



***FORGING THE  
SWORD: UNIT-  
MANNING IN THE  
US ARMY***

***Pat Towell***

***Thinking***

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**Center for Strategic  
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UNIT-MANNING IN THE US ARMY***

by

**Pat Towell**

**Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments**

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The analysis and findings presented here are solely the responsibility of CSBA and the author.

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## Overview

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The Army's plan for "Unit-Focused Stabilization"—organizing soldiers into combat units that would remain intact for about three years at a time—will implement an approach to personnel management that has been ardently promoted for decades both by some of the Service's most distinguished general officers and by some of its most prominent internal critics. This approach, which is generally referred to as "unit manning," marks a sharp departure from the Army's practice during most of the 20th century. In the past, personnel were routinely moved in and out of combat units, even during major wars in Vietnam and Korea, according to the dictates of a system focused on developing the careers of individual soldiers by moving them through a variety of assignments rather than on maximizing the organizational stability of units.

The goal of the new approach is to *stabilize* personnel in combat units. According to proponents, greater stability will foster relationships of mutual confidence and loyalty among unit members that will make the unit *more cohesive* and thus better able to tolerate the psychological stress of battle. A complementary argument is that stabilization enhances combat effectiveness by allowing personnel to train together long enough to become *more proficient* in complex

tactics that require collaboration among the unit's members in addition to individual skill.<sup>1</sup>

The argument that a closely knit “band of brothers” can whip a larger but less cohesive force is intuitively appealing and has been widely accepted in the Army and among civilian defense policy analysts, particularly since World War II. Indeed, in the mid-1980s, when the Army was conducting the COHORT (Cohesion, Operational Readiness, and Training) program—a previous effort to implement unit manning—a panel overseeing the program recommended that Army behavioral scientists *not* bother even trying to measure whether more cohesive units were, in fact, more resilient in battle.<sup>2</sup>

So, in mandating a sweeping adoption of the unit-manning principle for combat formations, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker stands in distinguished company. Nevertheless, it is striking that this far-reaching change is being undertaken despite the fact that the benefits are unproven and the associated costs and tradeoffs are largely unexamined.

The argument for stabilization rests, in part, on beliefs about the relationship of personnel stability to the relative performance of US and German troops in World War II and to, to a lesser extent, to the supposed failings of US troops during the Korean and Vietnam wars. This report offers an assessment of those historical cases. It also examines the COHORT program—the most ambitious of the Army's earlier efforts to implement unit manning—to determine whether formations organized on that basis realized the promised improvements in cohesiveness and performance.

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<sup>1</sup> Colonel John R. Brinkerhoff, US Army, “A History of Unit Stabilization,” *Military Review*, May–June 2004, pp. 27–28. In the public debate over stabilization, *cohesion* is the most prominently touted benefit. But the potential improvement in *tactical proficiency* (as a result of a unit's having a longer time to train on collective tasks) is worth noting separately.

<sup>2</sup> Capt. Paul Bartone, US Army, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore P. Furukawa, US Army, Capt. James E. Griffith, US Army, et al., *New Manning System Field Evaluation: Technical Report No. 3* (Washington, DC: Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, June 1, 1986), p. 1 [hereinafter cited as WRAIR Technical Report No. 3].

This report finds that the linkage between stability and military effectiveness is less clear than often asserted. In World War II, the cohesiveness of German troops had other roots besides personnel stability, the promotion of which would be repugnant to the American polity. Moreover, in all three wars, US units were effective in combat despite a lack of personnel stability until, in Korea and Vietnam, other factors undermined the forces' morale. As for the COHORT experiment, it demonstrated that high-performing units require not only a stabilized body of troops but also leaders able to handle a group of highly motivated soldiers and a training regime designed to channel the troops' energy toward mastery of progressively more demanding operational skills.

This does not mean that the Army's personnel stabilization proposal is necessarily a bad idea. Particularly in dealing with issues as subtle as soldiers' combat motivation, it is prudent to accord due deference to the judgment of the many experienced troop leaders who argue for stabilization. But the findings do indicate that the promise of stabilization must be kept in perspective, bearing in mind the opportunity cost in terms of other personnel factors that may conflict with stabilization and the direct cost in terms of complementary factors (such as specially trained leadership and more demanding training programs) needed to realize the promise of superior combat capability.

On the other hand, any attempt to draw lessons from the historical record also must acknowledge the important respects in which today's Army is more professional than the conscript Army of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam and the still-maturing all-volunteer force that was the setting for Project COHORT. By all indications, the raw intellectual talent of today's entry-level recruits is greater, the noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are more capable, and the methodologies and technologies of training are far more effective, to name only a few relevant changes that might make it easier to achieve the promised benefits of unit manning. For example, today's more

skilled NCOs might be much less likely to exhibit the failures of leadership that undermined many COHORT units.<sup>3</sup>

Although the service has embarked on the new personnel policy with no prior effort to validate the premise that stabilization will improve combat performance, the Army Research Institute is studying the results of the change on the Alaska-based 172<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, the first unit to be reorganized according to the Unit Focused Stabilization policy. Moreover, the RAND Corporation is slated to review units' performance in mock combat at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California to see whether any conclusions can be drawn about the impact of increased personnel stability, especially among unit leaders.<sup>4</sup> Since brigades will be converted to the new personnel system gradually—a few at a time over a period of about three years—the comparison of stabilization and nonstabilization units in roughly contemporaneous training exercises could provide uniquely valuable insights in the effect of stabilization.

On the basis of the cases of World War II, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and COHORT, this report also recommends that the Army leadership encourage a much wider discussion of additional near-term policy changes needed to realize the promise of stabilization and of the long-term consequences of stabilization for the career force. In particular, the COHORT experiment suggests that stabilized units may require changes in the selection and training of small-unit leadership and in unit training plans.

On the basis of the historical cases in which US units accommodated high levels of personnel turbulence while retaining their combat effectiveness, this report also concludes that, if some of those costs imposed by a rigid stabilization policy seem unacceptably high, the Army might be able to relax the general rule to ameliorate the

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<sup>3</sup> Major Bob Krumm, US Army Reserve, "Develop People and Units Before Developing Technology," *Military Review*, May–June 2004, p. 44. Although the draft had ended nearly a decade before COHORT was launched, Krumm contends that unit leaders had developed their leadership skills in the earlier, draftee environment, forming habits that were counterproductive in dealing with the more self-motivated soldiers in the COHORT units.

<sup>4</sup> E-mail from Col. Paul Thornton, US Army, Deputy Director of Task Force Stabilization, July 15, 2004.

costs. For example, if locking all the personnel in a brigade into that formation for three years seems likely to have an adverse impact on the professional development of future leaders, it may be that well-trained and well-led units can tolerate some level of managed turbulence (albeit a much lower level than currently prevails) without sacrificing very much by way of combat capability.

The Army's published plan for implementing the new personnel system is designed to avoid an excessively narrow or rigid focus on personnel stabilization at the expense of other factors. In a cover memorandum on the plan, deputy chief of staff for personnel Lt. Gen. F.L. "Buster" Hagenbeck said that the new policy focused on "three major components for building high performing units: Leadership, Training and Stability."<sup>5</sup> To avoid some of the failures that undermined the COHORT unit-manning effort, the plan calls for changes in the training of units and unit leaders to take account of the fact that soldiers in stabilized units are expected to have stronger mutual bonds than typically are found in units in which continual personnel turnover is the rule.<sup>6</sup> It also would let commanders exercise some discretion in applying the stabilization rule — for instance, by allowing officers and NCOs to leave their unit for short periods to attend professional development courses.<sup>7</sup>

But the balance and nuance in the Army's official plan may be at risk because the folklore that has developed around unit manning fosters too limited a perspective, overemphasizing the significance of personnel stability. One aim of this report is to demythologize the unit manning issue to promote a more fully rounded understanding of what it takes to create highly effective combat units and what costs and tradeoffs could be involved.

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<sup>5</sup> Lt. Gen. F. L. Hagenbeck US Army, "Force Stabilization Implementation Plan," undated memorandum.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff. G-1[Personnel], *The Army Force Stabilization Implementation Plan*, April 29, 2004, p. 20-21 [hereinafter cited as Army FSIP]. The training and leadership problems encountered in COHORT are reviewed in Chapter 4 of this report.

<sup>7</sup> Army FSIP, Appendix D, p. 6.

There is ample room for debate about such potential costs and tradeoffs, but these issues require considerably more public discussion than has been apparent thus far. This public discussion could be valuable, if only to maximize “buy-in” to the stabilization plan, both in the Army community and in the larger defense policy-making arena. Once before, an assertive chief of staff—Gen. Edward C. “Shy” Meyer—made unit manning a top priority for the Army. But after Meyer retired in 1983, competing priorities gradually stifled the COHORT initiative he had sponsored. A rigorous discussion now of the promise, the costs, and the tradeoffs of personnel stabilization might trigger a lively debate in the Service. But compelling the Army to grapple with those issues now might be the best guarantee that, if the policy has merit, it will survive Gen. Schoomaker’s tenure as chief of staff:

. . . [W]ithout specifically making the case for the “why,” the need for changing the manning system will not be fully inculcated, and a future generation of Army leaders might not fully appreciate or learn how to leverage the cohesion that might accrue from unit manning. A consensus could easily fail to develop, and the [unit-manning system] might again wither.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Colonel Eli T. Alford, US Army, “Implementing a Unit Manning System,” *Military Review*, January–February 2004, p. 57. Alford speculates that the relatively sparse public debate over the “unit-focused stabilization” plan may reflect a combination of loyalty to the chief of staff and a “can-do” attitude rather than a broad, institutional commitment to make the plan work.

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## Chapter 1. The Quest for Stabilization

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Advocates of personnel stabilization have cited several potential advantages to the policy, including improving the continuity of training, increasing administrative convenience for unit rotation abroad, reducing the cost of transferring soldiers and their families among posts, and improving unit cohesion. But in the long-running campaign for unit manning, the dominant argument has been the last of these: the contention that stability fosters cohesion, which, in turn, promotes greater combat effectiveness.<sup>9</sup>

This argument was famously summarized in 1868 by a French military analyst, Col. Charles Ardant du Picq, who argued that soldiers would suppress their natural instinct to flee the dangers of the battlefield if they trusted their comrades to protect them, felt a reciprocal obligation to protect others in the group, and valued the good opinion of other soldiers in their unit:

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<sup>9</sup> Although the debate usually is cast in terms of “cohesion,” the policy at issue typically—as in this case—is an effort to foster cohesion in units by imposing personnel “stability.” The focus on cohesion obscures the possibility that, whatever its impact on cohesion, personnel stability could improve a unit’s combat performance simply by enabling it to train to a higher standard, as it would not continually be reviewing basic skills to bring newly arrived soldiers up to speed.

Four brave men who do not know each other will not dare to attack a lion. Four less brave, but knowing each other well, sure of their reliability and consequently of mutual aid, will attack resolutely. There is the science of the organization of armies in a nutshell.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, American behavioral scientists using the concepts of small-group theory to analyze German unit cohesion in World War II concluded that the typical German soldier had fought tenaciously, right to the end of the war, largely because the *Wehrmacht's* personnel system was geared to creating and maintaining socially cohesive combat units:

He [the German soldier] was likely to go on fighting, provided he had the necessary weapons, as long as the group possessed leadership with which he could identify himself and as long as he gave affection to and received affection from the other members of his squad and platoon. In other words, as long as he felt himself to be a member of his primary group bound by the expectations and demands of its other members, his soldierly achievement was likely to be good.<sup>11</sup>

The American researchers' conclusion that personnel stabilization was a key component of the Germans' cohesion meshed with the Army's conclusion that its own practice of sending replacement soldiers to front-line units as individuals rather than in organized units had been profoundly demoralizing to those troops. These complementary judgments became cardinal premises of the recurring efforts since World War II to organize US Army combat forces on the basis of stabilized personnel (or, as it was most commonly referred to, unit manning).

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<sup>10</sup> Col. Charles Ardant du Picq, *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battles*, trans., Colonel John N. Greeley, US Army, and Major Robert C. Cotton, US Army (New York: The McMillan Company, 1921), p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Summer 1948, p. 284.

In the early 1980s, Colonel William Darryl Henderson, one of the most influential advocates of unit manning, warned that the Army was in such a perilous state that personnel stabilization was only one of many steps needed to shore up units' cohesion, which he deemed dangerously low. In a widely cited book, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat*, Henderson warned that a widespread softening in Army life, driven by changes in American society and the need to attract enlistees to an all-volunteer force, had dangerously undermined the Service's ability to form combat units that would be cohesive enough to be militarily effective against adversaries with grit. To forge sufficiently robust social bonds within a unit, Henderson contended, the character of barracks life also would have to be radically changed to more effectively isolate soldiers from distracting attachments to people or groups outside their units:

The US Army must move away from the utilitarian or econometric system presently used to attract and motivate soldiers. Instead, the US soldier must draw his primary motivation from within his unit and from his immediate leaders. Mess halls, barracks, and other facilities as well as numerous other practices and personnel policies must be decentralized and restructured to turn the soldier toward his unit as the primary source for satisfying his social and security needs in his day-to-day life.<sup>12</sup>

The Spartan regimen called for by Henderson is sharply at odds with the more permissive policies adopted by the Army and the other

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<sup>12</sup> William Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1985), p. 157. Henderson went on to head the Army Research Institute, the Service's human behavior research organization. In his book, Henderson analyzed four armies and concluded that North Vietnam did the best job of promoting small-unit cohesion, followed in order by Israel, the Soviet Union, and—far to the rear—the United States. He was writing just as the US Army was beginning to find its footing as an all-volunteer institution and while the NCO corps still was rebounding from the profoundly corrosive effects of the Vietnam War. Moreover, the Service had just emerged from a period (1977–81) during which, because of an error in scoring the standard examination taken by all recruits, it took in an unusually high proportion of enlistees of lower mental aptitude. This was associated with a sharp rise in disciplinary problems.

Services to attract and retain soldiers. Moreover, his alarmist rationale seems disconnected from the effective performance of US troops over a wide range of combat and stability missions in the two decades since his book appeared. Contrary to the thesis that stabilization is linked to high-quality performance, Army units have performed at a high standard despite a high rate of routine personnel turnover.

## THE CURRENT SYSTEM

By all accounts, personnel turbulence—a continual coming and going of members—is the peacetime norm for Army units. Through the course of a year, personnel of various ranks join the unit to replace departing members who leave for various reasons.<sup>13</sup> First-term soldiers come to the end of their enlistments (which are of varying duration) and either leave the Army or move to other, often more attractive assignments (sometimes as part of the package deal under which they reenlisted). Similarly, after a few years of service with one unit, most officers and NCOs are reassigned as well. Some start through the next in the long series of wickets comprising the Service's mid-career education system. Others move to a new assignment that will broaden their experience, thus—Army personnel policy long had assumed—furthering their professional development and preparing them for greater responsibilities in more senior positions. Still others move on to certain jobs that turn over at regular intervals, such as recruiting duty, liaison with Army Reserve and National Guard units, and service in South Korea where there is no provision for family members to accompany most Army personnel.

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<sup>13</sup> Any system aiming to stabilize membership in combat units will have to deal with the fact that (1) most of the “trigger-pullers” in combat units will leave active duty after a single enlistment of about three years' duration and (2) a tremendous amount of turmoil results simply from people entering and leaving the Service. For example, of nearly 280,000 “permanent change of station” moves in the Army during fiscal year 2001, about 60 percent were accounted for by the 86,043 new entrants moving to their first duty stations and the 85,241 soldiers leaving the Service who were moved to their home of record (Force Stabilization Decision Briefing for the Chief of Staff, Nov. 7, 2003).

In October 2002, Army Secretary Thomas E. White said that Army units based in the continental United States (CONUS) turned over, on average, 15 percent of their personnel every quarter.<sup>14</sup> That measure of “external” turbulence does not capture the many additional instances of “internal” turbulence, in which a soldier is transferred from one company or platoon to another within a larger unit. On top of these permanent transfers, units also routinely lose temporarily—at least for purposes of training for their combat mission—some personnel who are “borrowed” to perform administrative and maintenance chores at higher headquarters or at the post where the unit is stationed.

The upshot, according to many experienced officers and observers, is a level of turmoil that compromises both the ability of unit members to form bonds of trust and their ability to train together long enough to develop the teamwork needed to execute complex combat skills:

Very few platoons, battalions or divisions can progress in skill, intensity or complexity from one exercise to the next because, in the interval between training events, 5 or 10 percent (over a summer it may reach 33 percent) of the unit’s personnel have changed.<sup>15</sup>

The personnel system’s individual focus also results in the routine dissipation of the collective combat skills that units hone at the Army’s Combat Training Centers (CTCs), where battalions and brigades take on highly skilled opposition force units trained to fight as plausible adversaries might. These CTCs are the crown jewels of the revolution in training, begun in the late 1970s, which undergirded the Army’s climb from the depths to which it had sunk at the end of the Vietnam War, to the heights of lethal competence it had reached by the time of the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

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<sup>14</sup> Army Secretary Thomas E. White, Remarks to the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Association of the United States Army, Washington, DC, Oct. 21, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Tim Reese, US Army, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” *Armor*, May–June 2002, p. 8.

A hallmark of the CTCs is no-holds-barred feedback provided by trained observers to the training unit, both during the mock battles and at the end of the exercise, when the unit returns to its home base with a "take-home package" (THP) of recommendations for improvement. But in the months leading up to a unit's CTC exercise, routine personnel transfers—particularly for officers and NCOs in key leadership positions—typically are deferred so the unit can go into the wargame with a highly trained, cohesive team. The bill comes due as soon as the big event is over, when all the deferred moves kick in, leaving the unit to assimilate a large number of new personnel in key positions, rather than using the THP to build on an already established organizational foundation.

