



WHY MEN REALLY FIGHT

HARRY F. NOYES III

I saw it again the other night. The concluding comment in a videotape on fighting power—part of an excellent British television series called “Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle”—was that men fight for each other, for their buddies, not for patriotism and unit pride.

This is a cliché that has been foisted upon us by military sociologists ever since World War II. They created it to replace the old romantic cliché that men fight for God, country, and the admiration of their womenfolk.

It's time someone challenged this new cliché. Here goes.

Such clichés are not always wrong, of course, but they are often only half truths. That was the problem with the old romantic cliché, and that is also the problem with the new sociological one.

If the sociologists had said that the old cliché was incomplete and needed to be supplemented with new observations, there would be little to quibble over. Instead, they tried to sweep all of the non-sociological motivation completely off the boards and out of the thinking of professional soldiers. In so doing, they created an equally incomplete cliché.

That is not only academically incorrect: It is downright dangerous. It is dangerous because it means teaching entire generations of soldiers and leaders only one dimension of warrior inspiration. Thus, unless the better instincts of those soldiers and leaders prevail, they may neglect important components of their own combat motivation and that of their followers.

The truth is that motivation in any walk of life—and especially in battle—is a complex alloy of values. It is possible

to isolate the components of this amalgam for purposes of analysis. But it is wrong to assume that the components can be handled separately in practice, and even more wrong to assume that only one of them matters at all.

To push the alloy analogy a little further, treating the cohesion of the soldier's primary social group (the buddy group) as the only important element in combat motivation is like trying to explain a bronze statue by Rodin by discussing only the tin it contains.

Actually trying to inspire men to battle through sociological measures alone is like trying to improve the Rodin statue by melting it down to add more tin. This approach not only ignores the copper but, even worse, ignores the fact that the statue's true value lies in its artistic shape.

So it is with soldier motivation. Such misconceptions can be disastrous. For example, the U.S. Army's much-discussed internal troubles late in the Vietnam era stemmed more from neglecting the copper (the patriotic and idealistic side of motivation) than it did from weak tin (poor buddy-group cohesion).

LACK OF BELIEF

A lack of belief in the United States' war aims, not a disregard for fellow soldiers, is what undermined the U.S. Army's fighting power at certain junctures in Vietnam. (I will not join the debate over how bad this became. The existence of the phenomenon, not its intensity, is what concerns us here. And there is little doubt that, to some significant degree, the Army's morale and the willingness of many soldiers to be led and to fight were reduced by political disaffection.)

Why? I suspect it was because the military services never made more than a perfunctory effort to tell soldiers why they were fighting such a strange war so far from home. Isn't this the price we paid for teaching a generation of professional soldiers that such things didn't matter? Vietnam should have taught us that they do matter. Yet somehow we did not learn that lesson, perhaps because we were too busy trying to figure out the other lessons of this painful war.

Despite the 12-month tour limit and the continual rotations, by all accounts, U.S. Army buddy groups were generally strong in Vietnam. The problem was that the buddy group itself sometimes undermined fighting power instead of reinforcing it. The group's very cohesion could be used to frustrate the purposes of the Army chain of command and of the nation. Instead of steeling soldiers for combat, the buddy group sometimes became a mechanism for shirking combat. Some units may have conspired to cut patrols short, issue false position reports, and the like, to deceive the higher levels of command.

This was not unique to Vietnam, of course. Even at its worst, it may not have been as bad in Vietnam as it is sometimes portrayed as being. Overall, the Army did fight effectively in Vietnam. Yet there is strong evidence that such behavior and other expressions of frustration and poor morale that stemmed from cynicism about the higher purposes of the war hurt our war effort.

Wherever and whenever such things do happen, they represent a triumph of the buddy group over the Army and the nation as a whole—a perversion that damages our country's interests. And it all stems from neglecting the patriotic-idealistic element in the motivation of American soldiers.

One of the main challenges to military leadership, therefore, is to find ways of preventing this kind of psychological disconnection between the front-line buddy group and the larger purposes of the Army and the nation. If such a disconnection occurs, then the strength and cohesion of the buddy group become irrelevant (or even counterproductive) to victory. Furthermore, the buddy group concept itself offers no solution to the threat of such a disconnection and we must look elsewhere.

There are several strands to the harness that keeps the buddy group connected to the country's reasons for fighting. There are institutional measures such as inspections and military justice procedures. These are important if only because they remind everyone of the seriousness of the issue. And they assure the conscientious soldier that skulkers will not be allowed to shift their loads onto him. But every good leader knows that when one asks men to risk their lives under fire, the fear of official action is a poor substitute for devotion. Every effective Army uses other means.

