The American Volunteer Soldier:
Will He Fight?

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This article appeared in the June 1976 edition of Military Review and reports the results of a survey conducted by the authors of the All-Volunteer Force. The findings concerning soldier values, the importance of education to the force and the improvement in performance and attitude of an informed soldier will come as no surprise to today's reader. The conclusion that the volunteer soldier would fight if called upon would be proved in Grenada, Panama and, once again, on the Arabian Peninsula.

OVER TWO YEARS have now elapsed since the last draftee entered the military and the US Army began its conversion to an all-volunteer force. Today, the Army is composed entirely of volunteers. This conversion has been assessed and facilitated by a variety of pilot projects, studies and surveys.[1] But virtually nothing has been done to answer the most important question of all—will the new volunteer soldier perform well in combat?

The purpose of this article is to present an attitudinal profile of the volunteer soldier in combat units and to try to project these attitudes into some kind of understanding of possible combat behavior. We stress, however, that inferring combat behavior from attitudinal items is an impossible task, for it is only in the immediate circumstances of actual ground warfare that the behavior of combat soldiers can be truly assessed. But, short of such circumstances, there are partial indicators which can give researchers and Army leaders some ideas as to what the volunteer soldier's motivation and performance might be.

As formidable as predictions of combat behavior are, at least until the end of the draft in 1973, the US Army could base expectations on the experiences of a generation-long reliance on the conscription system. But, today, precious little is known about the attitudes of the new volunteer soldier toward possible combat involvement. How much did the turbulent social unrest of the latter years of the Vietnam War affect the values of the contemporary soldier? What is the interaction between societal values and the commitment of young soldiers to military goals? What does the volunteer soldier think about participation in possible future conflicts? To even pose these questions suggests how elusive—but important—are the answers. We propose that some limited understanding of these issues can be gained by the presentation and interpretation of data we have collected from a survey of volunteer junior enlisted combat soldiers.

Theories About Combat Behavior

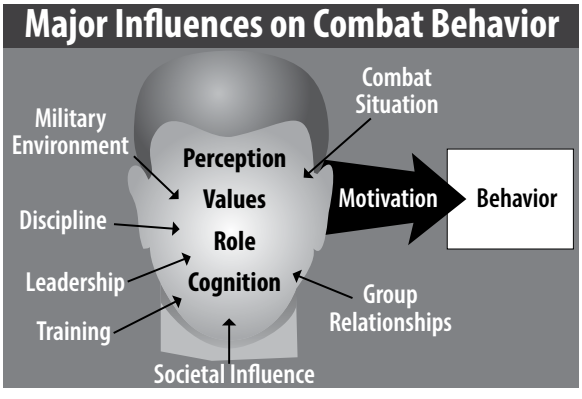
A Historical Perspective. To give a detailed account of theories of combat motivation would take us far afield. But, if we are to examine the attitudes of the volunteer soldier toward combat, we must first refer to some of the more widely known previous writings on the subject. Prior to World War II, Ardant du Picq's *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle*—which frontally introduced the notion of soldier morale—had the widest influence over the development of military theory and speculation about combat behavior. Arising out of World War II, two landmark studies appeared which empirically examined American combat behavior in that war. One was S.L.A. Marshall's *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War*, based upon data collected in after-battle interviews.[2] The other was the four-volume series entitled *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath* which relied upon large survey samples analyzed by the sociologist Samuel A. Stouter and his colleagues.[3] The studies of Stauffer and other sociologists (and Marshall implicitly) strongly emphasized the role of face-to-face or "primary" groups and explained the motivation of the individual combat soldier as a function of his solidarity and social intimacy with fellow soldiers at small group levels. Correspondingly, the World War II combat studies deemphasized the values systems of soldiers

and, to a lesser extent, formal organizational factors as well. In its more extreme formulation, combat primary relationships were viewed as so intense that they overrode not only preexisting civilian values and formal military goals, but even the individual's own sense of self-concern.