One battalion commander, quoted anonymously in a 1999 report by the General Accounting Office, describes what, apparently, is an all-too-typical situation:

Personnel turnover at the mid-grade and senior level NCO [levels] doesn't allow the unit to build a solid base. Assignments to Recruiting Command, AC/RC [active personnel supporting reserve component], Korea and US Army Europe (USAREUR), they all continue to eat away from your NCO experience within the battalion. The continuous drain of NCOs from the battalion after a CTC rotation decreases readiness and unit cohesion.<sup>16</sup>

At some point in their careers, of course, personnel must move on, thus disrupting established relationships both in the unit they leave and in the one they join. The question is whether the Army's normal personnel management processes should make a continual level of turbulence a routine fact of life that nibbles away at the readiness of all units. The planned shift to stabilized units is intended to keep most of the Army's brigades at a high state of readiness for about two and a half years at a time, during which routine personnel transfers would be deferred. At the end of each unit's three-year life-cycle (six months to organize followed by two and a half years in a

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *Military Readiness: Full Training Benefits From Army's Combat Training Centers Are Not Being Realized* (Washington, DC: General Accounting Office, September 1999), p. 1.

duty-ready status) it would stand down to be reconstituted while another unit—now at peak readiness for combat—takes its place.<sup>17</sup>

## THE ROAD TO COHORT

Between 1955 and 1975, the Army tried five plans for sustaining the permanent US garrisons in Germany and South Korea by rotating stabilized units from CONUS bases to those overseas sites. One goal was to improve *esprit de corps* in the units, and another was to reduce the cost of transfers overseas. Yet another was to reduce the large number of soldiers who, under the individual replacement system in effect, were in transit from one assignment to another at any one time rather than performing a mission. In general, these initiatives were dropped either because they proved administratively unworkable or because they incurred too high a cost in dollars or in readiness (since it took a month or two for a unit to get back into fighting trim after moving from the United States to an overseas billet).<sup>18</sup>

In 1979, when Gen. Meyer became chief of staff, some additional factors prompted another look at unit manning. First, the Service was in trouble, stressed by the corrosive effects of the Vietnam War and by the rocky transition to an all-volunteer model. Leaders feared the Service might not be able to field units capable of executing the Army's own doctrine and tactics:

In many units, cohesion was minimal. There were palpable hostility and real adversarial relationships

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<sup>17</sup> The issue raised by the usual rush of departures after a CTC rotation is whether the unit should, in effect, “stand down” just when it reaches its peak of training readiness. Under a unit-manning scheme, the unit would train to a peak of performance (which would be “certified” by some major training event, such as a CTC rotation) and then remain ready for deployment for an extended period before standing down, at which time its personnel could move on to other assignments.

<sup>18</sup> Lt. Gen. Robert M Elton, US Army (ret) in collaboration with Col. Joseph Trez, US Army (ret), “A Unit Manning System for the Objective force: Recommendations for Vital Changes in Army Manning Policies”, unpublished paper, Oct 7, 2002, Available from Task Force Stabilization website, [www.stabilization.army.mil/](http://www.stabilization.army.mil/)

across ranks. Many units offered little or no support to their members. In some units, soldiers died strangling on their own vomit following combined alcohol and drug use. They died in the sight of their fellows who uncaringly passed them by. In other units, NCOs and officers routinely referred to their soldiers as “scum bags” and “dirt balls.” Others announced that they had banned all family members from their company areas to avoid the exposure of women and children to “. . . the kind of animals I command.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition, Army leaders were coming to terms with the unexpectedly high incidence of combat stress casualties among Israeli forces during the 1973 Middle East War. The Israeli Defense Force had counted so heavily on their units’ high level of cohesion as a defense against the problem that they had no plans for treating such cases and returning these troops to duty. But the surprise, skill and violence of the Arab attack and the continuous high tempo of operations quickly rendered many Israeli soldiers, including veterans and leaders, incapable of functioning.<sup>20</sup>

To address this array of problems, Gen. Meyer launched the COHORT project under which recruits were organized during their initial entry training into companies of 100–180 soldiers. After initial training, these units were joined by cadres of officers and NCOs to form a maneuver company that remained intact for three years, after which it was dissolved. COHORT ultimately was abandoned for a variety of reasons discussed in Chapter 4 of this report. But one clear finding of the Army’s extensive in-house analysis of the program was that stabilizing the enlisted personnel of a unit did not necessarily

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<sup>19</sup> David H. Marlowe, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore P. Furukawa, US Army, Captain James E. Griffith, US Army, et al., *New Manning System Field Evaluation, Technical Report No. 1* (Washington, DC: Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Nov. 1, 1985), p. III-9 [hereinafter cited as WRAIR Technical Report No. 1].

<sup>20</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Larry H. Ingraham, US Army, and Maj. Frederick J. Manning, US Army, “Cohesion: Who Needs It, What Is It, and How Do We Get It To Them?” *Military Review*, June 1981, pp. 4–5. See also FM 22-51, *Leaders Manual for Combat Stress Control* (Headquarters, Department of the Army), pp. 1–5.

produce an effective unit, unless the troops were given leadership and training that took advantage of the stability.

## BEYOND THE COLD WAR

In the two decades after Gen. Meyer launched COHORT, the Army became a much more robust institution, recovering from the most corrosive effects of the Vietnam War and adapting to the exigencies of an all-volunteer system. Nevertheless, on several occasions, senior Army officials have reaffirmed their desire for greater unit cohesion and have explored the feasibility of moving to a unit-manning system for combat forces. Indeed, the Service adopted a unit-manning policy—on an *ad hoc* basis—in the months leading up to Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm (1990–91), Operation Enduring Freedom (2001–02), and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003).

In all three cases, the Army suspended the normal personnel churn by issuing so-called “stop-move” and “stop-loss” orders that froze in-place tens of thousands of personnel in designated specialties or designated units. Those actions testified eloquently to Army leaders’ recognition of the corrosive effect on units’ combat readiness of the turbulence caused by the individual-focused personnel system.<sup>21</sup>

As proof of what stabilization can accomplish, Army leaders tout the performance of 3rd Infantry Division, which was stabilized from the time it deployed to the Persian Gulf region in October 2002, about half a year before it stormed into Iraq:

When they finally hit the line of departure, Soldiers had confidence in how their teammates were going to react and fight....They had developed a special kind of

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<sup>21</sup> Commenting on the last of the eight stop-loss orders the Pentagon issued before the start of OIF, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel Lt. Gen. John M. LeMoyne said: “This new policy supports the stability and strengthens [the] unit cohesiveness and teamwork of deploying AC [active-duty] forces and will bolster the trust and confidence of our soldiers as they prepare to deploy.” Joe Burlas, “Latest stop-loss freezes soldiers in deploying units,” *Army News Service*, Feb. 24, 2003.

willingness to fight for each other, to risk death or severe wounds for their comrades that transcended all challenges. Their performance was magnificent. They rewrote the book on mechanized operations.<sup>22</sup>

But for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, unit-manning efforts were superimposed on a personnel system that remained, fundamentally, focused on individual career development rather than unit effectiveness. Shortly after President Bush's announcement on May 1, 2003, that "major combat operations" in Iraq had come to an end, the personnel system's routine, individual-centric nature reasserted itself. For instance, commanders of several units that had distinguished themselves in major combat were sent home to serve in previously scheduled reassignments, months before their units were redeployed to their home bases. Subsequently, the Army announced that it would not rotate commanders while their units are deployed overseas.<sup>23</sup>

The Army was slower to adjust its personnel rules for units deployed on peacekeeping or stability operations in the 1990s. During operations in Somalia in 1992–93, for example, the first Army battalion deployed lost so many men to routine transfers that the battalion commander disbanded one of the three platoons in each of the three rifle companies, spreading those soldiers around to fill vacancies in the remaining platoons.<sup>24</sup> By the late 1990s, when the

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<sup>22</sup> Army FSIP, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Vernon Loeb, "From the Front Lines to the Home Front," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 4, 2003, p. 23. In fiscal 1992, because of the backlog of transfers that had been deferred during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, the number of permanent transfers of active-duty personnel (technically called "permanent change of station" or PCS moves) was equal to roughly 75 percent of the Army's total, active-duty end-strength. W. Michael Hix, Herbert J. Shukiar et al., *Personnel Turbulence: The Policy Determinants of Permanent Change of Station Moves* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1998), p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Colonel Martin Stanton, US Army, *Somalia on \$5 a Day: A Soldier's Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), pp. 197–98. Stanton, then a major, was the operations officer of the unit, the 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment. The problem was exacerbated by a US government-imposed ceiling on the number of US troops sent to Somalia. Soldiers leaving Stanton's battalion were not replaced because their "spaces" under the ceiling were allocated to other units brought into the country for new missions.

Service began maintaining forces in the Balkans for an extended period, it began stabilizing units' personnel rosters for the duration of their deployments and deploying them for six months at a time.

However, because the personnel system remained focused on individuals rather than units, stabilizing the membership of even the handful of units deployed in Bosnia or Kosovo at any one time sent ripples of instability through many other units. Typically, 35–40 percent of the soldiers in a division tapped for deployment in the Balkans were unavailable for the following reasons:

- Roughly 4 percent could not have been deployed even under less restrictive wartime rules because of medical or other conditions.
- Roughly 20 percent were too close to their next scheduled reassignment or to the end of their period of enlistment. (Army policy barred the deployment of soldiers who could not remain in-country for at least 90 days and still return to their home station at least 45 days before a scheduled transfer or departure from the Service.)
- Roughly 15 percent could not be deployed because they had recently joined the division following a previous overseas deployment. (By policy, soldiers were not deployed within 12 months of returning from an overseas deployment.)

So before a unit deployed to the Balkans, it went through a “flush and fill” process: flushing out the nondeployable personnel from its ranks and filling the vacancies with deployable soldiers with the same skills drawn from other units. This had the effect of breaking up established small units, both in the brigade that was deploying and in other brigades from which the replacements were taken. For instance, in one case involving two tank battalions of the First Cavalry Division, 211 of their 528 armored vehicle crewmembers were nondeployable and had to be replaced with the same number of tank crew members drawn from other formations.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> J. Michael Polich and Ron Sortor, *Deployments and Army Personnel Tempo* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2001), pp. 46–48.

## HOW CERTAIN A FUTURE?

The Army's experience in the first decade of the post-Cold War era has combined with unfolding trends in military technology and the evolving security environment to shape the Service leadership's current vision of the future of land warfare. In that envisioned future—in contrast with its Cold War experience—the Army must be configured in lighter, more agile units that can deploy on very short notice on unforeseen missions on which, in more dispersed formations, they will conduct nonlinear operations at a very high tempo.<sup>26</sup>

Journal articles and officially sponsored studies speculating on the future of ground combat frequently argue that stronger unit cohesion—and the stabilization that is assumed to produce it—must be acquired quickly because the faster tempo of operations in years to come will impose much more stress on soldiers. Typical of the genre is an article in the March–April 2000 issue of *Military Review*, a journal published by the Army's Command and General Staff College, that listed “tomorrow's warfighting challenges” that would confront the soldier: “increased complexity” of the combat environment, “unparalleled speed and unrelenting tempo” of operations, “heightened physical and psychological isolation” from peers and leaders, and “unprecedented lethality” resulting from the greater range and precision of enemy weapons.<sup>27</sup>

But similar arguments had been made in 1981, at the outset of the COHORT experiment, when two Army psychologists asserted in a *Military Review* article that the increasing stress of future combat would require greater stability to bolster unit cohesion. They

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Transforming the Legions: The Army and the Future of Land Warfare* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2004), p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Antulio J. Echevarria II, US Army, and Maj. Jacob D. Biever, US Army, “Warfighting's Moral Domain,” *Military Review*, March–April 2000, pp. 3–6. Essentially identical assumptions about the increasingly stressful character of future combat routinely are built into Defense Department deliberations at very senior levels. See, for example, Defense Science Board Task Force on “Training for Future Conflicts: Final Report,” June 2003, p. 26, and Army Science Board 2001 Special Study, Final Report, “Manpower and Personnel for Soldier Systems in the Objective Force,” June 2001, p. 16.

predicted, among other things, that future wars might erupt with little warning so that units would have to be committed on very short notice, and that the sheer ferocity of combat would quickly subject troops to such terrible stress that many would crack under the strain.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, in the 23 years since the earlier article was published, conventional Army units have successfully prosecuted two major wars in the Persian Gulf region, a smaller combat operation in Panama, and stability and support operations in Somalia and the Balkans,<sup>29</sup> all without benefit of stabilized personnel in combat units.

To be sure, there have been some changes in the texture of combat that have crossed soldiers' psychological thresholds and triggered new and different reactions. One such instance seems to have been the increase in the tempo of mechanized combat between World War II and the Middle East War of 1973. During this period, the amount of time it took for troops to begin showing symptoms of debilitating combat stress dropped radically: "Until 1973, we believed a minimum of 25–30 days in the line was required to generate stress casualties, but, for the first time in their history, the Israelis encountered them within 24 hours."<sup>30</sup> But it is not clear *a priori* whether any given set of changes in the character or quantitative measures of combat intensity will trigger such changes in soldiers' reactions.

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<sup>28</sup> Ingraham and Manning, pp. 4–5. One element of these ominous forecasts about the future of warfare that has not materialized thus far is the prediction that come-as-you-are wars, requiring immediate deployment of a large ground combat force, would erupt out of the blue. A current version of this prediction is Army planners' contention that a large fraction of their force—not just a handful of "fire-brigade" units—must be ready to deploy along much shorter time lines in the future than were the norm during the Cold War. (Some Army documents refer to this as a shift from an "Alert-Train-Deploy" model to a "Train-Alert-Deploy" model.) This assumes both that the need will be there—which has not been the case heretofore—and that there will be enough strategic lift to quickly carry several United States-based divisions abroad—which there is not.

<sup>29</sup> Aside from the battle in Mogadishu on Oct. 2–3, 1993, Army units in Somalia and the Balkans were engaged in "stability and support" operations rather than combat. But in both cases, troops had to quickly improvise solutions to complex local situations under conditions of high uncertainty and nontrivial risk of attack by armed thugs.

<sup>30</sup> Ingraham and Manning, p. 4.

Moreover, there have been two profound changes in the Army since 1981 that have made it institutionally both more robust and more agile, and have helped the Service dominate recent adversaries without the presumed benefits of stabilization: One is the professionalization of the force rooted in the shift to an all-volunteer system;<sup>31</sup> the other is the revolution in training represented by the realistic experience provided by the CTCs. By 1989, Army battalions invading Panama were able to successfully execute novel missions under very restrictive rules of engagement, with most of the action being conducted at the squad level, frequently by units out of contact with higher headquarters—circumstances that should have been very stressful to the soldiers executing them. Although some of the battalions involved in Operation Just Cause were stabilized COHORT units, many of them were not. Army researchers reported that both types of units adapted to urban combat, constabulary and nation-building missions for which they had not been trained: “Their adaptability was not the product of rehearsals; it was the product of soldiers’ interest in military matters and pride in being competent—both of which energized participation in and absorption of general infantry training.”<sup>32</sup>

The ability of the Army’s garden-variety, non-elite line units to adapt to novel missions and circumstances in the conquest and pacification of Iraq suggests that, while planners should be alert to the possibility of radical change in the nature of future missions, they also should phrase their hypotheses in more explicitly conjectural terms. Nevertheless, the Army’s plan for transformation presumes that, to cope with the stress of unprecedentedly high tempo and lethality in future combat, units will need the enhanced cohesion that personnel stability is supposed to create.

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<sup>31</sup> Although conscription ended in 1973, the potential to recruit a quality force was not fully realized for well over a decade—the time it took for enlisted pay to reach respectable levels and for the Service to rebuild the NCO corps, which had been devastated by the Vietnam War.

<sup>32</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Farris R. Kirkland, US Army (Ret.), Morten G. Ender, Colonel Robert K. Gifford, US Army, Kathleen M. Wright, and David H. Marlowe, “The Human Dimension in Force Projection: Discipline Under Fire,” *Military Review*, March–April 1996, p. 62. It is particularly significant that these authors, all associated with the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, praised COHORT and non-COHORT units alike, as many of them were among the most ardent proponents of the COHORT project.

## ONE MORE TIME

To cope with the chaotic and lethal combat environment predicted by Army futurists, the Service has launched a far-reaching effort to reshape its combat units into a Future Force based on a radically novel suite of networked combat vehicles and sensors—the Future Combat System. To complement that technology, Army Secretary White announced in the fall of 2002 yet another attempt to organize the Service’s combat forces on unit-manning principles, billing it as “the human dimension” of the new force.

The payoff, White said, would be both improved cohesion and more well-honed teamwork:

Technology elevates America’s warriors, increasing operational capability, agility and knowledge, but it is the strong bonds of shared experience, mutual respect, common self-discipline, personal responsibility and judgment that are the lynchpin of this warrior culture. . . . Arguably, the more advanced our technology becomes, the more critical it is that we build and maintain stable teams to employ it. Otherwise, we risk collective stagnation at a basic level of proficiency because of a revolving door of individual replacements who leave units just as they begin to master these new technologies. . . . The goal is soldiers assigned and trained as a unit over a set time period as the way to achieve the highest degree of cohesion and readiness possible.<sup>33</sup>

In October 2003, shortly after beginning his tour as Army chief of staff, Gen. Schoomaker reaffirmed the drive toward unit manning, emphasizing that it would make life more predictable for soldiers and their families as the Service scrambled to cope with a seemingly unending string of open-ended contingency deployments. In July, 2004, he elaborated on his views in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee:

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<sup>33</sup> White, remarks to Association of the United States Army (AUSA); 2002 annual meeting, p. 11.

At a time when protracted conflict has become the norm, during which we will repeatedly deploy and employ major portions of our Army, . . . units will need to achieve and sustain a level of readiness far exceeding the ability of any individual manning system. The effects we seek are broad: continuity in training, stability of leadership, unit cohesion, enhanced unit effectiveness, and greater deployment predictability for soldiers and their families.<sup>34</sup>

Under the current unit-manning initiative—officially dubbed “Unit Focused Stabilization”—personnel completing their initial entry training will be assigned to a particular company for three years at a time. Personnel will rotate to another assignment only when the brigade combat team of which the company is a part comes to the end of its three-year life-cycle. The 172nd Infantry Brigade, one of the new “medium-weight” units equipped with the Stryker wheeled combat vehicle, was organized on this basis in the summer of 2003. Other brigades are slated to begin converting to the stabilized personnel model in fall 2004.

Some of the decisions that will be needed to implement Unit focused stabilization have been made. For example, in units that have been placed on a three-year life-cycle, soldiers generally will leave for schooling only at the end of the cycle, when the unit disbands. By the same token, if an NCO leaves a unit for medical, personal or legal reasons, a replacement usually will be promoted from within the unit. Since such departures typically average approximately 7 percent annually, stabilized units will get a “plug” of replacements once a year to make up for those losses.

