THE WORD OF COMMAND:

COMMUNICATION AND COHESION IN THE MILITARY

Abstract:

Military sociologists have emphasised the importance of primary groups in the military which are widely regarded as the fundamental basis of large military institutions. To explain the formation and persistence of these primary groups, military sociologists have focused primarily on the informal social interactions between soldiers which produce bonds of comradeship. This comradeship is the basis of social cohesion. Although sustainable, there is an unfortunate bias in the work of military sociologists. They focus almost exclusively on informal rituals which are without question important. However, the critical rituals which bind military groups together are the formal processes of training. Drawing on ethnographic analysis of the Royal Marines, this paper attempts to redress the balance. It examines the drills – above all the communication drills - which British soldiers are collectively trained to perform and claims that these constitute the key social rituals for the British military.

Introduction: Military Sociology

Military institutions depend on a level of social cohesion which is matched in few other social groups. In combat, the armed forces are able to sustain themselves only so long individual members commit themselves to collective goals even at the cost of personal injury or death. Military sociology has sought to explain the social processes which produce this extraordinary level of social cohesion. Janowitz and Shil's famous article on the social cohesion of the German forces in the Second World War is among the most important illustration of this attempt to answer the problem posed by collective military action.[i] In that work, Janowitz and Shil's describe the exceptional performance of the *Wehrmacht* by reference to the strength of small 'primary groups'. For them, primary groups were held together by bonds of very close comradeship. The article was a seminal contribution to military sociology. More recently, various other sociologists have confirmed Janowitz and Stils' emphasis on primary groups.[ii] They have illuminated the way in which male soldiers employ informal, exclusive masculine rituals to constitute themselves as social groups. The importance of informal social interaction to the creation of social groups cannot be underestimated; Weber himself demonstrated the importance of exclusive social interaction for the creation of status groups.[iii]

However, by emphasising these certainly significant informal practices, many sociologists have ignored the formal rituals which soldiers undergo; the intense training regimes in which collective drills are inculcated. In his recent discussion of 'interaction ritual chains', Randall Collins has emphasised the importance of repeated training rituals as a critical method of sustaining group identity: '"Training" is not simply a matter of learning; it is above all establishing identity with the group who carry out their skills collectively'.[iv] Training is a Durkheimian ritual in which the group is periodically re-created. Only through the collective practice of training do military groups become cohesive, oriented to shared goals and to the communal means of achieving them. Although perhaps less intriguing than masculine initiation rituals, training and the adoption of shared professional practices constitute the critical rituals for groups of soldiers. It is noticeable that Janowitz and Shils ignored the drills and tactics of the

German *Wehrmacht*. For them, the fear of betraying colleagues was sufficient to explain the exceptional performance of the *Wehrmacht*. Yet, military units are effective insofar as soldiers are able to perform collective drills. Informal rituals are certainly important but they are not sufficient to explaining the performance of military groups. For instance, many of the masculine practices which military sociologists have described among primary groups can be found across many other masculine social groups. The transgressive practices which these sociologists note of male soldiers can also, for instance, be found among football hooligans in Britain. Yet, while interested in violence, a hooligan firm would be completely incapable of conducting itself like a group of soldiers. The difference between soldiers and hooligans lies decisively in the training which soldiers undergo so that they can perform collective drills.

Aran's well-known (but problematic) analysis of parachuting is an early example of military sociology which attempts to analyse the collective drills of soldiers themselves. More recently, Boer has tried to redress the balance in military sociology, demonstrating the importance of operational work-ups and deployments to the performance of fighter squadrons in the Second World War, while Kretchnik has shown the importance of training to the effectiveness of multinational staffs.[v] This paper seeks to follow the lead of these contributors and to focus more specifically on training and actual military practices. In this way the paper seeks to re-orient contemporary military sociology away from informal masculine rituals towards formal training rituals. It would be possible to examine a multitude of professional practices in order to do this. However, there are certain practices which are especially critical to social cohesion. In his famous work on combat, S.L.A. Marshall claimed that during the Second World War, less than one in four US infantry soldiers actually fired their weapon at the enemy even if they had the opportunity to do so.[vi] Although Marshall exaggerated his results, he recognised that the modern battlefield was an empty space in which the soldier experienced isolation and loneliness.[vii] In order to overcome the emasculating isolation of the battlefield, Marshall proposed that soldiers should be taught to communicate with each other in tactical situations. Communication between

soldiers would remind soldiers of their collective obligations to each other and affirm to all that everyone was still committed to shared goals even in the dangerous environment of the battlefield. By communicating on the battlefield, social cohesion – critical to military effectiveness - would be maintained.

