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## UNIT FOCUSED STABILIZATION: PROSPECTIVES & ISSUES

Testimony by William Patrick Towell before the House Armed Services  
Committee

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, it is an honor to appear before you today to offer my thoughts on one facet of the timely and important issue of Army transformation, specifically Unit-Focused Stabilization, which is the Service's specific program for implementing a policy generally known as unit-manning. I have recently completed a comprehensive study on this issue, but will focus my testimony today on providing a brief historical overview of unit manning that outlines several major issues of concern. While unit manning offers worthwhile benefits to the capabilities of our fighting forces, it is important to keep in perspective the importance of flexibility and the possible negative effects of an ironclad troop rotation policy. I hope my testimony will provide this committee that balance.

The Army's plan for "Unit-Focused Stabilization" — organizing soldiers into combat units that would remain intact for about three years at a time — will implement an approach to personnel management that has been ardently promoted for decades by some of the Service's most distinguished general officers and some of its most prominent internal critics. This approach, generally referred to as "unit-manning", marks a sharp departure from the Army's traditional practice. During most of the 20th century, the Service routinely has moved personnel in and out of combat units, even during major wars in Vietnam and Korea, according to the dictates of a system focused on developing the careers of individual soldiers by moving them through a variety of assignments rather than on maximizing the organizational stability of units.

The goal of the new approach is to *stabilize* personnel in combat units. According to proponents, greater stability will foster relationships of mutual confidence and loyalty among unit members which will make the unit *more cohesive*. This is expected to make it more effective in combat both by being better able to tolerate the psychological stress of battle and by being more proficient in complex tactics that require collaboration among the unit's members in addition to individual skill.

The argument that a closely-knit "band of brothers" can whip a larger but less cohesive force is intuitively appealing and has been widely accepted in the Army and among civilian defense policy analysts, particularly since World War

II. Indeed, in the mid-1980s, when the Army was conducting the COHORT program — a previous effort to implement unit-manning — a panel overseeing the program recommended that Army behavioral scientists *not* bother even trying to measure whether more cohesive units were, in fact, more proficient in training exercises.

So, in mandating a sweeping adoption of the unit-manning principle for combat formations, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker stands in distinguished company. Nevertheless, it is striking that this far-reaching change is being undertaken despite the fact that the benefits are unproven and the associated costs and tradeoffs largely unexamined.

The argument for stabilization rests, in part, on beliefs about the relationship of personnel stability to the relative performance of US and German troops in World War II and to, to a lesser extent, to the supposed failings of US troops during the Vietnam War. But the linkage between stability and military effectiveness is less clear than often asserted. In World War II, the tenacity of German troops in combat had other roots besides personnel stability. Some of those factors, which included draconian discipline and the systematic exploitation of ethnic hatred, would be repugnant to the American polity. Moreover, in both wars, US units were effective in combat despite a lack of personnel stability until, in Vietnam, other factors undermined the forces' morale.

An earlier effort by the Army to adopt unit-manning — Project COHORT, launched in the early 1980s by then Chief of Staff Gen. Edward C. Meyer — underscored the fallacy of focusing too narrowly on personnel stability as the key to combat effectiveness. The Army's exhaustive, in-house review of COHORT suggests that to produce a highly effective combat team, you need not only a stabilized body of troops but also leaders able to handle a group of highly motivated soldiers and a training regime designed to channel the troops' energy toward mastery of progressively more demanding operational skills.

This does not mean that the Army's personnel stabilization proposal is necessarily a bad idea. Particularly in dealing with issues as subtle as soldiers' combat motivation, it is prudent to accord due deference to the judgment of the many experienced troop leaders who argue for stabilization. But the record indicates that the promise of stabilization must be kept in perspective, bearing in mind the opportunity cost in terms of other personnel management goals that may conflict with stabilization and the direct cost in terms of complementary factors (such as specially trained leadership and more demanding training programs) needed to realize a stabilized unit's promise of superior combat capability.

### **THE PROBLEM**

By all accounts, a relatively high level of personnel turbulence — a continual coming and going of members — has been the peacetime norm for Army units. Through the course of a year, personnel of various ranks join the unit to replace departing members who leave for various reasons. First-term soldiers

come to the end of their enlistments, which are of varying duration, and either leave the Army or move to other, often more attractive assignments (sometimes as part of the package deal under which they re-enlisted). Similarly, after a few years of service with one unit, most officers and NCOs are reassigned, as well. Some start through the next in the long series of wickets comprising the service's mid-career education system. Others move to a new assignment that will broaden their experience thus — Army personnel policy long had assumed — furthering their professional development and preparing them for greater responsibilities in more senior positions. Still others move on to certain jobs that turn over at regular intervals, such as recruiting duty, liaison with Army Reserve and National Guard units, and service in South Korea where there is no provision for family members to accompany most Army personnel.

