

The Darker Side of the Force

The Negative Influence of Cohesion

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Rielly, US Army

THE MY LAI MASSACRE is an emotional topic because it represents professional failure. Chronicled discussions do not cover the breadth and depth of what actually occurred in that small hamlet on 16 March 1968. Arguably, many factors contributed to the massacre; however, a rarely discussed primary cause is the importance of values in cohesion.

A popular misconception is that the unit involved at My Lai was some kind of rogue outfit operating outside the bounds of the rest of the US Army. Unfortunately, a catastrophe like this could occur in any unit if all the elements are present. Even Lieutenant General E.R. Peers who headed up the inquiry into the massacre concluded that what happened at My Lai could conceivably happen again.¹ The unit involved at My Lai, Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, was a normal unit. According to the investigation conducted after the massacre, the remarkable thing about the company was just how typical it was.

The battalion was formed during 1966 in Hawaii and trained for nine months before deploying to combat. The soldiers had been in Vietnam for about three months when the massacre took place.² The Army investigation “revealed that 87 percent of Charlie Company’s noncommissioned officers (NCOs) were high school graduates, nearly 20 percent above the Army’s norm. The figure for other ranks was 70 percent, again slightly higher than the average. In the areas of intelligence, trainability and aptitude, Charlie Company differed little from the US Army as a whole.”³ The company commander, Ernest Medina, was a former NCO who had a good record and was, as Peers recalls, “a strong, effective leader who took care of his men.”⁴ Medina was known as a disciplinarian. He was respected by his men, who agreed that he was an outstanding leader.⁵ Although Medina was a strong leader, his platoon leaders were not. The inquiry concluded that like

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many of the other platoon leaders who were young and inexperienced, they failed to take immediate, positive corrective action to correct wrongdoings.⁶ Peers further explains: “Although contributing to the tragic events of My Lai, the lack of leadership at platoon and squad levels cannot be accepted as an excuse. Every other US forces unit in South Vietnam had to make do with inexperienced junior officers and NCOs, yet they did not engage in manifestly illegal operations.”⁷

As a unit, Charlie Company won accolades and awards and was recognized as the best company in the battalion.⁸ Although some would argue the company had training deficiencies, they were no more serious than those in any unit in the division. Moreover, because the men had trained together nine months for combat, deployed to Vietnam and then participated together in combat, the company had become very cohesive.⁹ During January 1967, this best company in the battalion was selected, along with the best companies from other battalions, to form an ad hoc battalion called Task Force *Barker*.¹⁰

On the outside Charlie Company looked like a unit any captain would be proud to command. It was well-trained, disciplined and had developed through the months of cohesive training necessary to withstand the stress and horrors of combat and retain the will to fight. But something went wrong with the unit’s cohesion—the very thing we value in combat.

A soldier assigned to Charlie Company described

the situation: “When you are in an infantry company, in an isolated environment like this, the rules of that company are foremost. They are the things that really count. The laws back home do not make any difference. What people think of you does not matter. What matters is what people here and now think about what you are doing. What matters is how the people around you are going to see you. Killing a bunch of civilians in this way—babies, women, old men, people who were unarmed, helpless—was wrong. Every American would know that. And yet this company, sitting out here isolated in this one place, did not see it that way. I am sure they did not. This group of people was all that mattered. It was the whole world. What they thought was right was right. And what they thought was wrong was wrong. The definitions for things were turned around. Courage was seen as stupidity. Cowardice was cunning and wariness, and cruelty and brutality were seen sometimes as heroic. That is what it eventually turned into.”¹¹

This soldier describes the negative side of cohesion, which occurs when a cohesive unit develops values, attitudes, beliefs and norms contrary to the organization’s. This soldier’s description is enlightening for leaders. Charlie Company developed values, attitudes, beliefs and norms that conflicted with US Army and social standards. This corrupted core explains why seemingly good men could do awful things and yet not believe their actions were wrong.

When people join the military, they bring values developed throughout their lives, deep-seated preferences or judgments about worth. Milton Rokeach defines values as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence.”¹² Values form the basis for individual beliefs that determine a person’s attitude toward another person, group or thing. Values determine attitudes as well as behaviors.¹³ Most scholars recognize that values, attitudes and beliefs can be changed under the right conditions—most commonly, a significant emotional event such as combat.

During basic training, soldiers study the Army Values so they can adopt them as their own. Following basic training, soldiers are assigned to a unit where they become members of a squad or a small group. In theory, this group becomes the soldiers’ family, and they begin to bond with others and form the cohesion necessary to persevere in combat. Central to the cohesive concept is the individual’s desire to submit to group norms, the way a unit or organization does routine business.¹⁴

Group norms are based on individual attitudes and beliefs, but ultimately they are rooted in the values of the group. The values of a newly arrived individual may or may not match the group’s values. If they do not, chances are good the individual

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will adopt the group’s norms to be accepted as a member. Each squad or team in an organization will develop its own norms based on individual values, attitudes and beliefs.¹⁵ Group pressures to conform are substantial, and failure to conform results in group sanction.¹⁶ If the group members embrace Army Values, they will conform and act appropriately. However, if the group’s values are even slightly different, there is the potential for problems.

