



CHAPTER 4

Sustaining Combat-Ready Teams

This chapter discusses the leader's responsibility to sustain team spirit and effectiveness once a cohesive team develops. It tells what the leader can expect in the sustainment stage and what actions he can take to sustain the team. It concludes with the process of sustaining teams in combat.

THE SUSTAINMENT STAGE

The sustainment stage is characterized by accomplishing the mission through teamwork and cohesion. It begins when soldiers and leaders emerge from the questioning and challenging stage and begin to work together as a *team*. Soldiers now feel more comfortable about themselves and their leaders. They trust leaders to be fair in assigning work and in dealing with differences between team members. During this stage, the team, rather than individuals, accomplishes tasks and missions. The team, thinking, acting, and working as one, knows the requirements and gets better results more quickly and efficiently.

As soldiers share common goals, interests, and experiences, they feel pride in shared experiences and begin to develop a *sense of comradeship*. Comradeship describes the bonding process necessary for total trust in and acceptance by fellow team members and the leader. While comradeship develops slowly, it is necessary for high cohesion and effectiveness. It is enhanced as the team works together and succeeds in achieving high standards.

Comradeship occurs as team members realize that they share the same goals and are committed to the mission. It is important that team members orient on mission accomplishment because comradeship can also form around influences that harm team loyalty. One combat expression of comradeship is the buddy team. The leader's challenge is to focus individual soldiers, buddy teams, and fire teams on total unit teamwork. With this focus, comradeship will be realized through cooperative accomplishment of team goals.

TEAM
EFFECTIVENESS
CHANGES AS
TEAM COMPOSITION
CHANGES

In peacetime and in combat, the team experiences personnel turbulence. With each change, the leader also observes a change in team effectiveness. For example, when a squad receives one or more new soldiers, the automatic way it accomplishes complex team tasks is degraded. The shortcuts that the team has established by members working together have to be established with the new soldiers. Soldiers feel less secure in the effectiveness of the team and focus on relationships with more established team members rather than with new soldiers.

Soldiers continually encounter problems that range from financial hardships to professional differences to severe family crisis. They are distressed from time to time about disturbing news from home and frustrated when they cannot handle things from a distance. Such situations deteriorate teamwork and move the team back to an earlier stage of development. The result can be a minor decrease in efficiency when performing a previously routine task, or an outbreak of minor petty arguments which keep the team from performing up to an agreed upon standard. The leader must be aware that this can happen, alert to the signs, and prepared to smoothly ease the team back to the sustainment stage of development.

LEADER ACTIONS

Leadership is the key to sustaining cohesive teamwork. The leader must understand and respond to problems that affect quality teamwork over a long period. Certain leader actions associated with the sustaining process become necessary as well as some unit activities that support the process,

Deal with Change. As the leader responds to situations that threaten sustained teamwork, he needs to realize that team growth and stability will be uneven at best. The unit will reach a peak of teamwork and then seem to slump; then it will build to a new peak of performance. This natural process will continue throughout the life of the unit. The successful leader guides his unit to peak performance when it faces critical tasks or combat action.

As new soldiers gain knowledge and experience, the need for leader control decreases. Using team members to establish objectives and procedures bonds members to one another and to the leader. They become more committed to the team and its operations, resulting in a more cohesive team.

Reassess Goals and Priorities. A vital part of the sustaining process occurs when the leader rechecks the progress of each soldier in satisfying personal and professional goals. The soldier should now see that his goals and the goals of other members in the unit are compatible. Team members now *use team expectations and standards* as the measurement by which they accept new soldiers into the team.

When new members join the team, or a new team leader is designated, the leader reviews the short-term goals of the team, the responsibilities and expectations of the team members, and the procedures and rules by which they operate. Similarly, as the leader is given new taskings, or as situations change, he ensures that each team member understands clearly what must be done, what is expected of him, and how well he is expected to do it. At the same time, the leader identifies long-term goals and the time needed for the team to perform them to standard. If several things need to be completed in the same time period, he sets priorities and allocates time to complete each task. Additionally, the leader coordinates these plans with his superior to ensure that they agree with the priorities set by the higher unit.

