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## **A Profession of Love:**

### **Cohesion in a British Platoon in Afghanistan**

*Patrick Bury and Anthony King*

#### **Introduction**

British infantry platoons have been engaged in high-intensity combat and counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan since 2006. During this time, the British infantry in particular have taken some of the heaviest casualties per number of serving soldiers in NATO.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite these relatively high numbers of casualties, a complex and arguably vague counter-insurgency mission, and a constantly shifting U.K. strategic narrative for involvement in Afghanistan, the combat performance of the British infantry has remained remarkably effective. Along with the U.S. infantry and Marines, the British infantry has been deployed to the most violent regions of the country and consistently involved in some of the heaviest fighting of the war. Moreover, some engagements have been so intense and protracted that they have been described by commanders as the heaviest fighting undertaken by the British army since the Korean War.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, despite being initially deployed to isolated bases in dangerously small numbers whilst being chronically under-resourced,<sup>3</sup> a British infantry platoon has never been overrun, unlike their predecessors in Korea, or some of their NATO allies' infantry platoons in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Of course, while the Korean War had its own specific conditions in terms of enemy force size and tactics, superior air power and advances in weapons technology have acted as force multipliers for infantry platoons in a way not

possible in Korea. Yet, as we shall see, even in intense close-quarters engagements in Afghanistan, where the benefits of these assets have been negated and the insurgents have often held the initiative, British infantry platoons have remained highly effective. These engagements have often occurred in difficult terrain and in extreme climatic conditions, where platoons have remained resolute when faced with an equal or even superior enemy in conventional and non-conventional combat situations. Although the availability of airpower, especially the Apache helicopter—which the Taliban greatly feared—in many firefights has to be acknowledged, evidence suggests that even the Taliban insurgency in Helmand province learnt to respect certain British infantry units.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the insurgency's switch to asymmetric tactics, as evidenced by the massive increase in the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) threat from 2008 onwards, represented a tacit acknowledgement of the combat superiority of the professional British infantry platoon at the tactical level. While it is true that—like its retreat from Basra in 2007—the British Army's withdrawal from Sangin in 2010 is seen by many as a stain on its reputation, it is important to note that this was the result of a lack of political appetite for casualties rather than imminent tactical defeat. Indeed, despite coming close on numerous occasions, to date the British infantry platoon remains tactically undefeated in Afghanistan. Sociologically, in terms of the academic literature on military unit cohesion, it may be interesting to examine some of the factors that explain why this is so.

While the strong combat performance of the professional British infantry platoon in Afghanistan is by no means unique when compared to the performance of other nations' infantry, case studies solely focusing on the micro-interactions of the British infantry platoon remain rare. While the British example has been used to address the question of how professional Western infantry platoons have remained so effective in recent conflicts, and specifically in Afghanistan,<sup>6</sup> this chapter seeks to add to the recent literature on military

cohesion by exclusively focusing on the micro-interactions of one British platoon in combat in Afghanistan. The platoon that is examined was an air-assault infantry platoon in Ranger Company of 1st Battalion, The Royal Irish Regiment, attached to 2nd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment. It served in Sangin, Helmand province over the summer of 2008, during Operation Herrick 8, where it conducted counter-insurgent patrols and strike operations. In studying the combat interactions of this platoon, the chapter uses the case-study approach to analyse two combat situations that one of the authors (Patrick Bury) and his platoon experienced in Helmand province within six days of each other, to address some of the fundamental arguments about cohesion its components in modern professional forces.

Drawing on personal experience of combat in Afghanistan in 2008,<sup>7</sup> this chapter seeks to build upon and extend this ‘practical’ or professional paradigm. It utilizes two firefights involving 7 Platoon of the Royal Irish Regiment in Sangin in June 2008 as an evidential base from which to contribute to contemporary debates about cohesion and to the advance of the professional paradigm described in Chapter 1. In *The Combat Soldier*, King singles out the use of mnemonics in infantry battle drills that remind commanders of the procedures that they should go through when faced with different tactical problems.<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, these are precisely the procedures tactical commanders and those under their command use when reacting to contact with the enemy; not only do they engender effective individual and collective performance, they also distract from fear by occupying the minds of those executing the drills and stop them focusing on the chaos and danger of combat. However, while substantially supporting the perspective developed by King, Strachan and Ben-Ari that training constitutes the central explanation of cohesion in combat in a professional force, the chapter also explores the emotional bonds between the soldiers to explain their actions in combat. In this way, the chapter seeks to address a potential oversight in the emerging paradigm and, perhaps, to reconcile it partially with the classical literature where

interpersonal bonds in the primary group were prioritized. Nevertheless, as the evidence clearly demonstrates, even these intense emotional and apparently purely personal bonds are constituted through, and indivisible from, shared professional expectations and practices. Indeed, they cannot be fully understood without considering the situational dynamics of combat as experienced by a professional force.

