comment on some of the proposed and approved systems currently being implemented.

THE MODERN BATTLEFIELD: THE NEED FOR COHESIVENESS

With the very nature of weaponry available on the battlefield today, combat is going to be psychologically terrifying. Troops will be subject to a shock effect hitherto unknown. They must withstand prolonged exposure to fire, and there will be many battle-stressed casualties. Our experiences in two world wars and Korea indicated that the average soldier could take a minimum of 3 weeks on the frontline without suffering stress. However, in 1973 the Israelis encountered stress casualties within 24 hours. Neuropsychiatrists believe the cause lies in the sheer lethality of the modern battlefield. Apparently, psychological stress is a function of time and intensity, whereby either prolonged exposure to mid-intensity warfare or brief exposure to high-intensity war is sufficient to produce breakdown.[2]

Commanders are going to have to inspire their soldiers to withstand such shock, to stay together, and fight effectively against heavy opposition. This inspiration comes from a relationship of mutual trust and self-confidence, of strong group loyalty, and discipline. Group loyalty and discipline occur when soldiers have worked together for long periods and have faith in the proven ability of their leaders.[3]

Stability, therefore, is crucial. Officers and men must train together as a team; they must share discomfort and danger. A stable unit is akin to a successful football team which studies the opposing team members in great detail, identifies strengths and weaknesses, develops tactics to counter opposition moves, and then defeats them.[4] Morale and esprit de corps quickly generate and the team "walks tall," proud of their work, proud of "belonging." But to build a successful team takes time. All too often soldiers witness a change of leaders resulting in a new list of priorities, shifting standards, and procedures.[5] The more an individual moves from unit to unit, the more changes he will be confronted with. This myriad of changes can do little to inspire confidence in the individual. The soldiers, the commanders, and ultimately the unit all suffer. This problem of constant moving, of personnel turbulence, affects the cohesion of combat arms in the US Army today.

THE PEOPLE PROBLEM: PERSONNEL TURBULENCE

> Leadership comes in various ways and at various levels. At the top a few, very few, men inspire loyalty and devotion by their personality, others by respect based on success. At the lower levels, regiment/battalion/company/troop, the "personal touch" is more common and is more frequent than is generally supposed.[6]

Because of the high leadership turnover at junior levels within the US combat units, the "personal touch" referred to above is hardly warm. This is the fault of the career planning system adopted throughout the US Armed Services. Consequently, career officers spend a great deal of their time performing jobs not related to their primary military occupational specialty (MOS). A variety of skills is seen as job versatility and hence promotability. In fact, it generally results in the career officer being a "Jack-of-all-trades, master of none." Such instability is unheard of in other professional armies. A regular-service German officer initially serves 6 years in the same battalion. If and when he is chosen for

company command, the soldiers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) of his battalion know him and acknowledge that he has proven himself as a leader.[7] Regular British Army officers follow the same path through their regimental system.

While this problem of officer turbulence within US combat arms units has been recognized, sadly, little has been done, or is currently proposed, to improve the situation at company level. It is accepted that platoon commanders are seldom formally stabilized and can be moved within their battalion anytime after 6 months. Lieutenant General Robert M. Shoemaker, USA, acknowledged in a 1975 Leadership Conference that company commanders do not last much longer than their juniors: "We move them on any time after a year."[8]

Equally discouraging is the rapid turnover of NCOs and enlisted men. In a recent report to Congress the Government Accounting Office indicated that some US Army units have an annual turnover rate in excess of 50 percent.[9] This results in an increased training load on unit personnel and naturally degrades unit effectiveness. Some of the figures relating to training skills are very disconcerting. Some 50 percent of NCO instructors were not sure how to assemble the M203 grenade launcher; only 39 percent of Dragon gunners and 34 percent of TOW crewmen had fired a live missile.[10] The list is long and shows that unit commanders and training supervisors are finding it hard to keep up with the training needs of the individual soldier. (This problem has been recognized, however, and a new concept is underway in an attempt to reduce the rapid turnover of enlisted men.)

The unit commander faces a shortage not only of training time but also of motivated soldiers. A tremendous amount of authority has been stripped from the commander through the guise of the efficiency of computer centralization. The personnel management philosophy inadvertently promotes individual capabilities and aspirations rather than unit-wide efficiency and combat effectiveness.[11] Soldiers today are volunteers, but they still remember the draft and its impact on the nation. National will during the Vietnam era was sharply divided. There has since been an erosion of traditional military values. Soldiers, some say, look upon the military as a job, hardly a profession and certainly not a calling.[12] Unless the military creates a better environment that gives rise to loyalty, trust, and commitment of families as well as soldiers, service people will resign midway in their careers to seek a more satisfying environment for their families.