**SUCCESS
IN TRAINING
INCREASES TEAM
CONFIDENCE AND
MUTUAL RESPECT**

Focus on Teamwork. Sustaining cohesive teams requires that the leader focus continually on teamwork and on those things which he and his soldiers have in common, rather than on their differences. To do this, the leader must listen to what the soldier says, how it is said, and what the soldier does not say. He must continually evaluate the communication channels within the team to ensure that they are open. Even in a well-run team, soldiers have legitimate concerns, complaints, safety considerations, and recommendations for better ways to do things. Listening and then acting to improve the situation are powerful means of gaining trust and developing cohesion. The good leader is always alert to suggestions, complaints, and input from soldiers. The attitude that plans and procedures always need to be defended can separate the leader from the rest of his team and harm team readiness.

Focus on Training. As soldiers develop their personal skills and blend them into team training, they become more and more proficient as a team. Unit movements and activities become second nature, and the danger of boredom arises. Boredom challenges the leader to reinforce the basics while providing increasingly complex and demanding training. Realistic training can be conducted as the leader analyzes the risks involved and integrates safety considerations into the training scenario. The leader needs imagination and innovation, particularly in garrison situations, where the inevitable details and duties can undermine the morale of a high-performing unit.

Besides relieving boredom and developing teamwork, demanding team training enables soldiers and leaders to feel more competent to do their job in combat. This competence increases mutual respect among all team members. As the leader shows his ability to use his team effectively in realistic training or in combat, soldiers and leaders become one in accomplishing team missions.

Focus on Maintaining. While maintenance of personal and organizational equipment seems far afield to soldier team development, nothing could be further from the truth. It is essential to sustaining the fighting spirit of combat-ready teams. In such teams, soldiers develop special relationships with their weapons and equipment. At times they even give them names.

The leader should develop good maintenance habits as part of the unit training routine. The loss of firepower because of dirty weapons or the loss of mobility because of vehicle failure can seriously demoralize a tightly-knit team. If the unit goes into combat, there will be no time to stand down for maintenance. It will have to be done as routinely as other critical tasks necessary for day-to-day survival. Properly accomplished, maintenance builds confidence of soldiers in their equipment, thus enhancing teamwork.

Ensure Timely Supply. The leader must also do all in his power to ensure timely delivery of supplies to his team. If soldiers expect resupply of critical items such as ammunition or food at a certain time, delay can cause serious repercussions. The leader who ensures timely resupply of his team, or who takes time to explain the problem if resupply is delayed, develops the trust of his soldiers in his leadership and in the units responsible for resupply. This also reduces the fear of isolation that soldiers might feel.

Respond to Soldier Concerns. To sustain his team, the leader must demonstrate caring leadership through his entire time in the unit. Significant to caring leadership is the way the leader responds to the legitimate concerns of his soldier. One only has to assess the impact of an unexpected financial hardship, a troubled relationship with a loved one, or an illness or a death in his own family to understand how another soldier might feel in such a case. If the leader is insensitive to crisis events in the soldier's life, or takes the stance that the immediate Army "necessity" is more important than the soldier's concern, he can harm the soldier's morale and damage unit teamwork. If military necessity does dictate some hardship for the soldier, the leader first needs to show an understanding attitude and then communicate precisely why the soldier cannot be allowed to do all that he might want to do to alleviate his personal concern.

UNIT ACTIVITIES

Unit activities are events that involve all the soldiers and, in most cases, their families. When challenging and positive, they are vital to sustaining cohesive teams by encouraging mutual acceptance. They can take place during duty or nonduty hours. In the company, their purpose is to develop relationships among the participants. Regardless of

size, unit activities provide a focus around which members come together and create an atmosphere for emerging relationships and unit cohesion.

Care must be taken, however, to avoid overemphasizing unit activities. Overemphasis can be damaging if it takes the focus of the unit away from mission accomplishment. When done successfully, military ceremonies, sports activities, social activities, and spiritual activities enhance pride and spirit in the unit.