In October, 2002, Army Secretary White said that Army units based in the continental United States (CONUS) turned over, on average, 15 percent of their personnel every quarter. That measure of "external" turbulence does not capture the many additional instances of "internal" turbulence, in which a soldier is transferred from one company or platoon to another within a larger unit. On top of these permanent transfers, units also routinely lose temporarily — at least for purposes of training for their combat mission — some personnel who are "borrowed" to perform administrative and maintenance chores at higher headquarters or at the post where the unit is stationed.

The upshot, according to many experienced officers and observers, is a level of turmoil that compromises both the ability of unit members to form bonds of trust and their ability to train together long enough to develop the teamwork needed to execute complex combat skills.

On several occasions, senior Army officials have reaffirmed their desire for greater unit cohesion and have explored the feasibility of moving to a unit manning system for combat forces. Indeed, the service adopted a unit manning policy on an *ad hoc* basis in the months leading up to Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm (1990-91), Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-02), and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003).

In all three cases, the Army suspended the normal personnel churn by issuing so-called "stop-move" and "stop-loss" orders that froze in-place tens of thousands of personnel in designated specialties or designated units. Those actions testified eloquently to Army leaders' recognition of the corrosive effect on units' combat readiness of the turbulence caused by the individual-focused personnel system.

But in each case, unit-manning efforts were superimposed on a personnel system that remained, fundamentally, focused on individual career development rather than unit effectiveness. Shortly after President Bush's announcement on May 1, 2003 that "major combat operations" in Iraq had come to an end, the personnel system's routine, individual-centric nature re-asserted itself. For instance, commanders of several units that had distinguished themselves in major combat were sent home to serve in previously scheduled reassignments, months before their units were

redeployed to their home bases. Subsequently, the Army announced that it would not rotate commanders while their units are deployed overseas.

The Army was slower to adjust its personnel rules for units deployed on peacekeeping or stability operations in the 1990s. During operations in Somalia in 1992-93, for example, the first Army battalion deployed lost so many men to routine transfers that the battalion commander disbanded one of the three platoons in each of the three rifle companies, spreading those soldiers around to fill vacancies in the remaining platoons. By the late 1990s, when the service began maintaining forces in the Balkans for an extended period, it began stabilizing units' personnel rosters for the duration of their deployments and deploying them for six months at a time.

However, because the personnel system remained focused on individuals rather than units, stabilizing the membership of even the handful of units deployed in Bosnia or Kosovo at any one time sent ripples of instability through many other units. Typically, 35-40 percent of the soldiers in a division tapped for deployment in the Balkans could not be deployed. So before a unit deployed to the Balkans, it went through a "flush and fill" process: flushing out the non-deployable personnel from its ranks and filling the vacancies with deployable soldiers with the same skills drawn from other units. This had the effect of breaking up established small units, both in the brigade that was deploying and in other brigades from which the replacements were taken.

For instance, in one case involving two tank battalions of the First Cavalry Division, 211 of their 528 armored vehicle crew members were non-deployable and had to be replaced with the same number of tank crew members drawn from other formations.

### **THE SOLUTION?**

The Army's experience in the first decade of the post-Cold War era combined with unfolding trends in military technology and the evolving security environment to shape the Service leadership's current vision of the future of land warfare. In that envisioned future, by contrast with its Cold War experience, the Army must be configured in lighter, more agile units that can deploy on very short notice on unforeseen missions. Operating in more dispersed formations, they will conduct non-linear operations at a very high tempo. The Army's plan for transformation presumes that, to cope with the stress of the unprecedentedly high tempo and lethality in future combat, units will need the enhanced cohesion that personnel stability is supposed to create.

To cope with the chaotic and lethal combat environment predicted by Army futurists, the Service has launched a far-reaching effort to reshape its combat units into a Future Force, based on a radically novel suite of networked combat vehicles and sensors — the Future Combat System. To complement that technology, Army Secretary Thomas E. White announced in the fall of 2002 yet another attempt to organize the Service's combat forces on unit-manning principles, billing it as "the human dimension" of the new force.

In October 2003, shortly after beginning his tour as Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Schoomaker reaffirmed the drive toward unit manning, emphasizing that it would make life more predictable for soldiers and their families as the service scrambled to cope with a seemingly unending string of open-ended contingency deployments. "We don't know what unit manning will look like," he told reporters Oct. 7, "but we do know what desired characteristics we want to see: stability and unit cohesion."

