Army Unit Cohesion in Vietnam: A Bum Rap

ROGER KAPLAN

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In a 1981 essay Richard H. Kohn attacked the idea that any "phenomenon could possibly explain the motives of soldiers" in battle. Singled out for specific criticism were studies of primary group cohesion. He argued that differences in time and place rendered invalid comparative studies, and that existing literature had "never clearly shown whether solidarity with the group acted as a psychological prop to bolster men to endure the stress or as a motivation to carry out the mission and perform effectively in battle—or both."[1] While Kohn is correct in questioning the value of comparing such disparate groups as German soldiers of 1945 and American GIs of 1970, his second criticism overlooks one critical aspect of combat—results. It matters little whether primary group cohesion acts as a "psychological prop" or as a performance motivator, because the net effect of reducing combat inhibitors (stress, fear, isolation) or promoting esprit, morale, and teamwork is the same—enhanced fighting power.

The recently implemented program of the Army regimental system perhaps best typifies the current perception of the linkage between primary group cohesion and fighting power. Curiously, the US Army decided on this program based on one of the very factors Kohn cited in support of his argument, the loosening of unit ties caused by personnel policies during the Vietnam War.[2] By being assigned individually and without regard to previous unit association, it was reasoned, the soldier did not develop personal or unit loyalties and perceived his environment only in terms of his own security, an egocentric creed which the one-year tour accentuated.[3] Indeed, several commentators, particularly Richard Gabriel and Paul

Savage in *Crisis in Command*, maintain that unenlightened personnel policies—individual rotation among them—caused US Army, Vietnam (USARV), to all but disintegrate in the final years of that conflict.

Yet, is it true that Army personnel policies had such an inimical effect on unit performance? There are no conclusive studies of cohesion and fighting power during the Vietnam War, or for World War II and the Korean War. Even Samuel Stouffer's highly acclaimed work on World War II servicemen, *The American Soldier*, failed to ask many of the questions pertinent to such a study. Neither the Korean nor the Vietnam War stimulated works comparable to Stouffer's, and the limited studies that did result from the latter conflict were often colored as much by political content as they were by scientific method, John Helmer's *Bringing the War Home* and Gabriel and Savage's *Crisis in Command* being prime examples.

Nevertheless, there exists a body of literature critical of individual rotation policies during the Vietnam War and their deleterious effects. With few exceptions, the writers are civilian. Uniformed writers, in both the Army's *Vietnam Studies* series and the military journals, largely ignore cohesion and generally deny that personnel policies reduced American combat performance.

Interestingly, critics of individual rotation have failed to demonstrate with case studies how primary group cohesion was impaired. While comparing soldiers of different nationalities 25 years removed from one another, Gabriel and Savage failed to contrast the American GIs of 1968 with those of 1970. Could it have been that rotation policies did not cause the "disintegration" in fighting power observed in the final years of the war, or could it even be that they possessed some beneficial aspects? For example, the one-year tour caused neuro-psychiatric casualty rates to be substantially lower than those of World War II, a factor which could only have reduced personnel turnover and enhanced cohesion.

Although no authoritative research exists, a large body of personal memoirs and incidental studies does provide the basis for an examination of the interrelationship between personnel policies and unit performance in Vietnam. I contend that individual rotation did not adversely affect the unit cohesion which sustained American soldiers in combat throughout most of the Vietnam War even though other personnel policies did not take adequate cognizance of group dynamics.

Major Roger Kaplan is Assistant Fire Support Coordinator with Division Artillery, 10th Mountain Division, Ft. Drum, New York. Until recently he was an assistant professor of history at the US Military Academy. He is a 1975 graduate of the Academy and holds an A.M. in history from the University of Michigan. Major Kaplan has served as a Field Artillery officer in the 25th Infantry Division, 194th Armored Brigade, and the 528th US Army Artillery Group.

American Army units on the eve of intervention in 1965 were far better prepared for battle than their counterparts prior to Korea and World War II. Benefiting from President Kennedy's policy of flexible response, the Army was able to field highly trained, well-equipped, and fully manned divisions. Additionally, several units such as the 25th Infantry Division had prepared specifically for jungle combat.

