

# **Relooking Unit Cohesion: A Sensemaking Approach**

MAJ Geoff Van Epps

Staff Group 20D

7 Apr 08

**“[M]y first wish would be that my Military family, and the whole Army, should consider themselves as a band of brothers, willing and ready to die for each other.”**

*George Washington, writing to Henry Knox on October 21, 1798<sup>1</sup>*

When did the Army stop emphasizing the importance of unit cohesion?

As the quote from George Washington to the first Secretary of War of the United States illustrates, cohesion has been a fundamental objective for Army leaders since the founding of the institution. Yet the latest Army leadership doctrine virtually overlooks the importance of unit cohesion. This is both surprising and troubling, particularly in a time of decentralized operations by small units often spread over great distances, off on remote patrols or manning secluded combat outposts, vulnerable to being isolated and overrun. The soldiers in these units count on nothing with absolute certainty except the fellow soldiers immediately around them.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. XI, Jared Sparks, ed. (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1848), 329.

<sup>2</sup> For a harrowing account of an American patrol in Iraq in this very situation, see Jeff Emanuel’s article “The Longest Morning” from the November 2007 edition of *The American Spectator* (available online at [http://www.spectator.org/dsp\\_article.asp?art\\_id=12233](http://www.spectator.org/dsp_article.asp?art_id=12233)).

Unit cohesion is an important consideration in the best of times. In the worst of times—for a unit encircled, low on supplies, out of communication, beset by foul weather, and facing overwhelming odds—cohesion may be the one thing that enables it to hang on and survive until it can breakout or be relieved. The “guarantees” offered by persistent intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), modern communications, and other technologies make it tempting to dismiss as impossible the eventuality of American units being cut off and destroyed. But we ignore this threat, however unlikely, at our own peril, particularly in light of the grave strategic consequences that would accompany such a disaster.

The 2006 *Army Leadership* field manual represents an improvement over its predecessor, particularly in its embrace of the ambiguity and uncertainty that characterize the environment in which the contemporary Army operates. Unfortunately, it also reflects a slow erosion of emphasis on the significance of unit cohesion in US Army doctrine. The previous edition of *Army Leadership*, published in 1999, dedicated a total of six pages to discussing team building and unit cohesion at both the direct and organizational levels of leadership. By contrast, the latest edition allows only four short paragraphs to such an important topic.<sup>3</sup>

Worse still, the current edition conflates teamwork and cohesion by addressing both in the same section of the manual without defining either term or differentiating between the two, a trend that was underway in the 1999 edition and reached completion in the latest version. Yet the two concepts, while closely related, are clearly distinct. Teamwork is the collaboration or coordinated effort of a group of soldiers toward common goals or objectives. Cohesion, on the

---

<sup>3</sup> The bulk of the coverage in the 1999 edition is in paragraphs 5-102 to 5-119 and 6-132 to 6-139. In the 2006 version, the discussion is contained to paragraphs 8-23 to 8-26.

other hand, is more abstract and more basic. To use a classic definition, cohesion is the bonding together of members of a unit or organization in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, their unit, and the mission<sup>4</sup>. It is, in essence, the ephemeral glue that binds an organization together and enables it to function as single unified, integrated unit. Cohesion allows teamwork to occur when the going gets tough.

The seeming unimportance of cohesion in the latest *Army Leadership* manual is perhaps best seen in the understatement, “To operate effectively, teams, units, and organizations need to work together for common Army Values and task and mission objectives.”<sup>5</sup> The Army deserves a better explanation and a deeper understanding of such a vital concept. The remainder of this paper will address steps that can be taken toward that end. The next section will briefly outline the modern evolution of the US Army’s interest in cohesion. The following section will introduce the more recent ideas of Karl Weick, whose research into the connection between sensemaking and cohesion merit attention and may provide a way of discussing cohesion that is more appropriate in today’s complex and uncertain environments. Finally, the last section will apply Weick’s ideas to test their usefulness in explaining the differing fates of units cut off by the Chinese near Chosin Reservoir in North Korea in late 1950.

---

<sup>4</sup> Defense Management Study Group on Military Cohesion, *Cohesion in the US Military*. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1984), ix. For an overview of the various definitions available and the ongoing debates in the literature (horizontal vs. vertical cohesion, social vs. task cohesion), see Robert McCoun, “What is Known about Unit Cohesion and Military Performance,” in *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: Options and Assessment*, National Defense Research Institute (Santa Monica: RAND, 1993), 283-331.