Under the unit manning initiative, officially dubbed Unit Focused Stability, personnel completing their initial entry training will be assigned to a particular company for three years at a time, rotating to another assignment only when the brigade combat team of which the company is a part comes to the end of its three-year life cycle. The 172nd Infantry Brigade, one of the new Stryker brigades, was organized on this basis in the summer of 2003. Other brigades are slated to begin converting to the stabilized personnel model in fall, 2004.

Some of the decisions that will be needed to implement Unit-Focused Stabilization already have been made. For example, in units that have been placed on a three-year life-cycle, soldiers normally will leave — even for temporary schooling stints — only when the unit disbands. By the same token, if a soldier leaves a unit for medical, personal, or legal reasons, a replacement usually will be selected from within the unit. Since such departures result in an average attrition of 7 percent annually, units on a three-year cycle will get a "plug" of replacements once a year to make up those losses.

But a unit-manning system also will pose more fundamental questions requiring the Army to trade off conflicting goods. For instance, while locking officers and NCOs into a troop unit for three years at a time will enhance unit stability, it also may reduce soldiers' sense of control over their careers, thus complicating recruitment and retention by going against the individualistic grain of contemporary American life. The new policy also will reduce junior officers' opportunities to attend residential education programs or to gain experience in a variety of units — the kind of broadening experiences the Army has insisted, for decades, are essential to forming a well-rounded senior leader. The toughest choices facing Army leaders may be to determine which of those trade-offs are so onerous that they warrant making exceptions to the general rule of locking personnel into a unit for three years at a time.

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Gen. Schoomaker indicated that each potential departure from the norm of stability would be examined on its merits, but he expected that many of the routine rationales for moving soldiers out of their units would be discarded.

#### **THE RECORD**

Widely held views about the performance of German and US troops in World War II and of US troops in Vietnam overemphasize personnel stability as the key to cohesion and cohesion as the key to effectiveness. Thus, they may foster a viewpoint that could tilt those judgments sharply against accepting departures from the principle of personnel stability.

But more recent analyses of World War II and the academic analyses of Vietnam suggest that stability and effectiveness are much more loosely coupled than the conventional wisdom assumes. In each of those wars, the record argues, basically sound American units under competent leadership were able to tolerate a relatively high rate of turnover and remain combat effective. The implication for current policy is that well-led, well-motivated units can accommodate *some* personnel turbulence and still be highly effective.

**World War II.** For decades, public discussion of unit stabilization has been heavily influenced by a widely held view of the relative effectiveness of US and German ground forces in World War II that exaggerated the importance of personnel stability as a determinant of combat effectiveness. In a nutshell, that interpretation held that:

- Although the *Wehrmacht* was done in, at last, by a combination of the sheer mass of the allies' arsenals and Hitler's incompetent meddling in military operations, German forces outmatched US counterparts on a unit-for-unit basis to an awesome degree;
- One key element in German forces' relative tactical superiority was a personnel system that fostered and preserved tightly knit primary groups resilient enough to sustain *Wehrmacht* units as coherent, effective formations under the most adverse circumstances; and
- By contrast, US units' relative ineffectiveness was rooted, partly, in a personnel system geared to administrative efficiency, which shuffled soldiers around without regard to their psychological need for identification with a "band of brothers" — dealing with manpower, in the words of S.L.A. Marshall, "as if it were motor lubricant or sacks of potatoes."

Although that perspective, or something very much like it, remains a widely held point of view, it has been largely refuted in the past 15 years by a new generation of military historians, many of them professional soldiers. Common themes of this revisionist view are that:

- By mid-1944, the combat performance of *Wehrmacht* units (other than some elite formations) was much less competent than had been the case earlier in the war, and the stability-oriented personnel system had largely broken down.
- To the extent that German units continued to show remarkable tenacity on the battlefield, even as the war was being lost, the cause was not extraordinarily cohesive bonds within units but rather German authorities' ruthless treatment of deserters and their systematic exploitation of ethnic prejudice and ideological hatred of the enemy — policies that would be utterly intolerable for US forces, even if they did improve battlefield performance.

- Although the US Army's system for dispatching individual replacement soldiers to front-line units was demoralizing to the troops who moved through it, many of the front-line units to which they were assigned were able to assimilate a steady — and rapid — flow of individual replacements and still show a high level of combat effectiveness.

This revised view is highly relevant to the Army's evaluation of potential tradeoffs between stabilization and other facets of the current personnel system that may have to be sacrificed to maximize stability. The lesson of the new history of World War II is that the relationships among stability and effectiveness are sufficiently complex that the Army may be able to harvest most of the advantages of unit stabilization while tolerating a modest amount of personnel turnover. Thus, it might be able to avoid particularly onerous tradeoffs.