## Waterloo Day Contact: Drills and Training

7 Platoon's first contact occurred on 18 June 2008, known in the Royal Irish Regiment as 'Waterloo Day' due to the special significance of that battle in regimental history. As 7 Platoon readied themselves to leave the compound they had occupied for a number of days on the Forward Line of Enemy Troops, they picked up radio chatter that indicated an insurgent group was waiting in ambush for them. This information provided extra focus for members of the platoon and before they left the compound, the author, the commander of the patrol, again reiterated the platoon's formation and reaction to contact drills.<sup>9</sup> On the advice of Royal Marines whom the Royal Irish relieved, platoon tactics had already been altered somewhat from the conventional tactics to mitigate the risk of suicide attacks: the platoon deployed 1 Section one hundred metres off to a flank in the direction of the main enemy threat to shield the rest of the platoon and aimed to form a box if contacted to prevent suicide bombers from infiltrating the platoon and blowing themselves up in its midst. As a platoon untested in combat, it is interesting to examine the crucial role that battle drills played in the platoon's reaction to its first sustained contact and its avoidance of taking casualties in an enemy-initiated ambush where they did not initially hold the tactical advantage and were without air support.

The ambush occurred outside a cluster of Afghan compounds in the heavily irrigated fields of the Green Zone when a group of about six insurgents engaged one section of the platoon with rocket-propelled grenades and small arms from a distance of about two to three hundred metres. Indeed, it was the platoon's tactically bespoke formation—adapted from the Royal Marines—that saved it from taking casualties in the initial and accurate volleys of fire. This ensured only eight men were initially engaged. Each Ranger (private soldier) in 1 Section instinctively went through their personal RTR battle drills in Returning Immediate Fire, Taking Cover, and Returning Effective Fire, as did the rest of the platoon off to their flank. Caught in an open field and amidst the chaos of exploding grenade rounds and bullets clipping all around them, the Section Commander, Corporal Flynn,<sup>10</sup> then sent his contact report to the commander and began to manoeuvre out of the enemy's killing zone. This had been repeatedly practised in the section drill for reaction to contact, to the extent that it had become almost instinctive. At this stage the platoon commander also sent his contact report up to company headquarters, and was relieved that 'at least [he] remembered the first thing [in the platoon battle drill].'<sup>11</sup> Here, both section and platoon commanders used their respective battle drills in the initial seconds of the ambush to relay crucial information to the chain of command. However, the battle drill not only enabled the critical flow of information, it also provided a check-list for commanders to perform in the first moments of confusion. The drill distracts commanders from the immediacy of the violence and noise around them and cognitively guides them toward the next step of the drill that needs to be performed. The correct execution of the individual battle drill is therefore not only important to the platoon's physical response to combat, crucially, it also has an important psychological dimension, calming individuals and reassuring them that they are acting in the correct way. Following Strachan, when numerous individuals begin to react in a similar manner, psychological confidence in the group grows and collective action becomes easier to coordinate.

It is possible to highlight how the collective battle drills allowed the untested platoon to recover from the initial shock and panic of the ambush and begin to effectively perform as a unit. Firstly, the platoon sergeant told the platoon commander that: ‘I got the back door, boss. The backdoor’s closed. We’re secure...’<sup>12</sup> thereby informing him that he had executed the adapted platoon battle drill and deployed his group at the base of the other sections to face outward. The platoon had now effectively formed a box, all facing outward, with two sides engaging the enemy. This adaption of the platoon battle drill had been repeatedly practised as a drill in base and mitigated the chance of a suicide bomber breaking from cover to detonate in their midst—a favourite insurgent tactic once an ambush had been initiated. Once the platoon had its rear and flanks relatively secured, the platoon could focus on dealing with the enemy threat. Meanwhile, 1 Section, still pinned down by intense enemy fire, had identified the enemy and sent a target location, as per the section battle drill. Corporal Flynn then shouted a fire control order to his section to coordinate their fire: ‘Three hundred metres, left edge of compound, two times Taliban, raaaapid fire.’<sup>13</sup> In issuing the fire control order in the standardized format that his Rangers were expecting, the commander was able to quickly and accurately relay vital information on the enemy location to his section to enable them to collectively suppress the enemy. The standardized instruction ‘Rapid Fire’ also instructed his section as to the rate of fire expected from them: one round every second for riflemen. Understanding and obeying rate of fire instructions are fundamental to individual soldier’s and commander’s training; this mutual understanding of two simple words had a critical impact on the section’s reaction to contact and the conservation of ammunition, and therefore its combat effectiveness. Ritualized words of command were crucial to the section’s effective reaction to contact.