But if unit manning is to become the steady-state norm for the Army’s combat units once the Iraq deployment surge has subsided, the Service will have to make several permanent changes in its individually oriented personnel management procedures. The Army’s Human Resources Command already has advised officers that long-established rules determining when and where an officer will be

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<sup>34</sup> Statement of Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, US Army, to the House Armed Services Committee hearing on “Army Transformation, Implications for the Future,” July 21, 2004.

transferred have been shelved, in deference to the priority Schoomaker has assigned to unit stability and cohesion. For instance, officers in the Armor Branch were notified of several changes in a January 2004 notice that concluded with the following:

We need your patience and a modification of your expectations to make this work smoothly. We have not, and never will forget that we are dealing with officers and families, and we are as committed as ever to provide you with professional career management. Remember, the personnel system supports the warfighter, and maximizing unit cohesion is our goal.<sup>35</sup>

Other changes will be needed to make personnel stabilization work, some of which are outside the realm of personnel management. For instance, much of the pressure on commanders at one echelon to shuffle personnel among subordinate units (thus disrupting established teams) stems from the current “readiness” measurement rules, which evaluate whether the unit has the prescribed number of soldiers in jobs for which they are qualified, but does not take into account how long they have been in those positions. The solution would seem to be a new readiness metric that counts both “percentage fill” and “personnel stability.”<sup>36</sup>

A unit-manning system also will pose more fundamental questions requiring the Army to trade off conflicting goods. On the one hand, locking officers and NCOs into a troop unit for three years at a time will enhance unit stability. But, on the other hand, by reducing soldiers’ control over their careers, the new policy may complicate recruitment and retention because it goes against the individualistic grain of contemporary American life.

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<sup>35</sup> Lt. Col. Damon C. Penn, US Army, “Armor Senior Leader Update, January 2004,” US Army Human Resources Command website <https://www.perscomonline.army.mil/OParmor/arnews.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> One such measure is outlined by Major Brendan B. McBreen, USMC, in an unpublished paper, “Improving Unit Cohesion: The First Step in Improving Marine Corps Infantry Battalion Capabilities,” May 23, 2002, pp. 19–24. The paper is available on the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines Infantry Training website [www.2ndbn5thmar.com](http://www.2ndbn5thmar.com).

By extending to three years the tenure of captains as company commanders, the new policy will satisfy widespread demands by junior officers for longer command tours. But it also will reduce the number of different slots an officer can hold over the course of his career, thus reversing a decades-long Army policy of encouraging career soldiers to gain broad-gauged experience of the service to prepare them for senior leadership positions. The toughest choices Army leaders face in implementing unit focused stabilization may be determining whether such trade-offs are so onerous that they warrant making exceptions to the general rule of locking personnel into a unit for three years at a time.

The early studies of German and US troop performance in World War II, which focused on stability as the key to cohesion and cohesion as the key to effectiveness, fostered a viewpoint that could tilt those judgments sharply against accepting departures from the principle of personnel stability. But, as the next section demonstrates, more recent analyses of the war suggest that stability, cohesion and effectiveness are much more loosely coupled than the earlier studies implied. According to the newer studies, basically sound American units under competent leadership were able to tolerate a relatively high rate of turnover and remain combat effective. The implication for current policy is that well-led, well-motivated units can accommodate *some* personnel turbulence and still be *effective enough* to win.

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## Chapter 2. World War II

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For decades, public discussion of unit stabilization has been heavily influenced by a widely held view of the relative effectiveness of US and German ground forces in World War II that exaggerated the importance of personnel stability as a determinant of combat effectiveness. In a nutshell, that interpretation held that:

- Although the *Wehrmacht* was done in, at last, by a combination of the sheer mass of the allies' arsenals and Hitler's incompetent meddling in military operations, German forces outmatched US counterparts on a unit-for-unit basis to an awesome degree;
- One key element in German forces' relative tactical superiority was a personnel system that fostered and preserved tightly knit primary groups resilient enough to sustain *Wehrmacht* units as coherent, effective formations under the most adverse circumstances; and
- By contrast, US units' relative ineffectiveness was rooted, partly, in a personnel system geared to administrative efficiency, which shuffled soldiers around without regard to their psychological need for identification with a "band of brothers"—dealing with

manpower, in the words of S.L.A. Marshall, “as if it were motor lubricant or sacks of potatoes.”<sup>37</sup>

Although that perspective, or something very much like it, remains a widely held point of view, it has been largely refuted in the past 15 years by a new generation of military historians, many of them professional soldiers. Common themes of this revisionist view are that:

- By mid-1944, the combat performance of *Wehrmacht* units (other than some elite formations) was much less competent than had been the case earlier in the war, and the stability-oriented personnel system had largely broken down;
- To the extent that German units continued to show remarkable tenacity on the battlefield, even as the war was being lost, the cause was not extraordinarily cohesive bonds within units but rather German authorities’ ruthless treatment of deserters and their systematic exploitation of ethnic prejudice and ideological hatred of the enemy—policies that would be utterly intolerable for US forces, even if they did improve battlefield performance; and
- Although the US Army’s system for dispatching individual replacement soldiers to front-line units was demoralizing to the troops who moved through it, many of the front-line units to which they were assigned were able to assimilate a steady—and rapid—flow of individual replacements and still show a high level of combat effectiveness.

This revised view is highly relevant to the Army’s evaluation of potential tradeoffs between stabilization and other facets of the current personnel system that may have to be sacrificed to maximize stability. The lesson of the new history of World War II is that the relationships among stability, cohesion, and combat effectiveness are sufficiently complex that the Army may be able to harvest most of the advantages of unit stabilization while tolerating a modest amount of personnel turnover that might be required for the sake of other desirable outcomes.

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<sup>37</sup> S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Gloucester, MA, Peter Smith, 1978), p. 155.

## THE STANDARD VIEW

For many scholars, the proof of the German Army's awesome fighting power was not so much the speed of its blitzkrieg victories before 1942, but rather the tenacity with which, in 1943–45, it resisted the Allies' advantages:

[It] was outnumbered three, five, even seven to one. Yet it did not run. It did not disintegrate. It did not frag its officers. Instead, it doggedly fought on. . . [I]ts units, even when down to 20 percent of their original size, continued to exist and to resist—an unrivalled achievement for any army.<sup>38</sup>

In the late 1970s, retired Army Col. Trevor N. Dupuy, a pioneer in the mathematical modeling of combat, developed a comprehensive case that German units consistently outperformed their Allied adversaries on the Western Front. Fitting data from 81 engagements fought in 1943–44 into a model that took into account each side's number of troops, whether they were attacking or defending, the terrain, the effect of air power, and other variables, Dupuy concluded that Germans typically produced 20 percent more fighting power, man for man, than the US and British forces they opposed.<sup>39</sup>

While conceding that Nazi indoctrination and German culture may have contributed to this combat prowess, leading proponents of this view highlight the *Wehrmacht's* attentiveness to the human dimension of military power. In the words of historian Martin van

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<sup>38</sup> Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance, 1939–45* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, US Army (Ret), *Numbers, Predictions and War* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979), p. 59. Aside from that analysis based on the system of equations comprising his model of combat, Dupuy also argued that the data from 78 battles showed that, man for man, Germans typically inflicted half again as many casualties as did US and British soldiers. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German General Staff, 1807–1945* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), pp. 336–43.

Crevelde: “The German Army, in other words, was built around the needs, social and psychological, of the individual fighting man.”<sup>40</sup>

The instruments through which those needs were met, the argument goes, were units at the lowest echelon that held together for extended periods and in which the nearly familial quality of the social bond was reflected in the tradition of junior officers addressing their men as “Kinder” (literally, “children”). According to a 1948 study by sociologists Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz based on interrogations of German POWs—the canonical data source for this school of analysis—the power of those primary group ties was so great that, even in the last month of the war, many who deserted said they had been able to take that step only after obtaining the approval of comrades they were leaving behind.<sup>41</sup>

Particularly significant, from this perspective, was the German system for replacing casualties in a unit. Each division drew its replacements from a specific battalion in one of Germany’s military districts (or *Wehrkreise*), giving inductees a sense of institutional identification and giving the division an incentive to staff the intake battalion with talented officers and NCOs who would train the recruits. After recruits received basic training, they were conducted by officers of the division in organized groups to the front, where they received additional training from officers and NCOs of the division. Whenever possible, replacements were integrated into a division while it was temporarily rotated out of the front lines to be replaced by another division, a process that was facilitated by the large number of divisions the German Army fielded during the war.

The strength of the German system was that, from the initial induction of a recruit into military service, the individual was forced to identify with a unit. From basic training in the *Wehrkreise* through final training in the rear echelon replacement battalion, a soldier belonged. He was with soldiers from his home area, and he identified with his regiment or division throughout his military service. Thus, the German

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<sup>40</sup> van Crevelde, p. 165.

<sup>41</sup> Shils and Janowitz, p. 286.

system created for the soldier a strong and viable social group and, more importantly, a combat group.<sup>42</sup>

For its part, the US Army trained divisions and deployed them overseas as coherent units. But, as the ground force expanded from 23 divisions in active service at the end of 1940 to nearly four times that number by the end of 1943, experienced officers and NCOs were stripped out of some divisions to provide cadres for new divisions and replacements for units already in action that had taken casualties.<sup>43</sup> The result was a continual churning of personnel as some were reassigned to units with higher priority, particularly as units were deploying from US ports in 1944 for the assault into France. For example, one internal Army review of a group of four divisions with a total of 52,000 men found that, between March and September of 1944, more than 27,000 soldiers were transferred out of the four units and more than 39,000 were transferred in.<sup>44</sup>

More problematic than the process by which divisions were formed up was the process by which the Army dispatched casualty replacements to the divisions already in combat. Even official Army sources acknowledged that this system was profoundly debilitating, partly because of its utter disregard of soldiers' need for a sense of identification with the comrades alongside whom they would go into battle. After completing basic training, individuals were moved to the front through a series of "replacement depots"—derisively nicknamed "repple depples"—from which they were distributed to front-line units as the need arose. As many as four or five months could elapse between the time a soldier left his basic training center and his arrival at his new unit. Typically, this included long intervals of sitting around in depots that were interrupted by movement forward in open trucks and railroad freight cars. All the while, the soldiers' physical condition,

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<sup>42</sup> Major Samuel J. Newland, Army National Guard, "Manning the Force German-Style," *Military Review*, May 1987, p. 41. See also van Creveld, pp. 62–79.

<sup>43</sup> Robert R. Palmer et al., *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington, DC: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1948), p. 492.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 597.

combat skills, and morale atrophied.<sup>45</sup> The negative assessment of the system by an Army review panel after the war is typical of most historians' judgments:

Generally, [replacements'] morale and efficiency deteriorated steadily from the time they entered the flow until they reached their unit of final assignment. . . . In short, the individual replacement stream was but a mass of bewildered individuals, each lacking the sense of belonging that members of a unit normally possess.<sup>46</sup>

The standard view is that, because the Army fielded only 89 divisions during the war, it did not have enough units in most theaters to periodically rotate each division out of the front line to rest the veterans and give newly assigned replacements time to find their footing.<sup>47</sup>

To be sure, some Army leaders tried to ameliorate the strain this system placed on individual soldiers. For instance, within the Army staff, there were proposals to add a fourth regiment to the three that comprised each infantry division so that each regiment in turn could be rotated to a rear area for rest and reconstitution while the other three remained in combat. But these proposals were rejected on the grounds that field commanders would not resist the temptation to use

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<sup>45</sup> Dr. Robert S. Rush of the Army's Center for Military History maintains that such extended transit times would have been more typical of soldiers in supporting arms than of infantrymen. E-mail from Robert S. Rush, February 12, 2004.

<sup>46</sup> Replacement Board, Department of the Army, *Worldwide World War II Replacement System* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, September 1947), pp. 10–12. Quoted in Elton and Trez, pp. 3–4.

<sup>47</sup> van Creveld, p. 90. Though that was the general rule for US divisions in France and Germany during 1944–45 in Italy, Fifth Army commander Lt. Gen. Mark Clark improvised a system of rotating divisions out of the front lines at intervals to rest, retrain, and assimilate replacements (Brown, pp. 151–153).

the new units in the line rather than having a quarter of their units perennially out of action.<sup>48</sup>

The bottom line regarding the US Army, in the conventional view, is that its combat performance was inferior to the *Wehrmacht's* on a unit-for-unit basis and that an important factor contributing to that result was an individual replacement system that strongly inhibited the formation of cohesive units.

## THE REVISIONIST VIEW

A growing body of historical research since the late 1980s has challenged the conventional view, propounded by Dupuy, van Creveld, and others, that the *Wehrmacht's* unit-focused personnel system helped make it more capable than the individual-focused system of the US Army. Comparison of the two forces is difficult because, in 1942–43, while the untested US Army was coping with rapid expansion and gaining combat experience, the German Army already was battle-hardened. On the other hand, when the US force was reaching its stride in 1944–45, the Germans were reeling under years of hammering by Soviet forces on the Eastern Front and by Allied air power that was almost unchallenged over the Western Front's battlefields. But the new generation of analysts has focused on battles and campaigns in which, they insist, the two sides were matched evenly enough to allow a meaningful comparison.

One of the first major studies of the new school, appearing in 1986, was John Sloan Brown's analysis of the 88th Division which, while it was being mobilized, avoided most of the raids on its personnel that disrupted other newly forming divisions and which compiled an enviable combat record in Italy.<sup>49</sup> In an appendix, Brown

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<sup>48</sup> Palmer et al., pp. 228–31; Peter R. Mansoor, *The G.I. Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941–45* (Lawrence, KY: University Press of Kansas, 1999), p. 254.

<sup>49</sup> John Sloan Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1986). Brown, currently a Brigadier General, is the Army's chief of military history. His grandfather, Maj. Gen. John E. Sloan, had been the division's first wartime commanding

challenged Dupuy's mathematical model of combat, arguing that the equations exaggerated the advantages of US airpower and artillery (thus understating the combat effectiveness of the ground troops) and understated the advantages Germany units enjoyed by being on the defensive in 65 of the 78 battles included in Dupuy's analysis.<sup>50</sup>

Many others have followed. Mark Reardon chronicled the 30th Infantry Division's effectiveness in fending off an effort by parts of four panzer divisions to unhinge the Allied breakout from Normandy.<sup>51</sup> Keith Bonn examined the US Seventh Army's successful campaign in the Vosges Mountains of Alsace late in 1944 where, he argued, the paucity of US air power and the formidable combination of rough terrain and heavily fortified defenses occupied by German troops put the two sides on an equal footing.<sup>52</sup> Michael Doubler found in the Army's drive across France and into Germany an impressive display of adaptability, as GIs learned how to root out German defenders from hedgerows, city blocks, and massive fortifications.<sup>53</sup> Robert Rush, a retired command sergeant major, chronicled in meticulous detail the 22nd Infantry Regiment's grueling slog through the Hürtgen Forest on the Belgian-German border, about a month

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general. Although it escaped disruption while it was being trained in the United States, the division made up its personnel losses through the standard, individual replacement system while overseas.

<sup>50</sup> Brown, pp. 168–75. According to Dupuy's quantitative analysis, the 88th Division ranked as the most capable Allied division covered by that study, rating as nearly half again as effective as the average Allied unit. In an article published a year after Brown's book (which the article does not cite), Dupuy argued that the 88th's superior performance was a result of the extraordinary leadership of the two generals who commanded the unit during the war, particularly Sloan, who directed its organization and training. Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, US Army, Retired, and Gay Hammerman, "The 88th Infantry Division and Combat Excellence," *Military Review*, October 1987, pp. 68–79.

<sup>51</sup> Mark J. Reardon, *Victory at Mortain: Stopping Hitler's Panzer Counteroffensive* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

<sup>52</sup> Keith E. Bonn, *When the Odds Were Even: The Vosges Mountains Campaign, October 1944–January 1945* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994).

<sup>53</sup> Michael D. Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944–1945* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

before the German's Ardennes offensive in late December 1944, which launched the Battle of the Bulge.<sup>54</sup>

Peter Mansoor's comprehensive review of the performance of US infantry divisions in Europe, published in 1999, summed up the common theme of these revisionist studies of US combat effectiveness: "By the late summer of 1944, the Army had largely overcome its handicaps and had reached a high level of military effectiveness—superior to that of its enemies."<sup>55</sup>

The significance of all this for current policy is in countering decades of overemphasis on stability as a source of combat effectiveness. The point is not to argue against significantly increasing the stability of maneuver units but, rather, to establish that a certain amount of instability—indeed, a much greater turnover rate than normally would occur in peacetime—can be managed effectively while retaining combat effectiveness. While it is the reevaluation of US units that makes this point, it is worthwhile to survey briefly the revisionist assessments of German troop performance because the earlier view—that German units were extremely effective partly because they were very highly stabilized—retains great influence over discussions of the unit-manning policy.

**The *Wehrmacht* Revisited:** The newer school argues that, by the time US forces broke out of Normandy in the summer of 1944, German units' vaunted cohesion had broken down and, moreover, that such cohesion as the Germans showed had much less admirable causes than comradely loyalty. For example, Rush cites US intelligence analyses of thousands of German soldiers' letters to folks back home that were captured by Allied units advancing through France and Belgium to argue that the *Wehrmacht* force that fell back to the Siegfried Line was "a hodgepodge of intermixed and broken units." According to Rush, the letters also show that the German force was riven by soldiers' resentment that their own senior officers had abandoned them in the field and that other generals had tried to

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Sterling Rush, *Hell in Hurtgen Forest: The Ordeal and Triumph of an American Infantry Regiment* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> Mansoor, p. 14.

assassinate Hitler.<sup>56</sup> Except for the elite panzer and SS divisions, Rush maintains, the German replacement system by this time was reduced to sending forward those who were too old, too sickly, or too young or who heretofore had sat out the war in rear-echelon units.<sup>57</sup>

By this stage of the war, Rush says, German replacement troops typically were given an abbreviated training course that focused on a specific task, such as driving a truck or running a radio link, greatly limiting their battlefield effectiveness. Nor could German units in the line any longer be rotated to the rear for systematic rest and reconstitution, he argues:

The very extended frontages exacerbated the frailty of primary group cohesion, and neither the officers nor the men belonging to the same unit got to know one another well. Intermingled as they were, there was very little chance of cohesion at [any level] higher than soldiers possibly huddled together in the same position.<sup>58</sup>

Historian Omer Bartov argues that the German system broke down even earlier in the East because of the Reich's staggering losses on the Russian Front. By November 1941, only five months after Hitler

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<sup>56</sup>Rush, *Hell in Hürtgen Forest* p. 46, fn. 2. Rush contends that there is no reason to assume that the captured letters were written by individuals who were predisposed to surrender to the Allies; therefore, they more faithfully reflect German morale than do the prisoner-of-war (POW) interviews that were the basis of the Shils and Janowitz study.

Omer Bartov is particularly skeptical of taking at face value the POWs' denial of Nazi sympathies: "These men could hardly be expected to reply sincerely to questions posed by their interrogators regarding their commitment to a regime and ideology deemed criminal by the enemy. . . ." Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> An encyclopedic handbook on the German military, published by the US Army in March 1945, detailed changes in the replacement system during the war, including the breakdown of the linkage between units in the field and particular regions in Germany. US War Department, *Handbook on German Military Forces* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), pp. 58–68. (This is a reprint of the original 1945 publication.)

