# Cohesion and Rigorous Training: Observations of the Air Assault School

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***There is growing awareness of the beneficial effect that group cohesion can have on a unit's performance, particularly in combat. This phenomenon results from the shared experiences of a group of people. The authors report findings based on their participation in a physically and mentally demanding training course.***

DURING the summer of 1981, we attended the Air Assault School of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), Fort Campbell, Kentucky. We went as participant-observers to learn the techniques of air assault and to make observations in areas of our own particular professional interest. We wished to observe the effects of rigorous training upon group cohesion, especially in a group of soldiers who were not previously well acquainted with one another.

The school itself, the quality of the instructors, the thoroughness and safety of the course of instruction, and the caliber of the students were excellent. During the period that we attended the school, the course of instruction was 10 days, divided into three phases

- The first phase (three days) included aircraft familiarization and safety procedures, landing zone operations and training in combat air assault.
- The second phase (three days) included rappelling from a tower and from helicopters, climbing the troop ladder and training in the use of the tree landing platform.
- The third phase (three days) included rigging and sling loading for airlift by helicopter of light, heavy and multiple loads

There was a practical test following each of these phases and a written test following the first and third phases The 10th day of the course consisted of a 10-mile timed road march and graduation. Physical training was conducted each day with runs, road marches and hand-to-hand combat

Our classmates were a cross section of the Army, ranging from field grade officers and senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs), through company grade officers and junior NCOs, to enlisted men and Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadets Of our class of approximately 130, 73 percent graduated (to that date, the second highest percentage in the history of the school)

Reasons for being in the class varied. For officers and NCOs, success in the school was of importance in furthering their careers For the ROTC cadets, attending the school was a break from routine and a reward for superior performance during the school year. For the enlisted soldiers from Fort Campbell, though technically they were volunteers, successful completion of the class at some point was a requirement for genuine success with the 101st Airborne.

Soldiers also varied markedly in their extracurricular obligations and in their means for honoring them. One soldier, for example, was a single parent, living off-post, with no means of personal transportation

Group cohesion has been shown to improve individual performance in both combat and garrison and to decrease combat-related psychiatric casualties.[1] Shared rigorous or dangerous experience fosters the development of group cohesion. And, within limits, the more rigorous or dan-

gerous the experience, the more rapidly cohesion develops.[2] Research has demonstrated that cohesive forces develop in any group sharing common hardships. Unfortunately for the Army and other large institutions, unless guided in some way, these cohesive forces frequently do not serve the goals of the larger institution of which the group is a part.[3]

We expected that cohesion would develop in our class because of the shared dangers and the intensity of the training. Because of the controlled and focused nature of the training, we further expected that the cohesion that developed would be in the service of institutional goals (that is, to prepare qualified, competent air assault soldiers) We also expected the cadre would play an important role in channeling the developing cohesive forces toward these goals.

The greatest and most rapid development of cohesion occurred during the second (rappelling) phase of the school Little cohesion developed during the first phase, and the third phase served primarily to consolidate the cohesive bonds which developed during the rappelling phase.

During the first phase of the school, much time was spent in classroom instruction. Physical training was moderate in intensity, and shared dangers (with the exception of the obstacle course on Day 2) were minimal Though there were some risks in it, the obstacle course was perceived more as an individual challenge than as a common one, as successful completion was required to remain in the class Also during this first phase, there was considerable emphasis upon the formal aspects of military bearing, reinforced with pushups.

The focus of cadre attention was upon individual appearance and behavior. Soldiers who were late for formation, missing items of equipment or inattentive to the details considered important by the cadre received negative points. A sufficient accumulation of negative points forced a soldier to recycle and re-enter the course in one of the following classes. A few soldiers deliberately accumulated negative points in order to retake the class at what for them would be a more convenient time. This was the case with the soldier without transportation mentioned previously.

Throughout the course, soldiers were forced out of the class for accumulation of negative points, failure to pass a test or, in a few cases, a major safety violation. Concurrently, soldiers who had been dropped from earlier classes would join. The major portion of the attrition occurred during the first three days of the course, and it was also during this time that the greatest number of recycled personnel joined the class.