S.L.A Marshall's work provides a convenient starting point for the analysis of formal training rituals for he prioritises a central practice among soldiers; communication. In order for the military to maintain group cohesion, communication between soldiers is critical. It might even be argued that communication is the primary drill which soldiers learn since it co-ordinates all their individual skills, such as weapon-handling. Since it is only insofar as military units engage in co-ordinated action that they are powerful, communication is of paramount importance to them. An analysis of some of these communication drills will offset the bias in contemporary military sociology towards informal social practices. It will re-focus military sociology towards critical formal training rituals in the manner which Boer and Kretchnik suggest. Although any military force in the current era could be the focus of analysis, the British armed forces are the exclusive object of analysis here. Although they lag behind the United States' network-centric capability and have their own cultural peculiarities, their modes of operation are compatible with United States and other NATO forces. Thus, although culturally specific, this ethnography of some of the drills of the British forces is intended to illuminate more general procedures. In the current era, the British armed forces have developed sophisticated methods of communication. Although there are different procedures for different situations, at the tactical level, three kinds of communication drills are paramount; orders, signals and commands on contact. These three methods of communication currently constitute the essential basis of how the British armed forces conduct themselves on operations. They are the critical rituals by which groups of British soldiers orient themselves to collective goals.[viii]

Orders

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The orders process is the means by which plans (orders) are disseminated from the highest commanders down through the military hierarchy to the smallest units. During the Second World War, European and American armies began to institutionalise certain methods by which orders were given and it has now become an established formal practice in these military organisations. Significantly, in the NATO alliance whatever the audience whether a general staff or a 'section' of eight soldiers, all follow the same NATO orders procedure. The NATO orders process is divided into six stages, described as preliminaries, the situation, the mission, the execution, service support and, finally, command and signals. The structure of the orders process is logical. In preliminaries, the organisation of the orders process itself is arranged. Situation describes the relative position of enemy and friendly forces and the weather conditions which will be encountered on the mission. The mission is the most important element of any orders procedure when the task which is to be carried out is described. Execution involves a detailed description of how the mission will be achieved; it describes the scheme of manoeuvre, the plan of assault and the withdrawal. Service support describes the assets which will be available to assist the mission, while the command and signals section describes the various code words which will be used on the mission. The NATO orders process involves several striking elements which are sociologically interesting.[ix] However, for the purposes of illustrating the importance of formal training and collective drills, only a single aspect of the orders process will be examined here; the use of models in the orders process. The use of models has profound sociological significance as they are one of the most important means of communicating orders. Models are, consequently, central to instilling and maintaining group cohesion.

Orders are always given employing a model of the objective, as a heuristic tool. At the highest level of command, professional model builders are employed to create detailed dioramas of the areas in which the missions will be carried out, physically detailing the ground and enemy positions. However, even at the lowest section and platoon levels, models will always be employed by NATO forces. Here, models are improvised in interesting ways. In the field, NATO infantry units deploy from 'harbour positions'. These positions are located in relatively safe areas

away from enemy fire where troops bivouac in a tactical manner. On exercise or on operations, commanders will give orders in the harbour position. Consequently, one of the standard operational procedures which have to be conducted in a harbour position is the construction of models so that the commanders are able to give their orders satisfactorily. Normally two to four soldiers will be tasked with the construction of the models near or inside the harbour position. Models take a standard form. They consist of two shallow square 'pits' arranged next to each other with a small corridor of about a metre between them. The small corridor between the model pits is essential because the commander will use this gap to walk up and down while giving orders, illustrating the plan by physical reference to the models. In Europe, where wood is plentiful the 'model pits' are usually marked out by branches, gathered or cut down from near the harbour position.[x] Along these branches a series of spaced markers will be inserted to indicate scale while a shovel or stick will be employed to point out North. The two model pits are respectively referred to as the 'General Area Model' and the 'Objective Area Model'. The 'General Area Model' depicts the area in which the mission will be conducted; it includes approach and departure routes and usually depicts the harbour position itself. This model usually represents about 2 to 4 square kilometres. The markers on its side indicate 500 meters on the model. The 'Objective Area Model' refers specifically to the target area; that is, to the objective which troops are to reconnoitre or assault. This model is a larger scale model of one section of the General Area Model. It is usually on a scale of approximately four times that of the General Area Model and the scale markers on its edge normally represent 100 meters. The earth in the model pits is contoured into a relief of the stated area, physically representing hills and valleys, spurs and re-entrants. In harbour positions, soldiers use surprising creativity in sculpturing the earth inside the model pits, improvising with stones, grass, twigs and leaves to signify woods, streams, paths and roads. In the British Army, soldiers will also carry with them coloured ribbons and tags specifically designated to represent decisive points.

Once the models are prepared the orders process can proceed. The commander begins by describing the models. The commander addresses the General Area Model first, explaining what

each of the symbols represent as well as the main features of the model. Road, rivers, hills and forests will be identified. The commander repeats the process for the Objective Area Model, concentrating on the enemy position – the objective. It is at this point that the rationale behind model use becomes clear. It is unlikely that all the soldiers present will have a map and, consequently, a model is used simply as a substitute; it ensures that all are familiar with the ground on which the mission will be conducted. However, given their resources, the military could, of course, potentially provide maps for everyone and the orders process might be conducted with soldiers examining their own maps folded on their knees. Yet, even in small groups of Special Forces soldiers, where individuals are proficient in map use and it would be easy for each to have a map, models are preferred. There are compelling, sociologically significant reasons for this preference. On a pragmatic level, it is inefficient and sometimes simply impossible to use maps in the tactical situation. Commanders and troops need to be sufficiently familiar with the ground on which they must operate so that they can orient themselves automatically by reference to certain key features. They must be able identify central landmarks as the advance (potentially under fire) or as they lie in tactical concealment. The models allow the audience to imagine what they will see as they advance on their target. In each case, in the orders process, the commander will emphasise to the troops how these features will appear to them on the ground and how the individuals in the platoon should direct themselves in the relation to these prominent features.