<sup>58</sup> Rush, *Hell in Hürtgen Forest*, pp. 304–08.

invaded the Soviet Union, infantry units in the three-million-man German force had lost 50 percent of their manpower from combat and noncombat causes. The *Wehrmacht* attempted to preserve primary-group ties by preserving divisions that had been depleted by battle, but it used most of its replacement troops to create new divisions—a policy that failed dismally, Bartov says:

In practice, whereas the “primary groups” were destroyed by casualties, the replacements that did arrive were too heterogeneous to make possible the formation of new “primary groups” and too few to make these veteran divisions once more militarily effective. . . . It eventually had the effect of demoralizing the men at the front, for though numerically greatly diminished, these formations retained their old designations and were consequently given tasks far beyond their present abilities.<sup>59</sup>

How, then, can we account for the Germans’ tenacity? Some of the more recent historical studies argue that, insofar as small *Wehrmacht* units *did* hang together and keep fighting hard in a clearly losing cause, it was because of three factors that render the German model unworkable or unacceptable as a model for US policy:

- First, some analysts contend that Germans are (or were, half a century ago) culturally predisposed to relatively intimate, communal relationships that most Americans would find suffocatingly restrictive.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Bartov, p. 38.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Bassford, “Cohesion, Personnel Stability and the German Model,” *Military Review*, Oct. 1990, pp. 73–81. Interestingly, Shils and Janowitz included such an argument in their 1948 analysis that is the polestar of those who assert the Germans’ combat superiority. Although they relegated the cultural factor to a supporting role in their overall argument that small-unit cohesion was the key to the *Wehrmacht’s* effectiveness, the two American scholars described this putative German characteristic in very powerful terms: “Domination by higher authority was eagerly accepted by most ordinary [German] soldiers, who feared that if they were allowed to exercise their initiative, their *innere Schweinhunde*, i.e., their own narcissistic and rebellious impulses, would come to the fore” (Shils and Janowitz, p. 293).

- Second, German soldiers' tenacity was rooted partly in anti-communist ideology and partly in ethnic prejudice. More than a decade ago, Bartov drew on letters and diaries captured by Soviet forces, official reports and other sources to argue that, on the Eastern Front, where the vast majority of Germany troops fought, elements of Nazi ideology were widely held and deeply believed among the *Wehrmacht* rank-and-file. In particular, he argues, German propaganda fostered a dehumanized view of the Soviet adversary that tapped into anti-Slav, anti-Semitic and anti-Bolshevik sentiments that were widely held in the German populace. The proof, Bartov contends, is that German soldiers on the West Front were much more likely to surrender—less likely to fight “to the last ditch”—than were their compatriots facing Soviet troops.<sup>61</sup>
- Third, German soldiers were compelled to stay with their units, even against hopeless odds, by a draconian system of military justice that was especially ruthless in dealing with desertion or crimes against the state. On the Eastern Front alone, 15,000 soldiers were executed during the war for “indiscipline, defeatism

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<sup>61</sup> Bartov, pp. 33–35. Here again, Shils and Janowitz acknowledged the importance of ideology in motivating German soldiers, even though they then relegated it to a secondary role in their analysis: “The stability and military effectiveness of the military primary group were in large measure a function of the [Nazi] ‘hard core,’ who approximated about ten to fifteen percent of the enlisted men; the percentage was higher for non-commissioned officers and was very much higher for junior officers” (Shils and Janowitz, p. 286).

The two sociologists also reported that a phobia toward Russia loomed large in the prisoners' worldview, even though they had surrendered on the Western Front: “The question of Russians was so emotionally charged, so much the source of anxiety, that it is quite likely that fear of the Russians did play a role in strengthening resistance. National Socialist propaganda long had worked on the traditional repugnance and fear of the German toward the Russian” (Ibid. p. 301). They also reported that Nazi propaganda aimed at German soldiers played on these same fears, emphasizing the phrase, “*Sieg oder Siberien*” (“Victory or Siberia”), and warning that the western Allies would turn their prisoners over to the Russians (Ibid. p. 310). Indeed, they reported that, in the last three years of the war, rumors swept through the *Wehrmacht* that the Russians were castrating German prisoners (Ibid. p. 292).

or dereliction of duty.”<sup>62</sup> In the West, the power to administer capital punishment was devolved down to the level of regimental commanders in Sept. 1944, with those officers empowered to order immediate execution of the death penalty if needed to maintain discipline.<sup>63</sup>

So one aspect of the revisionist perspective on World War II is that the German Army may not have been all that socially cohesive and, to the extent that it was, the methods that made it so would be repugnant to the American polity. On balance, Mansoor concluded, if one considered the German and US armies at their respective peaks—the Germans just before the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, and the Americans at the end of the European war—they were evenly matched. But he added an important coda: “The Army of the United States reached its zenith of combat effectiveness without the extensive ideological indoctrination and fear-based discipline that infused many German units with their will to fight.”<sup>64</sup>

**GIs Reappraised:** The revisionists echo the established view that the US Army’s replacement system left soldiers demoralized, out of condition, and confused by the time they joined a front-line unit. Stephen Ambrose was not much more extreme than most historians of any school in his statement that the German Army could not have designed a system that would have done the Americans more harm and the Germans more good.<sup>65</sup> But the more recent studies highlight various actions taken by front-line US commanders to compensate for the replacement system’s deleterious effect once the replacements arrived at the units in which they would serve.

To be sure, there are all too many quite credible reports of disoriented replacements climbing out of a truck at the front and being sent immediately into combat—typically in a crisis—before they either

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> Rush, *Hell in Hürtgen Forest*, p. 107.

<sup>64</sup> Mansoor, p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The US Army From the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 277.

knew or were known by the soldiers to either side of them.<sup>66</sup> But some Army leaders did recognize the system's grave shortcomings and tried to correct for them. Beginning in late 1944, for example, billets and recreation facilities at the replacement centers were improved as was the transportation provided to the replacements, who were officially referred to as "reinforcements" in hopes that would boost their morale. Training programs also were instituted at some depots.<sup>67</sup>

There also were more radical proposals to improve the system. For instance, in early 1945, the commanding general of Army Ground Forces, General Joseph W. Stillwell, recommended that replacements be sent forward from US training bases already organized into squads or platoons and preassigned to a specific division, in hopes of delivering to front-line units teams of men already trained to work with each other as a unit. That proposal was rejected, but the European Theater agreed that replacements would travel from the United States in groups of four, which would be assigned to front-line units as intact groups. The war ended before the effect of this decision could be assessed.<sup>68</sup>

Apart from those efforts to reform the system, many of the front-line divisions took initiatives on their own that had a positive impact during the last year or so of the war. Most important, many divisions created training centers to give replacements some refresher training after they got to the combat zone and to make them feel part of the unit to which they had been assigned. Not all divisions did this, and there was considerable variation among those that did. For instance, the 83rd Infantry Division gave all replacement troops two and a half days of refresher training. The 104th Infantry Division commanded by Major General Terry de la Mesa Allen—a charismatic leader who believed in hard training—ran a 12-day course for replacements that emphasized weapons firing, squad-level tactics, and night maneuvers, among other topics. Perhaps as important as the information

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<sup>66</sup> John Ellis, *The Sharp End: The Fighting Man in World War II* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), pp. 302–06.

<sup>67</sup> Doubler, pp. 247–48.

<sup>68</sup> Palmer et al., pp. 230–31.

conveyed was the considerable time it afforded for replacements to quiz their instructors about what combat was like:<sup>69</sup>

By treating soldiers arriving in the division fairly and with respect, the division training center went a long way to ensuring that replacements would integrate smoothly into their new units.<sup>70</sup>

These efforts to remedy the obvious problems caused by the replacement system were belated and varied widely in quality. Nevertheless, the Army's extensive surveys of soldiers' attitudes, led by sociologist Samuel Stouffer, suggest that most replacements fit into their new outfits relatively quickly. Asked how long it was before they felt they really belonged, 14 percent said "after the first day," 33 percent "after a few days," and 18 percent "after the first week."<sup>71</sup> The studies did not examine what kind of formal reception program the replacements had experienced in their new units. Some of the Stouffer data suggests that soldiers already in a unit were quicker to accept a smaller group of newcomers than a larger one.<sup>72</sup>

**Summary and Implications.** On balance, the record of German and US forces in World War II provides little support for unit manning. The German replacement system designed to foster cohesion had largely broken down by 1944–45 (and possibly earlier on the Eastern Front). The tenacity that German units displayed was rooted, to a considerable degree, in cultural factors that are not present in American society and in ethnic hatred and draconian discipline that would be intolerable in US forces. Moreover, time and

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<sup>69</sup> Doubler, pp. 252–53; Even van Creveld, one of the Army's harshest critics, acknowledged the value of a well-run replacement reception and training program, singling out as a model the program run by the 79th Infantry Division. van Creveld, p. 78.

<sup>70</sup> Mansoor, p. 253.

<sup>71</sup> Samuel A. Stouffer, Edward A. Suchman, Leland C. De Vinney, et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath*. Vol. II, in *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II*. 4 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949) p. 280.

<sup>72</sup> Edward A. Shils, "Primary Groups in the American Army," in *Continuities in Social Research: Studies in Scope & Method of "The American Soldier,"* (Glencoe, IL:Free Press, 1950), p. 31.

again US Army units kept fighting effectively for months, all the while assimilating a steady flow of individual replacements to offset losses resulting from combat, illness and accidents.<sup>73</sup> This implies that, though personnel stability is one way to foster cohesion, it is not the sovereign factor.

Rush, who analyzed in meticulous detail the grueling battle in Germany's Hürtgen Forest won by the 4th Division's 22nd Regiment in November 1944, contends that an array of influences can motivate a group of soldiers to hang together and fight effectively in the most wretched circumstances:

While the primary group counts, the traditional idea of long service together in itself is not necessary. Rather, cohesion is instead sustained by a common aim and common circumstances. Although some of these aims and circumstances are local and deal with the problems of the moment—weather, terrain and being shot at—others are not, such as the common aim for World War II GIs of defeating the Nazis and the Japanese and believing the cause for which they were fighting.<sup>74</sup>

In any case, the World War II experience may be of limited relevance to contemporary personnel policy debates. The US Army then had been rapidly expanded, largely with draftees, to fight a total war. Today's all-volunteer force is much more professional and benefits from a revolution in military training that can give US units a uniquely honed fighting edge.

Stabilization may yield measurable advantages, if only in first-battle competence.<sup>75</sup> But the record of German and US performance in

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<sup>73</sup> Of the 42 infantry divisions that saw combat in the European Theater, 18 incurred more casualties in 1944–45 than there were men in the division at one time. The most extreme case, the 4th Division, lost 35,545 soldiers, which amounted to 252 percent of its strength. Mansoor, pp. 251–52.

<sup>74</sup> Rush, *Hell in Hürtgen Forest*, p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Unless the Army adopts the World War II German model of leaving a unit in combat without replacing casualties until it becomes too small to be effective,

World War II does not prove the case. Moreover, the fact that many US units remained combat-effective despite the individual replacement system suggests that, if the Army proceeds with the stabilization policy, it can be flexible in applying the principle. So, if the cost of comprehensive stability in units is too high, it seems likely that some degree of managed turnover can be accepted, with little loss of cohesion or combat performance.

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combat replacements will begin disrupting the established cohesion after the first battle.



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## Chapter 3. Korea and Vietnam

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Proponents of unit manning also have invoked the Army's experience in the Korea and Vietnam wars—particularly the latter—to support their case. In each war, they argue, the Army's morale and combat effectiveness were sapped by the fact that individual soldiers rotated into combat units for a fixed period and then returned to the United States, thus causing continual personnel turnover and precluding the formation of cohesive units. In fact, however, the implications for unit manning of the US experience in Korea and Vietnam are more complex and validate two key conclusions of this report. First, a certain amount of personnel turbulence, properly managed, evidently can be accommodated by effective combat units; second, a unit's combat effectiveness depends on many factors, some of which—such as the quality of small-unit leadership—may be more important than personnel stability in a given situation.

In comparison with the policies followed during World War II, the Army's personnel system focused even more sharply on individuals than on cohesive units during large-scale US combat operations in Korea (1950–53) and Vietnam (1965–72). Once US Army (and Marine Corps) units were deployed to those theaters, they were sustained by individual replacements, as had been the case during World War II. But in addition to replacing casualties on an individual basis, the system aimed at reducing the incidence of psychiatric casualties caused by “combat stress” by limiting the duration of any individual soldier's exposure to the battlefield environment. In each of the later

wars, personnel routinely were transferred from units in the combat theater to units back home after periods that ranged between 6 and 18 months.<sup>76</sup>

**Combat Stress.** The decisions to limit soldiers' time in the combat theater during the Korean and Vietnam wars were based on the Army's analysis in the late 1940s of the incidence of psychiatric casualties in World War II. Service leaders concluded that, in future conflicts, the duration of any soldier's exposure to combat should be limited in order to reduce the number of troops who broke down emotionally under the stress of combat.<sup>77</sup> Apart from the obvious humanitarian issue, driving soldiers to the point of emotional collapse was tactically counterproductive, as they would become sometimes careless, sometimes unduly cautious, sometimes listless but, generally, incapable of pulling their weight in a combat situation, which thus increased the risk of unit casualties and mission failure.

One study of units in the Normandy campaign concluded that soldiers typically began showing signs of "emotional exhaustion" after 40–45 *consecutive* days of combat. Another study found that infantrymen in North Africa tended to break down after experiencing a *cumulative total* of 200–240 days in combat. There was a similar pattern in divisions fighting in Italy, where the rate of psychiatric breakdown was much higher among soldiers who had spent nine months or more in the combat theater.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Most famously, Army personnel in Vietnam were given a DEROS (Date of Expected Return from Overseas) precisely 12 months after the day they arrived in the country. Marines had a 13-month time limit in Vietnam. During the Korean War, the time limit varied and, for a time, was based on a formula that counted service in a front-line unit as more stressful than service in rear areas.

<sup>77</sup> Called "shell shock" or "psychoneurosis" during World War I, the phenomenon usually was referred to officially as "combat fatigue" during World War II, a term that remained in use through the Vietnam War years.

<sup>78</sup> Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea & Vietnam*, (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2003) p. 161; Lieutenant Colonel U.P. Williams, US Army, "They May Not Die, But They Wither Fast," *Military Review*, July 1950, pp. 16–23.

## KOREA

In Korea, the Army used the same basic system of individual replacements it had used in 1944–45 as US forces slugged their way across France and into Germany, but with three important changes:

- Beginning in 1952, replacements were sent overseas in “packets” of four men who had been together during basic training and who were to be assigned to the same platoon. This was intended to prevent the demoralizing sense of isolation that had afflicted World War II replacements as they made their way to the front.
- After the front line stabilized in 1951, most divisions organized programs to receive new soldiers and leaders, integrate them into the organization, and teach them the ropes. There were cases—particularly in the first year of the war—in which commanders in desperate straits threw green replacements right into the meat-grinder of high-intensity combat. But once the contending forces stalemated, US units routinely rotated their components out of the front line to rest, refit and assimilate replacements.<sup>79</sup>
- Individual soldiers were rotated back to United States-based units after some stipulated period of exposure to combat. That time limit was changed more than once during the war and, for a period beginning in fall 1951, was based on a formula that awarded more credit toward rotation for time served in front-line units than for time in the rear areas.

The idea of rotating intact units through the theater surfaced from time to time, but was never adopted.<sup>80</sup> Gen. Matthew Ridgeway, who replaced Gen. Douglas MacArthur as theater commander in April 1951, opposed the periodic replacement of one unit with another on grounds that it would be inefficient and would deprive green troops of the benefit of advice from fighting alongside soldiers who already had

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<sup>79</sup> Kindsvatter, p. 73.

<sup>80</sup> The following two paragraphs are based on Robert S. Rush, “The Individual Replacement System: Good, Bad or Indifferent? Army Replacement Policy, Cold War and Before,” 2003 International Biennial Conference on the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, Chicago, Ill., October 26, 2003, pp. 18–19.

gotten a feel for the adversary, the climate, and the terrain. Similarly, Lt. Gen. James Van Fleet, who succeeded Ridgeway as commander of the Eighth Army, maintained that a monthly turnover of 30,000 troops would boost morale at no cost to combat effectiveness, provided the replacements were well trained.

When Ridgeway was succeeded in 1952 by Gen. Mark Clark—who, as commander of Allied forces in Italy during World War II, had had enough units at his disposal to rotate divisions in and out of combat—Clark recommended a shift to unit rotation in Korea. But Army personnel managers concluded that the process of building new units to replace those currently on the line would tie up more men than could be spared, so the plan was not tried.

Some senior officers were ambivalent about the individual rotation policy. In one Senate hearing, Army Chief of Staff Gen. J. Lawton Collins warned that if soldiers knew the specific date on which they would rotate home, they would lose their combat edge as that date drew near. Collins hoped to preserve some discretion for commanders in the field by not locking the Service into a precise formula that would allow an individual soldier to calculate to the day when he would be sent home (as became the norm in Vietnam). But he and other skeptics conceded that the policy was too popular to be reversed.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, the so-called “short-timer’s syndrome”—the tendency of soldiers nearing the end of their time at the front to become very cautious—was in evidence in Korea, though it became commonplace in Vietnam.<sup>82</sup>

But some students of the Korean War Army insist that the fixed individual rotation date actually was a plus for the Army. According to this analysis, a soldier’s knowledge that he would be transferred out of the combat zone after a reasonable period was essential to maintaining morale after China’s intervention in late 1950 ruled out any realistic prospect of either total victory or significant progress toward a geographically identifiable goal:

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<sup>81</sup> James H. Toner, “American Society and the American Way of War: Korea and Beyond,” *Parameters*, Vol. XI, No. 1, pp. 85–86.

<sup>82</sup> Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 284; Kindsvatter, p. 91.