Motivation seems to have been the major determinant of success. The highest rate of attrition was among the soldiers who were either less motivated or who had greater net extracurricular obligations. Junior enlisted men, who constituted the majority of the class, were the most likely to drop out. During the first phase, attention to the rules was used by the cadre as a test of motivation and comprehension. Later in the rappelling phase, when attention to detail became of great importance for safety, the preparation and selection of the first phase proved its relevance and value

Our observations indicate that cohesion did not develop to any significant degree during the first phase of the course. This appeared to have been for several reasons. During this time, there was considerable personnel turnover, some soldiers leaving the course and previously dropped soldiers joining. This made a personal investment in making friends a risk as the group had not settled into its final form. During the

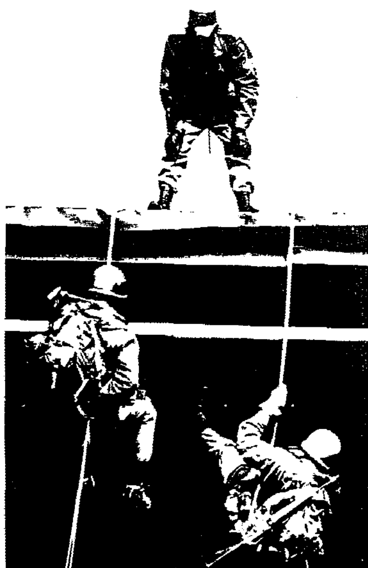
first three days, the focus of each person's attention was strictly on staying in the course and passing into the next phase. Most viewed this as a personal and competitive endeavor, and this served to discourage the formation of friendships.

Resources during the second (rappelling) phase of the course were limited relative to the number of soldiers beginning the course. As a result, during the first phase, there appeared to be, a definite attempt by the cadre to reduce the number of soldiers taking the course This encouraged competition. Most of the time was spent in a classroom, and, even with the confidence course and morning physical training, there were minimal shared rigors or dangers during the first phase For the above variety of reasons, cohesion developed to only a minimal degree during the first phase of air assault training.

The most physically demanding of the three phases was the rappelling phase (Days 4-6). Training began with learning to tie rappel seats and moved to rappelling: first, horizontally on the ground; then, on an inclined ramp; and, finally, off a 30-foot tower. The tower provided the first major test of courage in the course—the Australian rappel. In this rappel, the soldier leans out, face forward, over the edge of the tower until his body is horizontal. Then, on command, he runs down the face of the tower, playing out rope behind him

The difficult part is leaning out into the horizontal position. This requires confidence in oneself and in the cadre who talk one through this rappel. Most soldiers spent five to 10 minutes in line on top of the tower waiting to do this rappel We had ample opportunity to observe others going over the edge but were unable to see what happened after the descent began.

Of all the obstacles to successful completion of the Air Assault School, the Australian rappel was the most formidable, both beforehand and in retrospect. One officer and one enlisted man refused to go over the edge and were taken down from the tower. The officer refused to return and



was dropped from the class. The enlisted man, an 18-year-old private first class, returned to the tower, made a successful rappel and completed the school. His success was due both to his own courage and to the effort and ability of the cadre who quietly and patiently talked him back up the tower and through the rappel In effect, this soldier was treated like a battle stress casualty He was given a brief respite in relative safety followed by a rapid return to the class and to dangerous duty

The importance of the cadre in molding cohesion and channeling it along institutional lines cannot be overstated Their professionalism, emphasis on safety, obvious concern for the individual soldier and belief in the value of air assault training were crucial factors in helping many soldiers decide that the inherent risks of training were worthwhile. By exhortation and example, the cadre channeled the developing cohesion into the service of training air assault soldiers

The afternoon of the first day of the rappelling phase was spent on the walled sides of the tower. On the second day, we rappelled from the open sides of the tower, configured to simulate rappelling from the *UH1H Huey* and the *UH60 Black Hawk* helicopters. We were instructed in the use of the troop ladder and tree landing platform. The third day began with a practical examination which assessed performance on the skills important for successful helicopter rappelling. Failure on this examination meant recycling, successful completion of the examination meant proceeding to actual helicopter rappelling.

Helicopter rappelling was conducted during the afternoon and evening of the third day of the rappelling phase. Each student made six helicopter rappels. Four of the rappels were made during the day, and two were made at night. Both the day and night rappels were divided equally between the *UH1H Huey* and the *UH60 Black Hawk* helicopters. While rappelling from the tower had been from a height of 30 feet, rappelling from the helicopter was from heights of 70 to 90 feet.