The models assist collective action not merely because they depict the ground as the troops themselves will see it, however. More importantly, models are used because this ensures that there is only a single representation, to which the attention of all is directed. It is significant that in creating models, the makers focus precisely upon those distinctive features which the platoon will confront on the operation. The model makers are concerned with detail but no attempt is made at a universal model which represents every feature realistically. Model makers focus on those decisive points which soldiers have been trained to employ as orienting axes and reference points in tactical situations. Thus the model-makers and the commander using the model will

emphasis wood-lines (which stand out clearly even at night), roads, rivers and pylons which are unmistakeable physical features. All are knowingly oriented to decisive symbols which represent the tactical situation to all and, simultaneously, everyone recognises that everyone else is so oriented. On a recent training exercise with the Royal Marines, this use of physical features on the ground, represented on the model, and to which all are collective oriented was clearly demonstrated.[xi] The commander, a Royal Marine major, was giving orders to a group of Young Officers for a deliberate attack on an enemy position which would be conducted first during daylight and then at night. The enemy position, consisting of a truck and radio tent inside a berm, was represented on the Objective Area Model by a large stone which the Young Officers tasked to make the model had found locally. Beyond this stone, two sticks were placed which represented two large dead trees on the ground. The commander explained the significance of the sticks. The two trees – the sticks on the model – stood directly behind the enemy objective and as the two assaulting sections organised themselves on the line of departure before the assault and during the assault itself, these two trees could be used as reference points. They would orient the Young Officers, acting as an axis along which they could advance. In the event, as the Young Officers lay in their section positions on the line of departure, the trees were, as instructed, clearly visible. During the night attack this was even more the case, where as the commander had mentioned, they stood out against the night-sky. The memory of the commander's description of the ground and the stick symbols from the model could at that point be recalled by each member of the troop, ensuring appropriate collective action. Each member of the troop would know the location of the enemy position, assaulting on this defined axis of advance. The symbol on the model became a symbol in reality, co-ordinating collective action in actual time and space. In his work of aboriginal religion, Durkheim sought to illustrate the universal process by which human groups form. For Durkheim, human groups require intense periods of social interaction in which the group gathers and group members re-affirm their allegiance to each other. Durkheim emphasises that the existence of human groups is decisively dependent upon understanding. A group exists only when members recognise their special relationships to each other and act upon them. Since

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group depend ultimately on the concept which group members have of themselves, physical symbols or totems, are essential to the process of group formation. They are the tangible and physical representation of the group; physical objects symbolise the collective understandings which actually constitute the group. As Durkheim notes, 'without symbols, social sentiments could have only a precarious existence'.[xii] On this Royal Marine training exercise, Durkheim's argument about the centrality of symbols to group cohesion was demonstrated. The model – and particularly the two sticks representing the trees - had become a physical totem of the group inspiring collective action on the ground and sustaining group coherence. The sticks and, then, the trees oriented all group members to a single collective goal; the assault.

The use of distinctive physical features like woods, roads and rivers, represented symbolically on models by stones, ribbons or twigs, is reinforced by the use of certain verbal symbols which invest these features which additional meaning. At the end of the orders process, in the command and signals section, the commander will give nick-numbers and nicknames to key features on the ground.[xiii] While precise geographic points – usually denoting rendezvous points - are given nick-numbers (eg. 'Nick 11' or 'Nick 12'), large and distinctive features are given nicknames. Thus, in a training lecture on the orders process which described a hypothetical raid on an inland force by heliborne troop of Royal Marines, two prominent hills were nicknamed 'South Kidney' and 'North Kidney' since they were curved and kidney-like in shape.[xiv] Nicknames distinguish and individualise anonymous features, drawing the collective attention of the group to them. The group is communally oriented to a now distinctive point of which all are automatically aware. On operations, the same procedure is adopted but nicknames are often selected which have dense social connotations and, therefore, greater ability to co-ordinate collective action. In his plan for the assault of Mount Harriet in the final phase of the Falklands Conflict in 1982, Lieutenant-Colonel Nick Vaux, the Commanding Officer (CO) of 42 Commando Royal Marines, called the three summits of his objective, Tara, Zoya and Katrina.[xv] This followed 42 Commando tradition where the unit's objectives are named after the daughters of the CO. It is noticeable that on recent

operations in Iraq, 42 Commando once again used the CO's daughters' names for their objectives. On the same operation in Iraq, C Company of 40 Commando nicknamed three of their objectives on the Al Faw Peninsula, Plymouth, Taunton and Arbroath after the three towns in Britain at which 40, 42 and 45 Commandos are based. All members of 40 Commando would have been intimately familiar with these places, many having served with these units. The objective names, consequently, evoked dense social connotations for the members of 40 Commando. Similarly, 42 Commando's tradition of using the CO's daughter's names not only individualises the nicknames (and, therefore, the features themselves) – especially among other senior officers who might know the daughters after whom the objectives are named – but links with 42 Commando's collective memory. Every member of 42 Commando, past and present, knows that its military objectives are always named after the CO's daughters. In this way, although the objectives – and their nicknames - change, 42 Commando's past military actions are efficiently linked to the mission immediately at hand. Nicknames weight potentially meaningless and indistinct features with social significance. They become symbols on the ground, invested with an identity which suggests particular kinds of collective actions to individual soldiers. Their power can be enhanced by using terms which already have meaning to the collective to whom the orders are addressed. The nickname will not simply communicate the significance of a feature on this particular mission but will automatically remind soldiers of the general standards which they are supposed to achieve in relation to their forebears. In the case of the Royal Marines, these symbolic names direct them not just to the collective goals of their immediate group but to their Commando unit and the Royal Marines as a whole. This is a powerful means of ensuring appropriate social action. In this way, apparently lifeless features like hill-tops, forests or wadis are vivified and invested with intense meaning by this social group, encouraging social cohesion. Through the use of nicknames, military models are able to operate like those totems which affirm group solidarity among aboriginal clans.[xvi] The models – and the features which they signify - come to represent the group itself, inspiring feelings of solidarity and demanding collective action from individual members.