The goals of containing Communism and saving South Korea had thus been achieved; but total victory, meaning the defeat of North Korea and reunification of the country, was out of the question. Further fighting, therefore, struck the GI as senseless. Geographical measures of victory no longer mattered—the mission was simply to hold in place. . . . Thus the GI, much like the grunt in post-Tet Vietnam, came to see personal survival until his rotation date as the only goal of any importance.<sup>83</sup>

The emotional anchorage provided by a date for rotation out of the fray was all the more important during the Korean War because, in the main, the troops derived scant satisfaction either from enthusiastic popular support back home or from identification with those whose freedom they were fighting to save:

The Korean War GI not only resented what he believed was an insufficient effort by the [South Korean] Army, but he also came to resent the lack of support from the home front. Americans never displayed the antiwar sentiment that they did during the Vietnam War, but neither did they exhibit much enthusiasm for the “forgotten” war nor appreciation for the sacrifices of the GIs.<sup>84</sup>

## VIETNAM

In Vietnam, the Korean War policy of limiting the duration of any soldier’s exposure to combat was carried forward, with one significant change: There was no effort to take account of an individual’s proximity to combat, as was done—for a time—in Korea. With few exceptions, Army personnel assigned to units in Vietnam left the

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<sup>83</sup> Kindsvatter, p. 152; Roger W. Little, “Buddy Relations and Combat Performance,” in *The New Military: Changing Patterns of Organization*, ed. Morris Janowitz (New York, NY: Russell Sage, 1964), pp. 220–21.

<sup>84</sup> Kindsvatter, p. 153.

country a year to the day after they arrived. The exceptions applied mostly to senior officers who remained in the theater much longer.

Bureaucratic inertia may have played a role in the adoption of this simpler rule for Vietnam. One year was the standard duration for any unaccompanied, hardship deployment. But other reasons for treating front-line and rear-echelon personnel alike may have been that (1) all personnel were exposed to risk in a war with no really secure “rear” areas and (2) both groups faced the higher medical risks of life in a semi-tropical, developing country.<sup>85</sup>

The one-year rotation policy was strikingly successful in reducing the incidence of combat stress casualties. In 1968, a year of fairly heavy combat, psychiatric casualties accounted for 6 percent of medical evacuations from the theater, compared with about 23 percent of medical evacuations from combat theaters during World War II. Psychiatrists noted several factors that may have contributed to the dramatic difference: the more episodic nature of combat in Vietnam, the greater command attention to quality of life of front-line troops through provision of hot meals in the field, and brief respites outside the combat zone. But the assurance of rotation home after one year in the field was seen by many as a key element in giving soldiers the emotional stamina to see it through.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Roger Kaplan, “Army Unit Cohesion in Vietnam: A Bum Rap,” *Parameters*, September 1987, p. 61.

<sup>86</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1994) pp. 62–63.

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, who has treated Vietnam combat veterans with severe, chronic posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), argues that the individual replacement system in Vietnam resulted in a higher incidence of long-lasting (or long-hidden) psychological injuries among veterans of that war than was found among veterans of World War II. Shay argues that rotating troops into and out of combat as a unit would be “the most important measure for secondary prevention of combat PTSD,” because it would allow a soldier to talk about his traumatizing experiences after the fact with comrades whom he could trust to understand. Shay’s eloquent and provocative analysis does not address the practical question of how the Army could have rotated units, given the manpower limits under which it operated in Vietnam. Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 198.

On the other hand, there clearly was a downside to the continual flow of personnel into and out of units:

- One problem was the short-timer's syndrome. Because each soldier knew to the day when he was slated to leave Vietnam (barring death or serious injury), men became reluctant to engage in missions that entailed any significant likelihood of contact with the enemy as the departure date neared. Some units tacitly recognized their status, sending them to duties in rear areas in the last days or weeks before they rotated back to "the world," as the United States was known. By several accounts, the result was that, after the two months or so that it took for soldiers to learn the ropes, they were combat-effective for only 6–8 months before they began to lose their edge, about two months before the scheduled end-of-tour.<sup>87</sup>
- A second problem caused by the one-year individual rotation system was the dilution of the pool of experienced personnel in each unit from whom newcomers could learn. In the words of one experienced commander: "Those who had survived and learned how to fight in this difficult environment began going home in the summer of 1966; with them went all their experience and expertise. Replacing them was an army of new draftees which, in due course, would be replaced by newer draftees. The level of training drifted ever lower as the demand for bodies grew."<sup>88</sup>

In 1970—by which time the US troop withdrawal was well under way—a study by the Army staff concluded that an 18-month Vietnam tour would have been more efficient than the 12-month schedule that was used.<sup>89</sup> Provided that it would not have increased the psychiatric

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<sup>87</sup> Charles C. Moskos Jr., "The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (1975), p. 31; Spector, pp. 64–65. This begs the question of whether unit-manned formations on a deployment of fixed duration would have displayed *en masse* the same increased caution as the end of the unit's tour approached. Would the interpersonal dynamics within the unit cause each soldier to suppress his desire not to die on his last day in the field?

<sup>88</sup> Lt. Gen. Harold Moore, US Army (ret.) and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young*, (New York, NY: Random House, 1992), p. 405.

<sup>89</sup> Spector, p. 67.

casualty rate to an unacceptable degree, an 18-month deployment would have slowed the rate at which green recruits had to be introduced into the units, even as it increased the average experience level among the soldiers already there from whom the “newbie” would learn the ropes.<sup>90</sup>

Some critics of the Army’s performance in Vietnam link the one-year individual rotation rule to a disintegration of unit cohesion. They contend that this fostered a general breakdown of discipline that was evident in the incidence of drug use, desertions, units’ refusals to carry out combat missions, and assassinations of officers (dubbed “fragging” from the frequent use of a fragmentation grenade as the weapon). For instance, the one-year rotation policy is one element of a searing critique of the Service published in 1978 by retired officers Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, one of the first of the Vietnam postmortems to have a significant impact on US political elites outside the military.<sup>91</sup>

But this argument glosses over the fact that US units turned in a solid performance in the early years of the war and began to fray only in the later years of the conflict—ironically, as US forces were withdrawing and contact with the enemy became less frequent.

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<sup>90</sup> In 1965, the Secretary of the Army recommended—unsuccessfully—a 15-month tour on the grounds that it would reduce the number of replacements needed by 20 percent annually. Russell W. Glenn, *Reading Athena’s Dance Card: Men Against Fire in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000), p. 92, fn. 47.

<sup>91</sup> Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* (New York, NY: Hill & Wang, 1978), p. 13; see also Maj. (P) William A. Knowlton Jr., US Army, “Cohesion and the Vietnam Experience,” *Military Review*, May 1986, pp. 56–64.

As its title suggests, the brutal critique by Gabriel and Savage focused chiefly on the officer corps in which, they contended, traditional martial values of honor and loyalty had been supplanted by self-seeking careerism and an emphasis on management rather than leadership. However, the two authors also contended that the Army’s breakdown in Vietnam, while rooted in the corruption of the officer corps’ culture, was abetted by a lack of unit cohesion caused by the continual turnover of personnel and by the extent to which the known date of return to the United States induced among the troops an “every man for himself” perspective. They based this part of their argument in the Shils and Janowitz interpretation of the *Wehrmacht’s* unit cohesion.

Sociologist Charles Moskos, for one, argued that unit cohesion and morale were relatively high in 1965–67, the period during which he conducted field observations and in-depth interviews with troops in Vietnam. According to Moskos, widespread breakdowns in discipline did not occur until 1970–72, with 1968–69 a transitional period of mixed cohesion and demoralization.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Ronald Spector, a Marine Corps field historian who was in the northern part of South Vietnam in 1968 and part of 1969, contended that Army units performed creditably from 1965 until well into 1968, despite the centrifugal effect of personnel policies. In 1987—by which time the Gabriel and Savage argument had gained widespread acceptance—Army officer Roger Kaplan contended that the memoirs published up to that point by Vietnam veterans indicated that units had been cohesive, well into 1969.<sup>93</sup>

In 2003, Peter Kindsvatter, analyzing a much broader set of veterans' memoirs, oral histories and novels, as well as historical and behavioral science studies of units in the field, reached a conclusion similar to Kaplan's. Despite the continual personnel turnover, members of small units typically formed themselves into cohesive organizations under the necessity of surviving in a dangerous combat environment, Kindsvatter reported. To be sure, battlefield crises arose during which replacements fresh from the United States were thrown directly into combat. However, the norm in most divisions was to put new arrivals through an in-country training program lasting three to seven days that would include classes on Viet Cong tactics and instructions on patrolling techniques and the use of various weapons. Moreover, Kindsvatter concludes, while newbies typically got a cool reception from soldiers in their assigned unit until they proved themselves, the veterans typically made some effort to help them get acclimated.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Moskos, p. 25.

<sup>93</sup> Kaplan, p. 64.

<sup>94</sup> Kindsvatter, pp. 73–74. The 1st Cavalry Division ran a two-week jungle training school for newly arriving soldiers that some of the division's component units supplemented with additional orientation training. Some units also used a formal "buddy" system, assigning an experienced trooper to keep an eye on each new arrival. (Glenn, pp. 61–65).

Clearly, there was an appalling decline in discipline during the closing years of the Army's presence in Vietnam. But as units had coped with the disruptive effect of individual replacements during the war's first several years, it is hard to see how that factor can be blamed for the meltdown at the end. Instead, two other factors—failures of small-unit leadership and the collapse of national will to stick with the war—more plausibly were responsible for the Army's eventual breakdown which was manifest in high rates of indiscipline, desertions and fraggings in the later years.

**Leadership.** A problem that got steadily worse as the war dragged on was the combination of turbulence and marginal quality in officer and NCO leadership at the company level and below. The most obvious cause was the Army's policy of rotating officers out of command billets after no more than 6 months. The official rationale for this rule was a concern that the strain of command in combat took such a toll that men became fatigued after several months. Some senior officers hinted at another rationale: that giving more men a stint at combat command would give the Army a larger pool of "blooded" officers ready for command in case of a future conventional war in Europe or Korea.<sup>95</sup>

The official line—that the strain of combat command required short tours for commanders—had some basis in the Army's post-World War II stock-taking.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, few officers who held command in Vietnam for those brief tenures conceded having felt any sense of being burned-out at the end of six months.<sup>97</sup> Nor does the

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<sup>95</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 205–07; Kaplan, pp. 65–66; Spector, p. 66.

<sup>96</sup> Robert S. Rush, "Unit Rotation and Individual Replacement," unpublished paper delivered to the 2002 Conference of Army Historians. At least one senior commander drew that lesson from his experience in World War II. In 1951, while Matthew Ridgeway still commanded the Eighth Army in Korea, he warned the Pentagon that large numbers of officers who had served admirably in combat were nearing their breaking points.

<sup>97</sup> Krepinevich cites to this effect a 1976 survey of officers attending the Command and General Staff College (Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* p. 206); Spector reaches the same conclusion from reviewing collections of oral history interviews with officers who had commanded companies in Vietnam. These collections are divided between the Command and General Staff College and the Army War College (Spector, p. 66).

record support the argument that officers in command for longer periods lost their edge as a result of stress and fatigue: studies in 1965–66 showed that battalions commanded by men who had managed to stay in their jobs longer than six months suffered casualties in sizable firefights at only two-thirds the rate of battalions commanded by less experienced officers.<sup>98</sup>

The most obvious handicap inflicted on US forces by the six-month command tenure was the number of tactical errors that new commanders inevitably made in the course of learning their jobs.<sup>99</sup> In turn, those errors resulted in higher casualties, hence more replacements, hence an acceleration of the already high rate of personnel turnover.

But the six-month rule also undermined morale and cohesion in more insidious ways:

- First, the troops understood—and resented—the risks they would incur because of a new commander’s inexperience, compounding the difficulty of establishing the necessary relationship of trust and confidence between leaders and led.
- Second, because after six months commanders typically were transferred from their combat units to staff jobs in rear areas that entailed little risk of contact with the enemy, the system fostered resentment among enlisted personnel who had to spend their entire, year-long tour in combat billets.
- Third, soldiers often assumed that career-minded officers, afforded only a brief opportunity to make a splash as a combat commander, would operate the unit aggressively, at the grunts’ expense.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Kaplan, p. 66.

<sup>99</sup> Many officers interviewed for the Army’s oral history collection said they had become competent company commanders only a month or two before their six-month tour ended (Spector, p. 66).

<sup>100</sup> Spector, p. 66; Kaplan, p. 66.

The leadership problems created by the command tenure rule were compounded by the decline of standards for selecting officers and NCOs under the pressure of having to staff a greatly enlarged force without mobilizing the Reserve Components on a large scale. While the Army expanded the class size at West Point and tried to step up ROTC enrollment, the only practical way to commission enough junior officers to keep pace with the expansion of the force was to expand the Officer Candidate School (OCS) program. OCS output increased six-fold during the first year of the Vietnam War and doubled again in the second year. In the first nine months of 1967, as many officers were commissioned from OCS as the program had produced between 1958 and 1966.<sup>101</sup> Inevitably, such a radical increase in the size of the program was accompanied by a less-demanding selection process. Moreover, the selection process was applied to a pool from which many of the “best and brightest” were excluded because of the ready availability of draft deferments.

The Army’s solution to the demand for more NCOs was even more radical. Initially, it offered promising privates first class (PFCs) fresh out of their initial entry training a two-grade promotion to sergeant in command of a squad of 10–12 men. Ordinarily, a soldier would achieve that position only after at least five years of experience. In 1967, the Service launched a NCO candidate program that would promote PFCs to sergeant after a 12-week course. However, rigorous as that course was, it could not impart to these “shake-and-bake” NCOs the ability of a more mature and experienced sergeant to give young draftees a sense of identity and purpose.

They were well-trained at school, and got a few months jump on learning to be a sergeant in the jungle. Unfortunately, while they knew how to lay a Claymore [mine], they often had trouble getting others to follow their example. Telling somebody else where to go and what to do (and having them respect you for it)—that’s something you don’t learn in any

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<sup>101</sup> Spector, pp. 32–33.

school. You have to learn by watching somebody with the knack and then trying to copy.<sup>102</sup>

This sharp decline in the experience level of the NCO corps was particularly risky because the Vietnam-era draftees typically were younger and less mature than their World War II or Korean War counterparts and thus were more in need of mature, seasoned, first-tier leadership when the going got tough.<sup>103</sup>

The consequence was that, at the company level and below, the Army that fought in Vietnam was made up overwhelmingly of inexperienced personnel with little sense of identity or commitment to the Army and its values. As the war dragged on, it became a relatively loosely knit institution, lacking the fiber it would have needed to continue performing at a high level in the absence of either public support back home or any tangible evidence of progress toward any significant goal.

**LOSS OF PURPOSE.** The second major factor contributing to the collapse of the Army's morale in Vietnam was the fact that, after 1968, the US decision to withdraw from Vietnam deprived the Army's combat operations of any purpose except a vague hope of forcing the "other side" to the bargaining table. Facing that—and the concurrent upsurge of racial and political strife back home—the loosely knit-together units began to fray.<sup>104</sup>

One of the most remarkable things about this factor is the vehemence with which some critics deny its relevance to the Army's decline in Vietnam. The basic premise of these critics typically is a flat assertion that an army's organizational culture and practice trump all factors external to the organization in determining the morale and cohesion of the force. Almost invariably, this assertion is anchored in citations of the 1948 Shils and Janowitz postmortem of the *Wehrmacht* which—the argument goes—proved that soldiers' morale

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<sup>102</sup> Larry H. Ingraham, "Fear and Loathing in the Barracks—And the Heart of Leadership," *Parameters*, December 1988, pp. 75–80; Glenn, p. 99.

<sup>103</sup> Spector, p. 35

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

is nearly impervious to any influence other than factors internal to their army.

Gabriel and Savage exemplify this perspective: “While we do not wish to imply that military structures are totally independent of wider societal forces, we stress that forces internal to the military structure—such as a developed sense of professionalism and an honored military ethic—are far more crucial in understanding the degree of cohesion an army will maintain under stress.”<sup>105</sup>

For these two authors, the chief cause of the Army’s decline in Vietnam was the officer corps’ adoption of an ethic of self-serving careerism in place of traditional military virtues of honor and courage. From their standpoint, the personnel turmoil in units caused by individual rotation was only a secondary factor that contributed to the organizational decay. But this line of argument about the Army’s Vietnam experience muddies the current discussion of unit manning in three ways:

- By focusing on the admittedly adverse impacts of the one-year individual rotation policy, the critique obscures the fact that units coped with the personnel turbulence well enough to fight quite effectively, at least through 1968 or so.
- It glosses over the fact that there were reasonable—debatable, but reasonable—justifications for the one-year DEROS (Date of Expected Return from Overseas) policy (although perhaps not for the six-month command tenure rule).
- By exaggerating the importance for the Army’s combat performance of purely internal factors like the one-year individual rotation policy, this analysis risks absolutizing the importance of such organizational attributes. Thus, it could distort the evaluation of potential tradeoffs between personnel stability and, say, leader development policy. Perversely, this could have the effect of undermining support for a personnel stabilization policy by making it appear to carry too high an opportunity cost.

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<sup>105</sup> Gabriel and Savage, p. 33.

Of course, for at least a century, US soldiers have been famously skeptical of high-sounding declarations of the noble national purposes for which, supposedly, they were ordered to risk their lives. For example, Frank Capra's "Why We Fight" films made for the Army during World War II stand as monuments of the cinematic art, but they appear to have had no more impact on the GIs who were their intended audience than Richard Nixon's oratory had on the grunts in Vietnam.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, it seems utterly implausible that US soldiers would sustain a war in the absence of at least a subliminal confidence that the mission was legitimate—if only in the morally attenuated sense that they believed the mission to have been ordained by duly constituted authority.

Two years after sociologist Edward Shils co-authored the 1948 study of German morale that highlighted the importance of small-group relationships for military morale, he interpreted the extensive survey data collected from World War II American troops as demonstrating a "tacit patriotism" that channeled the GIs' loyalty to their small group of buddies into combat motivation responsive to the chain of command. At the very least, Shils contended, even GIs who described their motivation as wanting to "finish the job" so they could return home

... must, in some way, have accepted the legitimacy of the 'job' and felt some degree of obligation to carry it out.<sup>107</sup>

Twenty years later, Moskos reached a similar conclusion, arguing that US soldiers' willingness to accept combat risks in Vietnam was undergirded, by a "latent ideology," which he described as

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<sup>106</sup> Research under the auspices of Yale University concluded that, while Capra's films persuaded the troops to accept some of the factual information that was presented, they had little impact on soldiers' willingness to die for their country. Carl I. Hovland, Arthur Lumsdain, and Fred Sheffield, *Experiments in Mass Communication, Vol. 3 in Studies in Social Psychology in World War II*, 4 vols., (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), pp. 53–65.

<sup>107</sup> Shils, "Primary Groups in the American Army," p. 22.

. . . an anti-political outlook coupled with a belief—evident at least during the early years of the war—in the worthwhileness of American society. Correspondingly, when changes in these value commitments occurred in the later years of the war, this had indirect but important consequences on military cohesion.<sup>108</sup>

In other words, the Army stopped performing creditably in Vietnam when the country gave up on the war—precisely what one would expect of an institution rooted in the society it serves.