It is interesting to note here that the successful execution of the fire control order had a double impact on the platoon’s attempts to gain the upper hand in the firefight: not only did it

result immediately in an accurate and sustained weight of fire that suppressed the enemy and allowed the other sections to manoeuvre, it also created confidence that the platoon was reacting in the appropriate way, as it had been taught, and it reminded commanders of the next part of the drill to be carried out. As such, the next instruction issued to 1 Section was 'Baseline'; when shouted back to the commander in unison by the section it confirmed to him that his section had heard and understood the instruction that they were to hold where they were and fire another burst. This part of the reaction to contact drill also confirms to each soldier that they are not alone; that they are acting in a choreographed fashion that has been proven to give them the best chance of survival. Indeed, not shouting the reply in the din of battle is an instant indication that the section has taken a casualty and that the casualty extraction drill may need to be implemented.

This particular contact, which lasted approximately ten minutes, ended when the platoon manoeuvred to support 1 Section and suppress the enemy, causing the enemy to take a casualty and break off the attack. However, it was the platoon's bespoke formation and 1 Section's correct performance of the taught battle drills that both saved it from taking casualties and enabled it to initially suppress the enemy, allowing the other sections to manoeuvre. Due to the fact that the platoon reacted to an enemy-initiated ambush who then subsequently broke contact, it did not have time to go through the entire platoon attack drill, but it is clear from this account that the collective performance of battle drills not only ensured the timely and coordinated response to a tactical disadvantage, it also gave the platoon a sense of unity of purpose as it responded to the chaos of an ambush. The choreography of the collective battle drill allowed the soldiers to extract themselves and regain the initiative far faster and uniformly than if they had reacted individually; a point which is critically important, as initiative is crucial in all military engagements. Finally, the battle drill also acted as a template against which the platoon's actions could be assessed and



improved upon, both collectively and individually, after the event. As a result, the successful execution of battle drills also became a source of group pride and confidence within the platoon after the attack: 'We felt good that we hadn't let ourselves or each other down. That we had each others' backs, that we performed our individual tasks that, when combined, formed a cohesive whole that kept us alive. That we hadn't been frozen by fear.'<sup>14</sup> Clearly then, task commitment and collective battle drills were crucial to the inexperienced platoon repelling the ambush without taking casualties, and they remain fundamental to understanding effective British infantry combat performance at the tactical level. Moreover, the constant referral to, and repetitive practise of, these drills during downtime highlights the importance of professionalism to the platoon; the drill not only became a life-saving reality, its correct and slick execution represented the professionalism of the platoon itself.

## Sarwan Qala: Combat, Emotions, and the Profession of Love

In his work on the Israel Defense Forces, Ben-Ari et al. have highlighted the role of training and drills as decisive to the generation of 'swift trust' that allows professional soldiers unfamiliar with each other to interoperate due to common practices.<sup>15</sup> The implication is that cohesion and combat performance is independent of emotional attachment and, indeed, can be effectively, even optimally, executed without emotional cathexis. In fact, despite their emphasis on impersonality, Ben-Ari et al. recognize emotions and emotional bonds in their work, but they understate it in their examination of swift trust. It might be suggested that the contemporary literature on cohesion generally underemphasizes emotions as a corrective to the classical cohesion paradigm in which interpersonal bonds are the almost exclusive focus of interest. Yet, it is plainly incorrect to ignore the emotional responses of soldiers in combat; it is, after all, one of the most extreme and terrifying experiences known to humans. Indeed,

Collins' arguments on emotional entrainment and the emotional nature of violent interactions are highly informative here. In *Interaction Ritual Chains* Collins argues that almost all human interactions are infused with an emotional energy due to physical and cognitive synchronicity, or entrainment.<sup>16</sup> Building on this theory, in his micro-sociology of violence Collins shows that at the individual interactional level, conducting violence is fundamentally 'about the intertwining of human emotions'<sup>17</sup> as it requires humans to overcome the barrier of confrontational tension and fear associated with the threat of violence by turning 'emotional tensions into emotional energy'.<sup>18</sup> In breaking this barrier—in reaching a certain, highly situational emotional state—one actor is able to commit violence, often at the expense of the other. One of Collins' most important observations on the emotional nature of war is the causal role emotions play in what he terms 'forward panics'. Building on Du Picq's observations about a 'flight to the front' during combat,<sup>19</sup> Collins describes forward panics as a collective emotional reaction to the prolonged build-up of tension in certain violent situations. Much like fleeing, forward panics begin with the breaking of this tension and fear, but they differ from rear panics in that they are followed by an emotional 'hot rush'—often involving rage, frenzy, and elation—that is 'overriding and compelling'.<sup>20</sup> This 'overriding emotional rhythm'<sup>21</sup> is caused by group emotional entrainment in collective action and is particularly evident in combat. Here, soldiers' intense emotional release is directed with the heightened emotional focus of 'tunnel vision' at a particular subject—usually the enemy or civilians—and often results in overkill. Indeed, Collins posits that such is the emotional state of those in the grip of a forward panic, 'they always [have] the look of an atrocity.'<sup>22</sup> While Collins presents much evidence from pre-professional armies, he argues that forward panics have affected professional combat units, citing the Parachute Regiment's shooting of civilians at Derry's Bloody Sunday in 1972 and the similar actions of U.S. Marines in Haditha, Iraq in 2005.<sup>23</sup> As such, forward panics not only represent a physical manifestation of the barrier of