By the use of models as dense totemic symbols, the orders process is intended to minimise the opportunity for individual and idiosyncratic interpretations. However, the commander cannot be sure that individuals have understood the collective goal. It is possible that individuals may have mis-understood their roles. In order to affirm understanding, the orders process involves a final procedure which concludes each of the six sections. Having communicated the situation, the mission, the execution and so forth, the commander will pause and ask, 'Are there any questions?'. Sometimes there are none but any which are posed will be answered.[xvii] When it is clear that there are no further queries, the commander will then ask: 'If there are no further questions, I have some for you?'. At this point, he will direct questions to specified individuals under his command. The persons selected will usually be sub-commanders and the questions will be deliberately designed to ensure that these sub-commanders have grasped the essentials of the plan. The commander could ask what the nick-numbers or nicknames for the mission are, he might ask a question about the scheme of manoeuvre (where certain sub-units are meant to be when) or he might ask about 'actions on procedures'; that is the actions which the group should follow on encountering unforeseen circumstances such as media, obstacles or the enemy. In this way, the commander affirms that his orders have been understood but in answering questions, sub-commanders effectively repeat the plan to the rest of the group. The commander's questions provide a forum in which the plan is once again re-emphasised and all demonstrate that they have understood what it involves. There is a double dialectic at work which unifies the group. Every member of the group knows what to do and what others will do, but this is buttressed by the fact that everyone knows that everyone else understands what everyone is doing. The orders process has developed into an elaborate social process in which military units commit themselves to decisive forms of collective action through the use of verbal and visual symbols in a ritualised activity which represents appropriate conduct on the mission itself. The orders process is a critical method by which the isolation and dis-orientation of the battlefield can be overcome. Even in the confusion of battle, the ritualistically inculcated symbols of the orders process are intended to commit individual soldiers to collective goals. The success of British

soldiers in recent conflicts is primarily a result of the rigorous and lengthy training process in which recruits learn and re-learn how to receive and eventually to give orders. They become collectively sensitive to the way orders are given and what they imply for group members. In this way, the orders process constitutes a sophisticated system of communication by means of which social cohesion is sustained among British soldiers even in the extreme conditions of combat. It is here that the explanation of the performance of British – and any other – forces lie; not primarily in the way soldiers might drink together.

Signals

Clausewitz famously stated that 'everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is very difficult'.[xviii] Moving a troop of Royal Marines from their harbour position to the form-up point after the conclusion of orders demonstrated the point. In civilian circumstances, the approach to the form-up point was a gentle stroll, through some woods, across a valley and into another wood. However, the mere fact that thirty marines had to be manoeuvred tactically to the form-up point multiplied the difficulties. As S.L.A. Marshall noted, the advent of mechanised warfare in the 20th century has demanded concealment and dispersal. In particular, it has become vital for troops approaching their objectives to move silently. This creates significant problems of coordination and it is compounded by the fact that manoeuvres often take place at night. If a platoon could be co-ordinated as it moved forward by shouts and calls between its members, the problems of collective movement would be significantly reduced. Yet, this is precisely what cannot occur in a modern tactical situation. Consequently, military forces have developed a simple but extensive system of hand-signals which are intended to co-ordinate action without breaking silence. On a line of advance, these hand-signals will be passed up and down the line of advance, normally from first to last.[xix] As with orders, the British armed forces have developed methods of giving hand-signals which minimises the possibility of individual deviation. These methods were demonstrated by the Royal Marine Young Officer troop.[xx]

As the Royal Marine Young Officers advanced through to the first, second and final

rendezvous points, the signal for these points was given. The Young Officers stood in turn in the exactly the same position and drew an imaginary circle at their feet, through the middle of which they pointed decisively to a particular spot on the ground. It was emphasised to the Royal Marine Young Officers that they had to point to exactly the same spot as they had themselves been shown. As it moved through the wood, the troop of some thirty Young Officers was dispersed over 200 yards. If each Young Officer were careless about indicating each rendezvous point so that they did not make this gesture on the spot shown but back a little way from it, where they were standing when shown the gesture, the rendezvous point could actually move as it was passed along the troop. The troop would not be collectively oriented to one site but would be individually oriented to potentially thirty sites, each some ten or twenty yards from each other. The rendezvous point might be 200 yards apart for first and last man. Rendezvous points are used as rescue points should the mission go wrong. In the orders process, commanders will instruct soldiers who become lost or detached due to their own errors or to enemy action to retreat back through rendezvous system waiting for a designated period to meet with the rest of the group. If there is a diversity of the rendezvous points, detached soldiers will never be able to re-join their colleagues. At night, there needs only be a small discrepancy about rendezvous points for troops to miss each other or mistake each other for enemy with potentially disastrous consequences. The military have developed a series of hand-signals to co-ordinate action in tactical situations and they have developed methods of giving these hand-signals so that the potential for individual mis-interpretation and deviance is minimised. Hand-signals promote social cohesion. Although nothing is certain in war, these hand-signals are intended to give advancing troops the best possible chance of arriving as planned on their line of departure.