Anticipation of the intervention, a well-honed replacement system, and a stretched-out troop buildup schedule obviated the frantic mobilization that characterized the first month of the Korean War. (Units were spared the experience of the 1st Cavalry Division in Korea, for example, which lost 750 noncommissioned officers—infantry companies retained only their first sergeants—to help man the 24th and 25th Infantry Divisions following the North Korean invasion.[4]) Alerted divisions required only a few filler personnel, all of whom could easily be integrated during the seaborne journey to Vietnam. Nor was there a need for the hurried mobilizations of World War II. Deployment of the 1st Cavalry and 25th Infantry Divisions still left eight divisions in the continental United States, half of the Army's total. The Johnson Administration's policy of gradual escalation plus the localization of combat in one theater allowed the Army to avoid using draconian manning measures for almost all of the war. Not until the Tet Offensive of 1968 was the Army forced to rush troops to Vietnam, and then it sent just one brigade. Thus many of the problems that had impaired unit cohesion in the initial stages of the previous two wars were avoided. Yet, the circumstances of Vietnam were so different from those of the earlier wars that one cannot credit the Army's mobilization techniques to an enlightened awareness of group dynamics.

Opportune operational circumstances enabled the Army to avoid sending the first ground units in Vietnam directly into major combat. Instead, units began operations in the relatively quiet coastal enclaves before moving inland against North Vietnamese regulars. Later units were usually assigned less active sectors upon arrival, to the dismay of the forces they displaced, in order to get acclimated, a policy which favored cohesion.[5]

Replacement techniques also showed some improvement over the past. During World War II replacements spent months virtually alone in the personnel pipeline. They were assigned to a theater as individuals, rarely knew any of their fellow replacements, and were totally unaware of the identity of their future divisions until they left the corps replacement battalion. Once overseas the replacement spent one to three days at each of the five replacement units through which he had to pass on his way to the front, a process that provoked psychological disturbances and damaged morale.[6] Soldiers reported to the Army's overseas terminal in Oakland and were then flown to Vietnam. Once in country, replacements were quickly processed by computers at Long Binh or Cam Rahn Bay and sent directly to their division

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or separate brigade. Soldiers received only an abbreviated orientation and were en route to their units within 24 hours.[7] This system reduced much of the stress soldiers experienced in the past, but it did not relieve the sense of isolation felt by replacements proceeding as individuals.[8] Thus, changes in the system were essentially intended to facilitate administration. Indeed, an article by a former commander of USARV replacement operations concentrated not on what the system did for the soldier but on how administratively efficient it was.[9]

Once at their division or brigade, replacements were further reassigned and, in some units, given additional training. Operational requirements governed how long a unit had in which to integrate its replacements. For example, S. L. A. Marshall noted that companies of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, were in combat only days after each had received 35 new personnel. Since it had been established in previous wars that more combat fatigue resulted from a soldier's first combat than all other situations, concern for cohesion apparently took a back seat to operational necessity.[10]

Unlike soldiers of earlier wars, the Vietnam replacement (and those arriving as part of a unit deployment) knew when he would return to the United States. Even before the first ground combat troops arrived in Vietnam, American rotation policy had been decided. Personnel would return to the United States upon serving 12 months in Vietnam regardless of one's proximity to the fighting. Several factors, mostly bureaucratic, influenced this modification of Korean War policy (where tour length had been flexible, depending on type of assignment).[11] First, the standard length of other unaccompanied tours was one year. Second, military personnel in Vietnam already were serving one-year tours. Army planners also opted for a 12-month maximum for health reasons. (In the environment of the Southwest Pacific area in 1943, tropical diseases alone caused a hospital admission rate of 1032 per 1000 soldiers.[12]) Given the constraints of President Johnson's war policy, Army planners had no other choice. Unit rotation was feasible only for a small force; to accommodate the projected force level of USARV, a major mobilization would have been necessary (something Johnson would not authorize). Since tour length in country for

Vietnam War soldiers was on average three months longer than for front-line soldiers in Korea, Army planners could justifiably feel that they had enhanced unit cohesion, in-country experience, and thus fighting power. As noted earlier, respected combat commanders in their lessons-learned literature do not mention rotation as a problem. Similarly, Douglas Kinnard did not see fit to query Army generals who served in Vietnam about rotation (see *The War Managers*) even though he posed a great number of questions dealing with sensitive and often embarrassing policies and actions.[13]