emotional tension that often needs to be overcome to kill, they also indicate the importance of group emotional entrainment in combat situations. For Collins then, committing violence itself is typically a highly emotional experience. Moreover, the emotions which are cathected in violence are not random individual or universal genetically cued responses. The collective interactional dynamics of the groups involved in violence generates patterned emotional responses from their participants. However, these patterns are fluid; alternative inter- and intra-group dynamics produce different emotional responses among the members of those groups.

Here, we want to show how emotions are central to any explanation of combat performance but that these emotions cannot themselves be understood without considering the relationships within and between the combatant groups; crucially, in the current context, that the distinctive solidarity of the professional army evokes distinctive emotional responses. Emotional responses are generated by, and flow along, the contours of established social relations; they are an organic part of interactional dynamics. Moreover, they are precipitated by and articulated through collective understandings of the participants in these processes. There is no doubting the centrality of visceral emotions to professional combat performance—fear, anger, hate, shame, love, and pride are ubiquitous—but its manifestation is always already intertwined with the professional self-understandings of the troops and their relations to each other. As *The Combat Soldier* illustrates,<sup>24</sup> the motivation of professional soldiers and their relations to each other is distinctive, giving rise to equally distinctive emotional responses. Central here are the emotions of shame and pride (or honour) which underpin the relations between soldiers. However, as discussed in Chapter 5, while shame might be a universal human emotion, essential to social life,<sup>25</sup> it takes a specific form among professional soldiers. Unfortunately, many social scientists have typically been insensitive to these differences.

Six days after they had been ‘baptised’ in their contact on Waterloo Day, 7 Platoon were chosen to accompany C Company, 2 PARA, on an air assault into Sarwan Qala, in the Upper Sangin Valley. This area did not have any coalition or Afghan troops stationed in it and as a result it was assessed as insurgent territory. The nominal idea behind the air assault was to conduct reconnaissance of the 611 road in the area and meet local leaders; yet 2 PARA had lost three soldiers in previous weeks and this was also an attempt to strike at the insurgents’ heartland, induce a fight, and get revenge. It succeeded. The battle started at 4 a.m. with incoming fire as the helicopters arrived, signalling a hot landing zone, and ended approximately sixteen hours later, during which platoons were engaged in full combat for much of that time. Attack helicopters, fast jets, and artillery strikes were all utilized by the British troops, who were engaged in some of the heaviest fighting British forces had seen in Afghanistan to that date.<sup>26</sup> While it is evident that battle drills were again an important part of the platoon’s preparations before battle and its ability to perform during it,<sup>27</sup> it is also clear that during this heavier and prolonged engagement, emotional bonds between soldiers were also very important in maintaining effective performance. Indeed, in one incident, it was the emotional bonds formed over time that enabled the successful completion of the platoon’s task.

How this emotional bond, this ‘slow-trust’ as it were, motivated the platoon to perform in combat becomes apparent when the detail of the Sarwan Qala operation is examined. 7 Platoon had been pinned for approximately six hours on high ground by insurgents firing from the Green Zone below. During this time a 2 PARA Company Sergeant Major attached to the platoon, Warrant Officer Class 2 (WO2) Michael Williams, had been shot dead by an insurgent sharpshooter. As the company was now running out of ammunition and water, and had a body to be evacuated, it became imperative that a helicopter re-supply land to sustain the fight. 7 Platoon were tasked with securing the helicopter landing site (HLS) off to a flank,

but due to the abnormally accurate and sustained fire coming from the Green Zone, only one section was available: Corporal Flynn's. There were no possible safe routes to the HLS due to the tactical situation and with a helicopter in-bound and the company running out of ammunition and water in the forty degree heat, the task was urgent. The only way to reach the HLS was up a ridge, completely exposing anyone who attempted this to the same sharpshooter who had killed WO2 Williams and who had earlier repelled a similar attempt in the same direction. While task commitment remained a key motivator here, battle drills were now relatively redundant. It was abundantly clear to both the platoon commander and Corporal Flynn that to expose oneself on the ridge—given the proven accuracy of the sharpshooter—was akin to suicide. As such, the situation required action beyond the call of normal duty, beyond normal professional standards.

