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Cohesion, Combat Performance and Civil-Military Relations: Contextualising ‘The Word of Command’

In July 2006, *Armed Forces & Society* published my first serious article on military sociology: ‘The word of command: communication and cohesion in the military’. Before that piece, I had worked on the sociology of football (the topic of my doctoral dissertation) and social theory. The infamous terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 changed all that. I decided that as a sociologist, it was necessary to try to understand the wars which would inevitably follow that atrocity. I confess I underestimated quite how much conflict there would be in the following two decades, but the apparently endless proliferation of violence justified my decision back in 2001.

Unsurprisingly, I began my research on the armed forces by engaging with the sociological literature. As a sociologist, the canon was very obvious and, having studied football hooligan gangs, I was quickly drawn to the sociology of small units. I was, therefore, deeply impressed by Morris Janowitz’s and Edward Shils’s seminal paper ‘Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II’. There, against contemporaneous conventional wisdom, they argued that the Wehrmacht was potent, not because of its political fanaticism, but because of the dense masculine bonds of trust between its soldiers: ‘it is the main hypothesis of this paper, however, that the unity of the German Army was in fact sustained only to a very slight extent by the National Socialist political convictions of its members, and that more important in the motivation of the determined resistance of the German soldier was the steady satisfaction of certain *primary* personality demands afforded by the social organization of the army’ (Janowitz and Shils 1948: 281). Samuel Stouffer’s two volume work, *The American Soldier*, proposed a similar argument for US troops (Stouffer et al. 1949ab). From there, I followed the debate on cohesion through interventions

by Charles Moskos (1970, 1975), Roger Little (1964), William Cockerham (1978), Arkin and Dubrofsky (1978), Guy Aran (1974), Gabriel and Savage (1978), Stephen Wesbrook (1980), Donna Winslow (1997), Omer Bartov (1992ab), Nancy Kinzer Stewart (1991), Leonard Wong (Wong et al. 2003), etc. Although he was not a sociologist and his work has become controversial, SLA Marshall's famous 1948 book, *Men against Fire*, was important to the development of my position on cohesion (Marshall 2000).

This literature framed my research. However, having initially trained as an anthropologist, I was keen to engaged in an ethnographic study of the small military unit. The best sociological analysis depends on a deep appreciation of the lifeworld under investigation; it is necessary to comprehend the realities of social practice – what actually happens - and to recognise how social actors themselves understand what they are doing. Ethnographic fieldwork is an excellent way of gaining that indispensable 'thick' awareness (Geertz). Consequently, in the fall of 2003, I began observing training at the Royal Marines Commando Training Centre in Lympstone, Devon. I was attached to their Young Officer training programme: a fourteenth month course, involving fieldcraft, infantry tactics, amphibious assault, physical fitness, and leadership. The course involved about forty officer cadets, organised into two 'troops'¹ (platoons). I attended most of the field exercises in 2003 and 2004. Of the Young Officer batch I watched, two have died (in accidents), others have left the service, but a few have gone on to stellar careers in the Royal Marines and the Special Operations Forces. One is likely to become the next commander of the Royal Marines' Future Commando Force.

Young Officer training provided a fascinating insight into military life. On exercise, the officers practised infantry tactics: patrolling, harbouring, planning attack, and defence.

¹ Troop is the term used in the Royal Marines for a platoon; it is the smallest infantry unit, consisting of three sections (squads), and twenty-eight individuals. Infantry platoons normally consist of between 30 and 40 soldiers.

Exercises almost always culminated in a ‘troop’ attack. The reality was quite different from what I had expected from my reading of the literature on cohesion. The dominating theme of the scholarship from Janowitz and Shils onwards was that small unit performance on the battlefield was best explained by interpersonal relationships between the soldiers in squads, platoons and companies. Social cohesion explained combat performance. Of course, several scholars resisted this argument. Bartov (1992ab) and Moskos (1970; 1975) claimed that political motivation was more important though, in both cases, political commitments also generated solidarity, in the absence of long-standing friendships. The tenor of the literature was very clear. Interpersonal solidarity – friendship - was decisive.