Cohesion

Cohesion is essential for an organization in combat. To withstand the horror and strain of the battlefield, a soldier must bond with other small-unit members. Research consistently shows that soldiers fight for the other members of their cohesive small unit. They fight to obtain and retain the respect of their peers, even to the point of sacrificing their lives. Failing one’s comrades is worse than risking death because it damages an individual’s personal honor and reputation. The small group provides security, purpose, a coping mechanism, reassurance and a sense of immortality. Soldiers want to be members of a cohesive group because it offers them the best chance for survival, and they will do whatever it takes to belong. When external dangers arise, the group cohesion increases primarily because the individual fears isolation.¹⁷

Cohesion forms around a sense of teamwork, but it is more than teamwork; cohesion forms a sense of community in the minds of its members.¹⁸ Anthony Kellet feels that it “denotes the feelings of belonging and solidarity that occur mostly at the primary group level and result from the sustained interaction—both formal and informal—among group members on the basis of common experience, interdependence and shared values.”¹⁹ To be truly cohesive, a small unit must have shared

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beliefs, goals, values and attitudes. William Darryl Henderson further explains that “The normative power of the cohesive group causes the strong personal commitment on the part of the soldier that he ought to conform to group expectations. The development of unit norms and values causes unit members to band together in their commitment to each other, the unit and its purpose.”²⁰

Negative Effects of Cohesion

Soldiers recognize the value of cohesion; however, they rarely look at the possibility of negative effects. Because cohesion is intangible, it is tough to assess and measure even when it is positive. As the small-unit bond becomes strong, the group members develop norms for behavior. Norms the group develops are based on attitudes and beliefs that are rooted in their values. The group’s norms do not necessarily have to align with organizational values or what would be considered acceptable behavior. In fact, Richard Holmes explains, “there is every chance that the group norms will conflict with the aims of the organization of which it forms a part.”²¹

In many cases, leaders assume that every soldier in the organization believes in and practices Army Values and that new recruits will embrace these values during basic training. Leaders also assume that because their soldiers’ values are correct, their beliefs, attitudes and small-unit norms will also be consistent with what the Army considers desirable and acceptable.

One of the tragic lessons from the My Lai massacre was that leaders assumed the soldiers carried the values of the community at large with them onto the battlefield.²² However, simply creating a cohesive group does not guarantee that members will have desirable values and norms or that they will perform as expected. John Keegan and Richard Holmes suggest that the group “may come to believe that their interests are best served by avoiding rather than seeking combat and by adopting a ‘live and let live’ policy whenever the enemy will permit it.”²³

Ideally, all soldiers entering the Army will internalize Army Values and accept them as their own. Likewise, the values, beliefs, attitudes and norms

existing in our small units should match our organization’s accepted values, beliefs, attitudes and norms. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. US soldiers have committed brutal and criminal acts. For example, during World War II, 13 percent of a sample of infantrymen from Europe observed atrocities committed by other soldiers. Some soldiers stated they found it difficult not to kill their enemies in the heat of the moment. In addition, soldiers stated not all captured Germans made it into the prisoner-of-war handling channels and some rifle companies developed reputations for taking few prisoners.²⁴ US Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership*, has a vignette about character and prisoners that ends with a soldier stating, “Hey, we’re from America: we don’t shoot our prisoners.”²⁵ Very noble but, sadly, not always true.

In the introduction to one of the finest books written on battle experience, *With the Old Breed*, World War II veteran and noted author Paul Fussell describes a conversation between a marine sergeant and Phillip Caputo during the Vietnam War. The sergeant says, “Before you leave here, sir, you are going to learn that one of the most brutal things in the world is your average nineteen-year-old American boy.”²⁶ The hard truth is that US soldiers are capable of and have participated in brutality and war crimes, and although some may argue that it is not common, the fact that it happens at all is sobering and indisputable.

Every atrocity and war crime cannot be attributed to a single individual acting alone. Many acts occur with the unit’s approval or with its unobjecting silence. Henderson further writes that the small unit’s “behavior, whether deviant or desirable from the organization’s point of view, is the result of norms formed by primary group interaction.”²⁷ Thus, some small units developed norms that condoned or turned a blind eye to cruelty and brutality.

Group cohesion can produce negative effects in three ways:

- It forms values, attitudes, beliefs and norms that are obviously contrary to the Army’s.
- The group’s values, attitudes, beliefs and norms are close to the Army’s but not exactly what the organization wants.
- The group’s values, attitudes, beliefs and norms could change after prolonged combat or a significant emotional event.