<sup>5</sup> Department of the Army, *Field Manual 6-22, Army Leadership: Competent, Confident and Agile* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), page 8-6.

## The Rise and Decline of Interest in Cohesion

Until early in the last century, conventional wisdom held that panic precipitated the disintegration of military units. In the 1920s, Sigmund Freud turned that notion on its head in his studies of group psychology. He argued that it is the loss of cohesion that incites panic so that “none of the orders given by superiors are any longer listened to, and that each individual is only solicitous on his own account, and without any consideration for the rest. The mutual ties have ceased to exist, and a gigantic and senseless fear is set free.”<sup>6</sup> Although novel at the time, Freud’s contribution has long since become part of the Army’s collective wisdom—when cohesion breaks down, panic sets in and each soldier is left to fend for himself.

Studies of combat units in World War II reinforced this perspective. In his classic *Men Against Fire*, S.L.A. Marshall declared, “I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapon is the near presence or the presumed presence of a comrade... He would rather be unarmed and with comrades around him than altogether alone, though possessing the most perfect, quick-firing weapon.”<sup>7</sup> A more scientific investigation of the attitudes of combat soldiers in the European Theater, Samuel Stouffer’s *The American Soldier*, found a strong link between the loyalty soldiers felt toward one another and their level of confidence in their comrades’ abilities under combat conditions.<sup>8</sup>

Consistent with this point of view, leaders from the interwar period onward trained their units to, among other things, build confidence and cohesion among the members of the unit.

---

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (New York: Norton 1959), 28.

<sup>7</sup> S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire* (New York: William Morrow, 1942), 42-43

<sup>8</sup> Stouffer, Samuel, et al, *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II: The American Soldier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).

This paradigm was reinforced in the 1970s and particularly during the Vietnam War, when the individual replacement system was seen as disrupting cohesion and causing a decline in unit performance. The Army responded in 1981 by instituting a unit manning system, whose key feature was COHORT (Cohesion, Operational Readiness, and Training) units that formed and trained together for three-year cycles. Although noncommissioned officers and officers were not stabilized along with the rest of the unit, the idea of combat units based around a cohesive nucleus of soldiers was promising. However, by 1990 the Army deemed the COHORT experiment a failure and returned to individual manning.<sup>9</sup> Cohesion remained important, but the attempt to institutionalize its development fell out of vogue. The conclusion from US Army War College Study was that “cohesion among soldiers remains primarily the by-product of good leadership combined with important, fulfilling work.”<sup>10</sup>

Around the same time that the COHORT system was falling short of expectations in terms of performance and the building of unit cohesion, the idea of sensemaking began to emerge in academic literature as a complement to discussions of design and structure of organizations.

### **Weick’s Sensemaking and the Collapse of Organizations**

Sociologist Karl Weick was one of the first to apply sensemaking to organizations operating in complex or ambiguous environments. Weick argued that the ability to construct a coherent and shared explanation for events and circumstances enables organizations to continue to function during instances of great uncertainty. “The basic idea of sensemaking” he wrote, “is

---

<sup>9</sup> McCoun, “What is Known about Unit Cohesion and Military Performance,” 300-301.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth C. Scull, “Cohesion: What We Learned from COHORT.” US Army War College Study Project (2 April 1990), 24.

that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs...people try to make things rationally accountable to themselves and others.”<sup>11</sup> More simply put, people and organizations use shared mental models to deal with situations of disorderliness and ambiguity.<sup>12</sup> Weick explored this idea in order to determine what held organizations together and, conversely, what caused them to unravel during crises. His conclusion was that “[w]hat holds organization in place may be more tenuous than we realize.”<sup>13</sup>

Weick identified an unexpected vulnerability of organizations in their susceptibility to the collapse of sensemaking that may accompany events that are fundamentally unexpected or incomprehensible. The low probability of such an even occurring causes the organization and its members to be caught by surprise and shatters their individual and collective understanding of the situation. If the organization lacks the means to quickly recreate that shared reality or to adopt a new mental model to make sense of the chaos that surrounds them, they will cease to function as a unified team. The organization’s structure serves a foundation to facilitate sensemaking because it provides role systems and interlocking routines that tie the people into a team and keep them functioning while the shared situational understanding is being rebuilt. Thus, sensemaking and structure are interrelated qualities that enable cohesion and allow an organization to remain functional in the face of chaos.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Karl E. Weick, “The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, no 38 (1993): 635. Sensemaking has emerged in some literature on military leadership, primarily in the context of situational understanding and the commander’s visualization process as part of battle command.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher R. Paparone, “Strategies Gone Wild? Implications for Resourcing the Force in the Midst of Complexity,” *Defense AT&L* (November-December 2006): 37.