During the afternoon, there were three accidents. In the first, a soldier on belay became entangled in the rope as the helicopter ascended, lifting the soldier about 12 feet off the ground. Upon returning to the ground, the soldier disentangled himself, threw down his rifle and rucksack, and ran off toward the woodline. One of the cadre went after him. After considerable verbal exertion, he calmed him down and returned him to the class.

The other two accidents were both falls from heights of 30 to 40 feet. In one, the soldier appeared to have fainted; in the other, the soldier was breaking improperly and released the rope after burning his hands These falls caused a sprained thumb and a broken leg respectively.

After completion of the day rappels, we were dismissed until dusk, at which time we reassembled for the night rappels. The feelings of apprehension were greater that evening than they had been during the day It was still half-light when the class reassembled, and many hoped to be able to complete their rappels before it became completely dark. This was not to be. An air assault sergeant regaled us with stories until night had fallen.

The theme of these stories was the superiority of the "air assault soldier." As it happened, our night rappels were conducted on the evening of the wedding of Prince Charles to Lady Diana. The air assault sergeant told us that Prince Charles was a lucky man because, if Lady Diana had met an air assault soldier prior to meeting the prince, the prince would not have stood a chance. He continued, "Once you are air assault, all your fantasies come true " As preposterous as it may seem,

everyone seemed willing to suspend disbelief and accept his statement at nearly face value.

This story and others like it were comforting in that they did not make light of the dangers of rappelling which, after the events of the afternoon, were hard to ignore. Rather, they magnified in a humorous and magical way the rewards of successfully completing the night rappels. These stories helped to make the physical risks worth taking. Even so, when the actual rappelling began, there was almost complete silence in the lines as we each awaited our turn. This was in marked contrast to the afternoon when there had been animated conversation. The night rappels were completed without incident. In contrast to the mood of apprehension prior to the night rappels, the mood after rappelling was one of elation, many soldiers expressing regret that the rappelling phase was over.

Cohesion developed rapidly during the second (rappelling) phase of the course. Friendships formed among people close to one another in formation and between people generally while in the break area. Age and rank did not appear to be insurmountable barriers to the formation of friendships. Group cohesion was evidenced in many ways. Soldiers began helping each other with wakeup calls and transportation to and from the school. During morning physical training, there was help for those having difficulty on runs, including shouted encouragement, carrying of another's rifle and pushing or pulling a person along. Cooperation during formations increased as soldiers helped each other with equipment and checked each other prior to inspections.

As friendships grew, there was more criticism of classmates who should have been doing better by virtue of their rank, prior experience or presumed level of fitness. This indicated an increasing concern that those who should be fulfilling leadership roles be competent and committed and, in our view, reflected the growing cohesion. Respect for the cadre's authority shifted its focus from fear of punishment to

respect for the cadre's competence. There was increased socialization after hours, with genuine exchanges of ideas and feelings.

The third phase (Days 7-9) included rigging and sling loading of light, heavy and multiple loads for airlift by helicopter, the usual morning physical training and a 5-mile forced march. Morale peaked at the end of the second phase and remained high during the remainder of the course. Friendships and interpersonal ties continued to develop during the third phase. Physical demands in this latter phase were somewhat less than in the second phase of the course. Except during the actual hookup of loads to a hovering helicopter, physical danger was minimal

The relationship with the cadre took on a more informal character. This change was initiated by the cadre and was not unique to our class. We observed a similar qualitative change in cadre-student interactions in the class preceding ours. The general feeling of the class at this point was that the worst was behind us.

The 10th and final day of the school began with the 10-mile forced road march and ended with graduation Morale prior to the road march was high, and most soldiers were relaxed. During the march, soldiers traveled in small groups, usually based upon friendships formed during the earlier phases Many of these groups remained together throughout the march. Everyone finished within the required time limit. Therefore, everyone who had successfully completed the first three phases graduated.

Graduation itself was preceded by a rehearsal during which there was much joking and shouting. Following graduation, goodbyes were relatively brief, but some members of the class returned individually to the school to talk to the instructors, take pictures or simply stroll leisurely around the grounds.