The point is not to argue against significantly increasing the stability of maneuver units but, rather, to establish that a certain amount of instability — indeed, a much greater turnover rate than normally would occur in peacetime — can be managed effectively while retaining combat effectiveness. If the cost of comprehensive stability in units is too high, it seems likely that some degree of carefully managed turnover can be accepted, with little loss of cohesion or combat performance.

**Vietnam.** Proponents of unit manning also have invoked the Army's Vietnam experience to support their case. In that war, they argue, the Army's morale and combat effectiveness were sapped by the fact that individual soldiers rotated into combat units for a fixed period and then returned to the United States, thus causing continual personnel turnover and precluding the formation of cohesive units. In fact, however, the implications for unit-manning of the US experience in Vietnam are more complex.

By comparison with the policies followed during World War II, the Army's personnel system focused even more sharply on individuals than on cohesive units during large-scale US combat operations in Vietnam (1965-72). Once US Army (and Marine Corps) units were deployed to that theater, they were sustained by individual replacements, as had been the case during World War II. But in addition to replacing casualties on an individual basis, the system aimed at reducing the incidence of psychiatric casualties caused by "combat stress" by limiting the duration of any individual soldier's exposure to the battlefield environment to 12 months.

The decision to limit soldiers' time in the combat theater was based on the Army's analysis in the late 1940s of the incidence of psychiatric casualties in World War II. Service leaders concluded that, in future conflicts, the duration of any soldier's exposure to combat should be limited in order to reduce the number of troops who broke down emotionally under the stress of combat. Apart from the obvious humanitarian issue, driving soldiers to the point of emotional collapse was tactically counterproductive, since they would become sometimes careless, sometimes unduly cautious, sometimes listless but, generally, incapable of pulling their weight in a combat situation, thus increasing the risk of unit casualties and mission failure.

The one-year rotation policy in Vietnam was strikingly successful in reducing the incidence of combat stress casualties. In 1968, a year of fairly heavy combat, psychiatric casualties accounted for 6 percent of medical evacuations from the theater, compared with about 23 percent of medical evacuations from combat theaters during World War II. Psychiatrists noted several factors that may have contributed to the dramatic difference: the more episodic nature of combat in Vietnam, and the greater command attention to quality of life of front-line troops through provision of hot meals in the field and brief respites outside the combat zone. But the assurance of rotation home after one year in the field was seen by many as a key to giving soldiers the emotional stamina to see it through.

On the other hand, there clearly was a down-side to the continual flow of personnel into and out of units. One problem was the short-timer's syndrome. Since each soldier knew to the day when he was slated to leave Vietnam (barring death or serious injury), men became reluctant to engage in missions that entailed any significant likelihood of contact with the enemy as the departure date neared.

A second problem was the dilution of the pool of experienced personnel in each unit from whom newcomers could learn.

Some critics of the Army's performance in Vietnam link the one-year individual rotation rule to a disintegration of unit cohesion which, they contend, fostered a general breakdown of discipline that was evident in the incidence of drug use, desertions, units' refusals to carry out combat missions, and assassinations of officers (dubbed "fragging" from the use of a fragmentation grenade as the weapon).

But this argument glosses over the fact that US units turned in a solid performance in the early years of the war and began to fray only in the later years of the conflict — ironically, as US forces were withdrawing and contact with the enemy became less frequent. Sociologist Charles Moskos, for one, argued that unit cohesion and morale were relatively high in 1965-67, the period during which he conducted field observations and in-depth interviews with troops in Vietnam. According to Moskos, widespread breakdowns in discipline did not occur until 1970-72, with the 1968-69 a transitional period of mixed cohesion and demoralization. Similarly, Ronald Spector, a Marine Corps field historian who was in the northern part of South Vietnam in 1968 and part of 1969, contended that Army units performed creditably from 1965 until well into 1968, despite the centrifugal effect of personnel policies.

Two decades later, Peter Kindsvatter, analyzing veterans' memoirs, oral histories, and novels, as well as historical and behavioral science studies of units in the field, reached a conclusion similar to Kaplan's. Despite the continual personnel turnover, members of small units typically formed themselves into cohesive organizations under the necessity of surviving in a dangerous combat environment, Kindsvatter reported. To be sure, battlefield crises arose during which replacements fresh from the United States were thrown directly into combat. However, the norm in most divisions was to put new arrivals through an in-country training program lasting three to seven

days that would include classes on Viet Cong tactics, instructions on patrolling techniques and the use of various weapons. Moreover, Kindsvatter concludes, while newbies typically got a cool reception from soldiers in their assigned unit until they proved themselves, the veterans typically made some effort to help them get acclimated.