<sup>13</sup> Weick, “The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster,” 638.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 633-634.

Weick applied this concept to analyze the deaths of thirteen smokejumpers fighting a fire in Mann Gulch, Montana, on August 5, 1949—a story that bears striking similarities to a disastrous military patrol by a platoon or squad. To summarize the tragic chain of events, fifteen smokejumpers, led by foreman “Wag” Dodge, parachuted onto the south side of Mann Gulch to meet a forest ranger who had been fighting the fire alone for about four hours. They had been told to expect a “ten o’clock fire”—one they could surround and completely isolate by 1000 the next morning. Upon collecting the supplies they had parachuted in with, they discovered that their radio equipment had been destroyed in the landing. After eating a brief dinner, the crew marched along the hillside toward the river, when Dodge noticed that the fire had crossed the river and was moving uphill toward them. Dodge turned the crew around and headed them up the hill toward the ridge at the top. Calculating that the fast-moving fire would catch the smokejumpers before they reached the safety of the ridgeline, Dodge ordered the crew to drop their tools, lit a small fire in front of the group, and ordered them all to lie down in the area that he had just burned. No one obeyed. The entire crew ran for the ridge. Two smokejumpers made it to the top unharmed. One more made it to the top badly burned and died the next day. Dodge survived by lying in the area burned by his escape fire. The other twelve members of the crew were overcome by the flames and perished between Dodge’s escape fire and the ridgeline.<sup>15</sup>

Weick’s analysis attributes the disaster to the twin collapses of sensemaking and structure in the smokejumper crew. First, he argues, the team experienced what he labels a “cosmology episode” when they were told to expect a “ten o’clock fire” and ended up fleeing for their lives. Although the term is ungainly, it is important to understand because it signals the death knell of the organization. Weick explains:

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 628-629.

A cosmology episode occurs when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together.

Stated more informally, a cosmology episode feels like *vu jàdé*—the opposite of *déjà vu*: I've never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me.<sup>16</sup>

The smokejumpers never understood the threat posed by the fire until it was too late. Events began to challenge their shared understanding of “ten o’clock fire” that they thought they faced, like Dodge turning them upslope as the fire jumped the river. The minor blaze that they anticipated had become a threat. Their cohesiveness began to disintegrate. When Dodge ordered them to drop their tools, they lost their identity as an organization. What good is a firefighting crew with no equipment? Are they even firefighters anymore? Finally, when Dodge lit a fire in the middle of the only apparent escape route, their collective ability to understand the situation or respond to it as an organization disappeared. Lighting escape fires was an unknown technique at that time, and Dodge’s action were inconsistent with their grasp of the situation. The crew had ceased to exist. It was every man for himself.

Weick’s final analysis shows how the simultaneous collapses of structure and sensemaking led to disintegration of cohesion and, ultimately, disaster:

[The Mann Gulch fire crew] faced the...feeling that their old labels were no longer working. They were outstripping their past experience and were not sure either what was up or who they were.

As the ties weakened, the sense of danger increased, and the means to cope became more primitive. The world rapidly shifted from cosmos to chaos as it became emptied of order and rationality...

As their group disintegrated, the smokejumpers became more frightened, stopped thinking sooner, pulled apart even more, and in doing

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 633-634.

so, lost a leader-follower relationship as well as access to the novel ideas of other people who are a lot like them. As these relationships disappeared, individuals reverted to primitive tendencies of flight.<sup>17</sup>

Five days later, the efforts of 450 firefighters finally brought the Mann Gulch fire under control. Although the Forest Service had classified it as a Class C Fire, signifying an extent of between 10 and 99 acres, at the time the crew parachuted in to fight it, it was clearly not been a “ten o’clock fire.”<sup>18</sup> Deprived of external communications when their radio was destroyed during the jump, the smokejumpers could only rely on the information they had been given before the mission to construct their understanding of the mission and danger they faced. The next section of this paper will briefly examine two military units faced with conditions similar to those at Mann Gulch, and how their abilities to maintain sensemaking and structure led to vastly different outcomes.

