

When Cohesion Turns Evil: Leading Good Soldiers Astray

Throughout military history hazing has always been a problem from initiation practices to acts of discipline. Initiations practices have been a way for military members to accept new members into the organization. Hazing can be defined as, "initiation rituals by which newcomers to an organization are harassed and humiliated as a test or preparation for acceptance into the group" (Ostvik, 2001, pg. 18). Hazing practices have been looked down upon by society creating awareness among military members and that of the Artillery that these types of actions are no longer acceptable even when used in a training environment. Initiation actions should be taken with great concern within a military context, as members are being trained for violence and have access to weapons and heavy equipment (Ostvik, 2001). Making the situation worse is that members do not have the right to leave the organization as they choose making them feel isolated within their unit or section. Psychologists have developed the general belief that initiations can be seen to sometimes strengthen initial bonds between new members of the group but can also be manifestly have negative outcomes. (Eliens, 2011). The Royal Canadian Artillery and the military as a whole portray the idea that it exhibits a high level of perceived cohesion to society, which is basically that the military is a highly unified and tightly bonded group (Eliens, 2011). Cohesion is an essential element in any Troops operational effectiveness as it is positively correlated to job satisfaction, and task cohesion. The issue with Troop cohesion is that it can have its pitfalls as it develops a mentality in its service members that can result in abuse and alienation of members that do not adhere to group norms. This paper will discuss the events that happened in April 2011, when three marines were involved in the alleged hazing of a Lance Corporal Harry Lewis who committed suicide in Afghanistan shortly after hopefully creating psychological lessons for Artillery commanders to learn from. The three allegedly berated and assaulted Lance Corporal for falling asleep while on watch when he first arrived in Afghanistan.

According to Chu and a Marine investigation of the incident Lew committed suicide by shooting himself shortly thereafter (Cohen, 2011). This paper will propose how the group cohesion of this small military group, as comparable in the Artillery being such a selected group could have encouraged these negative group processes or other informal initiation processes. How such a cohesive military group such as a Troop can be very emotionally demanding and when failure arrives this can create a sense of disharmony, disappointment and loss of esprit de corps resulting in the Lance Corporals suicidal thoughts. This paper will also discuss the psychology of group dynamics and how it can make it can give us a better understanding of how to deal with these issues within an Artillery context.

Negative group processes through cohesion has always been an important part of any Troop's values creating a sense of comradeship that helps members deal with stressful and life threatening situations. The issue surrounding cohesion is that sometimes it can have negative consequences. Cohesion up to a certain level has a strong correlation with increased performance but the pressures to conform within cohesive groups also become much higher. As the small section bonds become stronger among group members, norms of behavior are developed deeming what is acceptable and what is not (Rielly, 2001). Many negative actions can occur through the approval of a small tightly cohesive group as loyalty to one another is very evident. As stated by Henderson in the Dark Side of the Force, "small unit behavior whether deviant or desirable from the organizational point of view, is the result of norms formed by the primary groups interactions" (Rielly, 2001, p.60). This theory can be seen through the hazing of Lance Cpl. Harry Lewis. He had been punished for his deviance and unconformity to the group's norms. In the Artillery members rely on one another for protection and security and failing to complete one's job efficiently is simply not acceptable. After being ordered by their sergeant to

correct the action after falling asleep on sentry "Lance Corporal Lew was beaten, berated and forced to perform rigorous exercise," as stated in the CNN news article, "He was forced to do push-ups and leg lifts wearing full body armour, and sand was poured in his mouth. He was forced to dig a hole for hours. He was kicked, punched and stomped on. And it did not stop until 3:20 a.m."(Cohen, 2011). This punishment may seem harsh when looking through an outside civilian perspective but through the eyes of his peers in a war torn area it may be said that he put in jeopardy the lives of his fellow soldiers. Group pressures to conform are substantial and failure to conform, in this case resulted in sanctions to the member (Rielly, 2001). The norms that became acceptable by the group in this instance were that peer punishment was acceptable and that the Lance Corporal needed to learn his lesson. Even though the intention was never to abuse him to the point of suicide, the fact is that the members of the unit let this action happen without truly seeing the actions as unlawful or wrong until the Corporal committed suicide. Emotionally demanding work within the Artillery world combined with the stresses of war and preparation for battle, gunners become very close knit in order to deal with harsh times and life threatening conditions. Cohesive groups such as a Troop are emotionally very demanding as each member feels that they do not want to let the team down. After falling asleep on post and receiving his brutal hazing, Lance Corporal Lew may have felt a strong sense of loneliness and neglect from his peers in an isolated war torn area with minimal support from family or friends. This could have been a leading reason to why minutes later, "he climbed into the foxhole that he just dug and shot himself and committed suicide." (Cohen, 2011). Engraved on the Corporals arm was a supposed suicide note that stated "May hate me now, but in the long run this was the right choice, I am sorry my mom deserves the truth."(Cohen, 2011). This note gives a sense of the emotional trauma that the Corporal felt and how he was finding it very