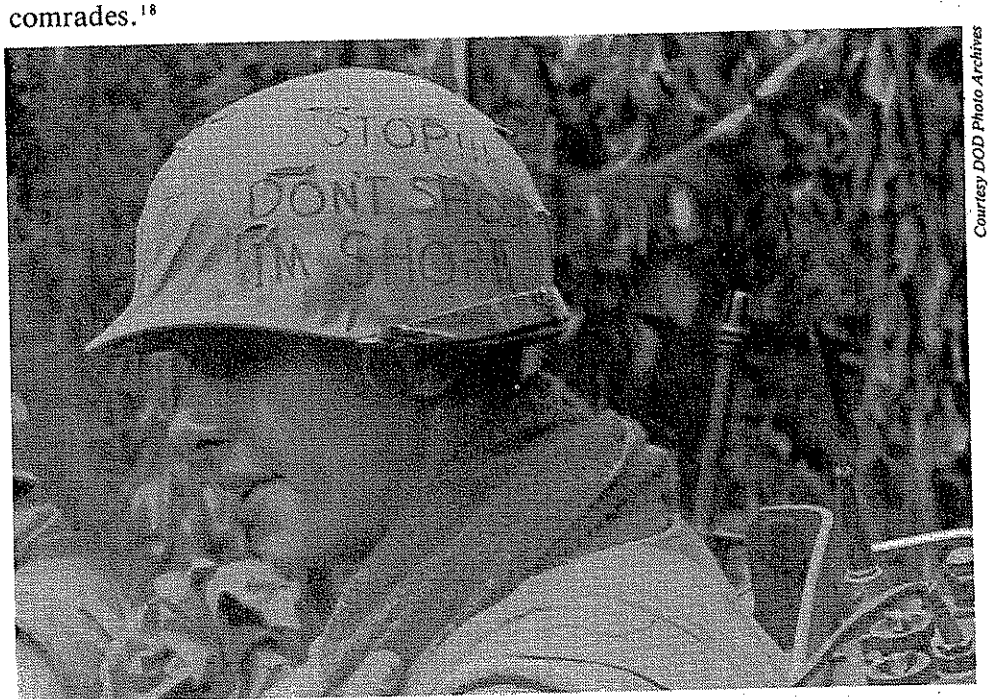
Yet military pundits and sociologists severely criticized individual rotation, just as they had during Korea. John Paul Vann, a former US Army lieutenant colonel, complained that "the United States had not been in Vietnam for ten years but for one year ten times." Peter Bourne saw rotation as breaking down cohesion by individualizing and encapsulating the war for each soldier. Charles Moskos, Charles Cotton, Gabriel and Savage, and others concurred, only grudgingly conceding the enhanced morale and lower neuro-psychiatric casualties that resulted from the one-year tour. None of the critics of rotation supported the accusations with data. Even Gabriel and Savage, whose *Crisis in Command* contained tables for almost every argument, were unable to provide figures linking reduced cohesion and combat power to individual rotation.[14]

Implicit in all such criticism was the assumption that the Army possessed alternatives to individual rotation, and that it idly accepted the ill effects of its chosen policy. But as we have seen, unit rotation was feasible only within the context of a major mobilization of reserves—a policy President Johnson considered and rejected. Except for two divisions during the Korean War, unit rotation has never been part of the American experience in wartime, and the costs in terms of mobilized forces make it an unlikely future course of action. Alternatively, the Army could have opted for longer tours, but such a policy would have created serious problems of its own. Prolonged tours during World War II had a devastating effect on troop morale and the neuro-psychiatric health of infantrymen in particular. Combat in North Africa and in Italy clearly indicated that psychiatric breakdown in combat units was not a question of who but when, a conclusion later substantiated in France and Germany. Based on European theater casualty rates, postwar researchers determined that 180 days of combat represented the "burn-out point" for infantry and other front-line troops. Of equal note was the discovery that after 180 days the neuro-psychiatric casualty rate of the survivors exceeded that of untested replacements.[15] Since a soldier could easily reach burn-out within a year, it was detrimental to *unit* efficiency to subject individual personnel to long tours. Not surprisingly there were 927,307 cases of "battle fatigue" in World War II, of whom 320,000 were discharged. This exceeded the number of combat deaths (292,131) and aggravated the Army's chronic shortage of

infantrymen, who accounted for the vast majority of battle fatigue casualties (the rate for infantry units was forty times that of service units).[16]

