

BONDS OF SOLDIERS IN COMBAT

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From ancient times scholars have pondered over two interrelated questions—why do men fight and what is the basis for the special relationship that develops between combat soldiers in wartime?

On January 27, 1967, A Co. 2/12 was on a company-size operation in RVN. The order of march that day was the 2nd Plt as point, followed by the 3rd and the 1st Plt bringing up the rear. As the 2nd Plt. moved from tall elephant grass into the wood line, we immediately came in contact with a force of unknown strength. We had gotten within range of throwing hand grenades back and forth at each other. We had taken numerous casualties. We were then pulled back and 3rd PLT went forward along with SP4 Evans, the 3rd Plt. Medic. They met extreme heavy fighting and numerous casualties. SP4 Evans being a very courageous young man and being true to his assignment as PLT Medic, never faltered when he heard the word, “Medic”. He was not one when he heard the call of “Medic” to return with a reply of, “I do not make house calls”. He went forward and applied aid to the wounded and moved them to the rear. After making numerous trips to get the wounded, SP4 Evans was mortally wounded when a Chinese claymore was exploded directly at him. SP4 Evans made a futile attempt to return to the rear but died on the battlefield. For those actions, SP4 Donald

Evans was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The United States Army Hospital at Ft. Carson in Colorado Springs, CO is named in his honor as Evans Army Hospital.

On October 10, 1968, during a firefight, SP4 Handrahan became the Unit's MIA. Sgt. Braniff was SP4 Handrahan's Sqd. Ldr. but was on R & R during this fire-fight. (Sgt Braniff would you please stand up). Sgt Braniff has made numerous trips back to Vietnam, using his own funds, in an attempt to locate SP4 Handrahan or his remains.

The Army's experimental cohesion, operational readiness training (COHORT)—Units such as ours of the 4th ID and 9th ID in Vietnam—were programs creating new combat arms companies which keep the same soldiers together and link them with their leaders through basic training and in advanced individual training. The COHORT program then keeps the personnel in the company or platoons together (as much as possible) through the first enlistment. This maximizes the positive bonding. Studies have confirmed that COHORT companies quickly reach a higher level of proficiency than units with high turnover of personnel. They score high on measures of cohesion. However, they also demand much more of their leaders. We only had approximately 6 months to get prepared for combat in Vietnam.

Throughout the course of the twentieth century, several generations of Americans answered the call to fight in foreign lands. It is likely they had some close relative who fought in World War I or II, Korea or Vietnam. The key point is that there was a well-established tradition in most families to serve in the military when called upon. When an individual received the message from the President of the United States ... "Greetings... You are hereby ordered to report for induction..." they obeyed this call to serve just as their relatives had during earlier wars. So it was not just a matter of obeying a Presidential Order, it was also complying with well-established

family traditions and the norms of society. But an unknown number declined to serve, especially the so-called “draft dodgers”, who did everything possible to avoid being sent to Vietnam.

In every war involving the commitment of American forces, we always had many who volunteered to serve in the armed forces. Like the draftees, these volunteers were influenced by family members who had served in previous wars and by the social norms of society.

While these were the principal motivating factors that brought young men to Vietnam, it is important to point out that this involved a contract with Uncle Sam to serve 365 days in Vietnam and not a single day longer. This one-year policy also meant that we had a continuous flow of troops and leaders who were either arriving or departing. The significance of this time limitation was always evident by not only the wide range of “short-timer” calendars in use, but also the bantering reminders by these short-timers that they would soon be heading home. While these bantering reminders were mostly expressions of happiness, they also contained a hidden element of sadness because of the approaching end to some very special relationships.

A soldier becomes a member of a team and this involves a very special and treasured relationship that develops between combat soldiers in wartime, often referred to as “the bonds between soldiers”, “comrades-in-arms” and “the band of brothers”. The use of “brother” highlights the importance attached to this special relationship, one equal to that existing between close blood relatives.

Trust formed that cornerstone for these special relationships and here we are referring to the ultimate form of trust—that of entrusting others with your life. In combat one has to trust that each member of the team will act to protect the others from harm. In other words, the members of a team acted as guardian angels for each other and their golden rule was “not to let your buddies down.”