Military Ceremonies. Participation in military ceremonies, such as retreat formations, parades, and battalion and company awards ceremonies, fosters pride and spirit in the unit and in the Army. Such unit spirit is essential in building cohesive teamwork. Likewise, when a death occurs in the unit, it is equally important to give soldiers an opportunity to express their feelings at a memorial ceremony or funeral. Such ceremonies help unit members deal with their feelings and contribute significantly to unit cohesion. This is especially important in combat. Such unit spirit is essential in building cohesive teamwork.

Recognizing soldiers and their families during unit formations provides formal and public recognition of their valued membership in the unit. For example, a new soldier, along with his family if appropriate, can be recognized as a new team member during such a ceremony. Departing team members and their families can also be recognized for their contribution to the unit. Such ceremonies show all soldiers that the unit appreciates a job well done.

The unit formation also provides the opportunity to reinforce the history of the unit and the Army. A short reading from the unit's history, or the soldier's creed, might be used to instill pride in the unit and its heritage.

Sports Activities. A unit sports program can give *all* the soldiers a sense of membership in the unit. While only a few soldiers can actively participate in sports teams, the excitement and pride in competition and the prestige of a winning team can be shared by all the soldiers. Soldiers begin to refer to the company team as "our" softball, volleyball, or touch football team. When they do so, they identify with their unit. These activities should be organized at company level to reinforce cohesion and a sense of identity

among the smaller teams that make up the company. Soldiers recall and talk about highlights of competition, reinforcing mutual feelings and building cohesion. Participation in several sports should produce enough winners to avoid a loser image that could be harmful.

Social Activities. The variety of social activities is limited only by time, imagination of the planner, and good taste. The unit party, at any level and in any appropriate form, provides a relaxed atmosphere for soldiers to develop positive relationships among themselves and with their leaders. It also provides an opportunity for families to meet families and enhances family belonging to and involvement in the unit.

Spiritual Activities. Encouraging soldiers to develop their spiritual lives is another way in which the leader can influence the cohesion of his unit. Because of our rich American religious heritage, soldiers have many and varied religious backgrounds. Each faith provides for its member soldier the strength to cope with difficult situations in combat. Through encouraging his soldiers to practice and develop their faith, the leader shows another facet of his concern for their well-being. The unit chaplain can assist in answering any question the leader may have in this area. The Unit Ministry Team provides religious services, rites, and activities for unit members and is a valuable resource for all leaders.

**The soldier's heart,
the soldier's spirit,
the soldier's soul
are everything.
Unless a soldier's
soul sustains him,
he cannot be relied
on and will fail
himself and his
commander, and his
country in the end.**

George C. Marshall

TEAM SUSTAINMENT IN COMBAT

Keeping unit spirit and teamwork at a high level during combat operations depends in part on the tide of battle, but it also requires work on the part of the leader and the team. Combat affects soldiers as individuals and the unit as a team. It is critical that the leader overcome conditions that deteriorate teamwork and, consequently, combat effectiveness.

DEAL WITH THE SITUATION

Conditions in combat exert pressure on the leader's efforts to sustain his team. The leader must know how to deal with each situation if his team is to successfully accomplish combat operations. Conditions that undermine teamwork are—

- Continuous operations.
- Enemy actions.
- Casualties.
- Boredom.
- Rumors.

Continuous Operations. The continuous operations anticipated on the modern battlefield cause effects such as decreased vigilance, reduced attention, slowed perception, inability to concentrate, mood changes, communication difficulties, and inability to accomplish manual tasks. Over time, these effects can lead to apathy in both leaders and their soldiers. If left unchecked, they can deteriorate the most cohesive teams and damage their will to fight.

Proper sleep and rest are necessary to keep soldiers functioning at their best. The leader needs to develop sleep discipline routines for his soldiers and particularly for himself. His soldiers cannot operate efficiently without proper sleep and he needs to be fresh to make necessary decisions. The battlefield is no place for the leader who stays awake for long periods because he feels that the unit cannot operate without him. (FM 22-9 provides valuable information to assist the leader during continuous operations.)