The present individual replacement system tends to destroy the stabilty needed for a good family environment. Officers and enlisted men during their career can expect three or four "short" unaccompanied tours of 12-18 months duration if posted to Germany, Korea, or Japan. Any tour in excess of 12 months unaccompanied will not guarantee government-controlled housing for a family in the continental United States (CONUS). Thus, some families find it necessary to rent or purchase housing during these "short" tours.[13] Officers and enlisted men are sent on unaccompanied tours because of the very real expense in providing adequate housing, schooling, and medical facilities. There is also the additional problem of evacuating dependents in a threatened war situation; Congress, in fact, at one time set a ceiling on the number of dependents allowed in West Germany. Dependents who do elect to join their husbands on "short" unaccompanied tours do so entirely at their own expense. In addition to having to find accommodations locally, the dependents are often denied post exchange and medical facilities.[14]

The family environment hardly improves when they do have accompanied tours. All too often servicemen live in lonely, faceless suburbs rather than a community of individuals. Housing military families in close proximity of each other generates neighborhood interaction and creates a village environment. Overseas postings are often labeled as "Foreign Legion" posts, and no small wonder, when so little is done to improve housing deficiencies and post facilities. The increasing erosion of dependent medical care, soldiers' education, and other "promised" fringe benefits only aggravates the situation and indicates to the soldier that the US Army is not really concerned about his welfare.[15]

Problems with benefits, housing, post facilities, and the soldier's general environment are all the concern of any good commander. He has a moral obligation to look after his soldiers' personal and family needs. And yet he cannot spend too much time in barracks dealing with these problems. He must not get distracted from his primary responsibility--training his men for war. Hence, some less-dedicated commanders may view cohesion as a "nice thing to have" in garrison but hardly worth special attention when compared to the more pressing needs of maintenance and training.[16]

Other professional armies have witnessed these problems before. To resolve them takes time and a considerable amount of money. Unfortunately, the US Army must solve its turbulence problems on its present budget. Costs, particularly

for military materiel systems, will continue to inflate at a rate far faster than the national average.[17] Thus, it is unlikely that a major increase in the military budget will gain approval. The Army must adopt other measures to resolve the people problem.

THE REGIMENTAL CONCEPT AS A SOURCE OF COHESIVENESS

From time to time it has been suggested that the US Army might benefit from the adoption of some, or all, of the features of the "regimental system." Obviously, total adoption of the British, Canadian, or any other regimental system would be unwise because of the relative differences in size of armies, cultural composition, geographical distribution, and defense commitments.[18] However, many parts of the regimental system have proven to enhance cohesiveness of combat crews and stability of soldiers and their families, with the resulting increase in unit readiness and combat effectiveness. The lessons learned from other armies have not been ignored by the Department of Army, and it is attempting to reduce the present high levels of personnel turbulence within combat units.

Two important studies have been conducted, both related to a regimental concept. In 1957 the Secretary of the US Army approved in concept the Combat Arms Regimental System (CARS) study, and this resulted in the present framework of combat arms, namely the reorganization into parent regiments with varying numbers of battalions. CARS, however, never reached full implementation because the establishment of a regimental headquarters, the "home-base" concept, was too costly in terms of manpower and budgetary restraints, and too big an administrative problem for the Army.[19]

The second study, under the control of the US Army Regimental System Task Force,* is an ongoing study and recommends unit rotation and changes in the present personnel management system. Some of these recommendations have been approved, while others because of additional considerations have not.

The failure to implement all of the recommendations of the original CARS study has left the US Army with the form, but little substance, of a regimental system. The study has since been reexamined in an attempt to solve the ongoing

* US Army Regimental Task Force, Soldier Support Center, Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana.

problem of personnel turbulence. A recent paper by the British and Canadian liaison officers to the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) made a detailed study of adapting the British Commonwealth regimental system to CARS.[20] Many of their major recommendations have been commented on in US military journals, and the US Army Regimental System Task Force has continued the argument for a "home-base" concept. The TRADOC paper concluded that a regimental system could indeed be adopted by US Army's combat units, but it would require careful planning and preparation. It reiterated the importance of a regimental headquarters assigned to a permanent CONUS location, able to maintain regimental history and traditions, keep personnel records, conduct regimental recruiting, and provide welfare support to dependents left behind because of unaccompanied tours.[21]

The Regimental System Task Force pursues a form of regimental system because this system makes for more effective personnel management. Unit commanders would be able to make decisions affecting the careers of individual soldiers down to the lowest levels.