Commands on Contact

As Marshall emphasised, communication is particularly critical to the military once they come under fire. In combat, military units will be effective only insofar as their members are committed to collective action but it is precisely under fire, that the breakdown of social cohesion is most

likely. Under the stress and confusion of enemy fire, individuals are most likely to resort to deviant action which will lead to the demise of the group and, ultimately, the individual. Military forces have developed procedures to sustain social cohesion, even though these actions demanded of individuals often run against the instincts of self-preservation. Above all, communication between soldiers under fire is emphasised and developed in training. Even in a deliberate attack, when a military force will be oriented by the symbols already established in the orders process, communication is essential. Soldiers will need to be informed how the plan is actually proceeding so that they can be confident of pursuing orders in the manner instructed. In addition, local circumstances are likely to differ somewhat to those described in orders. The ground is likely to offer more or less cover than anticipated in orders; enemy reactions are likely to be stronger or weaker than initially predicted by orders. Consequently, in even the most carefully planned assaults, communication will be essential to sustain collective action.

In live firing section attacks, the importance of communication in response to 'contact' (coming under effective enemy fire) was repeatedly stressed to the Royal Marine Young Officers. Communication drills are recognised as a central part of training as they are critical to operational conduct.[xxi] A section is divided into two four-man 'fire-teams', known as Charlie and Delta teams.[xxii] Charlie and Delta teams are matching units – armed with the same or similar weapons. The section operates according the standard infantry practice of fire and manoeuvre. In any tactical confrontation with the enemy, the section will employ its fire-power in order to manoeuvre. Fire-power is employed to suppress the enemy – to physically force them into cover – so that the section can move; either forwards into an assault or backwards into a withdrawal. The Charlie and Delta teams constitute mutually supporting fire-teams. While one provides suppressive fire, the other manoeuvres. Each fire-team is further broken down into pairs, which also mutually support one another, so that if one soldier is manoeuvring, his partner in the fire-team lays down covering fire. Following principles of fire and manoeuvre, in a section attack, the whole section will return fire to suppress the enemy, find cover and then, while Charlie team lays down further covering fire, Delta team will move forward to assault the position. In a live section

attack, following contact with the enemy, a Royal Marine Young Officer section took cover under a bank by a road with the enemy position (indicated by electronically controlled targets) some two hundred metres in front of them. At this point, the section commander instructed Charlie team to move forward and leftwards to a better fire position. Once the Charlie team was in position, the section commander led Delta onto the enemy position by means of a ditch which ran diagonally from the road up to the position. During these exercises, one of the training sergeants emphasised the utility of what he called 'pro words' (prompt words). Instead of giving verbose instructions, the section commander could direct the Charlie team leader with the simple words: 'Final position'. Instantly, Charlie team would know their role. In the command, 'final position', a series of messages about what Delta team were about to do and what the Charlie team should do to support them were contained. Charlie team would know that it should stay in that position suppressing the enemy with fire until Delta team had assaulted the objective. The 'pro word' acted in the same way that the symbols had in the orders process. They signified a complex series of actions in condensed form. Indeed, for this sergeant, an entire section attack could be co-ordinated by the use of three 'pro words'; 'final position', 'point of fire' (referring to the position which two members of Delta team adopted to support the final assault by the section commander and another soldier) and 'break down' (which referred to the clearing of the enemy position by the section commander and his assistant). Like the models in the orders process, decisive words of command are critical to the effectiveness of a military force when it comes into contact with the enemy. Because they are used repeatedly in training, commands develop dense significations, tying soldiers together and directing them towards collective goals.[xxiii]

In Iraq in 2003, the role of commands in promoting social cohesion was explicitly demonstrated. On the night of 19-20 March, Charlie Company and the Manoeuvre Support Company of 40 Commando seized an oil facility (the Manifold Metering Station) on the Al-Faw Peninsula in one of the first actions of the conflict. Although in orders, little enemy opposition was expected, in the event, an enemy of company strength (about 100 soldiers) was stationed at the objective and the Royal Marines came under fire immediately on landing. In order to counter

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the enemy, Corporal Peter Watts[xxiv] launched a section assault on the major concentration of the enemy in a position just beyond the Manifold Metering Station's compound. He conducted a 'text-book' section assault using the formally established words of command (the 'pro words'), with which the marines had become intimately familiar during training. Although only Watts' section was involved in the assault, the other members of Charlie Company and the Manoeuvre Support Group heard his words of command. As the Manoeuvre Support Group noted afterwards, the use of the familiar command words by Corporal Watts inspired confidence in them all.[xxv] His commands demonstrated that even in this hostile and dangerous environment, the Royal Marines adhered to the collective drills established in training.[xxvi] The collective pattern of behaviour was re-emphasised to all the individuals Royal Marines present. Even in this frightening situation, all were reminded that the members of the unit were adhering to familiar collective drills. In a later action on 30 March 2003, when the Manoeuvre Support Group was ambushed as they advanced on Abu Al Khasib, south-east of Basra, members of the group again emphasised the importance of commands and collective drills. On coming under fire, they instinctively fell back into fire and manoeuvre drills, co-ordinated with the appropriate commands. Members of the group described how they had constantly and automatically communicated to each other, informing each other of the enemy's position, their own movements as they sought cover, their ammunition state and whether they had stoppages. Maintaining social cohesion, the Manoeuvre Support Group was able to suppress the enemy with impressively heavy fire and extract itself from the ambush.