In contrast to critics of individual rotation in Vietnam, many post-World War II writers considered such tours to be the only solution to high levels of neuro-psychiatric casualties. They did not regard it as detrimental to unit cohesion because in their experience the infantry population of European theater units had been in constant flux anyway. Such units suffered casualties equal to their total personnel authorizations every 85 to 100 days in combat! This meant that the typical infantry unit was "destroyed" at least twice a year. Fifth Army casualty rates, which were average for the European theater, substantiate this estimate. Its infantry battalions possessed less than 18 percent of their original soldiers after 180 days, the majority of whom were cooks, clerks, and other support personnel.[17] Thus there was no point to rotating units because the originals had long ceased to exist after even one year.

Despite extremely high turnover, infantry units in World War II and later in Korea were able to function and sustain themselves in combat. Researchers noted that men fought together to survive and were forced to establish primary groups at the squad or platoon level to provide the security that was lost upon entry into military service. In other words, men formed ersatz families and by so doing developed loyalties to their units and comrades.[18]



Courtesy DOD Photo Archives

Tour length in Vietnam was an important factor in the unit cohesion equation. The message on the radio operator's helmet above: "Stop!!! Don't shoot. I'm short."

Critics of individual rotation to the contrary, personal accounts of combat veterans of Vietnam indicate that unit cohesion did exist and for the same reason that it existed in Korea and World War II—it was regarded as being essential to survival on the battlefield.[19] This view is not restricted to early participants of the war, most of whom arrived as part of a unit deployment, but is shared by those who fought during Tet 1968 and well into 1969. Soldiers who served in the latter years of the war disagree, but by then the nature of the war had changed. As Vietnamization proceeded, Army units operated in the field less and less, becoming responsible only for locating but not engaging the enemy (close air support and South Vietnamese units were entrusted with the latter mission). By 1972, units merely performed base security operations.

The differing perceptions of the veterans, however, provide the key to understanding unit cohesion in Vietnam: it was a function of the unit's exposure to combat operations. Individual rotation had provided the American soldier with one overriding goal—to survive his tour. However, this had little effect on unit cohesiveness. After all, survival had been the primary goal of World War II soldiers as well.[20] Of far greater importance were the clear distinctions between the field and the rear. In the large base camps to which the combat units periodically repaired, survival was chiefly an individual affair. Triple concertina wire, claymore mines, manned perimeters, and other visible means of protection provided the soldier with relatively good security. Additionally, the rear bases and the Vietnamese economy offered the soldier almost all the amenities of American life and sometimes more—privates could even afford servants.[21] The soldier's unit could hardly compete with the rear in providing for his basic needs. Even the unit mess hall had competition, its foes being the cafeteria and service clubs. Thus, the basic requirement for any primary group—the ability to insure survival—did not exist in garrison.[22] Not surprisingly, personal accounts do not refer to cohesion in the rear, emphasizing instead association with a small circle of friends. Significantly, most of the drug, morale, and disciplinary problems associated with unit disintegration in Vietnam sprang from experience in the rear.

In the field, however, the soldier was totally dependent on his unit for all support whether it be food, ammunition, or medical care. Most important, soldiers regarded their units as the only means of returning safely to base.[23] Not surprisingly, primary groups formed during combat, and soldiers sought to enhance the viability of their units. Shirkers were often threatened or socially ostracized, and racial and other prejudices were instinctively suppressed (only to flare up in the safety of the rear).[24] The close interactions demanded by field duty created personal loyalties as well, and a pervasive hatred of the enemy further added to cohesion in the field. Additionally, new people were taught how to avoid mistakes that could cause

themselves and others to be killed.[25] S. L. A. Marshall demonstrated through his studies of three wars that more soldiers would fire their weapons if they better related to one another. He noted that some 25th Infantry Division units in Vietnam had significantly higher percentages of firers than elite units of World War II.[26] The assertion that primary groups arise from the design of military organizations rather than from the peculiar chemistry of the battlefield is not substantiated by the Vietnam experience.[27]