We made further observations of interest with respect to the processes of developing cohesion In addition to one of us, there were three field grade officers in the class. Field grade officers were required to complete the obstacle course, pass all tests, make the rappels and finish the 10-mile road march. However, physical training, inspections, some classroom work, most formations and various other class activities were optional for them. Since our purpose for attending the school was to make observations, both of us participated in all class activities, required and optional.

The other three field grade officers elected to participate in only the required activities They shared the dangers of rappelling with the class but only a portion of the other activities. Overall, they were present about half of the time These officers reported a growing sense of belonging to the group during the rappelling phase, and one remarked at graduation on how cohesive he thought the group had become.

Although this is consistent with our general hypothesis and with our observations of the class as a whole, their feeling of belonging was one-sided The rest of the class clearly did not regard these officers as being part of the group. This was evident in a number of ways The most obvious was the small number and brevity of interactions between enlisted members of the class and these officers compared with the interactions which occurred between these same enlisted personnel and the other officers in the course We concluded that sharing some of the dangerous activities was sufficient to make a soldier feel that he is a part of a group but was not sufficient for the rest of the group to feel the same way toward him. For the latter to happen, the soldier must share in the

mundane activities of the group as well as the dangerous ones.

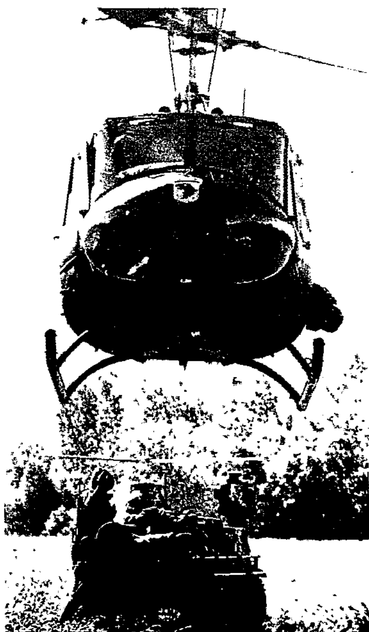
The leader may feel as one with his men by virtue of sharing in some dangerous activity with them, while the men may reserve this acceptance for those who not only share the hazards but share the daily routines and minor hardships as well.

An example of this from World War II might be General of the Army Douglas MacArthur who, despite his many decorations for bravery and his frequent exposure to enemy fire, was persistently referred to as "Dugout Doug" by his soldiers.[4] We are not suggesting that generals spend their time camping in the rain with privates or that being thought of as "one of the boys" should be a major concern of leaders We do believe, however, that leaders should be aware that this phenomenon of "one-way" cohesion can be a source of serious misunderstanding between the leader and the led.

A second observation concerns the role of personality and personal background in facilitating or impeding the development of interpersonal bonds under conditions of shared danger. We observed that interpersonal bonds formed easily, even among soldiers of widely differing personalities and backgrounds. We expected this. The literature of personal relationships in combat, and other situations of shared danger, supports the idea that personality makes relatively little difference in group formation under such conditions. In fact, cohesive groups will form under practically any circumstances given some shared interest or experience.[5]

Limits of group tolerance for personality deviation, however, while broad, do exist. An example of this occurred in our class. One soldier, recycled from a previous class, joined our group on the third day. He was one of perhaps a dozen recycled personnel who joined on that day, but he alone was not accepted into the group. He acquired the dislike of his immediate associates in the formation, and was in frequent verbal and, finally, on Day 9, physical conflict with his platoon sergeant and the class first sergeant.

After his fight with the first sergeant, another soldier said of him, "He's not one of us, he's a recycle." Since the other recycled personnel had been successful in integrating into the group, this was more of a pejorative label than an explanation for the man's difficulties Despite his being in a situation where group bonds were forming easily among persons of diverse backgrounds, this man was unable to integrate himself into the group. This was apparently by reason of temperament. We concluded that, while groups forming in situations of shared hardships are tolerant of personality variation, there is a limit of deviation beyond which a person becomes unacceptable to the group



With respect to our hypothesis that cohesion improves in response to rigorous training and shared danger, our subjective impression of the growth of cohesion in our class confirms this. Cohesion developed very little in the first three days. Then, it developed rapidly during the rappelling phase, the period of most rigorous training and greatest shared danger.

This development was rapid when compared to the slower pace with which friendships form under the less intense circumstances of the conventional workplace. Our impression from the literature is that rapid bond formation occurs in situations in which small groups are exposed to difficult circumstances and that such rapid formation of interpersonal bonds is typical of combat. On the other hand, in training involving mostly classroom instruction, it may be weeks or months before close friendships form.