Combat and war bring out the best and the worst in human beings. The direction which a combat stress behavior takes, positive or negative, results from the interaction of the physical and social context in which the stress occurs and prepares the body for flight or fight. The purpose of good military leadership, discipline, and training is to bring out the best while preventing the worst.

While patriotism and sense of purpose will get American soldiers to the battlefield, the soldiers' own accounts (and many systematic studies) testify that what keeps them there amid the fear of death and mutilation is, above all else, their loyalty to their fellow soldiers.

Cohesion literally means, stick together. The objective measure of cohesion is whether a soldier will choose to stay with his buddies and face discomfort and danger when given the opportunity or temptation to choose comfort and safety. The extreme measure of cohesion is willingness to die with fellow soldiers rather than leave them to die alone, or to choose certain death (as by throwing oneself on a hand grenade) in order to save their lives.

Bonding within the combat team is itself a positive combat stress behavior. Working together under stress to overcome difficulty and discomfort in order to accomplish a common goal is a good way to building cohesion in a small team. Normally, such bonding requires a long period of working together to become strong. However, the addition of danger and potential death which can be prevented only by trust and teamwork, plus living together 24 hours a day for days and weeks on end, forges the bond much faster and stronger. Combat soldiers describe the bond, hesitantly or openly, as love.

The closest bonding naturally forms with one's buddy in combat—the only soldier with whom an individual ideally can share his deepest thoughts and concerns. This bonding will also include the other close team members. Some of these may be people whom a person might have expected (and probably did expect on first introduction) to dislike intensely due to individual

personality differences or ethnic or racial prejudices. However, once these soldiers have proved themselves reliable, trustworthy, and competent, they become bonded brothers in arms. Being included in the cohesion does have to be earned by combat performance, but once established, it can lead the team to overlook or even condone other noncombat-related faults.

Personal bonding is not enough to produce a good military unit. It is possible to have teams which share very high personal bonding, but which are not dedicated to the units' combat mission. In that situation, their cohesiveness may be directed solely to keeping each other comfortable and safe; such as giving a false report on an ambush patrol's location which could lead to their demise if they need to call in artillery or air support.

On March 21, 1967, the 2/12 was staged at an old French Fort waiting for 2/22, a mechanized unit to secure the LZ. Not being able to secure the LZ, we stayed the night at the Old French Fort and in the am, a decision was made to go to a secondary LZ which was LZ Gold. The 2/12th was supposed to be in the first lift of helicopters, but as we were boarding the helicopters, the word came down for us to disembark and the 3/22nd went in on the first lift. Standing by the ground control jeep, I could listen to the incoming reports from the first lift that two helicopters fully loaded with troupes had landed on command detonated mines. All aboard were KIAs and the helicopters were destroyed. All other helicopters had received ground fire. The second lift also received ground fire at the LZ. A Co. 2/12th was the third lift in. Some of us had a gut feeling that this day was not going to be a good day. We landed at LZ Gold and moved off to form our own perimeter, leaving the 3rd of 22nd Inf. to man LZ Gold and the Artillery Unit which was to be lifted out later. The next am we could hear the perimeter at LZ Gold receiving heavy mortar and small arms fire from the NVA 272 Rgt. We also received either rocket fire or counter mortar fire from an artillery unit. The shells landed in our perimeter seriously wounding some members of A Co. 2/12. We left our wounded with the 1SGT and a small security force to have them

medivacked to the rear. We saddled up and moved towards LZ Gold to come to the aid of 3/22. We moved into the clearing seeing numerous dead bodies of NVA. The 3/22 had moved to their secondary positions, running extremely low on ammo, an artillery unit was firing beehive rounds towards the enemy. We were a happy sight to our Brothers from the 3/22. All in all that day, the NVA suffered 647 known losses. All participating units including A/2/12 received the Presidential Citation for their heroic defense of the fire support base “Gold” at the Battle of Suoi Tre.

In late 1965, A Co. 2/12 came together as strangers. We bonded together in Vietnam and now the 2/12 from the 60’s are brothers bonded by combat. In 2000, a few draftees from the original A Co. 2/12 in Vietnam, founded the Alpha Association. Through their efforts, all members from the original A Co., 2/12th in Vietnam have been located and over half of that original group attend a yearly reunion, truly reinforcing our “Band of Brothers” relationship.

Thank you for YOUR sacrifice to keep this Country free.