The norms that a small unit selects reflect how the unit will perform in combat and will determine what it considers right or wrong. In a crisis or highly stressful situation such as combat, soldiers will choose loyalty to their close friends over obligation to a higher organization.²⁸ If the comrades’ values



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are positive or closely aligned with Army Values, there is no issue. However, if the values of that small unit are negative or not closely aligned with Army Values, there is a problem.

Group cohesion that produces negative effects does not necessarily exhibit overtly negative behavior. Group members may exhibit some Army Values or have different definitions for their values. Based on their values, they will develop group norms that may be unacceptable. For example, a small unit may value members' survival more than mission accomplishment. Therefore, soldiers would only do what is absolutely crucial for combat survival and never go the extra mile for a greater goal. Small-unit members will only respond to what the small unit thinks is appropriate because it is the unit's collective approval they seek. Thus, if a small unit develops apathy or group preservation as a norm, it might not perform as aggressively as other units in combat. Apathetic small units may never understand what FM 22-100 terms the "warrior ethos." Keegan and Holmes write, "In Vietnam, some units generated strong loyalties, but far from promoting, say, aggressive patrol actions, such loyalties often actively discourage it; the term 'hero' becomes one of abuse."²⁹

Outright disobedience, however, rarely occurs because it obviously has penalties attached. Kellet states that "in modern warfare soldiers have found ways to reduce the risk implicit in their orders without inviting retribution. That is, they may comply with the letter of their instructions but not necessarily the spirit."³⁰ The small, cohesive group will perform until it satisfies its collective honor as established by group norms. When social approval is possible without great effort, it is little wonder that there is less than total commitment in attitude.³¹ Leaders cannot just assume that their small units will develop values, attitudes, beliefs and norms to the degree desired—it requires training.

In addition to the possibility of developing norms and values inconsistent with higher organizations, group cohesion can also prevent soldiers from reporting acts that go against their personal values. Gerald Linderman reports that during World War II, "Soldiers rarely turned in members of their own units who had killed prisoners; the claims of comradeship prevailed."³² To turn in a fellow member of your cohesive group is a tough decision for a soldier in combat. Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim point out that in the daily life-and-death struggle of combat, a soldier assumes risk by taking this action,

for it is difficult to “tell tales on men your life depends on.”³³ This is especially true if the action conflicts with the group’s values and norms. Leaders generally believe that soldiers will be more loyal to the Army and the nation than to their small-unit group members.

However, this is not a sure thing. The cohesive group is the soldier’s family. It offers many things, including security and survival. When faced with a choice, the soldier will remain loyal to the small

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group. For a soldier to turn in another member of the cohesive small group, a personal sense of morality must outweigh the small unit’s norms. On the other hand, a member of the small group may violate the group norm by performing a brutal act or committing a war crime. The group norm may not tolerate this behavior, and despite the soldier’s attachment to the other unit members, they may report him. However, if their loyalty to each other is strong enough, they will not.

Cruelty and barbarism can easily become a group norm. In *The Deadly Brotherhood*, John C. McManus recalls that during World War II, “the constant witnessing of such inhuman, degrading sights took its inevitable toll on men.”³⁴ It is a myth that Western soldiers do not display the same ruthlessness and willingness to die as their enemies. In fact, Holmes notes, “there have been times, particularly when they have been fighting a savage foe from whom no quarter could be expected that Western soldiers have displayed the same determination to fight to the bitter end.”³⁵ For example, in the Pacific Theater during World War II, dehumanizing the enemy led to atrocities and incidents of cruelty. Combat on both sides sometimes degenerated into a savage world of torture, mutilation, no surrender and taking no prisoners. E.B. Sledge served as a Marine infantryman in both Peleliu and Okinawa. He writes of a fellow Marine collecting a Japanese soldier’s hand as a souvenir and of other Marines collecting Japanese teeth.³⁶ Although outraged by the hand, Sledge and his fellow Marines did not object to collecting teeth. Collecting a hand had violated the group norm—collecting teeth had not.

Sledge explains that “This collective attitude, Marine and Japanese, resulted in savage, ferocious fighting with no holds barred. This was not the dispassionate killing seen on other fronts in other wars. This was a brutish, primitive hatred.”³⁷

Training

Leaders cannot just assume that small units will develop values, attitudes, beliefs and norms to the degree desired without training. Peers concluded, following the My Lai inquiry, that ethics and morality training was not done as well or as frequently as it should have been. When he asked other senior officers about ethics and morality training, they stated that most training time was devoted to “hands-on” training, such as vehicles, communications and weapons, and advised that little time remained to teach morality and ethics, so they were pieced in. Peers advised that ethics and morality training be given a higher priority.³⁸ This situation parallels today’s training environment in which training time is scarce and commanders prioritize other events above values or ethics training.