However, the social cohesion thesis, so deeply embedded in the literature, was dissonant with what I witnessed on those bleak training areas in the UK. Some of the young Royal Marines officers were plainly great friends. Yet, their exercises involved no formal group bonding activities. The cadets practiced their military skills; not their interpersonal connections. They trained hard so that they could execute their platoon attacks properly. This involved careful planning, a formal orders process, followed by rehearsals. Finally, officers employed a lexicon of institutionalised commands to coordinate their actions as the attacks were underway. Unlike war films or the legend of the British Pals’ Battalions on the Somme in 1916, they did not just exhort each other to attack, fix bayonets, and then charge. They sought to execute complex tactical manoeuvres. Their success relied on individual and collective skill, on teamwork; they had coordinate themselves and cooperate with each other at all times. While their friendships certainly deepened as a result of their training and the shared hardship it involved, their performances were not substantially determined by their interpersonal relations. Sometimes, they performed well on exercises; sometimes they failed – but their friendships endured. When they succeeded they worked well together; they executed their drills properly. When they failed, individuals or groups made technical

mistakes through inexperience, misjudgement, or tiredness. The result was that their tactical performance was poor.

There was a manifest dissonance between the literature and the reality which I saw. The literature prioritised friendship and interpersonal relations: social cohesion. The Royal Marines – and other military forces as I engaged with them – emphasised training, professionalism, competence and skill. My 2006 article on cohesion was an initial attempt to redress the balance of the literature. It was never my intention to say that interpersonal relations were irrelevant to combat performance, but that a sustainable sociology of small unit performance on the battlefield had to pay more attention to military practice itself. It had to investigate training and tactics. To be effective, soldiers do not need just to be willing to fight *for* each other, they have to be able to fight *with* each other as well; individual and collective skill are important.

Of course by 2006, I was not the only scholar who was moving towards a practical explanation of small unit action, and away from an interpersonal, affective account of male group bonding. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a number of other scholars were becoming dissatisfied with the cohesion paradigm, motivated by a variety of political and intellectual motivations. Elisabeth Kier (1998) and Robert MacCoun (MacCoun 1993; MacCoun et al. 2006) promoted the concept of task cohesion over social cohesion; David Segal and Meyer Kestnbaum (2002) disparaged ‘pure cohesion’. In 2005, just before my paper appeared, Eyal Ben-Ari and Uzi Ben-Shalom published an important and ingenious paper on ‘swift trust’ in the IDF (Ben-Shalom et al. 2005). In 2006, the military historian, Hew Strachan (2006) also published a paper on cohesion, which emphasised the importance of military training to combat performance. ‘The Word of Command’ affirmed these pieces, in an attempt to re-orient the debate on cohesion towards a sociology of military practice.

In my subsequent monographs, and most importantly in *The Combat Soldier* (King 2013), I sought to develop the line of argument. This work drew directly out of the 2006 article and Guy Siebold's response to it (Siebold 2007). By putting 2006 article into a historical context, *The Combat Soldier* sought to reconcile my arguments for the priority of training – task cohesion - with the social cohesion thesis. *The Combat Soldier*, therefore, proposed that in the mass, citizen armies of the twentieth century, interpersonal, masculine bonding – social cohesion - was, indeed often primary because these forces struggled to train their troops very effectively. Mass armies relied on appeals to group solidarity to encourage their troops. By contrast, the smaller, all-volunteer professional forces which have been dominant in the last half century, have relied much more on training and professionalism. The priority of training does not mean that personal bonds are irrelevant. On the contrary, they remain very important but their character changes; they too become professionalised. Friendships in small units are informed, even determined, by a professional ethos.

My 2006 article has generated considerable debate in the journal. Guy Siebold, in particular, responded to it of course, but also Charles Kirke (2009). More recently Ilmari Käikhö published a special section in the journal which sought to move the debate forward (Käikhö 2018ab). He and his colleagues argued that the cohesion debate had to be expanded to include non-western non-state forces (Haldén 2018; Hansen 2018; Verweijen 2018). However, Sinisi Malesevic's recent criticism of my 2006 article, and Guy Siebold's 2007 response to it, is perhaps the most pertinent intervention (Malesevic 2022). Although subtitled 'the social dynamics of close range violence', Malesevic's book is, in fact, a wide-ranging analysis of war - or 'social pugnacity', as Malesevic calls it. Malesevic addresses our debate at length. He dismisses our work on cohesion. For him, it is united by a common error: 'Since both Siebold and King perceive humans as intrinsically social they inevitably subscribe to the view that micro-level cohesion precedes organisational unity' (Malesevic