Clearly, there was an appalling decline in discipline during the closing years of the Army's presence in Vietnam. But since units had coped with the disruptive effect of individual replacements during the war's first several years, it is hard to see how that factor can be blamed for the meltdown at the end. Instead, two other factors more plausibly were responsible for the Army's eventual breakdown which was manifest in high rates of indiscipline, desertions, fraggings, etc., in the later years.

**1. Leadership.** A problem that got steadily worse as the war dragged on was the combination of turbulence and marginal quality in officer and NCO leadership at the company level and below. The most obvious cause was the Army's policy of rotating officers out of command billets after no more than 6 months. This was compounded by the decline of standards for selecting officers and non-commissioned officers under the pressure of having to staff a greatly enlarged force without mobilizing the Reserve Components on a large scale. While the Army expanded the class size at West Point and tried to step up ROTC enrollment, the only practical way to commission enough junior officers to keep pace with the expansion of the force was to expand the Officer Candidate School (OCS) program. Inevitably, a radical increase in the size of the program was accompanied by a less-demanding selection process.

The Army's solution to the demand for more NCOs was even more radical. In 1967, the service launched a Non-commissioned Officer Candidate program that would promote PFCs to sergeant after a 12-week course. However rigorous that course was, it could not impart to these "shake-and-bake" NCOs the ability of a more mature and experienced sergeant to give young draftees a sense of identity and purpose. This sharp decline in the experience level of the NCO corps was particularly risky because the Vietnam-era draftees typically were younger and less mature than their World War II or Korean War counterparts, and thus were more in need of mature, seasoned, first-tier leadership when the going got tough.

The upshot was that, at the company level and below, the Army that fought in Vietnam was made up overwhelmingly of inexperienced personnel with little sense of identity or commitment to the Army and its values. As the war dragged on, it became a relatively loosely-knit institution, lacking the fiber it would have needed to continue performing at a high level in the absence of either public support back home or any tangible evidence of progress toward any significant goal.

**2. National Loss of Purpose.** The second major factor contributing to the collapse of the Army's morale in Vietnam was the fact that, after 1968, the US decision to withdraw from Vietnam deprived the Army's combat operations of any purpose except a vague hope of forcing the "other side" to the bargaining

table. Facing that — and the concurrent upsurge of racial and political strife back home — the loosely knit-together Army units began to fray.

This argument runs against a widespread belief that studies of German soldiers after World War II "proved" that national politics, ideology and other social factors external to an army have little impact on its internal cohesion. In fact, the research usually cited to make this point — a 1948 article by sociologists Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz — asserts that a relatively small number of Nazi loyalists had a strong role in shaping the culture of German units. In a 1950 article, Shils interpreted the extensive survey data collected from World War II American troops as demonstrating a "tacit patriotism" that channeled the GIs' loyalty to their small group of buddies into combat motivation responsive to the chain of command.

Twenty years later, Moskos reached a similar conclusion, arguing that US soldiers' willingness to accept combat risks in Vietnam was undergirded, by a "latent ideology," which he described as:

...an anti-political outlook coupled with a belief — evident at least during the early years of the war — in the worthwhileness of American society. Correspondingly, when changes in these value commitments occurred in the later years of the war, this had indirect but important consequences on military cohesion.

In other words, the Army stopped performing creditably in Vietnam when the country gave up on the war — precisely what one would expect of an institution rooted in the society it serves.

As with the World War II case, conventional wisdom overemphasizes personnel turbulence caused by the individual replacement system as the source of problems in the combat performance of Army units in Vietnam. In fact, the record makes the following points:

- The decision to rotate individual soldiers out of Vietnam after one year was not the unthinking reflex action of a mindless personnel bureaucracy, but a judgment call based on the desire to minimize the risk of combat stress casualties.
- The admittedly anti-cohesive impact of an individual replacement system could be — and often was — partly offset with well-organized transit and reception procedures;
- The individual rotation timetable for troops in the theater, while detrimental to unit cohesion, was an important morale booster in wars that offered soldiers neither tangible standards by which to gauge progress nor the satisfaction of warm support on the homefront.
- While the mission performance of many units tailed off in the latter part of each war — dramatically so in the case of Vietnam — this resulted

more from the nation's abandonment of any hope of winning than from the state of social-psychological cohesion within combat units.

