

The Strength of the Wolf is the Pack

Improving Unit Cohesion in Marine Corps Infantry Battalions

by Major Brendan B. McBreen

Improving the stability and cohesion of our infantry units is a prerequisite for all other improvements. Of all the ideas for improving the combat capabilities of Marine Corps infantry battalions, cohesion is the only one that really matters.

benefit armies with high quality small units. Expeditionary operations will constrain the size of our forces. The common denominator for our future force is robust and capable small units.

What is Needed?

Improving unit stability and cohesion will increase the readiness, leadership, and training levels of our infantry units. This will maximize the effectiveness of all other improvements to doctrine and equipment.

Only stabilized, cohesive units can be trained to the high skill levels needed to meet future requirements and provide us with smaller, less expensive, yet more effective forces. Cohesion also provides lower costs, safer units, and higher quality of life.

Why do we Fight?

"Soldiers have to eat soup together for a long time before they are ready to fight."

— Napoleon

Marines do not fight for motherhood, apple pie or patriotism. When personal violence is close at hand, the key truth emerges. We fight for our friends.

Throughout history, warriors have fought well when organized

as cohesive teams. Individuals bond with their unit for recognition and protection. They fight for the esteem of their peers, to protect their comrades, and to achieve their unit's goals.

What is Cohesion?

Cohesion is the bond of trust between members of a small group. Cohesive unit are coordinated teams where individuals risk death for unit preservation.

Cohesion only applies to small groups with face-to-face relationships. Cohesion is not morale or esprit de corps.

There are four types of cohesion. *Horizontal Cohesion* is trust between peers. *Vertical Cohesion* is bonding between subordinates and leaders. *Organizational Cohesion* is the relationship of an individual to his organization. *Societal Cohesion* is how a military relates to its society.

Why is Cohesion Important?

Cohesive units fight better. Warriors who trust their comrades overcome fear, fight courageously, and execute more effective tactics.

Cohesive units communicate better. Implicit communications permit



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The New Century

In the new century, conflicts will emphasize quality over quantity. Skill still trumps technology. Units on the battlefield have become smaller and more dispersed, while weapons of increased lethality have become more precise. Today, technology has greatly increased the combat power of small units. Future combat will demand lower levels of autonomy and higher levels of competence. These trends will

less detailed orders and make mission orders, commander's intent, and OODA cycles possible.

Cohesive units train to higher standards. Continuity permits progressive training to higher skill levels. Refresher training is quicker and more effective.

Cohesive units suffer fewer battle casualties. Units that fight well suffer fewer casualties in combat. Leaders make fewer mistakes that result in casualties.

Cohesive units suffer fewer non-battle casualties. Confident individuals suffer less anxiety and psychological injuries. Sickness, drugs, alcoholism, and accidents are less prevalent.

Cohesive units do not fracture under stress. Shared privation is easier to bear. Cohesive units remain combat capable after losses and are easier to reconstitute.

Cohesive units require less administrative support. Units with tight social bonds suffer less legal and administrative problems and have lower attrition.

Cohesive units provide a higher quality of life. Humans seek recognition in meaningful groups. Long tours increase family stability and social ties, and increase retention.

How is Cohesion Built?

“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. That is the science of armies in a nutshell.”

— Ardant Du Picq

Stability plus Stress plus Success equals Cohesion.

Stability. Cohesion's central requirement is personnel stability. Strong units share common experiences. Marines should serve with the same peers as long as possible.

Stress speeds the cohesion process. Tough training events build unit pride and individuals learn to trust their peers.

Success. Teams that experience success learn interdependence. Members develop the loyalty and pride in their unit that is essential for combat.



Horizontal cohesion among peers is created by collective team training and an emphasis on unit identity.

Vertical cohesion from unit to leader is created by leaders who build teamwork, look after their people, and set a personal example.

Horizontal cohesion between leaders is

built on shared doctrine, standards, and experiences. Regimental systems, where officers serve in the same units throughout their careers, build this familiarity.

Vertical cohesion from leader to leader is built the same way, through shared interactions.

Organizational cohesion, the bonds between an individual and his army, are built on the culture, history, and traditions of the organization. Organizational esprit and morale, however, do not translate directly into small unit cohesion.

Societal Cohesion is the relationship between a military and its society. An army convinces its soldiers that society values their sacrifices. Citizens believe that soldiers act with competence and honesty.

Cohesion is destroyed by personnel turbulence. No matter how hard a unit trains, team skills cannot be maintained if teams are not maintained. Turnover requires repetitive, inefficient retraining. Introducing new leaders damages vertical cohesion. A lack of stability destroys cohesion.

How is Stability Measured?

A unit familiarity index is the average number of months each member a squad-sized unit has shared with the other members of the unit. A leader stability index is the average number of months that each leader has served in his billet. Leaders should track their units' stability in order to make good personnel decisions.

Reconstitution

There are three basic models of how units are formed and trained.

The Steady State model maintains units at full strength by a continuous supply of new individuals. This is the model most U.S. military organizations have used since World War I.

The Life Cycle model treats a unit like a living organism. It is created with all new members, serves on active duty for a number of years, lives on reserve duty for a number of years, and is then abolished.

The Reconstitution model introduces blocks of new people at fixed intervals. Each unit trains with the same people for a single interval. At a set date, half the individuals depart and an equal number join, bringing the unit back up to strength.

This model permits cohesive units to accept newcomers all at once and rapidly regain cohesion through focused training. Reconstitution units never fall to low levels of readiness. Unlike steady-state units, reconstitution units benefit from long periods of stability. Additionally, peacetime reconstitution is the same procedure needed to join replacements in combat.

