

Confronting the Tiger: Small Unit Cohesion in Battle

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BEFORE WORLD WAR II, observers thought technology would dominate warfare with little emphasis on the human element. They reasoned that the new, deadly machinery developed during World War I and the interwar years would win the battles and end the war—soldiers would be needed merely to mop up.¹ This mentality left US soldiers unprepared for direct combat, and they suffered accordingly. The US Army was harshly reminded of technology's limits; ultimately combat involves closing with the enemy. For those gruesome tasks, soldiers must have the will to fight. Early in the 21st century, the Army again seeks to leverage technology, knowing that ultimately soldiers will have to carry the fight to the enemy. To assess the Army's readiness for combat, this article examines two questions: What provides the will to fight? Does current Army training forge and sustain soldiers' will to fight, especially in prolonged combat?

Author Paul Fussell describes three stages soldiers transition through that affect how they behave in combat:

Stage One, "It can't happen to me," occurs most often among new troops first experiencing combat. For them combat is an adventure. They feel invincible and believe things such as their youth and training will not only keep them alive but prevent them from being injured.

Stage Two, "It can happen to me," takes over as soldiers gain confidence through combat experience and see more of what battle actually is and what can happen. Soldiers believe that even though they can be injured or killed, it is a remote possibility because experience, training and luck will keep them out of harm's way.

Stage Three, "It will happen to me," settles in when soldiers realize that death or injury eventually finds everyone. A feeling of inevitability overtakes soldiers as they see more and more of their comrades die despite youth, training, experience and perceived luck.²

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Recent US battles have all been short. Accordingly, many soldiers never moved beyond the "it can't happen to me" stage, and the Army has tended to ignore many behaviors associated with prolonged combat and concentrate on the first stage in which soldiers have the illusion of immortality. However, lessons on why soldiers fight drawn from recent experiences may not necessarily be the ones we need for prolonged combat.

Why Soldiers Fight

Different things motivate different individuals to fight. However, researchers generally believe that five factors kindle and sustain a fighting spirit: group cohesion, unit allegiance and pride, ideology and patriotism, lack of alternatives, self-preservation and leadership. However, all these motivating factors tend to deteriorate after prolonged exposure to combat except one: small unit cohesion.³

The strongest motivation for enduring combat, especially for US soldiers, is the bond formed among members of a squad or platoon. This cohesion is the single most important sustaining and motivating force for combat soldiers.⁴ Simply put, soldiers fight because of the other members of their small unit. Most soldiers value honor and reputation more than their lives because life among comrades whom a soldier has failed seems lonely and worthless.⁵ Although cases of strong company-level cohesion exist, research has shown that in combat, as soldiers draw closer to the squad, they identify

with the company less.⁶ Higher headquarters become even more abstract as soldiers concern themselves with their personal survival in their small world of combat.

Small-unit cohesion provides shelter from battlefield horrors and enables soldiers to persevere in

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combat. The group provides soldiers with security, the belief that the threat can be overcome, a coping mechanism to deal with the trauma of death and killing and a sense that their contribution has meaning. Psychiatric casualties have been highest among men who did not form close relationships with other members of their small unit. Soldiers' sense of obligation to comrades and their desire to obtain and retain respect allows them to endure what otherwise would be unbearable.⁷ It provides a powerful motivation to fight, the ability to overcome fear and the motivation to carry on.

During World War II, this strong bond caused wounded soldiers to go absent without leave from the hospital or replacement center and return to their squads rather than chance assignment elsewhere. As a US Marine sergeant during World War II, William Manchester was hospitalized in Okinawa when he heard his unit was about to make an amphibious landing. Manchester left the safe confines of the hospital to join his unit for the assault. He did not do it for the Marine Corps or personal glory; he did it because he could not let his friends down. By contrast, research shows many of the deserters in World War II were maladjusted in civilian life and could not integrate into the squad.⁹ Unable to form a cohesive bond, they were unable to cope with battlefield stress and saw desertion as the only way to adapt.

