

Unit Cohesion: A Blend of
Leadership, Motivation, Morale and Esprit de Corps

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Roster # 073

IOAC 2-86

The purpose of the following paper is to discuss the importance of leadership, motivation, morale, and esprit de corps in building a cohesive combat unit. There is no school formula for building a cohesive combat unit. The individual leader must use his own personality to blend the different factors to apply to his unit. A cohesive, well led organization, with a high level of esprit, can often defeat a superior force. Problems, such as severe weather and supply shortages, can also be overcome by a hard-fighting, dedicated unit. However, to create this type of combat force, the individual leader needs to look closely at the leadership, motivation, morale, and esprit de corps factors.

Leadership is probably the most important quality or skill for a combat leader to possess. There are many different techniques and leadership styles which are effective at influencing people. Leading by example is one of the most important and can be applied to many different situations. As a leader, you must lead by example at all times. You should participate in physical training with your men and set the standard. If you cannot run or do the required exercises, you should not be in a leadership position. Falling-out of a physical training run is a quick way to lose the respect of your subordinates, peers, and superiors. You cannot lead your men from behind. In the book, The Forgotten Soldier, Guy Sajer speaks in awe of his German Army Infantry captain who is the epitome of leading by example. Captain Fink pushed Sajer and the other trainees to their physical limit, but he earned their respect and made them good soldiers:

It seems scarcely credible that by the time we left we all nourished a certain admiration for the Herr Hauptmann. Everyone, in fact, dreamed of someday becoming an officer of the same stripe.¹

Hauptmann Fink earned the men's respect through good, tough training and leading by example.

Leading by example is vital in combat in all different sizes of units. If your men are living in harsh conditions, and sleeping on the ground, you should be doing likewise. As a leader, you should demonstrate to your men that you do not expect them to do anything that you would not do yourself. In his book, Platoon Leader, James McDonough realizes this and puts the theory into practice:

I would be risking oversupervision of the patrolling squad (whose direction was better left to the squad leader) if I went with it. I would also be away from the majority of my platoon back at the perimeter. On the other hand, I would not be sharing in the highest-risk operations of my men and therefore might lose their respect.²

McDonough compares the pros and cons of his options and decides to lead by example. General Patton was another combat leader who led by example.

When he left his command post for inspections of forward areas and to make himself visible to the combat troops, he came under fire regularly.³

General Patton knew the importance of not asking your men to do

something that you are not willing to do yourself.

Another good illustration of leading by example is that of Colonel Lawrence Chamberlain in the battle of Gettysburg. Chamberlain fought along side his men, got wounded, and still led a bayonet charge which sent the enemy reeling back down the side of Little Round Top. Chamberlain's men followed him because he had gained their trust and respect and also because they had good esprit de corps and unit cohesion.⁴

Another way to build cohesion and esprit is through motivation. Motivation is an intangible ideal that is a combination of a myriad of factors. According to FM 22-100, "A person's motivation is a combination of his desire and energy directed at achieving a goal."⁵ Motivation is closely related to morale which, according to FM 22-100, is defined as, "the mental, emotional, and spiritual state of an individual."⁶ Morale can help enhance a person's desire to accomplish a goal, which will also increase a person's morale, because he is accomplishing his goal. One builds upon the other.

Motivation can really be broken up into two parts; internal and external motivation. Internal motivation is the desire or determination you have inside that keeps you motivated even when times are tough. Not everyone possesses this internal motivation to the same degree. Professional soldiers must have it in order to do their job. This internal motivation is developed over the years as you grow up. It is based upon your values and beliefs. Patriotism and pride in yourself and your country are three factors that help build internal motivation. Why is internal motivation so important? I believe that internal motivation is

what keeps a man from quitting when things get tough. It is the difference between a leader and a follower. It is the difference between a person who is successful at accomplishing his goals, and a person who falls short. Internal motivation cannot be taught. A person has to learn what motivates himself, and wrap those factors up and keep them inside his mind. I think the quote, "I will find a way or make one," by Admiral Peary, summarizes internal motivation.⁷ A leader never quits.