> Enlisted soldiers up to E7 grade would be selected for promotion through a regimental board, which would determine the best qualified to occupy a specific position. The requirement for a secondary MOS would be deemphasized, allowing enlisted soldiers to perfect their combat skills and remain in units for extended periods. Selection of command sergeant major and the first sergeant would be decentralized, allowing the commander greater influence on selection. By placing the authority for selection of key NCOs upon the local commander, who knows the needs of a particular unit, [it] enhances the opportunity for building effective and cohesive units.[22]

The impact of the regimental system upon the officer would not be as great as for the enlisted soldier. Junior officer management could be decentralized, thus allowing a commander the ability to select officers for company and battalion staff positions.[23] However, while emphasis must be directed toward the training and development of the junior officer as a regimental member, some adjustment is required to the present Officer Personnel Management System. This

adjustment has already started in some areas. Effective 1 December 1980, company commanders can now expect assignments of 18 months (plus or minus 6 months).[24] This is an encouraging sign; however, newly commissioned officers are still vulnerable to a unit move within a year. At a higher command level an earlier adjustment was made in 1979, giving O5 and O6 grades an assignment of 30 months (plus or minus 6 months).[25] Again, this can only lead to greater stability within a unit.

Another attractive consideration of the regimental concept is the home-basing of units at a stateside installation. In its simplest form, home-basing means that each battalion of a regiment will always return to the same post after an overseas deployment. As explained earlier, however, government-controlled housing is in short supply. Thus, to establish a home-base concept, additional family housing is needed for married servicemen. This would mean an expensive and long-term program; but since families are an integral part of the regimental personnel management system, sufficient family housing is essential to create stability and a feeling of "belonging." The British Army considers the housing of the soldier and his family so important that at any given time 95 percent of all families are housed in government quarters.[26] Both the British and Canadian Armies have proved that regimental membership, home-basing, and stability of soldiers and their families result in highly cohesive combat-ready units.

Possibly the most challenging concept produced by the Regimental System Task Force is that of rotating units rather than individuals, so that a soldier is stable within a unit for 3 years or more. One of these proposed concepts known as Concept Alpha was examined by the Army Chief of Staff, General E. C. Meyer, in February 1981. He generally accepted the feasibility of the concept.[27]

Concept Alpha indicated that it is feasible to begin a rotation system in fiscal years 1983-84 that would retain the present division-based force structure and reinforce it with a combat arms (infantry, armor, field artillery) regimental system home-based in CONUS. The concept would be expanded in the mid-1980s to include combat support and combat service support soldiers--known as Concept Charlie.[28]

General Meyer had some additional considerations to contend with. Previous experiments with unit rotation had proved unsuccessful (these were known as Gyroscope and

OVUREP). Reasons were listed as a decrease in readiness, failure to achieve cost savings, and increased turbulence among soldiers. Concept Alpha chose a battalion as the basic unit for rotation because it

> provided a relatively balanced readiness posture between CONUS and OCONUS [outside CONUS]; it already had an internal stability as opposed to integrating companies into all the battalions of a brigade; tactical doctrine and programs focus on battalion management; a battalion is the lowest level with a full staff to assist the commander with training, logistics, maintenance, and personnel management. More important than other factors was that a battalion requires stability of leadership throughout to build confidence and cohesion.[29]

While the proposed time scale of Concept Alpha was viewed as somewhat hasty, the idea has been firmly rooted. As a pilot program, some 19 units consisting of 12 infantry companies, 3 armor companies, and 4 artillery batteries have been raised with the aim of keeping soldiers within their companie for at least 3 years. The pilot program is called Project Cohort and started in the spring of 1980. Already some units have completed basic and advanced individual training (AIT). The members of these units were kept together in the same platoon and were allowed to wear their unit patches. Before NCOs complete of AIT, they are drafted into the units to bring them up to full authorization. Each Project Cohort company or battery will spend at least 1 year in CONUS. Eight units will remain stateside their entire 3 years. Seven will go to Europe for 18 months and 4 will go to Korea for 1 year.[30]

At the end of each Project Cohort unit's 3-year period, present plans call for the unit to disband and be replaced by another Project Cohort unit. However, serious consideration is being given to extending the lives of these units. The fact is that Project Cohort is the beginning of the Army's move toward keeping people together. "We are moving to a system in which unit replacement will be the norm," says the Army's Chief of Staff, General E. C. Meyer.[31]

Project Cohort is certainly a step in the right direction. But why the delay? The original CARS concept was, after all, approved some 24 years ago. There are many reasons for the delay. Diehards have argued that change for change's sake is

unwise. The arguments against a regimental concept have been ongoing for some time and are not without reason. Critics argue that such a concept would produce morale-shattering inequities in promotion, command, and assignment opportunities; that administration and financial overheads would increase substantially; that decentralization of management is risky and open to error; and that it encourages unit distinctiveness, which some Army leaders have regarded as separatist and undisciplined. Above all, opponents question whether such a system would really improve unit cohesion, esprit de corps, and combat effectiveness.[32]