One of these is the development of pride in the large force—usually the regiment or the division. Some outstanding leaders (such as General George S. Patton, Jr., for example) have managed to focus pride on an even larger force, the numbered army. And for a U.S. Marine, the entire Corps is his focus of pride.

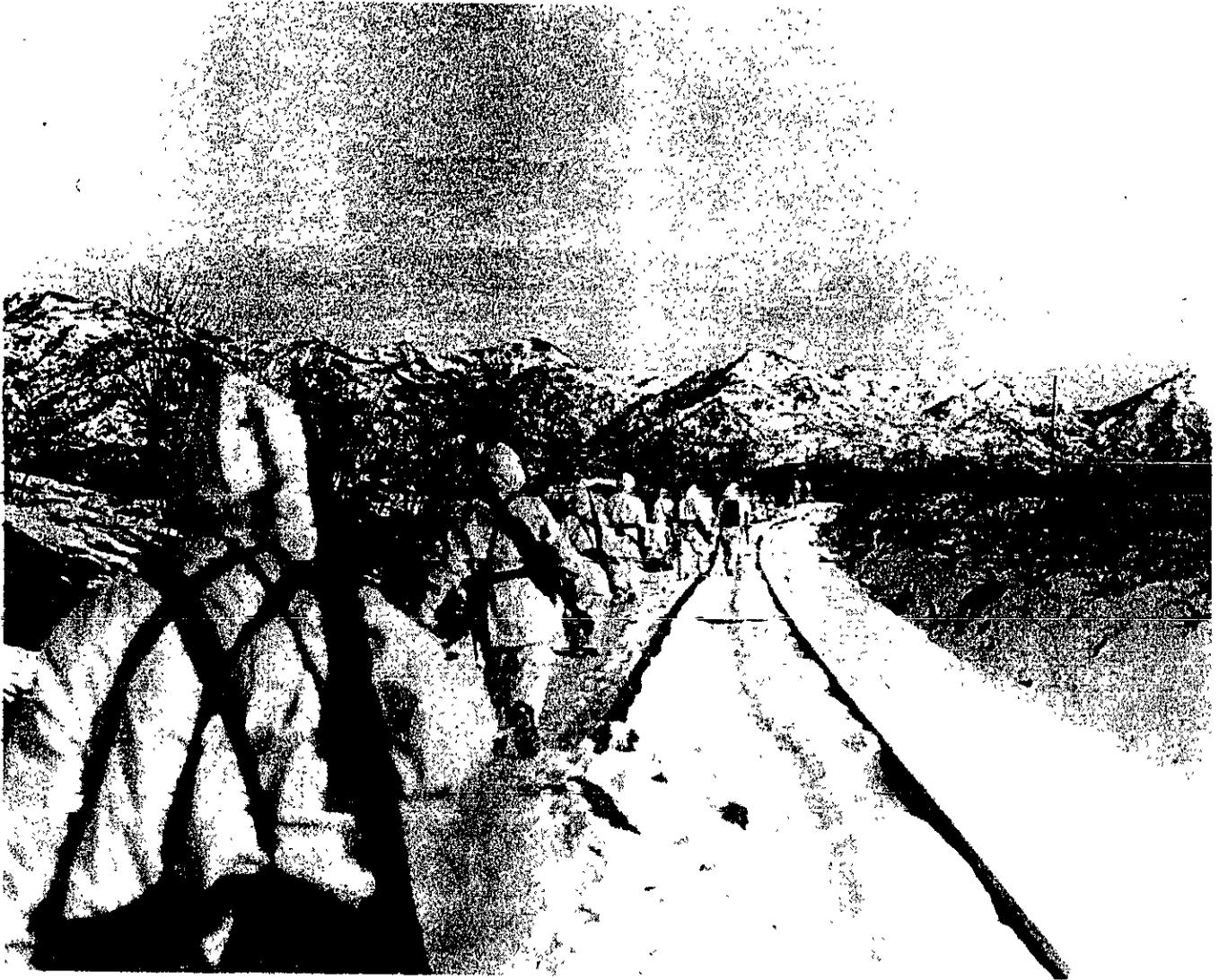
SHEER LEADERSHIP

Another tool is sheer leadership. A good front-line leader makes himself a sort of associate member of the buddy group. That is, without abandoning his proper leadership role, he nonetheless becomes someone whom the soldiers in the buddy group respect, like, and do not want to betray or disappoint.