Somewhat surprisingly, there have been only a handful of studies published about the American soldier's combat behavior since World War II. Roger W. Little's participant observations of combat troops in the Korean War revealed that the basic unit of cohesion was a two-man or "buddy" relationship instead of the form of World War II which followed squad or platoon boundaries. Although Little's conclusions were within the framework of the primary group explanation, his study also noted the salience of organizational factors such as Army personnel policies and differences between echelons.[4]

During the Vietnam War, Charles Moskos gathered data on combat motivation, based on his stays with combat units in 1965 and 1967. Among other findings, Moskos stressed the overriding importance of the rotation system as a determinant of combat motivation and the corresponding likelihood for soldiers to see the war in very private and individualistic terms. Moreover, Moskos introduced the concept of "latent ideology" and argued that an understanding of the combat soldier's motivation required a simultaneous appreciation of both the role of small groups and the underlying value commitments of combat soldiers. Moskos concluded that primary groups maintain the soldier in his combat role only when he has an underlying commitment, if not to the specific purpose of the war, then at least to the worth of the larger system for which he is fighting.

A Conceptual Model. Drawing upon the above hypotheses as well as the literature on Army leadership and training, we present in the figure a heuristic model of combat behavior.6 The relevant variables include external factors of both an organizational (policies) and environmental (for example, societal influences, small group relationships and the combat situation) nature. These factors impinge on a core value system of the individual soldier which include subjective perceptions of the external factors and cognition of the soldierly role. In concert, all these factors determine combat attitude and motivation which, in turn, is directly related to eventual combat behavior.



We are not so brash as to assign weights to these variables, nor even to justify their discrete importance. We are fully aware that life—and especially the—life and death of combat—is too complex to be captured in any schematic model. But we do hold that attitudinal items measuring these variables can suggest relevant considerations in trying to evaluate the propensity of the volunteer soldier to exert himself in combat.

Collection of Data

To gather data on the volunteer soldier's attitude and motivation toward combat, a questionnaire was constructed which tapped the items covered in the schematic model presented in the figure. The focus of the study was on junior enlisted personnel who had direct combat responsibilities. For reasons of manageability and economy, the sample was projected at a total of 400 volunteer soldiers. Four combat units were selected with the objective of getting about 100 soldiers from each unit to complete the questionnaire. The units selected were an infantry battalion, a tank battalion, an airborne infantry battalion and a ranger battalion. In selecting these units, there was a presumption that there might be a contrast between the normal volunteer units—the infantry and tank battalions—and the more elite units—the airborne and ranger battalions.[7] All the units selected were stationed in the southeastern part of the United States, and all were surveyed in April 1975.

Even though the units had busy schedules, the commanders were very interested in our research effort and gave us the utmost cooperation. In preparation for our visit, we requested that the selection of the sample of soldiers to be surveyed be as nearly representative as possible of the total unit. We feel confident that the soldiers who were administered the questionnaire were indeed representative of the volunteer soldier in the surveyed combat units. Thus, for example, comparison of the racial distribution of the unit with the soldiers actually surveyed showed no marked discrepancies. All told, 358 or 91.8 percent of the questionnaires were usable.

The mechanics of the administration of the questionnaire were that each item was read aloud. If required, clarification was given as to the intended

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meaning of the item. In Army parlance, the questionnaire was administered "by the numbers." Additionally, following the completion of the questionnaire proper, small numbers of soldiers-usually a dozen or less-took part in a give-and-take interview session with the researchers.

A Profile of the Sample

Age and Rank. The average age of our sample was between 20 and 21 years. Within our groups, the elite units were slightly younger than the others. Comparison of age to race and education indicated no significant relationship. Virtually all of the surveyed soldiers were of the pay grade E-3 or E-4.

Race and Region. The racial distribution between the units surveyed varied. The infantry and tank battalion samples were over 50 percent Black and about four to five percent other minorities. The two elite units had a higher representation of whites: 63-percent white in the airborne battalion and 84-percent white in the rangers. The high percentage of minorities in the infantry and tank battalions is explained partially by the fact that many of the members were recruited locally. Seventy-one percent of the sample personnel from these units were from the Southern states, compared with 35 percent of the elite units.

Slightly over half of the soldiers in our survey had spent most of their lives in small communities, while slightly over a third came from suburbia or large cities. This is not representative of the distribution of American society in general. But it is to be understood by the fact that the two normal units (for example, the infantry and tank battalions) were largely recruited from the South and many of the Blacks in those units (63 percent) came from rural communities.