Cohesion also provides the reason to risk or sacrifice one's life. Soldiers need a compelling reason to risk their lives. Most do not risk their life for lofty ideals or a unit; they do it for the members of their cohesive group. Some pundits claim that unit pride can sustain men in battle. They believe that fostering unit pride can provide and sustain soldiers' will during prolonged combat. Units spend much time

and effort trying to foster organizational pride, in the belief that a proud unit history will provide their men the will to fight. Using historical evidence derived mainly from British regiments, these analysts argue that regimental pride provided a motivating and sustaining force during combat. However, previous research overstated the importance of regimental tradition and underrated the loyalty men felt to individuals.¹⁰

In a stressful environment such as combat, men chose their buddies in their cohesive group first before the obligations to the organization. Although unit pride even in elite units could sustain men initially, over time their identification with the unit eroded in favor of their squad.

Many writers cite veterans' strong postwar ties with military organizations as evidence of unit pride above platoon level. However, veterans often align with a large unit for ease of identification. If the same squad or platoon were in another large unit, the veteran would identify with that new organization. It is not the large unit that provides belonging and meaning but a small number of individuals. Cultivating unit pride may be necessary in peacetime to build esprit de corps. However, in prolonged combat those affiliations will not provide the majority of soldiers the will to fight. The longer soldiers are in combat, the stronger their ties grow with members of the small unit and the weaker their stake in the higher organization's goals.¹¹

Leaders often appeal to patriotism and a transcendent cause to motivate soldiers. Although these abstractions may be useful for recruiting, they do not provide long-term motivation or the will to fight. British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery maintained that men do not advance across fire-swept ground in the conscious pursuit of ideology.¹² Most leaders want to believe that an appeal to a soldiers' patriotic duty will provide them the will to fight and sacrifice. Although it may for some soldiers, for the majority patriotism and ideology do not sustain the will to fight or provide a compelling reason to sacrifice one's life. This truth was highlighted by "A German army sergeant, captured toward the end of World War II, who laughed when his interrogators questioned him on the political opinions of his men. 'When you ask such a question,' he said, 'I realize well that you have no idea of what makes a soldier fight. The soldiers lie in their holes and are happy if they live through the next day.'"¹³

Some would argue that soldiers fight because they lack alternatives or out of a sense of self—soldiers fight because they have to and kill so they do not get killed. This notion fails to consider that without the squad, a soldier could simply choose not to participate or to participate only at a level needed to

satisfy his individual honor. A soldier has alternatives; he could always choose to hide or not to fight. Historian Richard Holmes writes that individually “the real limit of the western soldier’s resistance is the point at which he feels his individual honor has been satisfied. He will fight on until he considers that the terms of his contract have been fulfilled and he has done his bit.”¹⁴ The cohesion of the small unit limits these options, and instead “outright disobedience is a rare occurrence in combat because it obviously invites sanction. Yet in modern warfare soldiers have found ways to reduce the risks implicit in their orders without inviting retribution. That is, they may comply with the letter of their instruction but not necessarily the spirit.”¹⁵ Small-unit peer pressure compels the soldier to act because he does not want to let the other members of his group down.

Of all five factors that sustain the will to fight, one could argue that leadership has the most effect on soldiers’ will to fight. Although leaders in organizations above company level can affect soldiers’ will to fight, leaders at the small unit level have the greatest impact. Squad and platoon leaders provide the command climate that enables cohesion in a small unit. The influence of the small-unit leader can be so great that one who exhibits negative leadership or values can cause the entire small unit to adopt negative behavior as a norm.¹⁶

However, leadership alone will not sustain the will to fight in prolonged combat. Without the cohesion of the small group, leadership—no matter how charismatic—will not allow soldiers to withstand the pressures of combat. Small units with weak leaders can still become cohesive enough to sustain the will to fight and endure a prolonged war. Leadership cannot succeed without small unit cohesion. In small units, the leader becomes part of the cohesive group, and the leadership exercised in combat comes as much from the leader’s membership in his group as it does from his rank and responsibility. In 1944, a survey of soldiers from several infantry divisions indicated that only one percent of them thought leadership and discipline were most important to make them want to keep going and do well in combat.¹⁷ Without the trust generated from within the small group, a leader will eventually fail.