The people of the United States had decided . . . that the game was not worth the candle, that our forces were fighting a losing (some said wrongful) war and ought therefore to get out. The officers and noncoms who were charged with making the troops continue fighting had a near-hopeless task, for their authority to compel risk of life and limb had lost the legitimacy which national purpose bestows.<sup>109</sup>

Indeed, Moskos contends that the net impact on US combat effectiveness of the much-maligned, one-year individual tour changed from positive to negative only as the broader context in which soldiers were risking their lives changed. What once had been an effort to win the war now had become an effort to pull out gracefully, with the least possible damage to US diplomatic clout:

Apparently, during the period that the war was on the upswing, the rotation system contributed positively to the morale of the individual combat soldier. Contrarily, once the war was defined as on the downswing—the start of American withdrawal—the rotation system worked against combat effectiveness. Not only did the withdrawal of efficiency associated

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<sup>108</sup> Moskos, p. 27.

<sup>109</sup> Willam L. Hauser, "The Will to Fight," in Sam C. Sarkesian (ed.), *Combat Effectiveness: Cohesion, Stress and the Volunteer Military* (Beverly Hills and London: Sage, 1980), p. 150.

with the short-timer's fever begin to appear earlier in each [soldier's] combat cycle, but the whole élan of the American forces was undercut by the knowledge that the Vietnam War was coming to some kind of inconclusive end. Indeed, the quite rational feeling of not wanting to be the last man killed in a closing war which characterized the low morale of the American ground forces after 1969 can be regarded as a kind of short-timer's fever writ large.<sup>110</sup>

**Summary and Implications.** Conventional wisdom overemphasizes personnel turbulence caused by the individual replacement system as the source of problems in the combat performance of Army units in Korea and Vietnam. An examination of the two cases reveals a more complex relationship between the personnel rules and combat performance that provides little support for a general policy of unit manning as a means of increasing combat effectiveness:

- First, the decisions to continue the individual replacement system were not the unthinking reflex actions of a mindless personnel bureaucracy, but judgment calls that reflected the practical exigencies confronting a military that was spread too thin to cover global commitments beyond the theater of war. By the same token, units organized on a unit-manning basis almost surely would have to be sustained during a long-duration, high-intensity conflict by individual replacements for casualties.
- Second, the admittedly anti-cohesive impact of an individual replacement system could be—and often was—partly offset by well-organized transit and reception procedures.
- Third, the individual rotation timetable for troops in the theater, while detrimental to unit cohesion, was an important morale booster in wars that offered soldiers neither tangible standards by which to measure progress nor the satisfaction of warm support on the homefront.

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<sup>110</sup> Moskos, p. 32. Moskos' interpretation a quarter century ago largely squares with a more recent analysis of Vietnam soldiers' morale which Kindsvatter based on the dozens of primary and secondary sources that had become available by 2002 (Kindsvatter, pp. 136–54).

- Fourth, while the mission performance of many units tailed off in the latter part of each war—dramatically so in the case of Vietnam—this resulted more from the nation’s abandonment of any hope of winning than from the state of social-psychological cohesion within combat units.

As is true of the World War II case, one should be cautious in applying to the Army of 2004 lessons drawn from the Service’s experience in the two later conflicts. As in World War II, the US military that fought in Korea and Vietnam was largely a draftee force that was rapidly expanded to meet temporary wartime requirements. By contrast, today’s military is a highly professional force being organized to meet both peacetime and wartime requirements. Nevertheless, some lessons can fairly be drawn:

- First, no set of personnel rules will transform a US Army composed largely of short-term, noncareer soldiers—whether conscripts or volunteers—into a praetorian guard capable of prosecuting long-term, large-scale combat operations that the country does not support.
- Second, if units in Korea and Vietnam were able to accommodate a steady turnover of personnel and still maintain a sufficient level of cohesion to be militarily effective, it seems likely that units made up of today’s more professionally committed volunteers should be able to accommodate a limited amount of turnover. That implies that the peacetime manning system can allow some flexibility—for leaders’ professional development, for example—and that, in wartime, units committed to a long-term combat operation could, with proper leadership, easily assimilate packets of replacements.
- Third, regardless of the level of personnel stability in a unit, the quality of leadership, particularly at lower echelons, is critical to combat performance.

That third lesson was dramatically underscored by the most ambitious of the Army’s earlier unit-manning initiatives—Project COHORT—to which we now turn.

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## Chapter 4. The Lessons of COHORT

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Army Chief of Staff General Edward Meyer took the first steps toward what would become the COHORT project in the summer of 1980, when about 3,000 recruits were organized into platoons that stayed together through initial entry training and assignment to operational units. Early indications were that these stabilized units were, as hoped, bonding horizontally—soldier to soldier—and vertically—soldier to NCO and commander. Consequently, the process was expanded to produce stabilized companies and battalions.

By 1985, these initiatives showed enough promise that the Army decided to organize on COHORT principles the entire 7th Infantry Division (Light), based at Fort Ord, California. Initial data on this effort gathered by a bevy of observers from the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (WRAIR) indicated by November 1985 that the division's stabilized battalions and companies were becoming more effective in combat more quickly than traditional units.

COHORT soldiers become extremely competent, even under weak, indifferent or authoritarian commanders, but they may be alienated from those commanders. The presence [in the 7th Infantry Division (Light)] of several battalions of bright, eager soldiers organized under the COHORT principle and led by competent, concerned forthright officers offers an opportunity to

study the processes by which superb units are created and sustained.<sup>111</sup>

Two years later, however, a WRAIR assessment concluded that the effort to enhance military effectiveness by fostering unit cohesion in the 7th Division had failed.

While the [7th] division succeeded in achieving all conventional criteria set for it, it failed in the human dimensions. . . . There was no time to do it right, to prepare the installation, think through the organizational structure, prepare the TO&E (Table of Organization and Equipment), teach leaders, patiently coach performance and add missions as circumstances allowed. The Army staff threw money and people at the problem and said, "Do it!" In good American soldier fashion, the Division replied, "Can do!" and set about its task. . . . Nobody from the Army staff is known to have asked, "What about cohesion and the other human dimensions that lie at the heart of what we are trying to accomplish out here?"<sup>112</sup>

In that 1987 postmortem, WRAIR analysts insisted that some of the division's units had—for a time—realized the potential of COHORT, thus validating the basic concept. Moreover, for all its shortcomings in the human dimension of military preparedness, the 7th Division forged itself into a formidable fighting unit, as it demonstrated in the 1989 Panama operation. Nevertheless, the story of how the division's COHORT experiment rose and fell, told in the deadpan style of the WRAIR reports, is sometimes jaw-dropping, occasionally hilarious, and often heartbreaking, but ultimately all too easy to understand.

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<sup>111</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 1, p. VII-10.

<sup>112</sup> Faris R. Kirkland, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore P. Furukawa, US Army, Joel M. Teitelbaum et al., *Unit Manning System Field Evaluation: Technical Report No. 5* (Washington, DC: Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, September 1987), pp. 1–2 [hereinafter cited as WRAIR Technical Report No. 5].

For the division to have organized successfully on COHORT principles, WRAIR analysts concluded, commanding officers and NCOs at every echelon would have had to adopt an empowering, “power-down” collegial style of leadership, as many initially did. But as more and more tasks were piled on the division, too many leaders, under the stress of having to meet impossible demands, reverted to the centralized, top-down, coercive style that was the Army norm. “There is little wonder the Division seemed to lose sight of the human dimensions; nobody else in the Army was paying any attention to them either.”<sup>113</sup>

Beyond that problem, however, there are indications in the WRAIR studies that, even if the division had not been distracted from the goal of creating cohesion, the COHORT units would have been in trouble by the second year of the 7th Division experiment. Precisely because soldiers in the stabilized units did bond, they were more demanding of their leaders and of their training than traditionally organized companies and battalions. Some leaders measured up, but that was by chance rather than design.

The fate of COHORT underscores the fact that neither personnel stability nor a measurably high level of cohesion is sufficient to produce a militarily effective unit that fosters initiative at all echelons. That kind of unit also requires leaders who can empower subordinates without undermining their own authority. And it requires a training philosophy that offers meaningful feedback on realistic, mission-oriented training that is progressive in the sense that it allows a unit to master increasingly sophisticated missions over the unit’s entire life-cycle. While those two requirements were met in some COHORT units, the Army did not systematically aim at achieving those goals.

## The Implementation

Under the COHORT system, recruits were organized during their initial entry training into companies that were joined, after initial training, by cadres of officers and NCOs to form a maneuver company that remained intact for three years, after which it was dissolved.

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<sup>113</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 5, p. 2.

There were several variants of that basic approach, including one that deployed COHORT companies to Europe for 18 months after 18 months stationed in the continental United States (CONUS) and another that sent companies to South Korea for 12 months after 24 months in CONUS. Some of these companies were organized into COHORT battalions of three companies each.<sup>114</sup>

COHORT units were “overmanned” so they could accommodate the inevitable losses of personnel resulting from illness or injury, involuntary separation from the Service, transfers on compassionate grounds, and the like. In general, the units were “fenced” from the normal workings of the Army personnel system. So, for instance, soldiers could not be pulled out of those companies for other assignments. Nor could they be tasked by higher echelons for routine support duties such as serving as drivers for senior officers. By the same token, first-term soldiers in COHORT units could not volunteer

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<sup>114</sup> Gen. Meyer linked COHORT with a second personnel initiative: grouping three to seven battalions of the same type (infantry, armor, field artillery, or air defense) into a single regiment that would have a home base in the continental United States. The regiments were not operational field units. Tactically, battalions continued to operate as components of brigades. However, this regimental system, coexisting with the operational chain of command, was intended to foster unit cohesion in two ways.

For one, it would provide a new framework within which the Army would man its permanent deployments abroad. Under the existing system, individual soldiers were transferred from United States-based units to West Germany for a three-year assignment (with their families) or to South Korea for a one-year tour (without their families) with units permanently stationed in those locations. Under Meyer’s regimental system, entire companies and battalions would rotate overseas for a tour, after which they would be replaced by another unit from their parent regiment.

The proposed regimental system’s second function was to provide career soldiers with an institutional home over most of their careers. It was expected that an officer or NCO would remain attached to the regiment for far longer than the duration of any one assignment, thus spending much of his career—perhaps all of it—in a single, extended community of professional colleagues. The expectation was that career soldiers normally would serve in the battalions of a particular regiment except when detailed to professional education, recruiting duty, or other non-troop-related assignments.

for reassignment to other units or to programs such as Ranger training.<sup>115</sup>

However, from the standpoint of personnel stabilization, several features of the COHORT units detracted from the prospects for forging them into cohesive units:

- The COHORT experiment may have been hopelessly compromised from the outset because it stabilized only the enlisted personnel in a company, while officers and NCOs continued to rotate in and out as under the old system. WRAIR's assessment of the 7th Division COHORT battalions found that the rapid turnover of platoon leaders (lieutenants) and company commanders (captains) undermined the formation of "vertical cohesion"—soldiers' trust that their leaders were acting in their mutual best interest. Instead, the leaders were seen as merely punching a ticket to enhance their careers. Conversely, some of the officers were frustrated to be pulled out of a unit they had built that was just reaching a significant level of competence.<sup>116</sup>
- There were no limits on "internal" personnel turbulence: the transfer of a soldier within a division from one to another of the division's constituent units, which can be just as disruptive of primary group cohesion and small-unit teamwork as "external" turbulence generated by the Army personnel system. In a 1989 review of COHORT, Gen. Max Thurman—then commanding general of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)—said, "Because internal turbulence was not controlled, the stability of COHORT units during the field evaluation was less than that

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<sup>115</sup> Robert L. Goldich, "The US Army's New Manning System," Congressional Research Service, Report 83-129 F, June 28, 1983. However, first-termers were allowed to bid for officer candidate school OCS and admission to West Point. Some of these restrictions were relaxed later on in the COHORT project. E-mail from Robert S. Rush, Feb. 10, 2004.

<sup>116</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 5, p. 19. The situation with NCOs is ambiguous. Apparently, they had some opportunity for reassignment out of the COHORT units, but less so than did officers. According to Army historian Robert Rush, who served in the COHORT-based 10th Mountain Division a few years after the period covered by the WRAIR analysis, officers and NCOs were stabilized in the 10th. E-mail from Robert S. Rush, Feb. 10, 2004.

envisioned by the concept. . . . The need for, and value of, internal stability should be taught in the schoolhouse and become an inbred leader objective.”<sup>117</sup>

- Some of the obstacles COHORT encountered look in retrospect like obstructionist pettifoggery worthy of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. For instance, some COHORT units rotated to Germany for 18-month assignments—the second half of the units’ 36-month lifespan. But Army regulations allowed married soldiers to obtain housing for their families at European bases only if they served in Europe for 36 months. The Army in Europe had difficulty assimilating at other installations the relatively large number of troops and dependents suddenly released from a dissolving COHORT unit after only 18 months.<sup>118</sup>

## THE EVALUATIONS

WRAIR monitored the COHORT experiment with a massive battery of survey questionnaires and field observations. Between 1982 and early 1989, WRAIR analysts conducted 37,000 survey interviews and observed 94 COHORT battalions and companies and 60 non-COHORT battalions and companies. They also interviewed thousands of officers, NCOs, soldiers, and family members.

**Hard Data:** The salient finding from the quantitative research was that there was a higher level of cohesion among junior enlisted men in COHORT companies than in similar units manned by the usual individual manning process. The COHORT soldiers did not “like” their comrades better than those in non-COHORT units, but they were more likely to report that they felt close to the other soldiers in their

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<sup>117</sup> Gen. Max R. Thurman, “Unit Manning System,” unpublished report for the Chief of Staff of the Army, March 4, 1989, p. 35. [Available on Task Force Stabilization website, [www.stabilization.army.mil](http://www.stabilization.army.mil)]. According to Thurman, a limited (and unpublished) study by the Army Research Institute found that there were roughly 2.7 internal moves for every external move in combat arms units and that internal turbulence in armored and mechanized COHORT units was as great as in non-COHORT units.

<sup>118</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 1, p. V1-6.

unit, knew them well, and had formed more of their friendships within their unit. It is those latter sentiments, rather than simply “liking” one another, that, according to a WRAIR analysis, “contribute to confidence in the unit and the ability to count on and depend upon one another in combat.”<sup>119</sup>

But while that finding vindicates the argument for personnel stabilization to enhance cohesion, two other consistent findings of the WRAIR assessments raise warning flags:

- Although there was a general tendency for COHORT units to score higher in vertical cohesion (i.e., soldier’s confidence in their officers and NCOs), their advantage over non-COHORT units in that regard was not as large or consistent as was the margin by which they outstripped the traditionally-organized units in horizontal cohesion. Moreover, vertical cohesion appeared to depend on the stability of the leadership in a unit and the degree to which that leadership focused on fostering cohesiveness.<sup>120</sup>
- The level of horizontal cohesion declined over the life-cycle of a COHORT unit, though never to the level measured in non-COHORT units.<sup>121</sup>

Unfortunately, the WRAIR assessments did not collect data that would test a fundamental assumption of the unit-manning policy—that stabilized units would train to a higher standard on collective tasks (or train more quickly to a given standard). Particularly frustrating is the absence of quantitative data that would show whether or not the COHORT units had been able to train to steadily more sophisticated levels because they did not have to deal with a

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<sup>119</sup> Major Mark A. Vaitkus, US Army, “Unit Manning System: Human Dimensions Field Evaluation of the COHORT Company Replacement Model,” April 18, 1994. pp. iii, 10. This is the revised, final version of a report Vaitkus originally wrote in 1989, when he was on the WRAIR COHORT assessment team. Although it focuses on one of the four versions of COHORT that were tried out, the findings are representative of other WRAIR studies.

<sup>120</sup> Thurman, p. 29.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

continual influx of green recruits.<sup>122</sup> Though the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) collected data on all COHORT units and selected non-COHORT units at least through 1988, the findings were inconclusive. The data on individual skills did not necessarily reflect a unit's collective skill, and collective training events were not scored in a way that allowed comparison.<sup>123</sup>

**Leaders' Assessments:** By and large, battalion commanders whose units included a COHORT company deemed it not only more cohesive, but also more tactically proficient than their traditionally organized companies and likely to be more resilient in combat. Some who complained that their COHORT units were deficient in spit-and-polish terms commended their tactical prowess in a back-handed way.<sup>124</sup> For instance, one told a WRAIR observer:

They're certainly not my best unit. Their billets are not well kept, their uniform standards are not the highest and they are too close to each other, I think—too much fraternization. But in the field and in some other things, they seem to have it together in ways my other units don't. On alerts, for instance, my COHORT company is always the first to move out. The privates and specialists who live in the billets get the vehicles loaded on line and they are ready to move by the time the NCOs and officers come in from their housing areas. It's not like that with my conventional units. . . . They have to wait for their NCOs to come in and tell them what to do.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., pp. 31–33.

<sup>123</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Robin L. Elder, US Army, "Cohort: Is Readiness a Cost?" US Army War College Study Project, March 23, 1988, pp. 10–13.

<sup>124</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 1, pp. IV-4 through IV-17.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. IV-15.

## THE PROBLEMS

The COHORT units faced some obstacles that probably could have been minimized or eliminated to improve the chances that the experiment would succeed. One such problem was that they were viewed with resentment by non-COHORT units because it was perceived that they got special treatment for which the other units were the “bill-payers.” For instance, the COHORT companies were overmanned to start with (as a hedge against normal attrition) but were exempt from having to provide drivers and fill other administrative duties for which higher echelons and installation commanders typically draw men from subordinate units. Non-COHORT units pulled a correspondingly heavier share of the load.