Education. Analysis of the education variable reveals some interesting facts. The elite units were the most highly educated: Only 16 percent had not completed high school, and almost one-fourth had attended college. In our survey, there was no relationship between race and education. The same percentage of Blacks had completed high school as whites, a noteworthy finding considering the area of recruitment.

Attitudes Toward Army Life

Enlistment Influences. In considering what motivates an individual to volunteer for the Army, it must be assumed that more than one single factor will influence his decision. Based on this assumption, our questionnaire listed eight factors and asked the respondents to rank each of them independently on a scale of importance. The highest motivators were "learning a skill or getting an education," which ranked first (73 percent), followed by a chance to "serve my country" (70 percent) and a chance to "travel and get away from home" (64 percent).

The combat arms bonus did not rank as high as expected (49 percent), nor did civilian unemployment (46 percent) except for some of the minorities; this may be misleading, however, as these soldiers entered the service before the current recession. Least important was the influence of joining with a friend, followed by a military career and family influence.

Preferred Location of Assignment. Less than one-fourth of the soldiers preferred their current station of assignment. However, this is not surprising since the best place is always the one a soldier just left or is going to. Most of them (78 percent) wanted to be closer to their hometown or somewhere else in the United States (43 percent). However, few of them were interested in going to Korea (27 percent) and even fewer were interested in Germany (7.2 percent). Comments during the interviews indicated that this adversity to overseas duty was based on rumors about poor living conditions and status or the lack of mobility, boredom and poor morale in units.

Satisfaction With the Army. Our survey revealed that half of the soldiers liked Army life and slightly over one-third disliked it. The remainder were undecided. The infantry battalion sample disliked the Army the most, followed by the tank and airborne battalions in that order. The rangers liked the Army the most. Somewhat surprising, there was no significant difference between the feelings about the Army of high school graduates and those that had not finished high school. This represents a change in attitude from the pre-Vietnam days when it was found that the higher the educational level, the greater the dissatisfaction with the Army.8 On a related item, as reported in Table 1, the majority of the soldiers in our survey felt that their squad and platoon leaders depended too much upon "threats or harassment to get things done." This feeling

was most prevalent in the infantry and tank battalions (70 and 64 percent respectively) and less so in the airborne and ranger units (50 and 45 percent respectively). Although much of this sentiment might be attributed to normal enlisted grousing, the large proportion of soldiers reporting too much harassment deserves continued attention from the standpoint of troop leadership in the all-volunteer context.

As also reported in Table 1, less than a third of the surveyed soldiers stated that their best friends were in the Army, and we could detect no pattern when comparing units on this item. It does appear that the long-term erosion in Army primary groups since World War II seems borne out by this finding.

When asked if the United States ought to have a volunteer Army rather than the draft, two-thirds of them agreed or strongly agreed. The agreement between the units on this item was practically identical. Less than a fifth of the surveyed soldiers disagreed with the volunteer Army concept.

Social Attitudes

Army Traditions. With the end of the draft, it was anticipated that so too would end the issue of hair length among soldiers. Surely, it was anticipated that, because the volunteer soldier knows the Army policy on haircuts, he would not take as much exception to it as his drafted counterpart. Our survey included items on hair styles in the Army, and it appears that the hair issue is still with us. Close to three-quarters of the surveyed soldiers were in opposition to current Army haircut regulations. In comparing the units on this item, the rangers were the most conservative (that is, favored shorter hair) of the units although even a majority of the rangers favored a relaxation of hair styles. We also found that soldiers who had attended college tended to be slightly more conservative in their hair attitudes when compared to their lesser educated counterparts.

When asked whether "the Army should try to maintain as many traditions as it can which make it different from civilian life," our sample was about evenly split between agreement and disagreement. The split was fairly uniform among the units except for the rangers who were somewhat more likely to favor an Army with distinguishing traditions.

American Society. In order to assess the volunteer soldier's attitude toward the society from which he stems, we asked our sample how they felt about liberal attitudes and permissiveness in our society. As shown in Table 2, the responses to this question were diffuse and accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty. But, to ascertain more directly the soldier's evaluation of American society, we also asked did they believe "America was the best country in the world." Very significantly, an overwhelming majority agreed with this statement. Similarly, the surveyed soldiers were also strongly supportive of the proposition that America ought to have the best military in the world. Thus, our data indicate there is a profound reservoir of patriotism among today's combat soldiers though it will not be expressed in quite so open terms.