As is true of the World War II case, one should be cautious in applying to the Army of 2004 lessons drawn from the Service's Vietnam experience. As in World War II, the US military that fought in Vietnam was largely a draftee force that was rapidly expanded to meet temporary wartime requirements. By contrast, today's military is a highly professional force being organized to meet both peacetime and wartime requirements. Nevertheless, some lessons can fairly be drawn:

- No set of personnel rules will enable a US Army composed largely of short-term, non-career soldiers — whether conscripts or volunteers — to prosecute long-term, large-scale combat operations that the country does not support.
- If units in Vietnam were able to accommodate a steady turnover of personnel and still maintain a sufficient level of cohesion to be militarily effective, it seems likely that units made up of today's more professionally committed volunteers should be able to accommodate a limited amount of turnover. That implies that the peacetime manning system can allow some flexibility — for leaders' professional development, for example — and that, in wartime, units committed to a long-term combat operation could, with proper leadership, effectively assimilate packets of replacements.
- Regardless of the level of personnel stability in a unit, the quality of leadership is critical to combat performance, particularly at lower-echelons.

That second lesson was dramatically underscored by the most ambitious of the Army's earlier unit-manning initiatives: Project COHORT.

**Project COHORT.** Between 1955 and 1975, the Army tried five plans for sustaining the permanent US garrisons in Germany and South Korea by rotating stabilized units from CONUS bases to those overseas sites. One goal was to improve *esprit de corps* in the units, and another was to reduce the cost of transfers overseas. Yet another was to reduce the large number of soldiers who, under the individual replacement system in effect, were in transit from one assignment to another at any one time rather than performing a mission. In general, these initiatives were dropped either because they proved administratively unworkable or incurred too high a cost in dollars or in readiness (since it took a month or two for a unit to get back into fighting trim after moving from the United States to an overseas billet).

In 1979, when Gen. Meyer became Chief of Staff, some additional factors prompted yet another look at unit-manning. First, the service was in trouble, stressed by the corrosive effects of the Vietnam War and by the rocky transition to an all-volunteer model. Because of the abysmal state of discipline and morale in some units, Army leaders feared the service might not be able to field units capable of executing the Army's own doctrine and tactics:

In addition, Army leaders were coming to terms with the unexpectedly high incidence of combat stress casualties among Israeli forces in during the 1973 Middle East War. The Israeli Defense Force had counted so heavily on their units' high level of cohesion as a defense against the problem that they had no plans for treating such cases and returning these troops to duty. But the surprise, skill and violence of the Arab attack and the continuous high tempo of operations quickly rendered many Israeli soldiers, including veterans and leaders, incapable of functioning.

To address this array of problems, Gen. Meyer launched the COHORT project under which recruits were organized during their initial entry training into companies of 100-180 soldiers. After initial training, these units were joined by cadres of officers and NCOs to form a maneuver company that remained intact for three years, after which it was dissolved. Early indications were that these stabilized units were, as hoped, bonding horizontally — soldier to soldier — and vertically — soldier to NCO and commander. Consequently, the process was expanded to produce stabilized companies and battalions.

By 1985, these initiatives showed enough promise that the Army decided to organize on COHORT principles the entire 7th Infantry Division (Light), based at Fort Ord, CA. Initial data on this effort gathered by a bevy of observers from the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (WRAIR) indicated by November of 1985 that the division's stabilized battalions and companies were becoming more effective in combat, more quickly, than traditional units.

Two years later, however, a WRAIR assessment concluded that the effort to enhance military effectiveness by fostering unit cohesion in the 7th Division had failed. In that 1987 post-mortem, WRAIR analysts insisted that some of the division's units had — for a time — realized the potential of COHORT, thus validating the basic concept. Moreover, for all its shortcomings in the human dimension of military preparedness, the 7th Division forged itself into a formidable fighting unit, as it demonstrated in the 1989 Panama operation. Nevertheless, the story of how the division's COHORT experiment rose and fell, told in the deadpan style of the WRAIR reports, is sometimes jaw-dropping, occasionally hilarious, and often heartbreaking, but ultimately all too easy to understand.

For the division to have organized successfully on COHORT principles, WRAIR analysts concluded, commanding officers and NCOs at every echelon would have had to adopt an empowering, "power-down," collegial style of leadership, as many initially did. But as more and more tasks were piled on the division, too many leaders, under the stress of having to meet impossible demands, reverted to the centralized, top-down, coercive style that was the Army norm.

Beyond that problem, however, there are indications in the WRAIR studies that, even if the division had not been distracted from the goal of creating cohesion, the COHORT units would have been in trouble by the second year of the 7th Division experiment. Precisely because soldiers in the stabilized units did bond, they were more demanding of their leaders and of

their training than traditionally organized companies. Some leaders measured up, but that was by chance rather than design.