Enemy Actions. The movement of the enemy and the necessary countermoves of the friendly force can be confusing and frightening. The appearance of the enemy in force, or fire from an enemy that cannot be seen, can affect the soldier's performance as a team member. Discussion of real situations, along with battle drills practiced until they are automatic, can prepare the soldier for quick reaction to the situations that he will face. The more he knows about what to expect and how to react, the more confident he will be in the moment of crisis.

During breaks in combat, the team should spend time discussing recent combat actions, their performance, and ways they can improve. These after action reviews will increase the confidence of the soldier and help him develop a sense of responsibility for his own performance. They will also help eliminate the feeling that he is alone and allow him to vent possible feelings of anger, fear, and despair.

Casualties. Casualties create personnel turbulence and have a psychological effect on the soldier. They are a serious and continuous threat to sustained teamwork and cohesion. Proper safety precautions can assist in minimizing unnecessary casualties and their psychological impact on the soldier. But even with sound leadership, and by the leader doing

all that he can do to reduce casualties, the team will still sustain casualties in combat. Soldiers must have no doubt that if they are injured they will not be deserted because of hostile fire.

Further, when a casualty occurs, the leader must also counsel the casualty's buddies as promptly as the situation allows. Talk relieves tension and they may be feeling anger and fear. It is the leader's task to reassure the remaining men that their whole supporting unit structure is not collapsing. The quicker the unit can adjust to these casualties, the less damage to unit teamwork. More experienced soldiers can be invaluable in helping new soldiers to deal with the injury and death around them and in reassuring them. On a personal level, the Unit Ministry Team, consisting of chaplain and chaplain's assistant, can assist leaders, soldiers, and the team in coping with feelings caused by casualties.

The loss of a leader because of injury or death will even more seriously affect teamwork. Soldiers look to the leader as a stabilizing force in a chaotic situation. When the leader is hurt or killed, the spirit and teamwork of the unit can be severely degraded.

S.L.A. Marshall tells the story of Lieutenant William McCann. McCann had already served one tour in Vietnam as an enlisted man and was on his second tour, this time as a platoon leader in the First Cavalry Division. A very popular leader, he had "completely won his platoon."⁶ His platoon sergeant said of him, "The man's a charmer. He wants nothing but the best. So, we're all for the best."⁷ He had a real sense of his men and what they were going through.

After a series of successful operations in central South Vietnam, McCann's platoon had just finished some mop-up operations and moved into an area for pickup by helicopter. Lieutenant McCann sensed a threat to his men when he noticed signs of possible enemy troops in the vicinity of the LZ. Followed by several of his soldiers, he entered the elephant grass to confirm his suspicions. He was mortally wounded by enemy fire. The immediate effect of McCann's being wounded was stunning. Staff Sergeant Belfield, his platoon sergeant, stood transfixed. The shock of seeing McCann on the ground mortally wounded was too much for

him. Lieutenant McCann died minutes later as he was being lifted onto a MEDEVAC helicopter. Marshall describes the feeling of the team:

Behind him he left a sorely stricken outfit. One hour earlier, as these men had approached the LZ for their lift-out, they had been buoyant with the knowledge that they had not only survived but had made a high score and they had congratulated one another on a job well done. Now a sense of leaden futility weighed on their spirits. In some measure they were blaming themselves, and they felt resentful of a life that must express its values in terms of movement, action, and violence.⁸

When an event such as this occurs, the remaining leaders in the unit need to rally the unit and provide continuing structure and support to the soldiers. When a new leader is appointed, other leaders need to back and support him. Even if he has combat experience, he still has to fit into the new unit. His successful integration requires close supervision by the next higher leader and an intensive on-the-job training program that develops his tactical and technical competence. Each new leader has to depend on the soldiers and on other leaders to assist him in adapting his training and peacetime experience to combat.

