

# Developing a Cohesive Unit

CAPTAIN PETER G. KILNER

Time and again, analyses of the actions of men in battle cite cohesiveness as the most valuable combat multiplier. Soldiers who have bonded with each other and with their leaders are more likely to fight effectively. In combat, where the fate of all depends upon the conduct of each, mutual trust and respect are the cornerstones of success.

Developing a cohesive combat unit may be the most important task for an infantry leader, and often his most difficult task as well. Unfortunately, there is little concrete guidance on how to do it. In addition, cohesion is intangible. There is no mission training plan that states its critical tasks, and it is a difficult concept to quantify on an efficiency report. Still, leaders must emphasize cohesiveness. If they do not, their subordinate leaders who excel technically and tactically may be frustrated by their unit's sub-par performance.

Field Manual 22-100, *Military Leadership*, provides a general framework for developing cohesion in a unit. It stresses realistic training, personnel stability, and a sense of ownership on the part of the chain of command. Furthermore, it states:

*Caring is essential to cohesion among all soldiers and leaders in a unit. A soldier's belief that his leaders and buddies care for him, and will always do their best for him, increases his desire to fight to protect his fellow soldiers. This bonding is the basis for the cohesion needed on the battlefield.*

In a profession where leaders have an obligation to develop mental and physical toughness in their subordinates, leaders may not be sure how to demonstrate their care for their men.

Like all leaders, I experimented constantly with methods of fostering cohesiveness in my unit. I found three elements to be most successful: establishing a clear standard of integrity, writing to parents, and writing letters of recommendation.

The integrity standard establishes the moral climate in your unit. It marks you as the moral standard-bearer. Post it permanently on your unit bulletin board, and require all soldiers to read it during their initial counseling. Let it stand as a constant reminder—to you as well as your soldiers—that the welfare of the unit supersedes that of any individual. (My own integrity standard is included here as an example.)

This high standard of integrity must be coupled with a leadership climate in which honest mistakes are tolerated. Loyalty and empathy, up and down the chain of command, must be emphasized to insure the positive acceptance of the integrity standard.

The command climate fostered by the integrity standard reinforces unit cohesion in many ways:

- It improves communication, once subordinates realize that their leaders really want to hear the whole truth and that they will not be punished for "coming clean." Problems are thus more likely to surface, and to be solved. Every problem solved becomes a source of pride and confidence for the soldiers. Junior soldiers, who usually know their unit's shortcomings firsthand, appreciate that their leaders are genuinely concerned with being combat-ready, and not simply with looking good for the boss.

- It reduces personality conflicts. Disputes among peers are less likely

when there is no doubt about what is and is not acceptable behavior. Those who cannot conform to the norm are likely to leave; those who remain are able to trust each other.

- It encourages initiative among subordinate leaders. The sense of trust and shared mission frees junior leaders to train realistically. Because they are not afraid to fail sometimes in peace, they will be more likely to learn from their mistakes, and to succeed in combat. Realistic training and subordinate leader "ownership" are key elements in the development of unit cohesion.

Two other ways to promote unit loyalty and cohesion are the letter home and the letter of recommendation. These letters, generally written at the beginning and end of a soldier's tour, clearly demonstrate a leader's concern for him. In many ways, they mean more to him than an award or commendation.

The letter home is written as an introduction, and additional letters can be sent to keep the parents abreast of their son's accomplishments. In the first one, introduce yourself and your own background experience. Tell them the soldier is reliable, motivated, hardworking. Tell them specifically what he is doing: For example, "Joseph is a driver for a combat HMMWV (high-mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicle), the successor to the Army Jeep, which carries a scout squad of three men." Acknowledge the anxiety the parents may be feeling about their son's absence from home, and assure them that the entire unit is committed to his welfare. Tell them something about his platoon sergeant and his section or squad leader. Tell them about the oppor-

### Standard of Integrity

**Some people think integrity means to refrain from lying. They are right, to an extent—about 10 percent. Integrity is much, much more than simply not lying. It means telling the whole truth, unsolicited, even when it hurts you or someone else. It means not allowing someone to be misled or misinformed. Integrity is pro-active.**

**Integrity is the bedrock of an effective military organization. In training, it is a soldier's integrity that forces him to accurately record and report shortcomings and problems so they can be addressed and solved. In maintenance, it forces him to do the boring, seemingly inconsequential checks that may make the difference between combat readiness and deadlined equipment. Integrity spurs initiative**

**and efficiency in everyday activities. When leaders can trust their men, they spend less time checking and more time doing.**

**Integrity fosters trust. Trust breeds cohesion. Cohesion is a critical indicator of how a unit will fight (and survive) in combat. Soldiers need to know that they can count on one another. Integrity is infectious, part of a unit's culture. Practice it, encourage and enforce it, and it will become our way of doing business.**

**In this unit, integrity in its purest form is the standard. Our job (and our lives) are too important to accept anything less.**

**I am not so naive that I think everyone will internalize this concept of integrity. But I do expect that every soldier will conduct himself by it.**

tunities open to the soldier. Tell them about his state of health and about his upcoming promotion. Thank them for being his teachers and role models. End with an invitation for them to write to you with any concerns they may have.

Your soldiers will appreciate having you do the bragging for them. On leave, they will arrive home heroes, and they will owe it to you. That same sense of "going the extra mile" for each other

will foster the personal and professional bonds that pay off in combat.

Most parents are powerful allies for an Army leader. Their encouragement and pride are often a significant source of motivation for your soldiers. Their advice may tip the scales when it comes to reenlistment decisions. Additionally, soldiers who know you are in touch with their parents may think twice before doing something stupid. The small effort

in writing their parents pays big dividends in loyalty, motivation, and conduct.

For a soldier leaving your unit, writing a letter of recommendation—to a prospective employer or a college director of admissions—may be the easiest way to demonstrate your genuine concern for his welfare. He has nothing more to offer you, yet you continue to help him. It is the right thing to do. For a soldier who is leaving the service, that letter will be much more valuable than his award in securing civilian employment and schooling.

The time and effort you spend writing letters of recommendation will result in better cohesion within your unit. Your men will see that you care about them, and this will promote vertical bonding. They will be happy to work for someone who makes the extra effort to help them out.

Building cohesiveness in your unit is critically important. By making the extra effort to establish an integrity standard, write letters home, and write letters of recommendation, you will set some conditions that both foster cohesiveness and help the unit accomplish its mission.

---

**Captain Peter G. Kilner** is assigned to the 2d Battalion, 325th Infantry, 82d Airborne Division. He previously served as a Bradley platoon leader and as a scout platoon leader in the 4th Battalion, 8th Infantry, 1st Armored Division. He is a 1990 graduate of the United States Military Academy.

---

# Innovations From Operation DESERT STORM

CAPTAIN JOHN R. SUTHERLAND, III

Armed conflict and the pursuit of victory (or at least survival) have produced numerous innovations that have led to advancements in all fields of

human endeavor. The most obvious area of interest is the improvement of warmaking tools.

The Civil War brought us the minie

ball, rifled muskets, primitive hand grenades, and prototype submarines. World War I ushered in the tank, and World War II introduced guided