These objections can be supported by facts and figures and yet one cannot deny that the regimental system does work. After all, this system is firmly entrenched in a number of armies and has been shown to work equally well in peace as in war.[33]

The time is right for a change within the US Army. It will not be an easy change and much work remains to be done. Ultimately, finance will prove to be the crucial factor. But in the absence of a larger military budget, the answer might be a reduction in the size of the US Army. After all, the German victory in 1940 over the French Army, the largest army in Western Europe at the time, should remind us that numbers alone are rarely decisive.[34]

CONCLUSION

The next major war will be a severe test of the effectiveness and sustainability of soldiers on the battlefield. Combat will be prolonged and intensive. Strong leadership, loyalty, discipline, and a high state of training will be essential in order to ensure that troops may and fight effectively against heavy opposition. These qualities are lacking at present in the US Army's combat units because of the high level of personnel turbulence. The fault lies primarily with the present individual replacement system because it destroys any stability or cohesion within combat units. Commanders are finding it hard to keep up with training needs, young officers are not given the chance to learn from experience, and enlisted men lack motivation and a stable environment.

The problems have been identified; the suggested changes, however, are far reaching and challenging. It will take several years to implement the changes fully, and there will be some opposition to them. The intangible benefits are long-term and

difficult to measure. However, the US Army has recognized that it is in danger of losing the next war if it continues to place too much reliance on management and technology rather than on its people. Soldiers need to fight cohesively in order to stand up to the stress and shock of the modern battlefield. Soldiers win wars not as individuals, but as a team.

ENDNOTES

1. GEN Edward C. Meyer, "Leadership: A Return to Basics," Military Review, July 1980, p. 4.

2. LTC Larry H. Ingraham and LTC Frederick J. Manning, "Cohesion: Who Needs It, What Is It, and How Do We Get It to Them?" Military Review, June 1981, p. 4.

3. CAPT Edward R. Maher and CAPT Peter F. Kindsvatten, "Individual Replacements: There Must Be a Better Way," Army, May 1980, p. 37.

4. COL Ian R. Cartwright, "A Winning Combination--Leadership and Teamwork," Military Review, February 1981, p. 23.

5. Maher and Kindsvatten, p. 39.

6. Brigadier (Ret.) C. N. Barclay, CBE, DSO, "Fighting Qualities," British Army Review, December 1973, p. 53.

7. Maher and Kindsvatten, p. 40.

8. LTG Robert M. Shoemaker, "Leadership Needs at Unit Level," HQ TRADOC Leadership Conference Report, Headquarters, US Army Training and Doctrine Command, July/August 1975, p. 75.

9. Government Accounting Office, Report to Congress, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, March 1981), p. 43.

10. Ibid., p. 23.

11. MAJ Paul M. Searle, "Soldier Management," Soldier Support Journal, July/August 1981, p. 13.

12. MAJ James P. Isenhower, "Cohesion--Finding the Key," Military Review, October 1981, p. 46.

13. Interview with the Human Dimension Directorate, Headquarters, US Army Training and Doctrine Command, September 1981.

14. Ibid.

15. William L. Hauser, "A Srnaller Army? Adapting to the All-Volunteer Situation," Parameters, Journal of the US War College, September 1979, p. 3.

16. Ingraham and Manning, p. 5.

17. Hauser, 1979, p. 2.

18. MAJ David A. Zacchetti, "The Regiment," Soldier Support Journal, July/August 1981, p. 5.

19. LTC P. W. Faith and LTC D. I. Ross, "Application of the Regimental System to US Army's Combat Arms," Headquarters, US Army Training and Doctrine Command, April 1980, p. 7.

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21. Ibid., pp. 40-42.

22. Searle, pp. 14-15.

23. Ibid., p. 16.

24. Interview with the Human Dimension Directorate, September 1981.

25. Ibid.

26. Zacchetti, p. 8.

27. SFC Lewis W. Wright, "A Regimental System for the US Army," Soldier Support Journal, July/August 1981, p. 10.

28. Ibid.

29. LTC Thomas R. Genotti, "Unit Rotation," Soldier Support Journal, July/August 1981, p. 19.

30. Interview with the Human Dimension Directorate, September 1981.

31. SS Linda Kozaryn, "Project Cohort, Together Wherever," Soldiers, October 1981, p. 25.

32. Faith and Ross, p. 37.

33. Ibid., p. 38.

34. Hauser, p. 2.

35. Cartwright, p. 25.

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