**BOREDOM
ERODES COMBAT
EFFECTIVENESS**

Boredom. Combat activity will vary from periods of intense and violent conflict to times of boredom. Dealing with boredom is essential for combat effectiveness. In Vietnam some units spent days in the jungles and rice paddies without enemy contact. The only diversion was their constant alertness for booby traps. After a while, in its boredom, the unit would let its guard down and become careless. The unit then lacked combat sharpness when attacked, even failing to detect booby traps. Effective leaders found ways to occupy their units while they spent those days in the jungle. They focused on security, resupply, personal hygiene, patrol activities, equipment maintenance, and mission-related training activities such as cross training and radio procedures. Such activities helped develop and maintain unit cohesion and combat effectiveness.

Rumors. Rumors are bits of information that are not based on definite knowledge. They can spread quickly throughout the unit, increasing uncertainty and destroying confidence.

To sustain teamwork, the leader must constantly use truth to deal with rumors and put them to rest. Following are ways that help control rumors:

- **Stress honesty.** When soldiers discover that their leaders have lied to them once, they stop believing. Soldiers must be absolutely convinced that all information coming from their leader is true to the best of his knowledge. Honesty is a prerequisite for mutual confidence.
- **Inform.** The leader must start an effective information program and pass out as much information as possible. Soldiers must be confident that they are getting the whole story, the good and the bad.
- **Identify and counsel those who spread rumors.** The way rumors are communicated, however, makes identifying the source extremely difficult. Leaders should be careful to avoid wrongly accusing team members of starting rumors as this creates distrust.

DEAL WITH SOLDIER'S FEELINGS

When a soldier is threatened, he may feel anger, despair, or fear. When a soldier is angry, the anger may indicate a high confidence level. In this case, the leader's problem is how to direct the soldier's anger in the right direction. When a soldier is apathetic or despairing, it usually indicates he has an extremely low confidence level. The leader's problem with the apathetic soldier is how to keep him alive until the battle is over and he can get appropriate treatment. If a soldier is afraid, the fear is neither a good nor a bad sign in itself. It simply indicates that the soldier may, or may not, take action to eliminate the threat. It may depend on whether the soldier has learned to deal with fear or how skillful the leader is in controlling the undesirable effect of fear on himself and his soldiers.

Fear can come from many directions in combat. The sights and sounds of the battlefield frighten many. Others fear the unexpected or the unknown. Still others are afraid of dying or of being crippled or disfigured for life. And some fear being a coward or failing as a soldier. Whatever the source, these fears can immobilize soldiers, destroy a team's will to fight, and even lead to despair and panic.

If the leader can reduce fear levels, he can inspire effective action. In controlling fear in combat, the leader must emphasize that these fears are very normal. An open discussion of fear can best be conducted by either the team leader, or a combat veteran, who admits to fear in combat. Further, he can tell how he coped with it and went on to do his job in spite of it. The unit's chaplain and chaplain's assistant can assist in this effort.

Finally, leaders must use fear-control techniques. A powerful method for controlling fear in combat is to concentrate on each step of the task at hand. The soldiers must be trained to concentrate on specific aspects of the job, not the danger. A soldier who is concentrating on firing his weapon and on selecting his next firing position is not concentrating on fear. Once the soldier takes action to alleviate his situation, his fear usually subsides. Fear control is a central function of combat leadership.

DEAL WITH PANIC

In combat, many situations cause despairing behavior in individuals. The well-prepared leader can cope with such behavior as it occurs. A much more difficult and complicated leadership problem arises, however, when individual despairing behavior leads to *group* despairing behavior, or panic. Soldiers in panic have intense fear, are easily spooked, and tend to flee the battlefield.

Two battlefield conditions that are primary causes of panic are—

- Belief by the group that all escape routes are rapidly closing.
- Group feelings of helplessness and anxiety caused by an unclear situation or by what the group perceives as an immediate threat.