In the end, the soldier fights not for any cause, for America, the Army or his division. Throughout history, “soldiers have died more or less willingly, not for country or honor or religious faith or for any other abstract good but because they realize by fleeing their post and rescuing themselves they would expose their companions to grave danger. Such loyalty to the group is the essence of fighting morale.”¹⁸

A 3 AD tank disabled during the Germans’ Ardennes Offensive, Marcouray, Belgium, 7 January 1945. No matter how precarious the situation, cohesion is the keystone to courage and effectiveness in combat.



US Army

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Does the Army Prepare Soldiers to Fight?

Cohesion at the lowest level is critical in combat. When the Army has ignored unit cohesion in the past, soldiers strained to cope with battlefield stress and the results were grave.¹⁹ Although many policies and practices affect cohesion, one of the most potent and easiest to affect at the direct and organizational levels is training. Still, assuming that cohesion and the will to fight are building simply through a normal cycle of training events is a mistake. Collective activity builds teamwork, but because cohesion goes beyond that, training must be realistic, challenging and relevant. Such training bonds the small unit together in a sense of mutual accomplishment and the shared conviction that all members have overcome a tough test. Only by developing the trust and confidence in each member will the small unit develop cohesion. Furthermore,

realistic and challenging training must be sustained because small-unit cohesion is not permanent.

Training designed to challenge and build cohesion at the squad and platoon levels is not resourced at the same level as higher unit training. The Army spends a lot of time and money training battalion and higher commanders how to build teams in large

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organizations, but should they really get the emphasis? Of course that training is important, but what about time and resources to train the squads and platoons, which will be more critical on the battlefield? Check any unit's mission essential task list (METL) and you will rarely find "Build Cohesive Squads and Platoons" as a METL task. Despite its recognized importance, we do not consider it mission essential enough to add to our METL. If our training is truly battle focused, should we use the preponderance of resources to build cohesion at the small unit level?

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Since the Korean War, the Army has attempted to initiate individual soldiers to the sights, sounds and stresses of the modern battlefield.²⁰ Although this training indoctrinates the individual, the individual soldier rarely fights in isolation. The soldier enters combat as a member of a group; therefore, the group should train before combat to build group cohesion to help group members fight together more quickly.²¹

Does normal training build the cohesion that will bind a squad or platoon together and sustain it through the risks and hardships of combat? Recent combat examples prove training's effectiveness. However, since the Vietnam War, the US Army's

combat experience has been all short-term. Although these short conflicts yielded some good lessons, relying too much on that experience is dangerous. To fight and win our nation's wars, the Army must prepare for prolonged combat.

The Army needs to emphasize training that challenges small units and allows them the opportunity to develop the cohesion necessary to self sustain in combat. When the Jungle Readiness Training Center closed, many mourned the loss of a valuable training asset. But we lost more than a training asset; we lost a cohesion-building facility that challenged squads and platoons under harsh conditions. Not replacing that vacuum was even more critical. Many argue that cohesion comes as a by-product of multiechelon and collective training. But does it really? Do we really offer the squad leader and platoon leader the opportunity to train in ways that build cohesion? In many cases the answer is "no." Low-level training merely spins off the higher priority training at higher levels.

With the current fiscal realities, the Army is moving away from realistic training and toward simulations. Although simulations offer a cost-effective substitute to high-end constructive training, they cannot build the cohesion necessary for prolonged combat. Simulations, no matter how realistic, cannot replicate the harsh realistic conditions necessary to build cohesion. In addition to adding more realism into training, combat veterans consistently stated that soldiers should be given more training under live-fire conditions.²² Live-fire training is more realistic, tougher on the soldiers and better at building cohesion.

Supporters of current Army training point to the combat training centers (CTCs) as evidence of the Army's tough realistic training. However, the CTCs emphasize tactics and doctrine and not squad and platoon cohesion. If cohesion develops it is an offshoot of the higher training but not the main emphasis. The CTCs focus on brigades and battalions, not squads. Even if some small unit cohesion happens to develop, the frequency of unit attendance is not capable of sustaining it without emphasis during home-station training.