The fate of COHORT underscores the fact that neither personnel stability nor a measurably high level of cohesion is sufficient to produce a militarily effective unit that fosters initiative at all echelons. The WRAIR studies did show, clearly, that stabilizing the enlisted membership of companies did not — by itself — ensure that the groups would remain cohesive or that they would be particularly focused on their combat mission. In addition to stabilizing unit membership, a well-calibrated training program that would require the troops to master progressively more challenging tasks was essential, the Army assessment concluded, both to keep up the soldier's morale, and to realize the full military potential of stabilized, cohesive units. Moreover, too many small-unit leaders were not up to — or, at least, were not prepared for — the burden of leading troops through such a demanding program.

Beyond underscoring the fact that the stabilization hypothesis has not really been proven by hard data, the COHORT experience has a clear implication for the Army's Unit-focused Stabilization initiative: If stabilized units are to realize their promise of superior effectiveness, they will have to be offered a training program that is challenging, repetitive, and accretive and they will need officer and NCO leadership at lower echelons who have the talent and training necessary to lead a unit through such a program.

### **THE QUESTIONS**

While the often-cited historical cases do not prove the case for unit-manning, neither do they disprove it. Although the case for unit manning has often been overstated and oversimplified in the past, the Army's decision to stabilize personnel in combat units is a reasonable, if untested, initiative:

- The weight of expert judgment about the individual replacement system's adverse impact on unit readiness is too heavy to ignore. Particularly relevant is the argument that the continual churning of personnel severely hampers units' ability to master progressively more complex collective battlefield skills.
- The need to allow more time to train as a team may be especially significant given the way the Army is designing its Future Force to fight and the asymmetrical adversaries that force is most likely to face. Even the most junior soldiers in a unit will be expected to derive much of their potential combat power from teamwork with networked comrades; and all the soldiers in a unit may have to be better trained to cope with surprise, a context in which strong, habitual team relationships may be particularly helpful.

Although the Army is moving out to implement personnel stabilization on an ambitious timetable, brigades should be monitored for evidence that the change in manning policy is yielding the promised benefits. In addition to assessing reorganized units' cohesiveness using existing survey instruments, the Army should monitor data generated in the normal course of training for evidence that stabilized units are superior to individually-manned brigades in combat-relevant performance.

A particularly significant question is whether stabilized units using "accretive" training — i.e., training that leads soldiers through progressively more sophisticated tactics — outstrip individually-manned units in mastering more complex collective tasks. Whether or not stabilized units display increased "cohesiveness," a significant improvement in the level of complexity to which units can train might make a shift to unit manning worthwhile in its own right.

The Army also should place a high priority on monitoring over the long haul the effect of changes in personnel management and operational practice that result from the adoption of unit-manning. Some of these tradeoffs may entail direct budget costs in the near-term. But the others may have institutional impacts that will not become apparent for years. Among the potential consequences of personnel stabilization that should be tracked are the following:

- Eliminating or dramatically reducing soldiers' freedom to seek new assignments (including training that they see as providing valuable options for their subsequent military or post-military careers) while they are in a stabilized unit may adversely affect the number or quality of personnel recruited or retained in the combat arms. If there is such a decline, the Army might have to offset it by increased cash bonuses, special pays or other enlistment or retention inducements.
- Increasing the amount of time junior officers typically spend in one assignment with a unit will trade breadth of experience for depth of experience. One can only speculate about how that will affect their performance in higher command 10 or 15 years later on. But the change does seem to call for careful analysis rather than mere acknowledgement because, in the past, the Army has so adamantly given breadth priority.
- Stabilizing units at the brigade level will make it harder for captains to spend months at a time furthering their professional education in a residential setting, free from the demands of other assignments, as has been the case. Some argue that the officer education system's current emphasis on residential education affords invaluable opportunities for career soldiers to exchange views frankly with peers over an extended period. On the other hand, Lt. Gen. Robert M. Elton (ret.), a former deputy chief of staff for personnel, argues against individual schooling at the expense of pulling a leader out of "the greatest 'learning' experience of all — his platoon or company." Unlike the "depth over breadth" tradeoff, above, this one is being openly debated in the Army community. Beyond that, one can only hope that the Army — and, more importantly,

it's political overseers — watch for long-term changes in the quality of senior leadership that may flow from this shift in policy regarding mid-career professional military education.

- In case of a sustained mission (i.e., one lasting longer than the routine deployment window of any one, life-cycle manned unit), forces that have been serving in theater and have gotten the lay of the land periodically will be replaced by others that will have to start learning the local situation from scratch. In Iraq, the Army has tried to mitigate that risk by ensuring that, for at least a couple of weeks, the departing unit and its replacement overlapped in the theater so, in the words of Gen. Schoomaker, "... the new personnel gain the benefit of the experiences of the earlier and departing unit." Assessing the effectiveness of this hand-off process will be an important subject for the Army's "lessons learned" process.