In these circumstances, and according with some of the examples concerning discipline discussed in Chapter 5, it is interesting to note that the platoon commander did not and ultimately could not order Corporal Flynn onto the ridge.<sup>28</sup> He simply stated the importance of the task and the realities of the tactical situation they found themselves in: 'Right, Matt, the chopper's inbound in ten. We can't go down the 611 'cause 9 Platoon are being hit. We can't go over H's wall 'cause they are being hit. We know we can't go that way. The only way is up there.'<sup>29</sup> Corporal Flynn looked up the cliff and replied: 'Yeah... no worries, boss.'<sup>30</sup> He turned to his men: '1 Section, saddle up, we're going up there.'<sup>30</sup> In the event Corporal Flynn led his section through the withering fire to the HLS without further casualties. Flynn was later awarded a Mentioned in Dispatches for his leadership.

The incident at Sarwan Qala was brief but both extremely serious and illuminating. While battle drills and training are typically critical to the explanation of combat performance and were central to 7 Platoon's actions on Waterloo Day, they cannot so simply explain Flynn's willingness to accept a potentially suicidal mission. He was not ordered to advance

up the hill precisely because the dangers were so evident. His response was not an automatically ingrained response to a tactical order therefore; it was a considered decision, not just the automatic execution of a drill. As such, it was the deep professional and emotional bonds between the platoon commander (Patrick Bury) and his Section Commander that provided motivation for successful combat performance in extreme circumstances. Corporal Flynn could have refused to go, citing the threat to his men, but this would have ultimately broken the trust between him and his commander that had developed over time; it would have ended the relationship, both professional and personal. It may also have risked social ostracism from the platoon, and with that, professional shame, providing another powerful motivating force. Lastly, and probably least importantly in his decision to go, it could also have risked later disciplinary action, unlikely as this would have been, given the circumstances. Yet such a decision would have greatly improved Corporal Flynn's chances of survival.<sup>31</sup>

To understand the incident and Corporal Flynn's willingness to lead a charge up a ridge into enemy fire, it is important to place the action in the historical context of existing relations within the platoon. Originally, the platoon commander and Corporal Flynn had had a relatively poor relationship, with a number of 'arguments' during training and deployment.<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to note that the personal distrust between the two had been caused by Flynn's refusal to accept an order on a training exercise prior to deployment. As a result, the commander had both publicly appealed to Flynn's sense of professionalism and threatened him with being relieved of his command in stating that: 'Corporal Flynn! You are a Section Commander in the British Army. I don't care whether you give a fuck or not. Get your men and get up that hill now or I'll get someone else to do it'.<sup>33</sup> This was a professional dispute in which Corporal Flynn's competence had been called into question. Yet for both parties, and the platoon, this was an extremely serious situation since, as *The Combat Soldier*

discusses, trust, cooperation, and cohesion in the professional forces is heavily determined by reference to performance. In refusing an order on a training exercise, Flynn's professionalism had been called into question; he had been shamed by his commander in front of his own troops. The author's criticisms suggested that he no longer trusted Flynn and ultimately cast some doubt as to whether he should even be in the platoon, while Flynn, understandably, felt aggrieved that his credibility has been impugned so publicly. His reputation and standing, at the very least in the eyes of his commander, and possibly in the eyes of the platoon as well, had been significantly and perhaps irretrievably damaged.

However, as the Sangin deployment progressed, both parties endured adversity and earned each other's professional respect. There was a decisive moment when relations between them changed. After the platoon had nearly taken casualties in a friendly fire incident and the author was debriefing the Section Commanders on the incident, Corporal Flynn, embarrassed that an argument with his commander in front of the troops had undermined them both, extraordinarily expressed his affection for his commander: 'I love you, boss. I'd do anything for you ... I'd take a bullet for you.'<sup>34</sup> There is no doubting the sincerity of this statement, but it is worth considering why the corporal felt impelled to make such an extraordinary claim. At one level, it is possible that Flynn was attempting to mitigate the potential damage to his professional reputation which the very public argument between commanders prior to the blue-on-blue incident—and the pre-deployment dispute—had risked. It constituted repair work in Goffman's sense. He was compensating for an accidental and temporary mistake by the profession of the deepest bonds of personal commitment; he was ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for his commander. It would be easy to take this statement as clear evidence of the persistence of those interpersonal bonds of precisely the kind which are central to the classical cohesion literature. Indeed, a number of scholars and commentators adopt precisely this line. In their work on cohesion during the Iraqi invasion,

Lenny Wong et al. argue that soldiers were primarily ‘fighting for my buddies’<sup>35</sup>: ‘This is not simply trusting in the competence, training or commitment to the mission of another soldier, but trusting in someone they regarded as a closer than a friend who was motivated to look out for their welfare’.<sup>36</sup> There is no denying the sincerity of Corporal Flynn’s profession of love, nor of the intensity of the sentiment, but it is not at all clear that it can be understood in purely personal terms.