### **Sensemaking and Structure at Chosin Reservoir**

In late fall of 1950, the American X Corps had faced relatively light resistance in a rapid advance through North Korea toward the Chinese border on the Yalu River. Despite the blistering winter weather and terribly restrictive terrain, the Corps Commander Ned Almond

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 636-638.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 629.

ordered a new offensive to begin on November 27. This “ill-advised and unfortunate operation” was predicated on the assumption of continued light opposition in the Corps zone.<sup>19</sup>

To the west of Chosin Reservoir, the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division’s three reinforced regiments inched their way up the one road of any significance, pausing to consolidate after each successive move. Following hours of painfully slow progress, the division halted on the night of November 27th with the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiments arrayed around the town of Yudam-ni and the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment securing key terrain on the main supply route in the division’s rear.<sup>20</sup>

On the eastern shore of the reservoir, the 31<sup>st</sup> Regimental Combat Team (RCT) was the lead unit of the Army’s 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The unit spent December 31 arriving at their attack position along the main route east of the reservoir and waiting for the arrival of their third infantry battalion, which had lagged behind due to transportation delays. The regimental commander, Colonel Allan MacLean, confirmed that the regiment would attack to the north the following morning with whatever forces he had at his disposal. Consequently, the regiment did not prepare mutually supporting defensive positions or establish landline communication between units. Ominously, MacLean dispatched the regimental Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I&R) Platoon to scout the route ahead and it disappeared, never to be heard from again.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, as night fell, both the Marines and the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT hunkered down, intending attack north the following morning. Signs of an impending Chinese assault were there, but the Americans largely misread them. That night, November 27, three Chinese divisions attacked the

---

<sup>19</sup> Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950-1953* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 456.

<sup>20</sup> T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 2000), 239-243.

<sup>21</sup> Blair, *The Forgotten War*, 458-459.

1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division west of Chosin, while the 80<sup>th</sup> Chinese Division hit the 31<sup>st</sup> Regimental Combat Team on the reservoir's eastern shore. On both sides, the Chinese achieved nearly complete surprise, swarming out of the hills, overrunning outposts, penetrating unit perimeters and wreaking havoc. In desperate, often hand-to-hand fighting, the fought off the Chinese attacks. With the break of day, the Chinese melted back into the hills and the US units were left to tend to their casualties and figure out what to do next.<sup>22</sup>

Later in the morning of 28 November, Lieutenant General Almond flew forward to assess the situation for himself. Here the fates of the two units—the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division and the Army's 31<sup>st</sup> Regimental Combat Team—begin to diverge. Almond conferred with the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, Major General O.P. Smith, who informed Almond that based on the previous night's intense action, he had cancelled the division attack northward. His regiments were intact, but isolated and in jeopardy. He intended to order the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Marines to constrict their perimeters and hold their positions while launching an attack to the south to regain contact with the remainder of the division along the main supply route.<sup>23</sup>

Almond then flew to visit Colonel MacLean and the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT. MacLean had spent the night fighting alongside his lead battalion, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 32d Infantry, who had suffered about 100 casualties but who he still judged to be in "pretty good shape." He had no word on the fate of his second infantry unit, 3d Battalion, 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry, which had also been hit hard the previous night. There was no news about when his third infantry battalion, still in transit, might arrive. And he was unaware that Chinese action had blocked his regimental tank company from joining

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 462.

the regiment's main body. Nonetheless, MacLean was "reasonably optimistic" about the situation and did not object when Almond told him, "The enemy who is delaying you for the moment is nothing more than the remnants of Chinese divisions fleeing north. We're still attacking and we're going all the way to the Yalu. Don't let a bunch of Chinese laundrymen stop you."<sup>24</sup>

At nightfall on November 28, the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division and 31<sup>st</sup> Regimental Combat Team held very different views of the tactical situation. The Marines had cancelled offensive operations and were focused on consolidating their positions on defensible terrain while reopening their lines of communication. The 31<sup>st</sup> RCT's orders were to attack northward upon the arrival of its third infantry battalion, still expected at any moment.