In some cases, the “have-nots” unhappiness was stoked by well-intended but ill-advised administrative decisions. For instance, at some bases, COHORT unit members’ families were given priority in obtaining housing over other families who had been waiting longer. The antipathy was strong enough that there were cases of physical and verbal harassment of COHORT soldiers’ dependents, and the children of some COHORT soldiers were cautioned by their parents not to mention their participation in COHORT to their schoolmates. One non-COHORT unit favored a jogging chant (or “jody”) including the couplet:

“If I had a low IQ  
I could be a COHORT, too!”<sup>126</sup>

A second and more corrosive problem was the morale and quality of some NCOs assigned to the COHORT units. Many of the more senior NCOs had the assignments imposed on them on short notice and without explanation, some under threat that if they refused the COHORT billet they would be barred from reenlistment. Many believed that their career prospects were being handicapped by their having to forgo opportunities for schooling or promotion. Some of the NCOs interviewed by WRAIR researchers began the conversation by asking whether the interviewer could help get them transferred out of the unit. Though there were many other NCOs who were enthusiastic

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pp. IV-9, IV-13.

about the program, the malcontents passed their negative views on to soldiers in their units.<sup>127</sup>

Moreover, the criteria for selection of COHORT NCOs were breathtakingly slack. In the 7th Division, commanders of COHORT battalions and companies interviewed by WRAIR researchers had relieved, on average, one in three of the men assigned to the top NCO position in companies and platoons. As WRAIR reported:

The reasons for most of the senior NCO reliefs were known to [the Department of the Army] prior to their assignment to the 7th ID (L) [Infantry Division (Light)]. These included physical incapacitation, history of alcoholism, excessive age for assignment to a light infantry rifle company, and previous selection for elimination from the service.<sup>128</sup>

Some COHORT companies also had to cope with an adverse “command climate”—battalion commanders who were indifferent, if not downright hostile, to the program. Personnel of one COHORT company told WRAIR interviewers that the battalion commander routinely refereed intercompany athletic events personally so that he could make calls against the COHORT unit. The WRAIR assessments quote some battalion commanders who attributed the high performance of COHORT companies in their units to more carefully selected officers, stronger NCOs, or some other conventional explanation while discounting the importance of personnel stabilization.

Apart from higher commanders’ specific attitudes toward the program, their approach to the day-to-day routine of garrison life created an environment that was more or less conducive to the trusting and relatively collegial relationships between leaders and led that COHORT required:

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<sup>127</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 1, pp. IV-31 through IV-34.

<sup>128</sup> WRAIR, Technical Report Number 1, p. VII-21. In organizing the Light Infantry Divisions, the policy specifically was to avoid reliance on hand-picked personnel of superior caliber. But this seems to have been carried to an absurd level in the cases cited by WRAIR.

Such factors as barracks inspections, regulations, standards, furnishing and decoration, visitation by women and drinking in the billets may vary dramatically between sister battalions at the same post. . . . Some battalions actively encourage vertical integration in their units, some actively discourage it. Leadership philosophies differ widely, particularly in respect to NCO and junior officer authority, responsibility and relationships to troops.<sup>129</sup>

**Inherent Challenges:** To some degree, the problems caused by other units' hostility, unsuitable NCOs, and hostile command climate could have been averted or mitigated. But there also were certain dynamics inherent in the COHORT system which, while not fatal in themselves, caused the experiment to collapse when the concatenated demands of Army leaders swamped the initial focus on unit cohesion.

One consequence of the COHORT units' horizontal cohesion was that individual soldiers' negative assessments of their leaders tended to resonate through the unit more powerfully than in a traditionally manned unit:

An injury to one was perceived as an injury to all. The first termers in COHORT units established a rapid collective stance toward their leaders and their actions. The problems of leadership in COHORT units are therefore somewhat unique. . . . The very processes that maximize cohesiveness, interpersonal, psychological and social support and the profound belief that ones' fellows are the singular group of men with whom one would wish to go into combat, place far greater demands on leaders and their skills than does leadership in conventional units.<sup>130</sup>

A second challenge inherent in COHORT units was rooted in the unusually high level of commitment to the mission—being ready for combat—that COHORT members displayed compared with soldiers in

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<sup>129</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 1, pp. IV-4 through IV-6.

<sup>130</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 1, pp. IV-40 and IV-41.

traditionally organized units. The COHORT troops demanded that training be continually challenging and, because they did not have to cope with the periodic influx of green recruits, once they mastered tactical exercises at a certain level of difficulty, they wanted to be confronted with a new, more difficult problem. Moreover, they were relatively intolerant of the mission “distracters”—rock painting and other make-work drudgery around the garrison and athletic competitions that had no apparent tactical relevance. That added up to a problem for officers and NCOs accustomed to troops who demanded less:

They were threatened when troops balked at repetitive training on skills they had mastered and embarrassed that they had little else to teach them.<sup>131</sup>

COHORT troops also demanded that their leaders be expert in their own right as warriors and respectful of their subordinates. They were not insubordinate—indeed, they wanted to be led to higher levels of tactical prowess. But they were particularly intolerant of unfairness and of arbitrary or authoritarian superiors and they expected their orders to make sense. In effect, what they were demanding was what Gen. John Wickham—who succeeded Meyer as chief of staff in 1983—described as a relationship between superior and subordinate based on trust, mutual respect, affection, dedication to a common purpose, and open communication up and down the chain of command.<sup>132</sup>

On the face of it, these were good problems for troops to have: a high degree of loyalty among comrades; a strong focus on the real mission; and setting a high standard for their leaders. What could be wrong with that? What was wrong was that *in practice* COHORT focused on stabilization of junior enlisted personnel in their units without giving the appropriate attention to developing the small-unit leaders and training programs that could have channeled the troops’ enthusiasm into high levels of combat effectiveness.

The American soldier’s insistence on being given explanations is a cliché as old as the US Army, dating at least from Baron von

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<sup>131</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 1, p. II-3.

<sup>132</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 5, p. 4.

Steuben's letter to a colleague in Europe: "You say to your soldier, 'Do this,' and he doeth it, but I am obliged to say, 'This is the reason why you ought to do that,' and then he does it."<sup>133</sup> With COHORT, however, that normal independence evidently was magnified by the particularly strong horizontal bonding among junior enlisteds. The resulting demand for a leadership that combined "authority and intimacy" came at a particularly awkward time. In reaction to the alarming erosion of discipline in the Army's ranks during the closing years of the Vietnam War, Army culture and policy mandated formal, socially distant, leader-led relationships—even for NCOs. In that environment, there were "few available models for the development of friendship across the status differential that divides superordinate from subordinate," WRAIR reported.<sup>134</sup>

One NCO in a COHORT unit, asked if he knew the first names of the men in his platoon, responded: "The only first names my people have are Private, Specialist and Sergeant. To use a first name is to fraternize." Some COHORT units had the type of leadership Wickham called for. But so did some units manned in the traditional way, and both displayed strong vertical cohesion, though the traditional units typically did not also have the COHORT units' horizontal cohesion.

## THE 7TH INFANTRY DIVISION (LIGHT)

In 1985, the COHORT project melded with Gen. Wickham's plan to create a new model "light infantry division," organized to generate small, cohesive units that could operate independently in hostile territory. To make the new units more easily deployable, they were designed to include fewer than 11,000 soldiers and to be deployable in

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<sup>133</sup> John McAuley Palmer, *General von Steuben* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1937), p. 157.

<sup>134</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 1, p. IV-7, and Larry H. Ingraham, "Fear and Loathing in the Barracks—And the Heart of Leadership," *Parameters*, December 1988, pp. 75–80. Ingraham, who was one of the WRAIR researchers conducting the COHORT assessment, contends that the reaction against anything smacking of "fraternization" between and NCO and his subordinates reflected the sad state of the NCO corps in the aftermath of Vietnam.

550 sorties of C-141 cargo jets. To compensate for their reduced mass, it was assumed that these new units would display extraordinary war-fighting competence as well as physical and psychological stamina.

In a 1984 white paper laying out his vision of the Light Infantry Division, Wickham emphasized that particularly experienced and competent officers and NCOs who were concerned for their soldiers should be selected for the new type of unit. These leaders would

serve as role models for tactical and technical proficiency, physical fitness and ethical behavior. . . .  
But, above all, the leaders will have the high personal courage to inspire in their subordinates the respect and daring essential for victory under arms.<sup>135</sup>

In short, the new type of division Wickham envisioned needed exactly the kind of units COHORT was supposed to produce. Conversely, the new design division was supposed to develop the type of leaders that COHORT units required in order to thrive. The match should have worked like a charm—and, for a while, it seemed to as the first of the new divisions, the 7th, was organized at Fort Ord, California.

**The First Year.** When WRAIR took its first look at the division, during its first year of operation, the outlook was spectacular. Commanders at brigade, battalion, and company level said their COHORT units “had reached exceptionally high levels of military proficiency and readiness for combat in a very short time.” Several compared the units favorably with the Army’s elite Ranger battalions and 82nd Airborne Division. Progressive (or “accretive”) training was reported to be a reality, with COHORT units surpassing individually manned units in 60–90 days and continuing to improve with more advanced combat techniques:

The COHORT system . . . delivers substantially more than was expected of it. Expected were the possibility of accretive training and strong horizontal bonding among junior enlisted personnel. Unexpected benefits

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<sup>135</sup> Quoted in WRAIR Technical Report No. 5, p. 45.

include a powerful and continuing collective demand for progressively more advanced and sophisticated training, mutual support in learning military tasks, collective concern for troubled individuals, and group pressures against misconduct.<sup>136</sup>

Similarly, the style of leadership in the division seemed to be as called for by Wickham's vision: caring, respectful, and characterized by open communication. All officers and most NCOs participated in the demanding physical training regimen and field exercises, along with their men. Some successfully fostered vertical cohesion in their units:

Soldiers described these leaders as sharing their interest in military skills. They knew about tactics, communications, movement, use of terrain—all the processes of survival in combat and harming the enemy—and they talked to their lowest ranking soldiers about these matters.<sup>137</sup>

Moreover, this openness reportedly was the norm all the way up the division chain of command. Unit commanders said their superiors supported their innovative efforts to train their men.<sup>138</sup>

But in that hopeful preview, WRAIR presciently noted one potential problem: the COHORT units' horizontal cohesiveness could be harnessed to the division's goals *if* the mission were credible; the leaders were seen as competent, concerned, and honest; and the leaders trusted their subordinates. In principle, of course, this is nothing more than a statement of how the Army should run. In fact, however, the exigencies of running the Army in the real world soon swamped each of those requirements:

- As the prototype of the new type of division, the 7th faced a demanding set of certification requirements to refine the organizational design.

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<sup>136</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 1, pp. VII-7 thru VII-9.

<sup>137</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 5, p. 13.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. VII-8, VII-11 through VII-13.

- While reinventing itself along these new lines—and translating into practice the chief of staff's call for a particularly demanding standard of leadership—the division was supposed to maintain a high level of combat readiness, because it was designated as part of the Rapid Deployment Force.
- It was to do this on an installation that had not housed a maneuver division for years and which, therefore, had sub-par facilities and an acute lack of on-base housing (in an area with high off-base housing costs).
- And it was to do all this under the added pressure of extraordinary interest and scrutiny from senior Army officials.<sup>139</sup>

**The Second Year.** It was too much, and in the division's second year (1986), its nascent COHORT-based philosophy began to fail dramatically at several points:

The pressure on commanders at all levels to perform multiple and exotic missions, and to show visitors how well they performed them, pushed the emphasis from gradually developing combat capabilities to giving an immediate impression of having already mastered those capabilities. Seasoned NCOs and officers said they saw the training focus shift after the first year, from preparing for future action—allowing the units to “work out the bugs” and soldiers to “make expected learning errors”—to one that demanded polished performance at a moment's notice . . . [often] a demonstration for VIPs.<sup>140</sup>

Higher echelon headquarters began micromanaging their companies, according the same “top” priority to a burgeoning array of tasks, some serious and some frivolous, but many seen by the troops as detracting from their effort to train for combat, thus eroding the leaders' credibility.<sup>141</sup> With less time to train for the combat mission—

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<sup>139</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 5, p. 2.

<sup>140</sup> WRAIR Technical Report No. 5, p. 28.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

and no time to learn from mistakes—units began to lose their combat proficiency.<sup>142</sup>

Training exercises—the relevance of which troops increasingly questioned—were scheduled for weekends and it became difficult for soldiers to be excused because of illness or a family emergency.<sup>143</sup> Increasing rates of injury and disciplinary infractions accelerated the normal rate of attrition from the division, leaving fewer people to take on the growing burden. Meanwhile, leaders at all echelons, trying to push increasingly demoralized subordinates through a growing number of diffuse tasks, became more authoritarian and coercive.<sup>144</sup>

Most officers and NCOs were enthusiastic about power-down leadership, trust and candor. But only a small minority were able to implement them as they tried to cope with a growing load of mission requirements, dwindling strength, and continuing exposure to public scrutiny. Most regressed to more familiar and less stressful modes of interpersonal relationships—those they had learned from the old Army culture.<sup>145</sup>

WRAIR's 1987 assessment of the 7th Division COHORT program includes a chapter by the division's then-inspector general, Lt. Col. Bruce T. Caine, that stands as a brutally candid but respectful—even affectionate—obituary to the failed effort. With more foresight, and a more widespread understanding of the group dynamics, the problems might have been averted, Caine acknowledged, but he added:

I believe we simply asked for too much, too fast.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>143</sup> According to the commanding general, the division saved “millions of training dollars” annually by scheduling deployments to remote training sites for weekends, when troops could use weekend training flights of reserve component airlift squadrons. Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

Concurrently, the people of Fort Ord, military and civilian, soldier and family member, leader and follower, were expected to rebuild an installation suffering from years of budgetary neglect; to restructure a division into “something new” called Light; to modernize equipment while downsizing; to define and refine new tactical doctrine; to support a new strategic concept by becoming rapidly deployable without a contiguous airfield; to test a new system of manning; and to implement a leadership philosophy that emphasized stability and cooperation. We also promised soldiers opportunities to “be all you can be,” preached continuing education, exposed them to modern barracks and a reasonable quality of life in [initial training], and told them they were special. And they believed us.

Each of these change dimensions affected the others, often in unpredicted ways. Rather than always being mutually supportive, missions were often competitive and even mutually exclusive. And despite an influx of dollars and other resources, many constraints built into “The System” could not be bypassed, and the time to completely change people who had lived in that system for years was always in short supply. But we did try to make the brave experiment called COHORT work.<sup>146</sup>

In the late 1980s, COHORT lost momentum partly because of the difficulty in managing a fraction of the force—never larger than about 10 percent—on a unit-manned basis while most of the force continued to operate on an individually manned basis. To create each COHORT unit, a cadre of officers and NCOs had to be pulled out of several other units: “We appeared to be destroying cohesion in order to create it,” in the words of Lt. Gen. Robert M. Elton, a former deputy chief of staff for personnel.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>147</sup> Elton and Trez, p.7.

Variations of the COHORT system were continued on a trial basis for several more years, but from 1987 onward, most units carrying the COHORT label were stabilized for no more than 12 months, and some of them for as little as 4 months. In 1995, the program was suspended.<sup>148</sup>

**Summary and Implications.** Supporters of COHORT contend that it failed because it was too limited in scope, allowing a hidebound Army bureaucracy to stifle the experiment with its routine procedures geared to the existing, individual-oriented personnel system.

The unfortunate problem was that no decisive changes were made to the personnel policies that drive the individual development, rotation and organizational manning systems. This proved to be just too hard to accomplish. The senior commanders wanted cohesion, but not enough to agree to make the major changes.<sup>149</sup>

But the story of COHORT is more complicated than that. In addition to these external obstacles to cohesiveness, the Army's extensive monitoring of the COHORT experiment revealed inherent contradictions in the program. Some COHORT units displayed the superior performance promised by advocates of personnel stabilization, at least for a time. But the WRAIR assessments offered no hard evidence that stabilized units were able to train to a higher standard of combat-relevant collective performance. Moreover, one reason for that lapse is that the project did not systematically ensure that stabilized units were offered an accretive training program that would have capitalized on their promise.

The WRAIR studies did show, clearly, that stabilizing the enlisted membership of companies did not—by itself—ensure that the groups would remain cohesive or that they would be particularly focused on their combat mission. In addition to stabilizing unit membership, a well-calibrated training program that would require

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<sup>148</sup> "History of COHORT units within the Army," unpublished paper by the Army Center for Military History, July 13, 1998.

<sup>149</sup> Elton and Trez, p. 9.

the troops to master progressively more challenging tasks was essential, the Army assessment concluded, both to keep up the soldier's morale and to realize the full military potential of stabilized, cohesive units. Moreover, too many small-unit leaders were not up to—or, at least, were not prepared for—the burden of leading troops through such a demanding program:

Some COHORT leaders rose to the challenge, continually studied their profession, experimented, listened to their troops and subordinate leaders, and not only stayed a step ahead of their troops, but had fun doing it. Others fought back against the threat to their self-respect by bluffing, bullying, and otherwise acting defensively with their troops. Some leaders became habitually abusive under the pressure of leading beyond their competence.<sup>150</sup>

Beyond underscoring the fact that the stabilization hypothesis has not really been proven by hard data, the COHORT experience has a clear implication for the Army's Unit-Focused Stabilization Initiative: If stabilized units are to realize their promise of superior cohesiveness and/or superior mastery of collective tactical skills, they will have to be offered a training program that is challenging, repetitive, and accretive, and they will need officer and NCO leadership at lower echelons who have the talent and training to lead a unit through such a program.

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<sup>150</sup> Dr. Jonathan Shay, "Commandant, United States Marine Corps Trust Study: Final Report, Appendix E: Cohesion," Sept. 29, 2000, p. 48. [Available on Task Force Stabilization website, [www.stabilization.army.mil](http://www.stabilization.army.mil)]

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## Conclusion

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The case for unit-focused stability is not made by the historical cases often cited by proponents of the unit-manning approach:

- German forces in World War II derived much of their combat-staying power not from a personnel system that maximized unit cohesiveness but rather from cultural and political factors inapplicable to US forces.
- US Army units in World War II, Korea and Vietnam frequently were able to assimilate a continual flow of individual replacements while maintaining a high level of combat effectiveness.
- In the Army's COHORT project, personnel stabilization fostered stronger cohesiveness within units; however, those units did not reliably demonstrate better performance, partly because the Army did not systematically provide them with leaders and training programs geared to exploit the units' capabilities.

Likewise, the large body of psychological research on the relationship between cohesion and group performance yields no conclusive support for the stabilization thesis. A statistical analysis of 49 academic studies published between 1952 and 1992 found a positive correlation between cohesion and group success. However, the sequence of cause and effect is opposite of what the stabilization thesis assumes: On the basis of this literature, it appears that

increased success leads to an increase in a group's cohesion rather than higher cohesion leading to greater success.<sup>151</sup>

The situation had not changed appreciably by 1999, when a special issue of the journal *Military Psychology* reviewed the available research on cohesion in military units. In one article, a leading researcher on military cohesion acknowledged that, on the basis of the available research, it was “not clear how long it takes for a high degree of cohesiveness to develop in a group or how long it takes for a group to disintegrate.”<sup>152</sup>

Army researchers reported that the chief combat motivation cited by US soldiers who had participated in the 2003 Iraq campaign was bonds of trust within small units that had formed during weeks and months of shared experience prior to entering combat.<sup>153</sup> But, like the other reports that link stability to cohesion and cohesion to combat performance, the Iraq study begs key questions: What percentage of a unit's roster needs to be stabilized, for how long, and through what type of shared experiences in order to yield a highly performing combat unit? Unless those questions are answered, it is hard to decide whether it is worth accepting the adverse impact of stabilization on leader development and other values.