The commands which the British armed force use fulfil the requirement for a clear voice on the battlefield for which Marshall called[xxvii]; these commands promote social cohesion. In highly trained teams, communication becomes extremely fast and members respond automatically to minimal signals to which they have become used. One Royal Marine officer, on the Young Officer training team, who had served in the British Special Forces emphasised that in these units, members became so familiar with each other, that they knew instinctively what others would do in response to contact. Nevertheless, although to an outsider, communication seems to become irrelevant to well-drilled groups, the reality is that these groups operate so slickly because

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their communications are very efficient. Communication becomes denser not superfluous precisely because these groups have spent days and weeks building up collective drills with each other in training. During this time, shared goals and the collective means of attaining them become manifestly established to all. Special Forces are successful not because the individuals in them are military geniuses or heroes but because they train harder and more realistically than other military groups and, therefore, have the best collective drills. Individuals in the Special Forces will adhere to collective patterns of behaviour at extreme moments when other military groups will lose their cohesion and fragment. Significantly, the same officer, who had served in the Special Forces, stressed the importance of communication to the Royal Marine Young Officers, whom he was training. On watching a failed contact drill, he rebuked the Young Officers for the lack of clear commands between them which ensured that their collective drills were poor.[xxviii] Individual actions were not co-ordinated and, consequently, the quantity of suppressive fire was inadequate.

In tactical situations, verbal instructions are important but soldiers are taught to employ another symbol to co-ordinate their actions; fire itself. Enemy and friendly fire is specifically employed as a means of communicating what collective actions are appropriate. Thus, on a planned advance to contact or deliberate attack, the sound of friendly fire will stimulate a series of responses from soldiers in the group. They will seek cover and begin to return fire in support of their colleagues. Enemy and friendly fire is also decisive in indicating when a section should attack. The first rule of infantry tactics is to win the fire-fight. In the first exchanges, the assaulting force needs to suppress the enemy so that they are fixed in their position and are unable to lay down effective fire. Once the enemy is fixed, the assault can be mounted. Up to a point it is self-evident that manoeuvre should not be attempted until the enemy is suppressed; soldiers will be un-inclined to leave cover and advance if they can see, hear and, indeed, feel enemy rounds impacting close to them. It is obvious they will be killed. As fire becomes more sporadic and they are less likely to be killed, individual soldiers will be more inclined to move. However, soldiers do not respond individually to the suppression of enemy fire. If they did, a diversity of actions

might be taken as soldiers felt more inclined to move. Soldiers might rationally remove themselves from the battlefield as enemy fire became more sporadic or they might charge forward randomly in heroic individual assaults. In fact, soldiers are not trained to respond individually to enemy fire. On the contrary, enemy fire is used as a co-ordinating symbol, in response to which soldiers are taught to assault the enemy position collectively, firing and manoeuvring in support of each other. A specific collective response is tied to the symbol of enemy fire. Lack of enemy fire unifies the group into a single collective action: the assault. It is a symbol of social cohesion. Friendly fire is used in the same way. At the level of the section, the Charlie and Delta teams will respectively move only when they hear the distinctive noise of their comrades' covering fire to which soldiers become intimately accustomed after years of training and operations. Especially in the noise and confusion of battle, the report of friendly weapons becomes as important a unifying force for soldiers today as the drum and bugle were two hundred years ago. In the British Army, the distinctive crack of SA-80[xxix] is an unmistakable sound and British forces have maximised the social usefulness of this sound when they come into contact; they have made a virtue out of a necessity. The sound of gunfire has become a co-ordinating signal for British soldiers. They do, in fact, march to the sound of gun-fire.

Interestingly, gunfire does not always mean the same thing. In a different tactical situation, the same gunfire –a burst from an SA-80, for instance – can demand quite different actions from soldiers. In small patrols, SA-80 fire does not signal the start of a section attack but, on the contrary, a 'contact drill' which involves a tactical withdrawal from the enemy with the use of suppressive fire. Friendly fire constitutes a vital co-ordinating instruction in these contact drills but the actions which it promotes are quite different. The point-man of a patrol normally sets his weapon on automatic because a burst of automatic fire ensures that a greater volume of suppressing fire is generated very quickly. This has an important deterrent effect on the enemy. Although the fire is likely to be inaccurate, it will force the enemy to take cover. Yet, there is an important social function which the point man's automatic fire serves. It is an unmistakeably signal which initiates contact drills with a clarity which no verbal order could ever match. The

burst of automatic fire demands a decisive response from the rest of the patrol. All instantly understand what has happened even if they can see nothing; they are in contact. A burst of friendly fire drives them quickly to fire positions and into their withdrawal drills. Not only does it demand specific actions from each member of the patrol but by listening to the group's gunfire, everyone knows how everyone else is reacting to contact. Interestingly in different contexts, military groups determine that exactly the same signal – a burst of SA-80-fire – stimulates quite different reactions. When advancing to contact or on a deliberate attack, the burst of friendly fire is a sign that Charlie and Delta team should follow assault drills. On a patrol, however, the signal denotes a quite different set of procedures; it signifies contact drills. Gunfire has become an important signal in the British Army, denoting a variety of collective drills.