difficult after being ostracized from his peers. Within the military there are high ties between the emotional value of group membership and self-esteem (Ahronson, 2007). This feeling of depression, anxiety, and guilt shown by the Lance Corporal can best be explained by the old sergeant syndrome (Forsyth, 2009, p.135). The old sergeant syndrome is characterized by psychological disturbance by non-commissioned members that suffer heavy casualties. This can also be seen in an Artillery context through friendly fire situations. Strong loyalty to its members, these leaders feel so responsible for their unit's loss that they withdraw psychologically from the group. Although no one was killed due to the Corporal falling asleep while on sentry, just the idea of letting the team down and potentially causing the death of his peers was enough to set off such symptoms. The Corporal may have understood the potential consequences for his actions and may have had a tough time dealing with the impact it could have had on the group. Another aspect of highly cohesive groups as seen in the Artillery is the emotional investment that can prevent soldiers from reporting acts that go against their personal values (Rielly, 2001). After being ordered to conduct such abuse on a fellow member by the sergeant, the two soldiers followed diligently without questioning the order. Even though other members most likely knew about the acts, no members stepped up to say that the acts were inappropriate and that they must be stopped. Within the military a strong sense of comradeship prevails, members may feel that it is betraying their unit to turn in other members or even go against orders. Military leaders seem to believe that members will be more loyal to the organizational values or to the Nation which is usually false as small-unit loyalty usually always prevails (Rielly, 2001). The brotherhood that develops within a Troop is difficult to break no matter how horrific the actions and Artillery leaders must understand this.

The article “The Dark Side of the Force” by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Rielly, (2001) is closely related to the situation that happened in Afghanistan with the Lance Corporal. It explains the My Lai Massacre in 1968 in which an American company of the name Charlie Company massacred hundreds of unarmed civilians in South Vietnam. Before this action the company was seen as a very cohesive group and had very effective leadership. The excuses by members involved in the killings were related to the norms of the group “When you are in an infantry company, in an isolated environment like this, the rules of that company are foremost” (Rielly, 2001, p.59). So when ordered to kill these civilians all the soldiers acted accordingly and followed the order. This article offers an explanation of the events regarding the Lance Corporal and gives a good understanding to the potential dangers of extreme cohesion within the Artillery especially when in isolated conditions. It explains the idea of small unit dynamics and how the only thing that mattered to these soldiers was how the people around them were going to see their actions, and how the rules and opinions back home didn’t matter in their decision making to kill the civilians. This can be seen through the hazing issues as military members may see such punishment as acceptable due to the circumstances and the possible severity of the Corporals action on the unit. This way of thinking can cause good gunners and good men to do horrible things if the actions are socially accepted within the unit, even if back home in their personal life it would obviously be seen as inappropriate (Rielly, 2001).

When it comes to the cohesion-performance relationship with regards to group dynamics they are usually positively related. Cohesion makes groups more successful but also groups that succeed are more cohesive (Eliens, 2011). The problem arises when failure arises as the cohesion takes a dramatic hit and discipline is seen as the only option to control the problem. Within the Marine Corps many cases have been reported where non-commissioned members

(NCO's) have encouraged soldiers to "take care of it" or to deal with the units inner groups problems with the individual's performance (Wilcox, 1997). This type of hazing or performance altering behaviors may be difficult to control as leaders may turn a blind eye to such events. With lack of tools to correct discipline outside of formal sanctions that could result in dismissal of the soldier's career, the senior NCO's feels that hazing may be the only option in order to correct performance deficiencies. The armed forces also has a tendency to fall into the problem of "hazing creep"- in that the hazing progressively gets worse and worse as members try to out due one another (Wilcox,1997). In cohesive small military groups such as within the Artillery members can potentially become motivated to conduct hazing to encourage de-individuation, which is a psychological process in which capitalizes on an individual's need to feel a part of the group. James Ogloff, professor of psychology at Simon Fraser University, explains this process through the marines as members become "not accountable for what is going on, so they end up doing things that they wouldn't do individually,"(Wilcox,1997, p.36). This would be the reason the two members did not initially feel accountable for their hazing actions towards the Lance Corporal as it was carried out together. Each soldier would feed off one another's feeling of responsibility to correct this performance deficiency by any means necessary.

Group Dynamics plays a significant role in understanding how groups function and why group members take the actions they do. This horrific situation can be explained through group dynamics by looking at it through a military perspective. Through increased group cohesion and in the heat of the moment members of the section felt as though the actions on the Lance Corporal were acceptable. Cohesion is always an important aspect in any efficient group and especially in an Artillery Troop but when it gets to the level that negative norms are created it causes a problem and members begin to have altered judgment. These underlying norms can

cause members to sway away from speaking out or voicing their opinion and can cause them to cover up issues or even turn a blind eye on unacceptable behavior. Within the Artillery world leadership is very essential and sometimes when members are not lead in the right direction as seen through the sergeant in this situation, they will make poor decisions. The Artillery needs leadership to guide decision making and in a military context leaders must make sure that military values are upheld at all times. There are many repercussions to hazing used as a disciplinary action within the Forces. Within incidents like this, the already difficult military recruiting process may become even more difficult as potential members will no longer be interested in becoming involved in such an organization (Wilcox, 1997). Hazing in such cohesive groups can have very negative results that can not only create very negative publicity in the media but can also potentially lead to the loss of an innocent life as seen in this article. The only way to combat these types of atrocities is to educate military leaders on the potential consequences of high levels of cohesion in highly disciplined military groups. Soldiers must understand the effects of hazing and that it is not appropriate in any context even when used as an initiation or disciplinary practice. Through increased awareness these types of events will be reduced as commanders will take precautions to ensure that the values of the military organization are always upheld in every situation even under the stresses of battle.

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