It is not difficult to see that the intense situational pressure which was exerted on the platoon in Helmand played a role in heightening Flynn’s emotional dependence on his platoon commander. Precisely because the members of the platoon were so professionally dependent upon each other for survival, their emotional attachments intensified. In Helmand, competent combat performance no longer generated the cool professional appreciation recurrently seen in training, but visceral and intense approbation precisely because soldiers knew their lives depended upon it. There, soldiers no longer simply admired proficient colleagues, they necessarily came to love and honour them because they had protected, defended, and sometimes saved them from death and injury. Flynn’s profession of love was indivisible from his professional respect for and dependence on his platoon commander, heightened by this operational context. He was effectively implying the superior competence of his commander and subordinating himself to it. He was professing his love not in order, in the first instance, to repair a personal relationship of friendship between himself and the platoon commander (although one certainly developed), but also to rehabilitate his professional reputation with his commander and the platoon.

This profession had very serious repercussions for Flynn at Sarwan Qala. Having stated his professional commitment to the platoon commander so definitely, Flynn felt obliged to advance up the ridge even though it put him in great personal danger. To have refused to carry out this task would have demonstrated that his profession of love was empty and that in



fact the commander's previous doubts about his professionalism may have been justified. Flynn's reputation had already been damaged somewhat by his unprofessional refusal of an order on exercise and, more collectively, in the argument before the friendly fire incident; he could have been catastrophically shamed if he had refused to secure the HLS, even though it was practically a suicidal mission. No one was forcing Flynn to advance up the ridge, but he was acutely aware of both the necessity of the task at hand and the implications of a refusal, given the context of previous relations with his platoon commander. Chapter 5 notes that, in the professional force, 'the sanction for combat failure is ostracism; it is professional rather than actual death'.<sup>37</sup> Flynn may not have articulated his predicament in this way, but there seems little doubt that this is how he understood his actions that day. His refusal would have preserved his own life and someone else, or another section would probably have been found to secure the HLS. However, his professional existence in this platoon would have been over. He would have been definitively shamed. By contrast, his undoubtedly brave actions that day cemented his reputation in the platoon, and because of his subsequent gallantry award, in the wider army, permanently and absolutely. He categorically demonstrated that he could be trusted. His professionalism articulated through a profession of love had been vindicated.

In fact, these emotional commitments extended beyond the corporal's relationship to his platoon commander. Chapter 5 addresses the distinctive informality of discipline in a professional force. Typically, in professional volunteer armies, soldiers are not ordered to conduct missions or tasks against their will. For some missions, the option of refusal is often given to them; they will not be subjected to military justice if they refuse. Rather, they will be submitted to the tribunal of their fellow soldiers' good opinion; inadequate performers will be threatened with the sanction of shame and ostracism. This tribunal extends well beyond the primary group. If Corporal Flynn had refused the request to advance up the ridge, his refusal would have become common knowledge across the entire battalion. Flynn's reputation could

have been shattered in the Regiment and he would have been rejected even by soldiers who did not know him personally. Thus, the powerful sanction of shame exerted not only by his immediate colleagues but also by the Regiment as a whole also provided critical motivation for him.

Indeed, this network of shame extended a good deal further even than the Royal Irish. There is another important complementary explanation for Corporal Flynn's performance. In Sangin in 2008, the Royal Irish—and Ranger Company in particular—were especially sensitive to their reputation and therefore to the threat of professional humiliation. The sanction of professional shame operated at a much wider and more impersonal level. Specifically, regimental politics and the awareness of the potential vulnerability of the Royal Irish to future cuts also informed the performance of Ranger Company at Sarwan Qala.<sup>38</sup> Ranger Company was chosen to deploy with the elite 2 PARA Battlegroup because it had proven itself the best company in 1 Royal Irish during a number of tests set by their Commanding Officer, who subsequently made it clear that members of the company were representing his battalion. At Sarwan Qala, Flynn (and the rest of the company) were deeply sensitive to their reputation in the eyes of the paratroopers from 2 PARA, many of whom they did not know nor would ever meet. Accordingly, while the inducement to perform to the best of the company's ability for reasons of group pride is obvious, it also contained a professional and political element. As the only single battalion regiment in the British army, 1 Royal Irish was protected from potential defence cuts as long as it remained in the high-readiness 16 Air Assault Brigade. Proving capable of combat operations alongside paratroopers was seen as a step toward securing that coveted 16 Brigade position to the institutional advantage of 1 Royal Irish.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, in terms of the Royal Irish's combat performance, 2 PARA's Commanding Officer chose to deploy Ranger Company on his main effort—the population centre of Sangin town—with his own paratroop companies deployed

outside in a loose cordon to block insurgents. Such a move points to an understanding of both the intrinsically aggressive characteristics of the Parachute Regiment's training and ethos and perhaps the higher acumen of Ranger Company in population-centric counter-insurgency, given that many of its members had grown up on the streets of Northern Ireland. The Royal Irish seemed to have successfully convinced 2 PARA of its combat utility. Thus, regimental political motivations also had an impact on the performance of Ranger Company.