**Fleshing Out the Details.** Aside from the fundamental questions of whether stabilization will effect the desired improvements and, if so, whether they will be worth the cost, the Army must address a range of questions about how it will implement the general approach. The success of the Unit-Focused Stabilization initiative will turn, in large part, on the answers to questions such as these:

**1. How Are the Leaders Prepared?** The type of "power-down," leadership contemplated for the Army's Future Force can be taught, up to a point. But whether the teaching is credible is another question. For several years before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, there were alarming indications of a morale crisis in the Army's officer corps, part of it due to a widespread belief that seniors were micromanaging their subordinates in a desperate effort to achieve a "zero-defects" record in each of their key posts, as they scrambled up the greasy pole. This was one of several conclusions reached by an in-house analysis of the officer community published in 2001, based on interviews with 13,500 soldiers:

With the Army on a wartime footing for more than two years, it is hard to tell whether the underlying problem with officer morale has abated. Conceivably, the patriotism fostered by the Sept. 11 attacks and the subsequent US responses has made senior officers less obsessed with zero-defects and subordinates more tolerant of overly zealous superiors. Moreover, to the extent that Army's rapid drawdown in the early 1990s fostered a self-protective perspective among those who survived the cuts, the end of the cutbacks may have relieved some of those anxieties.

But it would be dangerous simply to disregard the shockingly open expressions of contempt for, and mistrust of, the senior uniformed leadership that were rampant in the officer corps just a short time ago. Some reformers have proposed radical changes in the officer personnel system in an effort to restore the ideal of "selfless service" which, they contend has been smothered in careerism. Those issues are beyond the scope of this paper, except to note that, if stabilized units are to go beyond mere horizontal cohesion to become the high-performing combat forces that they could be, the Army leadership

will have to find ways to convince middle and low echelon leaders that the "power-down" philosophy is more than a PowerPoint slide.

**2. What Kind of Training Will be Offered Stabilized Units?** The clear lesson of COHORT is that, if troops are able to progress to more complex tasks (because they need not repeat the basics for a steady influx of new arrivals), then they will demand that kind of steady increase in sophistication in their training. Nor can the demand for progressive training be satisfied by simply raising the bar so that the troops wear themselves out in doing some bit of busywork faster, farther or higher for the sake of the an artificial competition. Some COHORT unit commanders in the 7th Division came up with very well designed training plans, but they proved to be impractical because of their expense (mostly for travel to distant training areas).

- Do developments in simulation and raining technology over the past 15 years offer low echelon leaders significantly more flexibility in creating challenging training scenarios on relatively short notice and at relatively little expense? Remember that the huge, fixed infrastructures required for the National Training Center reflect the technology of a quarter century ago. How close are we to "CTC-in-a-Box" — a portable combat scoring system cheap enough to let a battalion engage in high-fidelity close combat at their home station?
- Are commanders at battalion echelon and above prepared to rebalance the training schedules to afford company commanders more time — and more control over that training time — to hone small-unit skills? A focus on lower echelon skills would comport with the higher degree of tactical autonomy for lower echelon units that is contemplated in the Future Force. Coincidentally, it could alleviate the discontent apparently rampant among company grade officers through 2001. According to several sources, a major contributor to their disaffection was the lack of freedom to actually "command" their units.

## **CONCLUSION**

One of the brief *Fables for Our Time* written by humorist James Thurber tells of a bear that routinely arrived home staggeringly drunk, accidentally breaking furniture and knocking out windows before falling asleep on the floor. His wife was greatly distressed and his children were very frightened. Eventually, the bear reformed and became a famous temperance crusader who would lecture visitors about the evils of drink and about how much better he felt since giving up booze. He would illustrate his well-being by performing vigorous calisthenics and cartwheeling throughout the house, accidentally breaking furniture and knocking out windows. His wife was greatly distressed and his children were very frightened. The moral of this tale, according to Thurber: *You might as well fall flat on your face as bend over too far backwards.*

It is hard to imagine that it would not be a good thing to considerably reduce the rate of turnover in Army combat units for the sake of improving cohesion and training. The problem is that decades of accumulated folklore so exalt the importance of stability, that the Army may end up overdoing it, a risk

that is exacerbated by the fact that the nuances of a policy being vigorously promoted by the senior Army leadership may be lost on those far down the chain of command who must implement it.

One possibility is that the Army will be too loathe to make exceptions to the general policy of stabilization and thus, perhaps, unnecessarily diminish other goods, such as the professional development of future, senior leaders or the quality of long-range planning by staff organizations. Another is that, because of the focus on stability, the Army — or its civilian political masters — will short-change programs to develop the high-quality leaders and the progressive training required to realize the potential of stabilized units.

Thurber's fable of the bear argues that even good things must be kept in perspective. So does this testimony.