During the night of November 28-29, the Chinese attacked again and the results were the same—high casualties on both sides during desperate fighting. Still the Americans held. Colonel MacLean of the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT came to the decision that the regiment needed to consolidate temporarily into a single perimeter until his last infantry battalion and his tanks arrived and he could resume the attack. Thus, early on the morning of 29 November, MacLean ordered the "temporary withdrawal" of 1-32 Infantry, his lead battalion, into the perimeter with 3-31 Infantry and other regimental units. The soldiers would not abandon or destroy their equipment; they were ordered to remove critical parts and carry those parts with them so that they could repair the equipment for use in the attack the following day.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 463-464.

The withdrawal of 1-32 Infantry into the 3-31 Infantry perimeter happened, but not without difficulty. 1-32 Infantry fought its way south only to find the 3-31 Infantry situation just as precarious as their own position had been. Tragically, MacLean misidentified a column of approaching troops and allowed the Chinese to take him prisoner. The senior battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Don Faith of 1-32 Infantry, assumed command of the 31<sup>st</sup> Regimental Combat Team.<sup>26</sup> Faith waited for help from his division or corps to arrive, but there was none to give. On November 30, the Assistant Division Commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division flew into Faith's perimeter to tell him that the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT was on its own. The regiment would have to fight their way back to safety.

By the morning of December 1, the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT had survived four consecutive nights of brutal attacks by the Chinese. Its ranks were decimated. Several of the regiment's companies had ceased to exist. Others had no officers left alive. Supplies and ammunition were critically low. Fatigue and the vicious cold had pushed its soldiers to the limits of human endurance. Faith judged that his men would not withstand another night of Chinese attacks. He ordered a breakout attempt to begin at noon. Soldiers would destroy all equipment that could not move. The remaining vehicles would carry the hundreds of seriously wounded. Every soldier who could walk—wounded or not—would fight dismounted.

The 31<sup>st</sup> RCT got underway around noon. Within minutes, a Marine pilot providing close air support dropped a canister of napalm short, killing several American troops. Things got worse from there. The RCT had to run a gauntlet of roadblocks and blown bridges under withering enemy fire. Vehicles stopped running. Drivers were killed behind the wheels of their

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 506-507.

trucks. A Chinese grenade mortally wounded Faith, leaving no clear commander of the unit. The dismounted rear guard began to overtake the trail vehicles of the column, leaving them vulnerable to the pursuing Chinese. The unit began to disintegrate as soldiers set out on their own across the frozen ice of the reservoir or into the high ground along the roadway. Ultimately, the formation lost momentum and ground to a halt. Those who could still move under their own power headed south toward friendly lines as individuals or in small groups, hoping to avoid the Chinese who stood in their way. Those who could not move were left for dead. The 31<sup>st</sup> Regimental Combat Team had ceased to exist.<sup>27</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division had its own share of problems. The limited attacks to restore contact between the division's scattered elements had failed. Nightly Chinese attacks had decimated the ranks. On the morning of December 1, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiments began their own breakout attempt, attacking southward from their consolidated position toward the remainder of the division. They came out as intact units in tactical formations. The Marines brought their jeeps, trucks, trailers, and guns with them. Almost 600 wounded were piled in trucks or strapped across the hoods of jeeps, just as in the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT. The vehicles kept to the road out of need, but the infantrymen repeatedly maneuvered to seize the key terrain necessary to secure the force. It took three days of exhausting, bloody fighting, but the Marines managed to sweep aside countless ambushes and roadblocks to reach friendly lines at Hagaru. The 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division was intact and had maintained enough combat power to resume its attack to the south three days later, after evacuating thousands of casualties.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Roy E. Appleman, *East of Chosin: Entrapment and Breakout in Korea, 1950* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 195-277.

<sup>28</sup> Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War*, 246-248.

Why were the fates of these two units so vastly different? They faced similar tactical circumstances in terms of force ratios, terrain, weather and resources available. Both the Marines and the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT enjoyed advantages over the Chinese in automatic weapons, heavy mortars, artillery, and close air support. And both were completely cut off and faced an untenable situation that compelled them to attempt a breakout in order to preserve their forces. Traditional explanations do not adequately answer why the Marines survived as a fighting force and the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT was defeated in detail.