The influence of professional institutional politics on cohesion has been rarely discussed; even in the military memoir, Karl Marlantes' *Matterhorn* remains unique in its examination of the relationship between institutional interests and successful performance in combat infantry units.<sup>40</sup> Illustrating the importance of the institutional element on effective unit performance, it is no coincidence that the major who commanded Ranger Company will soon take over the highly competitive command of 1 Royal Irish, and that the Company sergeant major was later promoted to Regimental sergeant major upon his return. Thus, it is evident that Flynn's actions in Sarwan Qala—and the emotions which motivated them—were not pristine personal sentiments but situational products of the micro-dynamics of the circumstances in Sarwan Qala on that day, his professional relationship to his platoon commander and the rest of his platoon, and the institutional position of the Ranger Company in Helmand (under command of 2 PARA) and in the British Army, with its own distinctive organizational culture. Paradoxically, Corporal Flynn's love for his commander should not be understood merely as private sentiments which personally motivated him to secure the HLS. This love and the motivation it engendered were generated by the specific expectations and interactional processes which operated in his platoon and the wider company and battalion given its position on this operation and in 16 Air Assault Brigade. At each level, however, the concept of professional shame and honour, and the intense emotions cathected by them, operated with great force, driving Corporal Flynn to accept a dangerous task which he might

have refused to perform. His love for his commander and his motivations for acting at Sarwan Qala might be better understood as collective responses enjoined in a professional force.

## Conclusion

This chapter has used a case study of a British infantry platoon's low-level micro-interactions in combat in Afghanistan to examine the impact of drills, emotions, and regimental politics on cohesion in the professional infantry platoon. In deconstructing two different battlefield experiences of 7 Platoon, it has given some clear examples of how cohesion in a professional British infantry platoon is generated from highly situational and dynamic personal and collective interactions. Clearly, 7 Platoon generated cohesion—whether defined as social bonds or effective collective performance—through a complex array of practices, interactions, and identities, which include drills and training, emotional bonds, and political motivations. However, in examining each of these sources of effective combat performance it also becomes clear exactly how complex and integrated the relationship is between each of these components of cohesion in reality. The execution of collective battle drills not only increases effective performance, it also psychologically increases group confidence in the unit's ability to survive. Yet, in certain situations, battle drills may not be the primary indicator of successful performance; social bonds and emotional commitments can be critical to motivating soldiers to act effectively in combat. However, the nature of these social bonds appears to have fundamentally changed since Shils and Janowitz first identified it; they are now underpinned by pervasive and collective concepts of professional pride, shame, and discipline amongst soldiers. Moreover, unit ethos, traditions, and even internal bureaucratic politics also actively encourage professional performance and infuse the interactions within

the platoon with added emotional force. The evidence suggests that even these interpersonal emotions are highly influenced by, and are inseparable from, the impact of professional standards and behaviour. As a result, it is possible to argue that both the traditional literature on social cohesion and the more recent literature on performance-based cohesion are closer to one another than previously argued. At the tactical level of the platoon, the reality of effective combat performance suggests that the relationship between professional and emotional motivations for effective performance is highly fluid, and dependent on the situational dynamics of combat and those involved. This evidence directly correlates with the experience of U.S. infantry platoons.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in the testing zone of combat, cold professionalism is inextricably intertwined with the intense emotions of love, pride, and shame: combat performance relies upon this fusion.

## Abstract

This chapter uses a case study of the combat interactions of a British infantry platoon in Afghanistan to address some of the fundamental arguments about cohesion and the relationship between its components in modern professional forces. Specifically, it deconstructs two different battlefield experiences to give some clear examples of how cohesion in a professional infantry platoon is ultimately generated through a complex array of practices, interactions, and identities that include drills and training, emotional bonds, and political motivations. Decisively, the chapter expands on the most recent cohesion literature to argue that, far from simply relying on the cold execution of professional skills, successful combat performance is inextricably intertwined with the intense emotions of love, pride, and shame.

## Keywords

cohesion; drills; emotions; professionalism; combat; Helmand

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<sup>1</sup> Casualty statistics available at <<http://icasualties.org/OEF/Nationality.aspx>>, accessed 20 October 2013.