The British armed forces have established certain physical and verbal symbols by means of which group cohesion is maintained even under the stress of combat. In order for these symbols to communicate collective action, extensive training is essential. Although informal interaction is certainly not irrelevant to the performance of military units, groups of soldiers will recognise collective symbols and respond to them only after lengthy periods of training. It is interesting to note that while 40 Commando's Manoeuvre Support Group maintained its social cohesion in combat by recourse to collective drills and their supporting words of commands, the Group was not unified in informal rituals. Immediately before the operation, there had been a large brawl between the machine-gun and anti-tank sections of the Manoeuvre Support Group on HMS *Ocean*. The Group's unified professional conduct in Iraq cannot be explained by reference to the prior social unity of the Group. The informal interactions on board ship denoted a serious social divide within the Group. During the ambush, however, anti-tankers and machine-gunners mutually assisted each other in line with the drills they had been trained to perform. Group members described how anti-tankers delivered ammunition to the machine-guns, while machine-gunners operated the Milan missile systems when the need arose, although Milans are anti-tank weapons. The priority of training is illustrated by other military forces. The *Wehrmacht*, for instance, was successful because its doctrine was sound and its training methods – rigorous to the

point of brutality – ensured that every soldier was able to adhere to the collective drills specified by doctrine.[xxx] As German soldiers were unified into these collective drills, extremely close bonds of friendship developed which promoted excellent conduct but it is vital to recognise that in military units, collective drill is primary. Strong primary groups are not necessarily ones in which soldiers are deeply fond of each other, though they often are. In reality, the bonds of friendship grow out of military proficiency. Soldiers who successfully adhere to collective drills and in that way promote the group are honored and looked upon with affection. Bad soldiers, however well-liked they might have been at the beginning of training, are shamed and eventually excluded from the group. British paratroopers on the Falkland Islands demonstrated the priority of professional practice in creating bonds of comradeship. In his account of that conflict, a lance-corporal in the Support Company of the 3rd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, described how his friendship with a private in his section was undermined by the latter's professional incompetence. Bramley described how the private had stood up to put on waterproof trousers during a battle, thereby compromising the section's position: 'I felt embarrassed by him. Twice he had acted like a week-one recruit. Things were never to be the same between us'.[xxxi] Crucially, honour and shame is attached to collective, professional practices. A successful army, such as the *Wehrmacht*, will consist of a myriad of such practically proficient groups which interlock into a larger whole.

Conclusion

Military sociologists like, Janowitz, Moskos, Arkin and Winslow argue that social cohesion in the military is maintained by the existence of primary groups. These groups arise through informal, social interactions in which bonds of comradeship are forged; in these groups, soldiers are motivated by a desire for honour and a fear of shame in front of their peers. Consequently, individuals commit themselves to group goals even if personal sacrifice is involved. The analysis of Janowitz *et al.* is illuminating; informal rituals producing bonds of friendship are important. It is undoubtedly true that military units cohere only when the soldiers in them are personally known to each other. In the Royal Marines, the informal social process of swapping stories

(known as 'dits') is widely recognised to be important in sustaining professional practices. Moreover, during fieldwork among the Royal Marines, the importance of informal masculine rituals became evident. Between formal training evolutions, training sergeants would engage in 'banter' with the Young Officers. The sergeants would discuss and joke about the Young Officers' recent sexual exploits; it was noticeable that the joking was not reciprocated. Denoting the status hierarchy, the Young Officers could not mock the sergeants. Formal professional performance is supported by a series of informal practices which the training team also sought to inculcate. Nevertheless, the training described here only affirmed the priority of formal rituals for the creation of coherent groups. Although many of the Royal Marine Young Officers might accord with the standards of masculinity described in these friendly and humorous discussions with sergeants, only those individuals who attained the required professional standards would be able to serve in the Royal Marines, whatever status they had in the informal sphere. Military sociologists have generally paid too much attention to subsidiary rituals while ignoring the critical process of training. In the military, strong primary groups are the product of intense training regimes; collective practices are inculcated primarily in these formal rituals. The power of primary groups in the military rests on their ability to adhere to these collective drills even under intense pressure. In every case, communication is critical to social cohesion and to the successful conduct of collective drills.

ENDNOTES:

[i] Janowitz, M and Shils, E. 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II' in Janowitz, M. Military Conflict (London: Sage, 1975), 177-220.

[ii] See Moskos, C. 'The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam' Journal of Social Issues 31(4), 1975, 25-37; Moskos, C. Soldiers and Sociology (London: Macmillan, 1989); Arkin, W. 'Military Socialization and Masculinity', Journal of Social Issues 34(1), 1978, 151-66; Cockerham, W. 'Attitudes towards combat among US Army paratroopers', Journal of Political and Military Sociology 6 (Spring, 1978), 1-15; Ben-Ari, E.. 'Tests of Soldiering, Trials of Manhood' in Ben-Ari, E and Rosenheck, Z (eds.) War, Politics and Society in Israel. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2001); Hockey, J Squaddies: Portrait of a subculture (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter, 1986); Kinzer Stewart, N. Mates and Muchacos: Unit Cohesion in the Falklands/Malvinas War (New York, Brasseys Inc, 1991); Stouffer, S, Lumsdaine, A, Harper Lumsdaine M, Willians, R, Brewster Smith, M, Janis, M, Star and Cottrell, L. The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949). Winslow, D. The Canadian Airborne Regiment: a socio-cultural inquiry (Ottawa, Canada: Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 1997); Vaughan, D and Schum, W. 'Motivation and US Narrative Accounts of the Ground War in Vietnam', Armed Forces and Society 28, 1 (Fall 2001), 7-31; Rosen, L, Knudson, K and Fancher P, 'Cohesion and the Culture of Hypermasculinity in the US Army Units', Armed Forces and Society 29, 3 (Spring 2002): 325-52.