2022: 229). For Malesevic, small unit cohesion is not *sui generis*. It cannot be studied independently, as it is a product of wider organisational, and ideological processes: ‘the social cohesion of military units is often a structural product – the outcome of long-term organisational and ideological processes’ (Malesevic 2022: 230). While small belligerent groups might be able to engage in violence temporarily, major conflicts require massive state investment. Wars just cannot be sustained at the level of the small unit: ‘they both remain hampered by the pronounced weaknesses of the Durkheimian perspective – its functionalist logic, its idealist epistemology, and its ahistorical understanding of social change’ (Malesevic 2022: 245). Malesevic, therefore, claims that rather than focusing on small unit cohesion at the micro level, it is necessary to address macro-organisational contexts which are far more important to explaining military violence. For him, ideology and state organisation are critical. Only massive popular mobilisation and prodigious state resources can sustain a major conflict. Small unit cohesion is a function of ideology and the state. The state and its armed forces, as an organisation, must be central to any analysis of small unit cohesion.

This is a very strange reading of the debate about cohesion and my work on cohesion, in particular. It is true that in the 2006 article, I focused entirely and consciously on the small unit, the Royal Marine troop; organisational and historical questions were deliberately bracketed out of a short initial statement. It is also true that *The Combat Soldier* sought to explain small unit action on the battlefield. Indeed, it concentrated specifically on the platoon attack. Yet, it is simply wrong to claim that this monograph – or indeed the 2006 article – was uninterested in organisational or historical factors. On the contrary, *The Combat Soldier* investigated an organisational and historical thesis; that was its whole point. It was arranged around a historic division between twentieth century mass citizen armies, and twenty-first century professional forces. I argued that small unit solidarities in each army and each era was distinctive, reflecting the political, economic, cultural and organisational imperatives of

the time. Cohesion was by no means intrinsic, or universal. The entire point of *The Combat Soldier* was to prove that battlefield performance and social cohesion itself – the bonds between soldiers which motivated them to fight - was a product of wider institutional, operational and historic conditions.

To sustain his argument, Malesevic ignores the considerable explanatory weight which *The Combat Soldier* placed on the move from citizen to professional armies; and which was certainly implied in the 2006 article. It is important to recognise that the transition to an all-volunteer, professional force has not been a contingent, easily reversible transformation. On the contrary, it reflects profound changes in civil culture and in the relationship between the people and the state. In the mid-twentieth century, states were at the apogee of their power. They had control over the lives and deaths of their citizens. Citizens, united in more ethno-politically homogenous nations, consented to the state, whose interests were aligned with their own. Then, it was easier to mobilise citizens; often, they volunteered for or were willingly conscripted into military service. That era is over. Full male conscription was an artifact of the last century.

Today, citizens are more sceptical. Israel is an obvious exception. In western states, it would be very difficult for western states to bring back full conscription. The Russo-Ukraine War provides a useful comparison with the twentieth century. For instance, even though the war has become an existential issue for both countries, the truly massive mobilisations of the First and Second World Wars have not happened in either Ukraine or Russia. the Ukrainian armed forces, a year into the war, have introduced limited conscription. Although it has a population of 44 million, its armed forces consist of possibly 200,000 combat troops in total, but far fewer are fighting, with another 300,000 militia. It is a significant force. Yet, during the Second World War with a similar population, 2.5 million Ukrainians were conscripted into the Red Army, 25,000 served willingly for the Germans, while between 40,000 to

200,000 joined the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Reid 2022: 148-149). In the Second World War, the Red Army was 8 million strong. Russia, with a population of 143 million, has failed to reach its target of 300,000 new recruits; many thousands of young men have fled the country to avoid military service. The state's authority and the people's willingness to serve has declined. The political settlement has changed; the contract between people and state altered. In addition, precisely because forces have professionalised and become more technical proficient, mass recruitment is not as essential as it once was. There is now less requirement for mere soldiery. The armed forces require more experienced, specialist personnel. The Ukraine Armed Forces has relied less on the sheer numbers of raw recruits, and more on the specialist skills which civilian computer scientists, engineers, technicians have brought (*The Economist* 2023: 37-7). The rise of the professional force is a profound historic fact. It reflects a fundamental change in social and political realities. My analysis of small unit cohesion implied these major reconfigurations. I was not interested in the esoteric details of infantry tactics for their own sake; I was writing as a sociologist, not a military pedant. Against Malesevic's imputations, my analysis of the small unit always presumed a wider organisational and historical context. Often that presumption was completely explicit.