<sup>2</sup> ‘UK General warns of Afghan threat’, *BBC News*, 10 August 2006, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/4779321.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4779321.stm)>, accessed 18 October 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *House of Commons Defence Committee Fourth Report—Operations in Afghanistan, Part 2 Operations in Helmand in 2006*, (London: HMSO, July 2011), <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/55402.htm>>, accessed 18 October 2013.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the dismounted French parachute infantry ambushed in Uzbin Valley in Kabul province were found to be poorly equipped and badly organized, according to a NATO report. See Graeme Smith, ‘French soldiers unprepared for Taliban ambush: report’, *The Globe and Mail*, 19

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September 2008,

<<http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20080919.wparatroopers20/front/Front/Front/>>, accessed 27 January 2014, or Jake Tapper, *The Outpost* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2013) which details the breaching of Combat Outpost Keating in Nuristan province, and Bill Roggio, 'Joint al Qaeda and Taliban force behind Nuristan base attack', *The Long War Journal*, 14 July 2008, <[http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/07/joint\\_al\\_qaeda\\_and\\_t.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/07/joint_al_qaeda_and_t.php)>, accessed 27 January 2014, for an American perspective on two attacks that breached American platoon positions causing very heavy casualties.

<sup>5</sup> Signals intelligence intercept of Taliban commanders' communications, Nad e-Ali district of Helmand, February 2010, on display in Officers' Mess, 1 Royal Irish Regiment, Ternhill, Shropshire.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Bury was a Platoon Commander in the Royal Irish Regiment on Operation Herrick 8, part of a company attached to the 2nd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment Battlegroup.

<sup>8</sup> King, *The Combat Soldier*, 415–17.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Bury, *Callsign Hades* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 147.

<sup>10</sup> The Corporal's name has been changed to protect identity.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Bury, *Callsign Hades*, 153.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Bury, *Callsign Hades* 154.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Bury, *Callsign Hades*, 155.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Bury, *Callsign Hades*, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Uzi Ben-Shalom, Zeev Lehrer and Eyal Ben-Ari, 'Cohesion During Military Operations: A field study on combat units in the Al-Aqsa Intifada', *Armed Forces and Society* 32(1) (2005): 63–79.

<sup>16</sup> Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 42.

<sup>17</sup> Randall Collins, *Violence: a Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 4.

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- <sup>18</sup> Collins, *Violence*, 19.
- <sup>19</sup> Ardant Du Picq, *Battle Studies* (Charleston: Bibliobazaar, 2006).
- <sup>20</sup> Collins, *Violence*, 92–3.
- <sup>21</sup> Collins, *Violence*, 85.
- <sup>22</sup> Collins, *Violence*, 94.
- <sup>23</sup> King, *The Combat Soldier*, 12.
- <sup>24</sup> King, *The Combat Soldier*, 12.
- <sup>25</sup> Thomas Scheff, ‘Shame and Conformity: the deference-emotion system’, *American Sociological Review* 53(3) (1988): 395–406.
- <sup>26</sup> Bury, *Callsign Hades*, 195; Sam Kiley, *A Desperate Glory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 133–61, 219.
- <sup>27</sup> Bury, *Callsign Hades*. **See p.** 166 for a description of reminding platoon of drills before battle; pp. 175–7 and 179 for drills being implemented in combat.
- <sup>28</sup> See King Chapter 5 ‘Discipline and Punish’ in this volume.
- <sup>29</sup> Bury, *Callsign Hades*, 187.
- <sup>30</sup> Bury, *Callsign Hades*, 187–8.
- <sup>31</sup> The enemy’s fire was so accurate and heavy that only four men crossed the ridge before the attempt was abandoned.
- <sup>32</sup> Bury, *Callsign Hades*, 60–1, 133.
- <sup>33</sup> Bury, *Callsign Hades*, 61.
- <sup>34</sup> Bury, *Callsign Hades*, 136.
- <sup>35</sup> Leonard Wong, Thomas Kolditz, Raymond Millen and Terrence Potter, *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), *Why They Fight*, 9.
- <sup>36</sup> Wong, *Why They Fight*, 10–11.



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<sup>37</sup> See King Chapter 5 'Discipline and Punish' in this volume...

<sup>38</sup> Anthony King, *The Ethos of the Royal Marines: The Precise Application of Will*, unpublished report commissioned by Commander, Commando Training Centre, 2004; Anthony King, *The Ethos of 16 Air Assault Brigade*, unpublished papers prepared for the commanders of both units.

<sup>39</sup> Bury *Callsign Hades*, 294. In fact, the command team were told by the 2 PARA CO at the end of the tour that they were his best company. The Royal Irish subsequently enjoyed a 2-year extension to their rotation in 16 Bde.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn* (London: Corvus, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> See Elizabeth Rubin, 'Battle Company Is Out There', *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 February, 2008; and Dan Bellavia, *House to House* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 227–56 for many examples of the complex relationship between different motivating factors, training, and successful combat performance.