Although we found a marked predisposition for support of the United States and its military among the sample, our post-survey interviews revealed an ignorance of the positive reasons for the global commitments of our country. Few of the combat soldiers could come

Table 1. Volunteer Soldiers' Attitudes Toward Army Life*
(Percentages)

Item	Strongly Agree*	Agree*	Undecided*	Disagree*	Strongly Disagree*	Number Surveyed
Leaders Depend Too Much on Harassment	34.4	23.7	9.2	20.7	12.0	358
Best Friends in Army	12.9	17.6	19.0	31.1	19.3	357
Should Have Volunteer Army	39.3	28.4	14.9	9.6	7.9	356

Table 2. Volunteer Soldiers' Attitudes*
(Percentages)

Item	Strongly Agree*	Agree*	Undecided*	Disagree*	Strongly Disagree*	Number Surveyed
Relax Army Haircut Standards	61.2	13.7	6.7	12.0	6.4	358
Army Should Maintain Traditions	16.3	23.9	18.0	22.8	18.9	355
American People Too Permissive	12.7	32.2	34.7	12.4	7.9	354
America Best Country	54.1	25.8	14.3	2.8	3.1	357
America Has Best Military	52.0	30.1	8.7	7.3	2.0	356

up with reasons as to why we need a strong military establishment-even though they favored it in principle. Yet, when we raised points for their consideration (for example, the stabilizing influence of America on the world scene, the unpredictability of international affairs, the security of the United States), there was strong interest and quick agreement. As we heard over and over again: "Why hasn't anyone ever told us that before?" Our research strongly indicates that American soldiers must know the "why" of their military service if they are to give maximum performance.

Attitudes Toward Combat

Trust and Respect for Fellow Soldiers. More than any other one variable, the relationship of the individual to his group in combat seems to exert the most influence on combat effectiveness. It is also the hardest to measure short of the soldier experiencing combat, for "an individual's combat survival is directly related to the support—moral, physical, and technical—he can expect from his fellow soldiers."[10] Realizing this, it becomes extremely difficult to project the cohesion and role relationships of soldiers from a peacetime environment into combat.

Our survey asked what the soldiers thought of their peers in a combat role. As reported in Table 3, the item concerning "respect" for a fellow soldier who tried to get out of combat brought forth diffuse opinions with a rather high degree of undecidedness. However, in comparing units, the elite units were most severe on combat shirkers.

When asked if they would "trust" the members of their unit in combat, the responses were again diffuse. But, on this item, interunit differences were very pronounced. While only 19 percent of tank and infantry battalions agreed with the statement they would trust their fellows in combat, 71 percent of the airborne and rangers indicated such trust. Again, as on many other items, the elite units reflected the highest degree of trust and respect for their fellow soldiers.

Table 3. Volunteer Soldiers' Trust and Respect of Fellow Soldiers*
(Percentages)

Item	Strongly Agree*	Agree*	Undecided*	Disagree*	Strongly Disagree*	Number Surveyed
Respect Combat Shirker	17.1	16.6	22.8	16.3	27.2	356
Trust Fellow Soldiers in Combat	16.8	28.2	23.2	14.8	17.0	358

Readiness to Participate in Combat. A good portion of our survey dealt with the volunteer soldier's attitude toward a variety of stress situations. The responses to these hypothetical combat situations are shown in Table 4. Using two recent national polls as a benchmark, the volunteer soldier's attitude was compared to the public's attitude in scenarios where a comparison could be attained. It was found that the attitudes of the volunteer soldier did not mirror that of the general public. For example, a Harris Poll revealed that barely one-third of the public was in favor of sending US troops into the Middle East if Israel were being defeated.11 And in a recent California Poll, "almost half" of those sampled did not want US troops fighting in Israel, and only one-fourth supported troops fighting in Korea.12 When given these same scenarios, almost three-quarters of the troops in our survey indicated that they would, "volunteer" or "go if ordered." This is also sustained by the fact that almost the same amount responded positively toward two opposing situations-a war the American people supported and one they did not. Again, in all the situations depicted in Table 4, the elite units, led by the rangers, responded most positively.