The current emphasis on higher-level training is not supported by post-combat comments. Colonel Merritt A. Edison, a US Marine Regimental Commander, stated after the Guadalcanal fighting that "if I had to train my regiment over again, I would stress small group training and training of the individual even more than we did. In your training put your time and emphasis on the squad and platoon rather than on the company, battalion and regiment."²³

During World War II the Army failed to develop rational and emotional attitudes among the troops

to motivate and sustain soldiers in combat.²⁴ The battlefield is not the sanitized, organized, rational place often portrayed in movies, described in doctrine and history books or portrayed in simulations and training.²⁵ The more realistic and challenging the training at the small-unit level, the better the chance the unit will form the cohesion and collective will to fight in prolonged combat. Many contribute the German army's success in World War II to its small-unit cohesiveness. "The links between the realism of basic training and the group cohesiveness that emerged from it were precisely what allowed the German Army to excel."²⁶ Throughout the war the German army conducted continuous realistic training whenever possible not only to sustain their units' fighting proficiency but to form the veterans and replacements into cohesive units. US Army officers are fond of quoting T.R. Fehrenbach's imperative that resolute nations must put their "young men into the mud."²⁷ However, many miss Fehrenbach's point.

Yes, it takes ground troops, but the ground troops must be mentally and physically prepared for combat, and they must be part of a cohesive unit. Fehrenbach writes that the Army of 1950 was physically untrained for combat tasks, emotionally unprepared for its stresses and "learning in the hardest school there was, that it is a soldier's lot to suffer and that his destiny may be to die. They were learning something they had not been told: that in the world are tigers."²⁸ Because the soldiers of 1950 lacked training, they did not develop mutual trust and form strong bonds. Then, when the hardships hit, soldiers suffered alone, broke and ran; without cohesion they lacked collective courage. Because the US Army was poorly trained at its basic levels, regimental commanders had to shoot tanks with bazookas.

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Although many elements affect a soldier's willingness to suffer, fight and even die—comradeship at the squad and platoon level is the most important element. No matter how good the cohesion at battalion or higher is, without cohesion at the squad level soldiers will not sustain the will to fight.

We do not need another quarterly training brief slide about the number of cohesive squads. Peacetime measurement may not guarantee wartime performance. We do need more strategic and organizational commitment to train squads and platoons—even at the expense of higher-level training events. Committing to battle-focused training means resourcing the level most essential to battlefield victory. The Army must prioritize training efforts and forego some higher-level training in favor of lower-echelon training with clear combat payoff. Unfortunately, Army experiences in recent short wars falsely suggest training trade-offs. However, when the US Army enters the next prolonged conflict, how will soldiers do when day after day they confront tigers in the world? **MR**

NOTES

1. Paul Fussell, *Wartime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4-5.
2. *Ibid.*, 282.
3. Francis Steckel, *Morale and Men* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1990), 300.
4. John C. McManus, *The Deadly Brotherhood* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998), x.
5. John Keegan and Richard Holmes, *Soldiers A History of Men In Battle* (London, England: Harmish Hamilton, 1985), 52.
6. Anthony Kelleet, *Combat Motivation* (Boston, MA: Kluwer Nijhoff Publishing, 1982), 24.
7. Richard Holmes, *Acts of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 302.
8. William Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 384.
9. John Ellis, *The Sharp End* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), 244.
10. Anthony Kelleet, *Combat Motivation*, 24.
11. *Ibid.*, 102.
12. *Ibid.*, 170.
13. John Keegan and Richard Holmes, *Soldiers A History of Men In Battle*, 44.

14. *Ibid.*, 323.
15. Anthony Kelleet, *Combat Motivation*, 146.
16. W. Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion The Human Element in Combat* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1985), 6.
17. John Ellis, *The Sharp End*, 229.
18. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 40.
19. Francis Steckel, *Morale and Men*, 110.
20. Anthony Kelleet, *Combat Motivation*, 85.
21. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors*, 44.
22. Anthony Kelleet, *Combat Motivation*, 84.
23. John Ellis, *The Sharp End*, 94.
24. Francis Steckel, *Morale and Men*, 383.
25. John C. McManus, *The Deadly Brotherhood*, 75.
26. Stephan G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 24.
27. T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War* (London, England: Brassey's, 1963), 290.
28. *Ibid.*, 84.

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