Although cohesion was, to some extent, a self-sustained phenomenon, there still existed several ways in which Army policy could affect it. For example, the policy of returning in-country hospital discharges to their former companies did reduce turnover, thereby facilitating the security of interpersonal relationships and continuity of experience. Other policies, however, were harmful. As late as 1967, some units permitted rear area assignment after a soldier had received two wounds. Since 50 percent of those wounded required no hospitalization, some of the personnel who qualified for reassignment hardly suffered the pain this program attempted to redress.[28] The price in any event was a needless increase in personnel turnover. Policies that USARV imposed on its medical command were equally destructive. In order to maximize present for duty rates, wounded soldiers who could otherwise have been treated in country and eventually returned to their units were instead evacuated to Okinawa or the continental United States. Increasing the incidence of unnecessary medical evacuations was the creation of manpower spaces for temporary-duty personnel in USARV, which counted against the overall troop ceiling. These were achieved by reducing in-country hospital patients from 3500 to 3000 despite an Army hospital capacity of 5000.[29]

More damaging was the retention of the Korean War practice of assigning commanders to most line units for just six months. This enabled the Army to get as many officers into combat as soon as possible, thus broadening the experience base and spreading the risk, but there was a price. Enlisted soldiers who had to serve 12 months in a company often perceived this as an indication that they alone were expendable, a view probably reinforced by the fact that short-term commanders would likely feel a greater need to produce immediate results. Six-month command assignments also destroyed a critical component in the maintenance of cohesion that the sociologist Roger Little noted—mutual risk between the leader and the led. The resentment on the part of the enlisted soldiers constituted a handicap for the commander not of his making, and often such attitudes eroded their confidence in the leader, thus adversely affecting unit performance (a theme common to many personal accounts was that confidence in one's officers was vital to successful unit operations).[30] Abbreviated command tours also inhibited cohesion because they resulted in increased combat casualties in units, thereby further aggravating personnel turnover.

Studies in 1965 and 1966 revealed that "US maneuver battalions under experienced commanders suffered battle deaths in sizable fire fights at only two-thirds the rate of units under battalion commanders with less than six months' experience in command."[31]

Why did the Army institute personnel policies that risked the impairment of unit cohesion? Probably because Army leaders tended to associate success in combat not so much with cohesion as with morale. Indicative of the Army's high regard for morale was the creation of a formidable array of recreational activities. Moreover, to support those activities, USARV readily diverted personnel, resources, and even construction units from the war effort. Similarly, units indulged in liberal awards programs and other practices to bolster morale.[32] Yet none of these measures was able to prevent the disintegration of USARV combat units during the final years of the war, *a period when combat operations and casualties actually declined.*[33]

Despite uninspired Army personnel policies and the inability to rotate units, cohesion did exist throughout most of the Vietnam War. The integrity of the deploying units can hardly be credited with sustaining cohesion because losses and eventually tour completions quickly changed the character of each formation. Rather, cohesion was the product of necessity and group dynamics, the same factors that bolstered unit cohesion in World War II and Korea. Soldiers understood that the unit represented survival and instinctively built its cohesion. Relatively good leadership further cemented cohesion as did widespread support of the war until 1968. Only when combat declined and disengagement became the American goal did cohesion deteriorate.

In attempting to remedy in the future the perceived deficits in unit cohesion during Vietnam, the Army has focused on peacetime personnel policies. Although programs such as the Army's regimental system may enable strong, cohesive units to enter combat, they will not alleviate the real systemic personnel failures common to Vietnam-type war. USARV neglected to institute policies that would *sustain* high levels of cohesion. It denied soldiers experienced commanders, needlessly evacuated sick and wounded servicemen who could have rejoined their comrades, and created morale support services that undermined the importance of the unit. Unless the Army formulates sound wartime personnel policies that accommodate individual rotation as well as the realities of group dynamics, soldiers again will be condemned to fragmented units, with the high casualties and other dire implications for combat effectiveness that such a situation entails.

NOTES

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