He must not totally merge into the buddy group, for if this happens, he may then become a co-conspirator in the measures the soldiers may take to avoid combat. He must avoid being perceived by the troops as merely "one of them."

The difficult but essential role of the front-line leader is to overlap the two worlds of the buddy group and the leader and to act as a channel between them. Such leaders are the most important day-to-day link between the Army and the fighters. The Army must be careful to lead and motivate these first-line leaders properly, to prevent them from sinking entirely into the buddy group. This is the difficult but essential role of *their* first-line leaders—one that is sometimes neglected by commanders who take their subordinate leaders for granted.

There is something else, though, something deeper and therefore harder to see and easier to ignore or disparage, but ultimately the most important of all. And that is the soldier's patriotism and commitment to the spiritual values of the nation—freedom, democracy, justice, human equality, decency.



Korea, January 1952

If cynicism about our war aims can undermine our fighting power, then it is only logical to conclude that faith in them—the conviction that we are fighting for those traditional American values—can reinforce our combat power. A soldier is a member of the nation and shares its values, and that is the indispensable basic element in the alloy, the copper in the bronze, of his fighting power. The tin (the buddy group) may give him the hardness to face war's bitterest moments, but it is the copper (patriotism and idealism) that will give his efforts their direction.

And what evidence do I offer that this is true? To that question I offer a combination of history, testimonials, and simple logic.

There are thousands of examples from the history of war that leave no doubt about the role of patriotism and idealism:

- Why did American prisoners of war willingly bring mistreatment and death upon themselves in British prison hulks during the War for Independence by singing patriotic songs on the Fourth of July?

- Why did Russian soldiers resist so indomitably the inva-

sion of their homeland by Napoleon and later by Hitler?

- Why did Israeli troops fight with such incredible ferocity on the Golan Heights in 1973?

- How could Confederate soldiers hold out for so long against such great odds and still go out fighting?

It stretches credulity to assume that the Russians, the Israelis, and the American Southerners were just natural-born buddy-group builders. In fact, the explanation is found in words such as Mother Russia, Zion, and Dixie, which have nothing to do with buddy groups. I defy the military sociologists to find knowledgeable historians who fail to attribute these phenomenal military performances at least partly to a love of homeland and home people.

It is almost universally acknowledged among political and military scholars that national armies are tougher and more reliable than mercenary forces. This fact cannot be explained in terms of primary social groups, but it can be explained in terms of patriotism. Soldiers in national armies have a personal stake in the issue when their nations make war.

Are we to conclude that Niccolo Machiavelli was naive when

he called for a national Florentine militia instead of *condottieri*, or mercenary leaders? The *condottieri* concept of the buddy-group's solidarity extended across the line to include profitable cooperation with the enemy. *Naive* would be a strange word to apply to Machiavelli.

Not to be ignored are the testimonials of great combat leaders:

- George Washington stressed the importance of teaching the troops "the importance of the cause and what it is they are contending for."

- Stonewall Jackson said that "the patriot volunteer, fighting for his country and his rights, makes the most reliable soldier upon earth."

- And British Field Marshall William Slim said that fighting for a worthy cause is the most important morale factor.

Somehow, I think these men are at least as well qualified to speak on this subject as the sociologists.

More humble perhaps but significant to me is the testimony of my father-in-law, who fought for more than three years in one of the best Wehrmacht divisions in World War II in Russia and on the Western Front. His 116th Panzer Division is noted in U.S. war reports as an efficient and honorable foe.

As a noncommissioned officer, he had little chance to observe the inner workings of the officer-education process and the general staff system that professionals rate so highly. But he knew the fighting soldiers and the foxhole buddy group intimately, and he says German soldiers fought well because they were patriots.

No wonder, then, that World War II was so hard-fought. Patriot against patriot. Such men do not quit easily. It is a point we cannot afford to miss, but usually do.

So it seems that both the sociological and the patriotic-idealistic dimensions play roles in motivating soldiers. What exactly is their relationship?

It's really not so hard. Like the copper and the tin in bronze, the sociological and the patriotic-idealistic elements of motivation are thoroughly mixed into the soldiers' make-up. Each serves a slightly different function. But the two are thoroughly blended.

Consider this. A soldier may stick around during hot situations only because of his commitment to his comrades. The documented tendency of new replacements to flee their first fights immediately unless they have first had a chance to become integrated into the buddy group shows that commitment is indeed vital under actual fire. If buddy-group cohesion were the only thing that influenced the behavior of men under fire, though, the likely result would be simply to ensure that they all ran away *together*. So something else must be at work here.