Values decay over time, and to keep them alive requires constant regeneration.³⁹ John W. Gardner advises that constant training to provide continuous renewal is necessary to “renew and reinterpret values that have been encrusted with hypocrisy, corroded by cynicism or simply abandoned.”⁴⁰

Small-unit cohesion can be fractured after losing key personnel. When new leaders arrive, the norms of the small unit can change either positively or negatively to reflect the new makeup. To simply train the current leaders falls short of the necessary goal. Everyone needs high-quality, sustained training. Values are like skills; they can be instilled with repeated emphasis during training.⁴¹

Training values is a difficult feat. The nation’s service academies do a great job of initially training and subsequently sustaining values in cadets. Yet, even these institutions have had problems. James Toner gives a prime example of midshipmen at the US Naval Academy “who recently cheated on an exam and subsequently covered up for one another, contending that loyalty to one’s buddies was higher than loyalty to the honor concept at Annapolis.”⁴² These cadets were taught values in an institution serious about values training, and yet they had a twisted sense of honor. This example illustrates two key points. First, even with good values training, things can go wrong, so to conduct haphazard or infrequent training courts widespread disaster. Second, group norms can deviate from what the organization considers acceptable; loyalty to the group can transcend loyalty to the organization.



Sikh troops of the British-Indian Army are bayoneted and shot with pistols after execution by Japanese soldiers in Singapore. (Inset) A woman in Phoenix, Arizona, receives a grim souvenir from her boyfriend in New Guinea.

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Leadership Makes a Difference

A leader's role is key to ensuring that the small group's values and norms are aligned with those of the Army.⁴³ Gardner suggests that “One of the tasks of leadership—at all levels—is to revitalize those shared beliefs and values and to draw on them as sources of motivation for the exertions required of the group.”⁴⁴ When leaders fail to provide the necessary example, guidance and understanding, the small unit will develop what it thinks will best align with higher headquarters' values and norms. Henderson empathizes the critical role of leaders, that the “primary group influence can militate against organizational goals unless appointed leaders become the dominant influence within the group.”⁴⁵ In some units where these needs are not met, soldiers will seek fulfillment outside the unit,

often in groups whose goals do not match the Army's.⁴⁶ Leadership is especially critical in combat, where soldiers turn to officers for leadership. If officers do not provide it, soldiers will turn to whoever will.⁴⁷ Whether the leader's values are congruent with the Army's will not matter.

Henderson observes that “Although small-group cohesion can exist independently of unit leaders, unit cohesion that accepts and reinforces Army goals and purposes as the unit's own can occur consistently when soldiers identify closely with their immediate leader.”⁴⁸ To create a cohesive, combat-capable small unit that will act in accordance with Army Values, the leader must inculcate the desirable values so soldiers adopt them as their own and develop norms from these values. Leaders cannot ignore or take this responsibility lightly. Toner explains why:

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“Good ethics must be taught by good leaders.”⁴⁹

Although both initial and sustainment training are part of the solution, just teaching is not the answer. Leaders have to set the example for values. My Lai showed that paper leadership—the rules of engagement, numerous codes of conduct and other directives all of which contained the loftiest intentions—

failed to provide the necessary example. Leaders failed to ensure that soldiers at the lowest levels understood policies and expectations. Peers found that this “created a significant void in many of the soldiers’ minds as to what was expected of them.”⁵⁰ This is a simple lesson, yet even today not everyone believes values training is important. As we sacrifice more of the human element for technology and spend more time and resources on other pursuits, we must spend the time to model, teach and enforce values. Recent events in Kosovo prove that negative cohesion can still develop in today’s units.

The investigation into the command climate of Company A, 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Division revealed some obvious problems. Among the principal problems were small-unit norms that condoned beatings, threats and groping women. Although the full report has not been made public, leaders can infer that these small units developed negative cohesion despite the ongoing emphasis on values and values training.

Leaders who dismiss the importance of values in cohesion shortchange their units. Commanders can control values training and establish priorities that will produce success and preserve honor. 

NOTES

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32. Gerald Linderman, *The World Within War* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 127-128.

33. Bilton and Sim, 83.

34. John C. McManus, *The Deadly Brotherhood* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998), 95.

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49. Toner, 103.

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Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Rielly, US Army, is a leadership instructor, Center for Army Leadership, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He received a B.A. from Norwich University and an M.A. from the US Naval War College. He is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College and the College of Naval Command and Staff. He has served in various command and staff positions, to include S3, 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, Texas; chief of inspections, III Corps Inspector General, Fort Hood; and deputy inspector general, III Corps Inspector General, Fort Hood. His article, “Confronting the Tiger: Small Unit Cohesion in Battle,” appeared in the November-December 2000 issue of Military Review.