Through his internal motivation, a leader starts to motivate his men. Soldiers can be motivated in many different ways. Hopefully, our soldiers will have some internal motivation, but we must also provide some external motivation factors. As leaders, it is our job to ensure that our soldiers are motivated. One of the best ways to build motivation is by giving your soldiers a mission. If a soldier believes that everything he is doing is building to prepare him to accomplish his mission, then he will be motivated and he will have high morale. One technique for accomplishing this goal is to start with individual tasks which can be built into collective tasks. These collection tasks are grouped together to accomplish a unit task or mission.

The use of rewards and punishments may also be used to motivate our soldiers. If a soldier has done an outstanding job, it is a good idea to give him some sort of recognition. Certificates, medals, and recognition in front of his peers will all help a soldier feel like he is doing a good job and that his hard work is appreciated by his leaders. Likewise, if a soldier is not performing to standard, he should be counseled. It is

important to counsel a soldier immediately if he is having problems. If he does not improve his performance, then some form of punishment may be in order. Extra training and UCMJ action are two methods you can use to help "motivate" a soldier. These will not necessarily raise his morale. Punishment is not the preferred way to motivate a soldier who is having problems.

Soldiers can tell if a leader really cares about them. A good leader looks out for the welfare of his troops. One of the ways you can show soldiers that the unit cares about them and their families, is through a good sponsorship program when a new soldier arrives at your unit. A sponsor should be assigned to a new soldier to assist in answering questions and inprocessing the new man. If the new soldier is married, the sponsor can help him get settled into housing.

A new soldier should also be counseled by his chain-of-command through company level. The purpose of these talks is to introduce the soldier to the mission of the unit and mention any significant upcoming events. This will make him feel like part of the unit more quickly.

In his article titled, "Morale: The 10th Principle of War?", Colonel Thomas B. Vaughn discusses his views on morale and its effect on a unit's ability to accomplish its mission during a war. He sees morale being built through a series of steps from individual morale all the way through the morale of the Army and the Nation. Colonel Vaughn believes that we can build upon individual morale at unit level by encouraging healthy competition between platoons and companies. This can range from sports competitions to rewarding units for performing well during

field exercises or gunnery. But Colonel Vaughn realizes that a soldier and a unit need other morale building factors. The most important of these is the national morale. Viet Nam is a classic example of a situation where the war became more and more unpopular at home and it carried over to the morale of the Army, the unit, and the soldier. As a result of this lack of support from the nation, some of the other nine Principles of War were not applied in Viet Nam and it hurt the Army in trying to accomplish its mission. Maybe, morale should be made the 10th Principle of War.⁸

Esprit de corps is "the common spirit existing in the members of a group and inspiring enthusiasm, devotion, and a strong regard for the honor of the group" according to Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary. Esprit de corps is not something that makes your soldiers perform well during an ARTEP. It is a spirit or loyalty in a unit that builds and grows as a result of a good performance during an ARTEP or other field exercise. Esprit de corps builds morale and morale builds esprit de corps. It is important that we try to build esprit de corps within our units. A strong tradition, regiment or symbol will assist us in building esprit de corps. The lack of a distinguished unit history is not an excuse for not having good esprit de corps. When soldiers really take pride in their unit, the spirit is catching. Everyone starts to work as a team and they do not want to let their friends down by failing. A trust starts to form and perpetuates itself. It is important that we not forget that we are loyal to the Army first, and our unit

second. When we start to put the interests of our individual unit above the interests of the Army, we are not doing our duty as professional leaders. The Marines have an excellent tradition where they are a Marine first and an individual in the unit second. This esprit de corps will help build unit cohesion just as good leadership, morale, and motivation will also contribute to the overall picture. This cohesion, which will stand up to the stress of combat, is what we are striving to develop as leaders.