However deeply buried, however little the soldiers themselves may sometimes be aware of it, other factors do matter. Leadership and unit pride are certainly among them. But would even that be enough if they were not convinced that their efforts were vitally important to the people back home? I believe it is that conviction that causes soldiers to consider desertion en masse to be just as shameful for the group as desertion alone would be for an individual.

But even unit pride is reinforced by pride in country or by idealism. Soldiers serving in foreign armies rarely show much pride in their units except in certain cases: They are immigrants in a regular army unit; their unit is a nationally based one such as the Swiss brigades of early modern times or today's Gurkhas; the soldiers are united by a fierce commitment to an ideological cause; or the adopting nation has very carefully and skillfully integrated each soldier into its units in such a way that an aura of second nationality and vicarious patriotism can be built up around the units. This last is a rare and difficult feat that depends on monopolizing the world's sup-

The Delta, Vietnam, 1968



ply of a particular breed of man: Only the French Foreign Legion (a semi-national group because its officers are French) seems to achieve it.

In each of these instances, non-national soldiers and units seem to be most effective when they actually have some kind of national cement to bind them together; that is, when they aren't really as non-national as they first seem to be.

However this may be, the argument for patriotic-idealistic motivation gets stronger when we move one step further away from the firefight. Before a man can fight, he must march to the battle. Before he can do that, he must successfully complete a complex training process. And even before that, he must willingly become a soldier.

Yes, willingly. Even under a conscription system, only the dullest of men can fail to see many ways of avoiding service. It's easy enough if a man is willing to face some degree of social opprobrium—he can admit to infamous habits, or deliberately fail various tests or training phases.

Yet most people don't take these ways out. Most do choose to rally to their country's flag. Some may do so with misgivings, but a surprising number show real commitment and even enthusiasm when the threat to their homeland is perceived as being clear-cut. (Indeed, the proportion of martial enthusiasm to the directness of the perceived threat to the homeland's vital interests and values is further historical evidence of the importance of patriotic-idealistic motivation.)

This enthusiasm cannot be attributed to the buddy group. Except for a small number of group enlistments, the buddy group doesn't even begin to form until after training starts. And the buddy group that counts the most, the small combat units, may not be formed until much later.

The farther back from the front one gets, the less important the buddy group is and the more important the patriotic-idealistic motivations become. Indeed the buddy group seems most powerful, felicitously enough, at precisely the moment when it is most needed—in the actual midst of combat.

Behind the front in World War II, the U.S. Army suffered from a large number of desertions and unauthorized absences. Apparently, soldiers don't feel so bad about abandoning their closest buddies when those buddies are not in any immediate

danger. This is an important point, because combat soldiers are not "up front" all the time. And many support troops with vital jobs rarely or never get involved in close combat.

Therefore, we had better start paying more attention to what makes men stick to the colors when life gets tough but not exactly bullet-riddled. It would be a mistake simply to rely upon a soldier's youthful upbringing to instill into him the proper sense of duty. Civilian society isn't teaching patriotism or responsibility the way it used to. A military leader who neglects to foster the patriotic and idealistic sides of his soldiers' training is, in my opinion, making a fatal error.

But how can we foster such qualities?

Although a detailed answer is beyond the scope of this article, in general a leader must use the same tools of communication, example, and encouragement that he uses to instill any other qualities in his troops. Most of our leaders are patriots. Therefore, they must not be shy about proclaiming and showing it in their daily work and behavior. They must be willing to talk about and demonstrate it.

Admittedly, this is a sensitive subject because it can become preachy or sentimental. As with all such issues, though, sincerity is the vaccine against preachiness and sentimentality. A truly sincere leader can discuss and demonstrate love of country convincingly and effectively.

Our soldiers of all grades share the same love of country that animates their leaders, although young soldiers may have learned to repress it for fear of appearing "uncool" to their school friends. The open patriotism and idealism of respected leaders will help them unleash their own passion for the United States and its ideals.

They'll surely be better soldiers for it. The soldier who, not only in battle but also in training and in garrison, is conscious of his patriotism, who sees his military work as a glorious calling in the service of mankind and mankind's greatest nation, cannot help approaching his duty with more devotion.

Harry F. Noyes III has written extensively for various civilian and military publications. Commissioned through ROTC in 1967, he served four years with the Air Force. He is now a major in the Army's Individual Ready Reserve.