[iii] Weber, M. Economy and Society, trans. E. Fischoff, (London: University of California Press, 1978), 935.

[iv] Collins, R. Interaction Ritual Chains (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 91.

[v] Boer, P. 'Small Unit Cohesion: the case of Fighter Squadron 3-VI.G.IV', Armed Forces and Society 28, 1. (Fall, 2001), 33-54; Kretchik, W. 'Multinational Staff Effectiveness in UN Peace Operations: the case of the US Army and UNMIH, 1994-5', Armed Forces and Society 29, 3 (Spring 2003), 393-413. See also Elron, E, Shamir, B and Ben-Ari, E, 'Why don't they fight each other? Cultural diversity and operational unity in multinational forces', Armed Forces and Society 26, 1 (Fall 1999), 73-98.

[vi] Marshall, S.L.A. Men against Fire (New York: William Morrow and Company,1968), 9.

[vii] Marshall, S.L.A. Men against Fire, 44-47.

[viii] This paper is based on research conduced at the initial officer training academies in Britain. In particular, the article draws on a period of ethnographic observation of Royal Marines 'Young Officer' training between December 2003 and May 2004; lectures, physical training, weapon instruction, drill, tactical field exercises and

class-room tasks have been observed.

[ix] In addition to the use of the physical symbol of the model, described here, orders are structured verbally and are organized physically to ensure group cohesion. The mission for instance is positioned for maximum rhetorical effect after the introductory sections and is repeated in order to minimize the chances of misinterpretation. The seating plan of the group receiving represents their relative position on the mission. Thus, in a platoon attack, 1 section will sit on the right, 2 on the left with 3 section sitting behind, representing their reserve position on the mission.

[x] In environments where it is difficult to dig pits, 'ponchos' (neoprene sheets which are used as bivouac shelters) are used as models. They are pegged out flat and made into relief models by the insertion of rocks, pieces of equipment or clothing beneath them.

[xi] The exercise took place between 12 and 15 January on a wooded estate some 8 miles from the Commando Training Centre, Royal Marines at Lympstone. The Commando Training Centre is situated on the Exe Estuary 5 miles south of Exeter in south-west England.

[xii] Durkheim, E. The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, trans. J. Ward Swain, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976), 230-1.

[xiii] The use of nick-numbers and nicknames is also intended as a security measure; the enemy will be unaware of the significance of these terms.

[xiv] This training lecture, conducted by the Young Officer training team, took place at the Commando Training Centre on 6 January 2004.

[xv]Ladd, J. By Sea, By Land: The Royal Marines 1919-1997 (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 390.

[xvi] Durkheim, E. The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.

[xvii] Questions are recognized to be important in eliminating unclarity. However, these questions must never be allowed to develop into a debate. Such a debate would undermine the entire point of the orders process which is to unify the group to a single collective action. British forces are trained that if a debate should break out in the orders process, the process should be temporarily halted. The dissenting voice taken aside and objections heard in a separate context. This ritualistic separation of dissent is designed to maintain the social potency of the orders

process.

[xviii] Clausewitz, Carl von. On War, ed. and trans. M. Howard and P. Paret. Princeton (New Jersey: Princeton, 1989), 119.

[xix] In the British forces, there are hand-signals denoting the order of march, ambushes, stop-shorts and various other tactical procedures

[xx] In the Royal Marines, a troop is the equivalent of a platoon.

[xxi] The Royal Marines Young Officers conducted a live firing exercise at the Sennybridge training area in Wales between 15 and 19 March 2004. The examples discussed here took place on 16 March.

[xxii] The term 'four-man' or 'point-man' is used in this paper because in the British Army or in the Royal Marines, only males are allowed to serve in combat units which will perform the drills described here.

[xxiii] When small units are patrolling, with no intention of engaging the enemy, different commands are employed. On contact with the enemy, small groups will conduct 'contact drills' which allow them to retreat from the enemy with suppressing fire. For these drills, the key commands are 'contact front/right/left/rear', 'baseline' and 'rally', each denoting a specific phase in the drill to ensure collective action.

[xxiv] Corporal (now Sergeant) Watts was awarded a Military Cross for his part in the action.

[xxv] The Manoeuvre Support Group made this point in the interview with them on 27 April 2004.

[xxvi] Interview with the Maneouvre Support Group.

[xxvii] Marshall, Men Against Fire, p.47

[xxviii] Both the discussion of training among the Special Forces and his criticisms of the Young Officers occurred on the exercise already cited on 12-15 January 2004.

[xxix] The SA-80A2 is currently the standard weapon of the British infantry, although the Special Forces prefer the M16.

[xxx] See Sajer, G. The Forgotten Soldier (London: Cassell, 1999); Keegan, J. Six Armies in Normandy (London: Pimlico, 1992).

[xxxi] Bramley, V. Excursion to Hell (London: Pan Books,1991), 170.