One interpretation emerges from applying the ideas on sensemaking and structure that emerged earlier in this paper. According to this view, the Marines were able to keep their structure and sensemaking ability intact and thereby maintain the cohesiveness of their units throughout their ordeal. On the other hand, the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT suffered a twin collapse of both structure and sensemaking, causing the unit to disintegrate into a rabble of small groups and individuals. Evidence from members of both units supports this perspective.

Within the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, there was skepticism from the outset toward the claims that the X Corps attack to the Yalu River would face nothing but light resistance. One account describes how “[t]he Marines, from O.P. Smith on down, were exceedingly reluctant to proceed with the offensive” and how the Marine attack that began on November 27 was “unenthusiastic.”<sup>29</sup> The caution that accompanied this skepticism meant that the Marines were better prepared both tactically and mentally for the Chinese onslaught on the night of November 27. Smith, the division commander, immediately cancelled the scheduled attack, signaling abruptly to his entire division that the situation had changed drastically.

---

<sup>29</sup> Blair, *The Forgotten War*, 457-458.

Smith and his division leadership intuitively began to refine the collective understanding of the situation they faced, a key part of sensemaking. Lieutenant Colonel Ray Murray, the commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, said of his surprise at the heavy Chinese attack, “I personally felt in a state of shock...My first fight was within myself. I had to rebuild that emptiness of spirit,” an apt description of the process of finding a mental model to explain the surprise that had befallen him.<sup>30</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Marines tightened their perimeters and began to try and restore contact with the remainder of the division. When they could not, it became clear that they would have to break out.

Major General Smith explains how he attempted to communicate his new understanding of the situation not only down to his division through tactical orders, but up the chain of command to X Corps: “For two days we received no orders from X Corps to withdraw from Yudam-ni. Apparently, they were stunned, just couldn’t believe the Chinese had attacked in force.”<sup>31</sup> The Marines had quickly and effectively made sense of the situation even though their higher headquarters continued to operate off of a broken paradigm. The Marines ability to quickly grasp the new conditions they faced allowed them to develop a plan that suited the situation and kept the structure of the organization intact. They would consolidate their available forces, keep all of their vehicles and equipment functioning, employ their units in the sort of tactical maneuver for which they were designed, and fight for survival. The 31<sup>st</sup> Regimental Combat Team would not achieve similar success in grappling with the changing conditions.

---

<sup>30</sup> Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War*, 246.

<sup>31</sup> Donald Knox, *The Korean War: Pusan to Chosin, An Oral History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985), 528.

The 31<sup>st</sup> RCT moved into their positions on the eastern edge of Chosin Reservoir with none of the healthy skepticism of their Marine comrades. In a clear misreading of the tactical picture, Lieutenant Colonel Faith told his division commander on November 26 that his battalion could attack north by itself the following day if the division could loan him a platoon of four tanks. Even when the entire regimental I&R platoon vanished without a trace on November 27, Faith and his regimental commander, Colonel MacLean, showed no indication that they understood the danger they faced. And on November 28<sup>th</sup>, after suffering heavy casualties the night before, MacLean agreed to the corps commander's order that the regiment would begin its attack the next morning. It took a second night of savage fighting against the Chinese on 28 November to convince MacLean to withdraw 1-32 Infantry in order to consolidate the entire regiment at one location, and even then he showed a poor understanding of the situation by ordering the disabling of equipment (rather than destruction) as part of his "temporary" withdrawal plan. Conditions were changing faster than the unit's ability to make sense of the situation. Then the unit's structure began to unravel as well, leading the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT into one of Weick's classic cosmology episodes.

Leaders had begun to fall during the Chinese attacks—a handful of company commanders and platoon leaders killed the first night, along with two battalion commanders wounded. Still more officers were killed or wounded during the subsequent fighting, and then MacLean himself was captured by the Chinese. Faith consolidated the RCT into one perimeter, but didn't retract the order to be prepared to transition to the attack. That made little sense to soldiers who had spent three nights fighting for their lives against overwhelming numbers of

attacking Chinese. Still more officers and noncommissioned officers were killed through the fourth night of fighting.