Why do men continue to fight when things get really desperate and many men would quit or surrender? It is probably a combination of a number of factors, the most important of which is the bond between two soldiers who have shared numerous experiences together, often in life or death situations. It might be that one man is afraid to let the other down by not doing his job. The men build a trust in each other and it is a trust that could help carry them through combat alive. This trust must also be a two way exchange between the leaders and the men.

The movements troops had learned through practice were of less value than the spiritual bond between one man and another. The most valuable lesson was that of mutual support. And unless this lesson was supplemented by confidence in the judgement of those in authority, it is to be doubted that they were helped at all.⁹

Bonds formed through tough, realistic training can help carry our soldiers through hard times during war.

This camaraderie can extend to all situations when a man feels like he is in trouble and needs a motivator to keep him going.

An Air Force jet-fighter pilot who had barely finished training was called to fly from his Carolina base to Adana, Turkey, during the 1958 Lebanon crisis. With four minutes of fuel left, he barely made contact with the tanker over the Azores, then flew on. On landing, mission completed, he said: "In my worst moment, I suddenly realized that staying with my gang meant more than anything in the world."¹⁰

Friendship can help a soldier make it through the toughest of times.

The British Army is fortunate enough to be able to have great unit cohesion through their regimental system of organization. In his article, "Determination in Battle," Major General T. S. Hart refers to the defense of Calais in May 1940 by the 30th Brigade. This Brigade is comprised of two rifle battalions and a tank regiment. They were opposed by two panzer divisions and 100 Stukas. The 30th Brigade had the mission to "defend Calais and thereby assist in the withdrawal of the British Expeditionary force." The Brigade was deployed without all its ammunition and transportation. It lost its water source at Calais almost immediately. Finally, the Brigade was supposed to be withdrawn, but was then asked to "defend to the last." As it turned out, the 30th Brigade fought for four days and held the two panzer divisions. When questioned about "Why did they fight

so well?", the Adjutant for 1st Battalion, the Rifle Brigade, said, "The Regiment has always fought well, and we were with our friends."¹¹

The British Army is fortunate in that it is small enough to allow officers and enlisted men to stay with the same regiment and even the same battalion for almost their entire careers. This has been proven to be effective in building unit cohesion that will stand up to the stresses of combat.

In the book, The Forgotten Soldier, Guy Sajer's major theme relates to the factors that keep a common foot soldier motivated and fighting even under the worst conditions imaginable. Sajer gives us a real insight into what a man thinks about while under the severe mental and physical stress of combat. More importantly, he talks about what motivates him to keep fighting when many other men give up.¹²

Sajer's friends and comrades are the major reason he fought on in such trying times. The trust and friendship that is formed during training is solidified during combat. It is a friendship that cannot be matched or fully understood by those who have not experienced combat.

As leaders today, we can begin to instill this trust and friendship in our soldiers by leading by example, motivating our soldiers, boosting their morale, developing esprit de corps within our units, and ultimately, unit cohesion. It is a real leadership challenge to blend all these factors effectively. But then again, combat is not an easy challenge.

Footnotes

¹Guy Sajer, The Forgotten Soldier. (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1972), p. 204.

²James R. McDonough, Platoon Leader. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985), p. 31.

³Martin Blumenson, Patton, The Man Behind the Legend 1885-1945. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985), p. 184.

⁴Michael Shaara, The Killer Angels. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), p. 232.

⁵U. S. Army Combined Arms Center and Ft. Leavenworth, FM 22-100 Military Leadership. (Washington: Dept. of the Army, 1983), p. 217.

⁶Ibid., p. 228.

⁷Department of Defense, The Armed Forces Officer. (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office), p. 29.

⁸Thomas B. Vaughn, "Morale: The 10th Principle of War?" Military Review, May 1983, pp. 23-39.

⁹Department of Defense, The Armed Forces Officer, pp. 129-130.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 6.

¹¹T. S. Hart, "Determination in Battle," Armor, May-June 1980, pp. 33-34.

¹²Sajer, The Forgotten Soldier, pp. 1-566.

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