Malesevic's interpretation of my work on cohesion may be questionable but it identifies an important point about it. My 2006 article analysed the minutiae of military practice. What did these technicalities have to do with the grander mission of *Armed Forces & Society*? When he established the journal in 1974, Morris Janowitz described his editorial policy. He wanted to journal to be a 'scholarly medium which focuses on (a) an interdisciplinary and (b) an international approach to the topics of armed forces and society, war, revolution, arms control and peace-keeping' (Janowitz 1974: 1). Plainly, the remit was broad. However, having published *The Professional Soldier* in 1960, Janowitz was primarily concerned with civil military relations; he was interested the relationship between the armed

forces and the state and society. The title *Armed Forces & Society* – especially with an ampersand – was surely very deliberate; it denoted that civil-military relations, the interactions of the state and society with the armed forces, and their political implications, were the prime topic of the journal. It was also significant that the leading article in the first issue was Samuel Finer's 'A man on horseback -1974', a version of an additional chapter from his celebrated book provided an assessment of military regimes (Finer 1974). Despite Janowitz's very general mission statement in his opening editorial, from the very first, then, civil-military relations, the political interaction of the government, society, and the armed forces, were the central themes of *Armed Forces & Society*.

My micro-analysis of cohesion seems a long way from Janowitz's central concerns or the general tenor of that first issue. Yet, in fact, Malesevic usefully highlights the intimate connection between my micro-analysis of military practice and the grand themes which Janowitz identified. On exercise in twenty years ago, those Royal Marines officer cadets were training for small unit tactics; they were learning how to command a troop of marines. They may have been unaware of it, but the attacks they practised and re-practiced on those bare moors, implied a highly distinctive arrangement between the armed forces, the government and society. In 1957, Samuel Huntington famously asserted that the armed forces were under 'objective' political control (Huntington 1957). Civil power was primary, but the armed forces should be able to prosecute military campaigns independently, according to their professional expertise. In 1960, Janowitz reversed Huntington's argument (Janowitz 1960). He claimed that the armed forces were under the 'subjective' control of military powers. As constabulary action became more common, the military profession was converging with the role of civil managers. Consequently, military professionals were actively and unwittingly aligning their policies and their values with their civil masters. There was an organic fusion of civil and military powers.

In the twenty-first century, the relationship between the government and the armed forces has changed. It is no longer captured adequately by the concepts of objective or subjective control. Hew Strachan (2013) and Lawrence Freedman (2022), for instance, have argued that a professional armed forces certainly have their own unique skills and capabilities. They self-evidently are not civilian. However, in the twenty-first century, they cannot be – and should not be – independent of the government, if they ever were. In the age of the internet, social media, digital communications, and complex coalition campaigns, apparently pristine operational issues quickly become political. Consequently, although they have their own unique professional expertise, military commanders cannot be independent, as Huntington insisted; every professional decision has a delicate political implication. Nor are military professionals obviously converging with their civilian counterparts, as Janowitz claimed; US military commanders are notably martial in their bearing and orientation. Generals James Mattis, or Stanley McChrystal have been described as ‘warrior monks’ – not managers or politicians. US generals have directed lethal operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and (vicariously) in Ukraine. Each attack is potentially sensitive with implications not only for the US, but for their allies, and for indigenous states. As professional military commanders, they must interact constantly with their political masters, therefore: not as civilians, but as military experts. Today, it would appear that military commanders are ever more closely integrated into civil power, tailoring operations and even tactical actions to immediate political need, in a way which George Marshall and Douglas MacArthur would have found intolerable. Yet, paradoxically, they are integrated precisely because they are the experts in organised violence.

The Royal Marines officers, I watched, probably knew little of this as they ran about in the rain in 2003, but in joining a highly professionalised military force in an advanced democracy engaged in coalition operations, they were ultimately committing themselves to

this complex political settlement. It was certainly their duty to execute their missions professionally. At the higher levels of command, that professionalism also involved intense interaction with political leaders to ensure that the armed forces executed coherent operations, in the correct way, in line with local, regional and global interests – even down to the platoon level. My 2006 article was an analysis of military professionalism in the early twenty-first century. Consequently, although its focus seemed entirely tactical, its organisational and political implications were potentially profound. It is perhaps for this reason that readers have continued to be interested in those wet and muddy marines, whom I was so privileged to watch.

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