Suddenly, on December 1 the same soldiers who had been repeatedly told that they were going to resume the attack at any moment were told that the situation was hopeless and a breakout was necessary. They had already left much vital equipment behind when the regiment consolidated days earlier. The order to breakout was incongruent with what they had been told earlier, but discipline and survival instincts allowed them to initiate the attempt. As the breakout convoy lurched forward, more leaders fell. Captains commanded the remnants of battalion, then lieutenants. The Marine aircraft accidentally dropped napalm on the convoy. The repeated delays to clear roadblocks and bypass downed bridges made the operation look more like a traffic jam than a breakout attempt.

Then Lieutenant Colonel Faith was killed. There was no one left to explain the plan to the unit; there was no internal communications left by that point anyway. Nor was there any longer a reason to suppress the instinct to flee. As one historian described the unit's cohesion at this point, "Virtually all the officers who tried to get the rank-and-file to follow them...commented on the reluctance, the surly unwillingness of the men to do so, and many men who were forced to act soon deserted the effort...The men were no longer normal soldiers. They were worn out; they no longer cared. All they had left was individual instinct for survival."<sup>32</sup> In the words of a survivor from the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT, "The chain of command disappeared. It was every man for himself."<sup>33</sup> The unit had abandoned much of its equipment. It had lost its identity as a

---

<sup>32</sup> Appleman, *East of Chosin*, 316.

<sup>33</sup> Blair, *The Forgotten War*, 518.

fighting force. Its chain of command was gone, and so was the cohesion that had held it together to that point. Like the smokejumper crew at Mann Gulch, the 31<sup>st</sup> RCT had fallen victim to the collapse of sensemaking and structure.

### **Conclusion**

The conduct of warfare has changed substantially since the savage battles near Chosin Reservoir in 1950. Technological, informational and organizational innovations have offered our armed forces new means of waging war against our nation's enemies. Yet some things about warfare remain immutable, particularly its human dimension. While we have been fortunate in recent years not to have experienced a disaster on the scale of Chosin, the demands of the modern battlefield compel the Army to regularly place small units in remote locations where they are vulnerable to the same sort of isolation, danger, complexity and ambiguity that the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division and the 31<sup>st</sup> Regimental Combat Team faced in late 1950. When the technology fails or the enemy surprises us, it will be the human factor—particularly the cohesion that binds that unit together—that may spell that unit's survival or destruction.

Understanding and fostering unit cohesion remains vitally important in today's operating environment, and Army doctrine must reflect that importance. Traditional views on unit cohesion should be updated for today's Army, not cast aside as useless or antiquated. New views, such as Weick's thoughts on sensemaking and structure, should be incorporated to flesh out the topic and restore the Army's traditional emphasis on such a critical subject.

## References

- Appleman, Roy E. *East of Chosin: Entrapment and Breakout in Korea, 1950*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987.
- Blair, Clay. *The Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950-1953*. New York: Doubleday, 1987.
- Defense Management Study Group on Military Cohesion. *Cohesion in the US Military*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1984.
- Department of the Army. *Field Manual 22-100, Army Leadership: Be, Know, Do*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1999.
- Department of the Army. *Field Manual 6-22. Army Leadership: Competent, Confident and Agile*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006.
- Fehrenbach, T.R. *This Kind of War*. Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2000.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. New York: Norton, 1959.
- Knox, Donald. *The Korean War: Pusan to Chosin, An Oral History*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985.
- Marshall, S.L.A. *Men Against Fire*. New York: William Morrow, 1942.
- McCoun, Robert. "What is Known about Unit Cohesion and Military Performance." In *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: Options and Assessment*, National Defense Research Institute, 283-331. Santa Monica: RAND, 1993.  
<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~maccoun/GMILch10.pdf>.
- Paparone, Christopher R. "Strategies Gone Wild? Implications for Resourcing the Force in the Midst of Complexity." *Defense AT&L* (November-December 2006): 36-38.
- Scull, Kenneth C. "Cohesion: What We Learned from COHORT." US Army War College Study Project. 2 April 1990. <http://stinet.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA223529&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>.
- Stouffer, Samuel, et al. *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II: The American Soldier*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949.
- Washington, George. *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. XI. Jared Sparks, ed. New York, Harper and Brothers, 1848.
- Weick, Karl E. "The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38 (1993): 628-652.