As a general item, the soldiers were asked: "Suppose the Army needed people to go into combat. What would you do?" Seventy-nine percent stated they would "vol-

Table 4. Volunteer Soldiers' Readiness to Participate in Combat*
(Percentages)

Item	Definitely Volunteer*	Go if Ordered*	Try to Avoid*	Probably Refuse*	Number Surveyed
Army Needed You, Go Into Combat	34.2	45.2	13.6	7.1	354
Invasion of US	65.3	24.9	7.1	2.8	354
Invasion of Western Europe-Germany	31.7	44.5	17.6	6.2	353
Invasion of Far East-Korea	27.6	48.3	17.0	7.1	352
Invasion of Middle East-Israel	31.9	42.5	17.4	8.3	351
Overseas War Americans Support	36.4	44.0	12.2	7.4	352
Overseas War Opposition at Home	23.3	46.9	21.3	8.5	352

unteer to go" or "go if ordered." Ninety percent of the elite units so responded, compared with 69 percent of the infantry and tank battalions.

Conclusion

The results of our research and provisional analysis suggest that the transition to the volunteer Army has been generally successful. The volunteer combat soldier in today's Army can be expected to perform as well if not better than his counterpart of the early 1970s.

We believe that the conceptual model presented here points out some of the relevant variables which impinge upon the behavior of the soldier in combat. We also found that there was a diverse attitude among the volunteer soldiers on a variety of items. On some social issues—such as hair styles—the volunteer soldier reflects prevailing civilian attitudes. The findings also suggest that the better educated volunteer soldier will be the more committed soldier. It was also found that there is some variation between units with regard to their stated willingness to accomplish their mission or volunteer for dangerous assignments. The elite units—the airborne and especially the rangers—were consistently more likely to report positive statements toward possible combat involvement.

We speculate that primary group determinants will be less salient in explaining combat performance in the future than was the case in the past. Our survey and interviews indicated that the volunteer soldier is more likely to reflect an internalized value system rather than rely primarily on group opinion in his unit. Our finding about the lack of understanding of the role of the American Armed Forces on the contemporary world scene is thus especially to be stressed. That is, while the surveyed soldiers were quite positive in their willingness to defend the United States, they showed a marked drop in their willingness to fight overseas-whether in Europe, the Middle East or the Far East. We propose that an indoctrination program as to the "why" of an American military might be well-considered.

Lastly, we believe that beneath the common veneer of cynicism lies a good soldier with a fundamental willingness to serve his country in the ultimate test of combat. There is certainly a marked trait in that direction, and it behooves all of us to cultivate that trait, for it is not enough just to have an Army as good as we had during the draft. The volunteer Army must be the best possible. Our task is to strive to make the volunteer Army an effective and efficient force in the event of hostilities. ***MR***

NOTES

1. See *The Report of the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970); and Gary R. Nelson and Cathrine Armington, *Military and Civilian Earnings Alternatives for Enlisted Men in the Army* (Arlington, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis, 1970). There were also the Army pilot projects such as VOLAR 4 (Volunteer Army) and MVA (Modern Volunteer Army). Surveys on All-Volunteer Army issues have also been conducted by the Human Resources Research Organization, the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army, and the US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences.
2. S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1964).
3. Samuel A. Stouffer et al. , *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath*, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949).
4. Roger W. Little, "Buddy Relations and Combat Role Performance, "*The New Military: hanging Patterns of Organization*, edited by Morris Janowitz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1965), 194-224.
5. Charles C. Moskos Jr. , *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today's Military* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970), 134-56.
6. This model is very similar to one developed to explain "influence of behavior in a work situation." See Fremont E. Kast and James E. Rosenzweig *Organization and Management* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1970), 251.
7. The elite units—the airborne and ranger battalions—can be considered volunteers on top of volunteers.
8. Moskos, 208.
9. Edward A. Shills and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 12 (1948), 280-315.
10. Moskos, 145.
11. *The New York Times* (4 March 1975), 12.
12. *The Washington Post* (25 May 1975), A-9.

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