Such rapid bond formation under stress may have its roots in our evolutionary history as hunter-gatherers Gathering was characteristic of early human groups. Hunting was a special activity and, for many groups, a relatively infrequent one Its success depended upon close cooperation The same is true of organized defense The ability to rapidly form close personal bonds of a temporary nature under intense and difficult circumstances may be a central part of our biological heritage stemming from the dual requirements of hunting and defense.[6]

As indicated, cohesion developed most rapidly during the rappelling phase. An interesting consequence of this was that soldiers who joined after the rappelling phase had begun remained virtually anonymous. Few joined during the third phase of the course, but the one that we observed, who appeared on the morning of the seventh day, was still unknown to those next to him in formation even on the 10th day. Thus, it appears that integration of new people into a group may be relatively easy as long as the group as a whole has not yet coalesced and conditions of shared danger still exist. Joining a group that has already formed is more difficult. This phenomenon presents a significant problem for combat replacements.

Cohesion can develop rapidly in situations of shared danger This would appear to support the Army's relative indifference to the development of group cohesion prior to combat. However, several factors make it important that cohesion and morale be developed prior to going into battle First, cohesion develops in almost any group and, if not channeled in institutionally acceptable ways, may operate counter to the goals of the institution.[7]

Second, although cohesion can develop in three to four days of shared hardship and danger, in modern high-intensity warfare, such time intervals may not be available as soldiers find themselves moving from garrison life to combat over the space of a few hours. Third, whereas cohesion develops rapidly in newly constituted groups, the key to good performance in a garrison setting is stability of the group over an extended period of time.[8]

Fourth, a critical factor in combat is the effective integration of replacements into the combat unit. In World War II, a replacement who came up at night during a fire fight was at high risk to be dead, wounded or a battle stress casualty by morning,[9] demonstrating, among other things, the fallacy of the idea that, when a unit begins to take casualties, it is better not to know one's comrades.

While to a degree successful integration depends on the personality of the replacement, the major factor is the cohesiveness of the group and the capability of the group leaders. Group stability and cohesion are important in sustaining good performance

both in garrison and in combat. The 101st Airborne could take advantage of the cohesion and morale developing during air assault training by sending already constituted squads or platoons through the school as units and keeping these groups intact after the completion of the training. In addition, being air assault qualified could be used to reinforce cohesion and morale by requiring units to rappel as a group once a quarter.

An idea occasionally advocated in the military is that, with sufficient and proper training, individuals in any given unit should be interchangeable and easily replaced by other, similarly trained, individuals. Nothing could be further from the truth. The following are examples which illustrate this

In the course of the airborne landings in Normandy during World War II, some units landed together, while others were widely scattered. As the soldiers assembled on the ground, two types of groups emerged. One type was composed generally of soldiers known to each other, and the other type was composed generally of soldiers unknown to each other. Almost without exception, the soldiers in groups formed primarily of those unknown to each other contributed nothing to the success of the airborne invasion.[10] This was despite their being from elite airborne units and despite their depending upon group effort for personal survival.

In the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Israeli soldiers arrived at the base of the Golan Heights individually or in units. Tank crews whose members arrived together would be given a tank and sent up the Golan to join the battle. Tank crew members arriving individually would be assembled ad hoc into crews, given a tank and sent up to the fight. Crews composed of soldiers known to each other and trained together were more effective in battle.

Also, when a crew took physical casualties, battle stress casualties were higher in those crews whose members were not personally acquainted.[11] The examples support the idea that soldiers are more effective and more resistant to combat stress when they are with people they know, even in the face of heavy casualties. Soldiers who do not know each other are likely to be militarily less effective and more vulnerable to psychiatric breakdown.

In conclusion, air assault training is rigorous and, to a degree, dangerous. Cohesion developed rapidly in the class and, furthermore, developed along lines useful to the goals of the Army. Cohesion developed most rapidly during the rappelling phase, a period during which there was rigorous training and shared danger. From our review of the literature, in addition to our observations of the Air Assault School, we conclude that rigorous training and shared danger are vital factors in the development of cohesion. We further conclude that cohesion is central to effective performance in combat and to resistance to combat stress.

## NOTES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