**Still Worth Trying.** Though the often-cited historical cases do not prove the case for unit manning, neither do they disprove it. Although the case for unit manning has often been overstated and oversimplified in the past, the Army leadership's decision to stabilize personnel in combat units is a reasonable—if untested—initiative:

- The weight of expert judgment about the individual replacement system's adverse impact on unit readiness is too heavy to ignore.

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<sup>151</sup> Brian Mullen and Carolyn Cooper, “The Relation Between Group Cohesiveness and Performance: An Integration,” *Psychological Bulletin* (1994), Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 210–27.

<sup>152</sup> Guy L. Siebold, “The Evolution of the Measurement of Cohesion,” *Military Psychology* (1999), Vol. 11, Issue 1, pp. 5–26.

<sup>153</sup> Leonard Wong, Colonel Thomas A. Colditz, US Army, Lt. Colonel Raymond A. Millen, US Army, and Colonel Terrence M. Potter, US Army, *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (US Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), pp. 9–14.

Particularly relevant is the argument that the continual churning of personnel severely hampers units' ability to master progressively more complex collective battlefield skills.<sup>154</sup>

- Those training limitations may be especially significant given the way the Army is designing its Future Force to fight and the asymmetrical adversaries that force is most likely to face. Even the most junior soldiers in a unit will be expected to derive much of their potential combat power from teamwork with networked comrades, and all the soldiers in a unit may have to be better trained to cope with surprise, a context in which strong, habitual team relationships may be particularly helpful.<sup>155</sup>

Ideally, the decision to implement unit-focused stabilization should have been preceded by a searching assessment of whether stability produces the desired improvements in units made up of today's more professional and better trained soldiers. Such an analysis should also have weighed whether alternative policy changes—for instance, providing more field training for units, or increasing reenlistment incentives to increase retention (and thus the average experience level) in combat units—would produce the same improvement as stabilization at equal or lower cost.<sup>156</sup> However, no such assessment has been undertaken, nor is one planned. “The Army originally considered a testing plan but rejected it in order to move quickly to meet the implementation time line and because of worldwide operational requirements,” according to one analyst.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Defense Science Board Task Force on Training for Future Conflicts: Final Report, June 2003, pp. 40–41.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>156</sup> In fact, an assessment should consider not only stark “either-or” options but also equal-cost mixes of alternatives—for instance, a combination of less personnel turnover and more field exercises. Ideally, it also would address the “shape of the curve,” graphing the relationship between stabilization and performance: What level of increased stability produces a given increment of combat-relevant performance?

<sup>157</sup> Alford, p. 60.

## Recommendations

Although the Army is moving out to implement personnel stabilization on an ambitious timetable, brigades should be monitored for evidence that the change in manning policy is yielding the promised benefits. In addition to assessing reorganized units' cohesiveness with existing survey instruments, the Army should monitor data generated in the normal course of training for evidence that reorganized units are superior to individually manned brigades in combat-relevant performance.<sup>158</sup>

Since the stabilized units will remain together for about two years after completing a CTC exercise, they will be able to harvest the lessons of the experience in a way that traditionally manned units are unable to do. This alone should give the new units a considerable advantage. But the Army's plan for implementing Unit Focused Stabilization also calls for capitalizing on the units' personnel stability by training them for more sophisticated operations, once they complete their six-month startup period and are "certified" as combat ready in a CTC rotation or similar major exercise. "Once a unit reaches the 'run' stage, it should be possible to sustain it there and focus on more complex collective tasks."<sup>159</sup>

The Army also should place a high priority on monitoring over the long haul the effect of changes in personnel management and operational practice that result from the adoption of unit manning. Some of these tradeoffs may entail direct budget costs in the near term. But the others may have institutional impacts that will not become apparent for years. Among the potential consequences of personnel stabilization that should be tracked are the following:

- Eliminating or dramatically reducing soldiers' freedom to seek new assignments (including training that they see as providing valuable options for their subsequent military or postmilitary careers) while they are in a stabilized unit may adversely affect the number or quality of personnel recruited or retained in the combat

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<sup>158</sup> In support of the Unit Focused Stabilization initiative, the RAND Corporation has launched a study to assess the relationship between personnel stability and training proficiency. Army FSIP, p. 17

<sup>159</sup> Army FSIP, p. 20,

arms. If there is such a decline, the Army might have to offset it by increased cash bonuses, special pays, or other enlistment or retention inducements.

- Since junior officers and NCOs will change jobs less often once units are stabilized for three years at a time, stabilization is incompatible with the long-standing policy of ensuring that career soldiers experience a wide range of jobs in their early years of service. According to the Army's implementation plan, young officers and NCOs will be evaluated for the "depth" of their experience rather than its "breadth" and service in one company for six years or more may become the norm.<sup>160</sup> The earlier "breadth over depth" policy has been sharply criticized for rotating soldiers through a succession of jobs at such a rate that they gain only the most superficial grasp of their responsibilities before moving through the next wicket. One can only speculate about how the new "depth over breadth" policy will affect officers' performance in higher command 10 or 15 years later on; but the change does seem to warrant careful explication rather than mere assertion because the Army has defended the previous policy so adamantly for so long.
- If stabilized units demonstrate the promised superiority over units manned on an individual basis, then stabilizing all the combat brigades will bring 65–80 percent of them to a new peak of competence while leaving the remaining 20–35 percent of units—those that had just disbanded at the end of a three-year life-cycle—practically unusable until they complete months of training for their new allotment of "green" troops. By contrast, under the current, individual-manned system, few if any brigades are completely unready, although few are honed to as fine an edge as the unit-manned brigades are expected to achieve.<sup>161</sup> Arguably, if

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<sup>160</sup> Army FSIP. pp. 22-23.

<sup>161</sup> Reconstituting a life-cycle manned unit would be less difficult if those members who did not separate from the Army at the end of the unit's cycle were retained as a cadre around which the unit was re-formed for the next cycle. But even in that case, training up the unit's entire cohort of first-term soldiers—who would account for a large fraction of the trigger-pullers—

the country suddenly faced a major regional conflict requiring deployment of a massive ground force, it might be better to have all of the active component maneuver units largely ready than to have most of them honed to a very keen edge, with the remainder stripped to cadre status. But the prevailing view among Pentagon planners is that a smaller force hitting the enemy faster can bring the conflict to an end quickly enough to avert the need for a larger force later on. From that perspective, the superior combat power that a unit-manned force could generate quickly would be worth the gamble, *if* there is enough strategic lift to get that smaller but more ready force to the fight promptly.<sup>162</sup>

- In case of a sustained mission (i.e., one lasting longer than the routine deployment window of any one life-cycle manned unit), forces that have been serving in theater and have gotten the lay of the land periodically will be replaced by others that will have to start learning the local situation from scratch. In Iraq, the Army has tried to mitigate that risk by ensuring that, for at least a couple of weeks, the departing unit and its replacement overlapped in the theater so, in the words of Gen. Schoomaker, “. . . the new personnel gain the benefit of the experiences of the earlier and departing unit.”<sup>163</sup> Assessing the effectiveness of this hand-off process will be an important subject for the Army’s “lessons learned” process.

**Fleshing Out the Details.** Aside from the fundamental questions of whether stabilization will effect the desired improvements and, if so, whether they will be worth the cost, the Army must address a range of questions about how it will implement the general approach. The success of the Unit-Focused Stabilization initiative will turn, in large part, on the answers to questions such as the following:

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probably would take longer than locking down the (usually) transient membership of an individual-manned unit and whipping it into a cohesive team.

<sup>162</sup> According to the Army's implementation plan, once all the Army's brigades are stabilized, it would take six months to deploy the ready 80 percent of them using existing strategic lift. By the end of that time, the remaining 20 percent of the brigades would be ready to go. Army FSIP, Appendix D, pp. 8-9.

<sup>163</sup> House Armed Services Committee, “Hearing on Force Rotation in Iraq,” Jan. 28, 2004.

(a) **How Much Stability?** Incorporating a clear lesson of the COHORT experience, the current stability policy will apply to the officer and NCO leadership, at least through the company echelon, along with first-term soldiers. But other questions remain:

- How will recruits be selected into annual replacement plugs rather than into units forming up to become newly formed operational formations? Since the stabilized unit is expected to be following a plan of “progressive” or “accretive” training, how will replacements be brought up to speed once they arrive at an existing brigade? Will they simply be parceled out to those small units that have vacancies with the expectation that they will learn by immersion? When the replacements are parceled out to squads and platoons, is there some irreducible module of “buddies”—two or three or four soldiers—that will be assigned en bloc to the same low-echelon unit?<sup>164</sup>
- How will the Army protect personnel stability in maneuver units by reducing “internal” turbulence—transfers among units within a unit of action? The current plan apparently is to allow transfers within a company but discourage transfers out of a company. To be sure, commanders need flexibility to manage the personal chemistry of their units and command teams. But the importance of stability must be a salient schoolhouse lesson for officers and NCOs. Former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric K. Shinseki may have eased this problem, somewhat, with his policy of manning the combat units to 100 percent of authorized strength. This should reduce the need for units to raid sister units for key people in order to deploy.
- How far will the Army go to curb any erosion of readiness that results from the “borrowing” of troops from maneuver units to perform post support duty for the host installation or to make up manpower shortfalls at higher echelons? The plan is that soldiers will not be diverted to such tasks during the six-months in which their brigade is being organized and trained.<sup>165</sup> For the balance of the unit's three-year lifecycle, lower echelon components of the

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<sup>164</sup> This apparently was the model adopted during the Korean War.

<sup>165</sup> Army FSIP, p. 25.

brigade apparently will be liable to such details, except when preparing for a deployment. But this policy seems to disregard the WRAIR analyses of COHORT units in the 7th Infantry Division (Light), which found that soldiers' morale was undermined when they were assigned tasks that they regarded as distractions from their mission of being ready for combat.<sup>166</sup> An alternative solution is the one drummed into the Navy by former Navy Secretary Richard Danzig: the Service must stop treating the time of enlisted personnel as a free good. The implication is that installations must begin to honestly budget for base operations and other activities that regularly are carried “off the books” but “on the backs” of troops whose time is frittered away. Diverting troops from a unit's training plan may be particularly unwise if the unit is not simply trying to stay at a plateau of competence but is following an accretive program that builds on its existing skills to develop more sophisticated tactical capabilities. Does the Army plan to monitor the impact of post support requirements on the progressive training plans of units of action?

- When a unit dissolves at the end of its three-year lifecycle, will there be incentives for the soldiers who do not leave the service to remain together as the cadre around which a new three-year unit will be formed? The Army estimates that as many as 30-40 percent of the soldiers in a disbanding unit might “roll-over” into a newly organizing one. The question is whether there will be steps take to encourage them to do so.<sup>167</sup> One lesson of COHORT is that soldiers in a stabilized unit place particularly heavy demands on their first-tier leadership—their squad leaders. It might be easier for a new NCO to tolerate that strain if he is embedded in a familiar chain of command.

**(b) How Are the Leaders Prepared?** The type of “power-down” caring leadership that Gen. Wickham called for in the Light Infantry Divisions can be taught, up to a point. But whether the teaching is credible is another question. For several years before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, there were alarming indications of a morale

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<sup>166</sup>See page 66, *supra*.

<sup>167</sup> Army FSIB, p. 25.

crisis in the Army's officer corps, partly because of a widespread belief that seniors were micromanaging their subordinates in a desperate effort to achieve a "zero-defects" record in each of their key posts, as they scrambled up the greasy pole. This was one of several conclusions reached by an in-house analysis of the officer community published in 2001, based on interviews with 13,500 soldiers:

Micromanagement has become part of the Army Culture. There is a growing perception that lack of trust stems from the leader's desire to be invulnerable to criticism and blocks the opportunity for subordinates to learn through leadership experience.<sup>168</sup>

With the Army on a wartime footing for more than three years, it is hard to tell whether the underlying problem with officer morale has abated. Conceivably, the patriotism fostered by the Sept. 11 attacks and the subsequent US responses has made senior officers less obsessed with zero-defects and subordinates more tolerant of overly zealous superiors. Moreover, to the extent that the Army's rapid drawdown in the early 1990s fostered a self-protective perspective among those who survived the cuts, the end of the cutbacks may have relieved some of those anxieties.

But it would be dangerous simply to disregard the shockingly open expressions of contempt for, and mistrust of, the senior uniformed leadership that were rampant in the officer corps just a short time ago. Some reformers have proposed radical changes in the officer personnel system in an effort to restore the ideal of "selfless service," which they contend has been smothered in careerism.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> "Army Training and Leader Development Panel Officer Study: Report to the Army," 2001, p. OS-9.

<sup>169</sup> Colonel Douglas A. MacGregor, US Army, author of *Transformation Under Fire* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), and Major Donald Vandergriff, US Army, author of *The Path to Victory* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 2002), are prominent exponents of this view. Both call for unit manning, but as only one facet of much broader reform agendas. Even for Vandergriff, who gives more attention to the personnel system, unit manning is only one element of a complex plan intended to improve the officer corps by making it smaller and harder to get into with less fratricidal competition for promotion; Vandergriff

Those issues are beyond the scope of this report, except to note that if stabilized units are to go beyond mere horizontal cohesion to become the high-performing combat forces that they could be, the Army leadership will have to find ways to convince middle- and low-echelon leaders that the “power-down” philosophy is more than a PowerPoint slide.

- How will training for officers and NCOs — including precommissioning training — be changed to better equip leaders at the company echelon and below to balance authority with intimacy and to lead in a noncoercive way that relies in part on open communications up and down the chain of command?<sup>170</sup> The late Lt. Col. Faris R. Kirkland, a member of WRAIR’s COHORT assessment team, wrote a pamphlet for prospective COHORT commanders in 1987.<sup>171</sup> Former Army Personnel Chief Elton recommends a training program developed by the Army Research Institute for COHORT leaders and used to advantage by light divisions in the 1990s.<sup>172</sup>
- How, and for how long, will the cadre of a newly forming unit train itself before joining its fill of first-termers? At least one effort to provide a formal training program for COHORT cadre was abandoned when it was clear it was being ignored.<sup>173</sup> Some cadres, who got together five weeks before meeting their troops, ran out of things to do. Some that met only a few days before the recruits arrived accomplished little preparation. One study found that three weeks of advanced preparation was “about right” but there

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also calls for reorganizing the force into a larger number of smaller, self-contained combat units in a much flatter organizational hierarchy.

<sup>170</sup> The Army's implementation plan calls for the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and other Army agencies to prepare training modules that will prepare leaders for the special challenges and opportunities of leading stabilized units. Army FSIP, pp. 21-22.

<sup>171</sup> Faris R. Kirkland, “Leading in COHORT Companies,” WRAIR, Dec. 21, 1987.

<sup>172</sup> Elton and Trez, pp. 8–9.

<sup>173</sup> Capt. David J. Knack, US Army, “COHORT Cadre Training Evaluation,” TRADOC, May 1987.

appears to have been little systematic effort to plan this important part of the COHORT process.

**(c) What Kind of Training Will Be Offered Stabilized Units?**

The clear lesson of COHORT is that, if troops are able to progress to more complex tasks (because they need not repeat the basics for a steady influx of new arrivals), then they will demand that kind of steady increase in sophistication in their training. Nor can the demand for progressive training be satisfied simply by raising the bar so that the troops wear themselves out in doing some bit of busywork faster, farther, or higher for the sake of an artificial competition. Some COHORT unit commanders in the 7th Division came up with very well designed training plans, but they proved to be impractical because of their expense (mostly for travel to distant training areas).

- Do developments in simulation and training technology over the past 15 years offer low-echelon leaders significantly more flexibility in creating challenging training scenarios on relatively short notice and at relatively little expense? Remember that the huge, fixed infrastructures required for the National Training Center reflect the technology of a quarter century ago. How close are we to “CTC-in-a-Box”—a portable combat scoring system cheap enough to let a battalion or company engage in high-fidelity close combat training at their home station?<sup>174</sup>
- Are commanders at battalion echelon and above prepared to rebalance the training schedules to afford company commanders more time—and more control over that training time—to hone small-unit skills? A focus on lower echelon skills would comport with the higher degree of tactical autonomy for lower echelon units that is contemplated in the Future Force.<sup>175</sup> Coincidentally, it could alleviate the discontent apparently rampant among company grade officers through 2001. According to several

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<sup>174</sup> An effort in this direction by Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is highlighted in the Defense Science Board Task Force on Training For Future Conflicts: Final Report, pp. 58–59.

<sup>175</sup> Maj. Robert J. Reilly, US Army, “Confronting the Tiger: Small Unit Cohesion in Battle,” *Military Review*, November–December, 2000, pp. 61–65.

sources, a major contributor to their disaffection was the lack of freedom to actually “command” their units.<sup>176</sup>

One of the brief *Fables for Our Time* written by humorist James Thurber tells of a bear that routinely arrived home staggeringly drunk, accidentally breaking furniture and knocking out windows before falling asleep on the floor. His wife was greatly distressed, and his children were very frightened. Eventually, the bear reformed and became a famous temperance crusader who lectured visitors about the evils of drink and about how much better he felt since giving up booze. He illustrated his well-being by performing vigorous calisthenics and cartwheeling throughout the house, accidentally breaking furniture and knocking out windows. His wife was greatly distressed, and his children were very frightened. The moral of this tale, according to Thurber: *You might as well fall flat on your face as bend over too far backwards.*<sup>177</sup>

It is hard to imagine that it would not be a good thing to reduce considerably the rate of turnover in Army combat units for the sake of improving cohesion and training. The problem is that decades of accumulated folklore so exalt the importance of stability that the Army may wind up overdoing it, a risk that is exacerbated by the fact that the nuances of a policy that is vigorously promoted by the senior Army leadership may be lost on those far down the chain of command who must implement it.

One possibility is that the Army will be too loathe to make exceptions to the general policy of stabilization and thus, perhaps, unnecessarily diminish other goods, such as the professional development of future senior leaders or the quality of long-range planning by staff organizations. Another is that, because of the focus on stability, the Army—or its civilian political masters—will short-change programs to develop high-quality leaders and progressive training required to realize the potential of stabilized units.

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<sup>176</sup> Leonard Wong, *Stifled Innovation: Developing Tomorrow's Leaders Today* (US Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute, April 2002).

<sup>177</sup> James Thurber, *Fables for our Time and Famous Poems Illustrated* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 31.

**Thurber's fable of the bear argues that even good things must be kept in perspective. So does this report.**