A peacetime reconstitution cycle should be as long as possible. In combat, reconstitution *cannot* be done while in contact. During World War II, the Marine Corps found that when men were joined under fire, it *decreased* combat power. Replacements did not

know their leaders, had not trained with the unit, and were seeing combat for the first time. To overcome this, NCOs had to lead them at great risk, *increasing* casualties among the most experienced men.

Based on these experiences, Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Cushman, later to become Commandant, recommended in a 1947 *Marine Corps Gazette* article that units train for combat *overstrength*, and, when losses occur, be pulled out of combat for reconstitution.

The steps of reconstitution are: (1) remove the unit from combat, (2) join new members to existing cohesive teams, (3) share combat lessons learned and integrate new equipment, and (4) train to reestablish cohesion.



Cohesion and the Marine Corps Infantry Battalion

The 1999 Marine Corps Order 3500.28 *Marine Corps Cohesion Program Standing Operating Procedures* established two initiatives. *Synchronization* matches a ‘fill window,’ with each

battalion’s deployment schedule. New privates are joined at least eight months before deployment. Each Marine’s length of service is synchronized so the Marine deploys twice, maximizing the number of Marines who serve in the same battalion during their first enlistment. *Team Integrity* creates teams of privates in school and then assigns teams to a single battalion to train and deploy together.

The cohesion order improved horizontal cohesion among first term Marines. NCOs, SNCOs, and officers, however, have no cohesion policy. The cohesion order states “Out-of-cycle replacements run counter to the philosophy of unit cohesion.” Yet that is exactly how leaders are joined. Short serving leaders degrade vertical cohesion with their Marines and horizontal cohesion with their peers.

Training cycles are not synchronized with personnel cycles. Small unit training is meaningless when executed before new Marines arrive. Large training events that receive the majority of resources are least effective for training small units. A fill window eight months before deployment is not sufficient training time. Formal school schedules interfere with team building.

The most telling evidence that the Marine Corps has not put enough emphasis on cohesion is that measures of unit stability are invisible to unit readiness reporting.

Cohesion and the Marine Corps Infantry Battalion As-It-Will-Be

Marine infantry battalions should be composed of the most cohesive small units possible. The Marine Corps should:

1. Establish a “reconstitution cycle” for each battalion that parallels the training and deployment cycle. We need to establish a four-week reconstitution window at the beginning of each cycle and transfer *all Marines* during this window. Eliminate separate “lock-on” targets for MEU and UDP battalions. All units lock-on by a single fill during the “reconstitution window.”
2. Assign all Marines—officers, SNCOs, NCOs, and privates—to infantry battalions for two cycles. Extend service obligations when needed. Turn over approximately half the battalion each cycle.
3. Collect quarterly stability data for readiness reporting. A sample infantry company report would read: **Alpha Company**—Leader Stability: 10.7 months, Average Familiarity Index: 13.3 months, High: 16.1 months, Low: 8.9 months. Rewrite the 3500.28 cohesion order measures of effectiveness to a percentage of Marines who serve their first enlistment in same *company*, not battalion.
4. Overfill units to account for normal losses during the two-year reconstitution cycle.

We need to build a culture of cohesion within the Marine Corps. *TECOM* should publish training guidance to link the reconstitution cycle to the training cycle. I recommend that the first quarter of battalion’s training cycle focus on small units, and large exercises only be held during the last quarter of the cycle.

Increase emphasis on training within units. Change the philosophy from “School prepares a Marine for combat,” to “School prepares a Marine for units. The unit prepares a Marine for combat.”



Manpower should maintain tour lengths for all Marines at two cycles. Publish stability goals for readiness reporting. Assign career Marines to the same regiment where they served previously. Stop transferring career Marines upon promotion. Permit Marines selected for school to defer attendance.

The Ground Combat Element Advocate should prioritize unit cohesion personnel policies ahead of equipment programs.

Why Now?

Small unit cohesion is more important today than at any time in our past.

Warfighting Doctrine. The current capabilities of our units do not yet meet the requirements of our Warfighting doctrine.

Commander’s intent, mission orders, and rapid OODA cycles require implicit communications and tactics based on trust. Expeditionary forces trained for immediate deployment need peacetime cohesion.

Training. New technology and doctrine have increased our training requirements. Increased obligations have decreased our training time. We need to produce better trained units by training more effectively. Cohesive units train to higher levels and retrain faster. Cohesion permits experience to be retained long after large exercises and lowers the importance of expensive exercises and centralized training centers.

Casualties. Cohesion reduces casualties, saving trained manpower and preserving fighting strength.

Expense. Cohesive units maximize our investment in personnel. Cohesion reduces training expenses, maintenance expenses, and retention expenses. Fewer transfers reduce moving expenses and the lost man-hours due to trainees, transfers, prisoners, and patients. Cohesion among officers permits leaner staffs.

Future Initiatives. Stable units are more effective when dealing with changes to organizations, doctrine, training, and equipment.

Relevance. Highly-trained Marine Corps units are more relevant. The American people and our national leaders expect high levels of warfighting competence. Capable units that are adaptable, better trained, and suffer fewer casualties reduce the political cost of deploying ground forces.

Conclusion

Unit cohesion costs almost nothing, yet has historically proven to be the single most effective method for building highly capable infantry units. No enhancements to doctrine, organization, training or equipment will be fully effective until we improve the stability and cohesion of our units. Cohesion is more important now than at any time in our past.

The duty of Marine leaders is to build and lead combat-capable units. As we prepare Marines for combat, we should ensure that our Marines go into harm's way alongside skilled comrades that they know and trust. In the crucible of combat the Marine Corps will reap the benefits of a culture of cohesion.

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