When these conditions exist, a “trigger” incident can cause soldiers to panic. A trigger incident confirms the belief of soldiers that the situation is out of control, causing them to give in to their worst fears and suspicions. Examples of trigger incidents are a soldier fleeing to the rear, fire coming from an exposed flank, or a respected leader or soldier being killed,

Also, combat troops tend to relate all previous and subsequent information to the trigger incident. If the trigger incident was an exceptionally heavy artillery barrage in the

friendly rear area, soldiers may interpret the lack of an ammunition resupply as evidence that all ammunition has been destroyed. The trigger incident, and other reinforcing evidence, lead to uncontrollable fear that, in turn, can lead to hysterical behavior on the part of one or more soldiers. If a soldier turns and runs, others may follow and the action may snowball until the entire unit is in flight.

To prevent panic, the leader must focus on and control what the soldiers believe to be true. If soldiers believe that their escape routes are rapidly closing, if they believe that uncertain situations lead to uncontrollable events, or if they believe in their most pessimistic appraisals of the situation, then the seeds of panic are firmly planted. It is what the soldiers think is true that counts, not what is actually true.

**KEEPING
SOLDIERS
WELL INFORMED
HELPS
PREVENT PANIC**

Soldiers in combat are regularly exposed to death and battle wounds. They are subject to all the fears that lead to panic. Experienced soldiers who are well trained, organized, and led seldom give way to panic because they are confident in their ability to cope with difficult situations.

The reverse is true for the inexperienced, inadequately trained, poorly led soldiers. In either case, the leader must constantly evaluate the confidence level of his team, strive to increase soldier confidence, eliminate the conditions that lead to panic, and decrease troop despair.

A leader should be on the alert for incidents that soldiers may interpret as critical. When trigger incidents occur, the leader must follow with prompt and calm action. He can—

- Keep the soldiers busy with routine tasks that are simple and repetitive but meaningful. If the troops are concentrating intently on a routine task such as firing their weapons, they will pay less attention to their own fears.
- Move from position to position, reassuring the soldiers that the situation is not critical. When the leader does this, he not only reassures the men but also adds structure to the situation.
- Slow the soldiers down so that they can act instead of react. This is especially important if they are showing early hysterical behaviors such as extreme agitation or confusion.
- Set a personal example of fearlessness, even though he feels fear, and insist that all on the leadership team do the same.

- Explain the reasons for withdrawals and delaying actions.
- Stress the unit's ability, as a unit, to cope with all battle-field situations.
- Assure the unit that it is in command of the situation and not in an inescapable situation.
- Assure the unit that its flanks, rear, and supplies are secure, if this is the case.

If panic develops in spite of all the leader's efforts, he must take firm and decisive action to stop it as soon as possible. Remember, panic is contagious! The leader can often restore unity of action by standing with a few volunteers in the path of fleeing soldiers, ordering them to return to their positions. These volunteers must be ready to take firm action, manhandling or restraining those men who come within reach, or threatening the others. The overriding consideration is to stop the panic. Once panic is stopped, the leader must immediately restructure the situation and give the panicked soldiers something constructive to do as part of the larger unit. The work will distract them from their fears, and the stability of the unit will restore their confidence.

RESTRUCTURE THE SITUATION

The leader must work constantly to restructure the situation and keep the unit organized, together, and working. His main concern is that the unit does not disintegrate. When the unit is disrupted, members are preoccupied with individual physical survival and the attraction to remain a member of the team is minimized. Following are actions the leader can take to help restructure:

- Use the chain of command wherever possible to avoid conflicting orders and to prevent rumors.
- Manage time efficiently to prevent prolonged waits.
- Avoid false alarms.
- Train subordinate leaders to take command immediately in the event of the death or incapacitation of their leader.
- Prevent surprise by stressing security.
- Keep the soldiers informed on all matters, especially on their own location and that of the enemy.

- Never express dissension in the presence of the soldiers.
- Forcefully correct those soldiers who are increasing fear by irresponsible talk. A soldier who is inflating the accuracy and lethality of enemy weapons or exaggerating the strength of the enemy increases soldier despair. He must be warned about his irresponsible behavior.

SUMMARY

As the unit becomes an effective, combat-ready team, unit members will take responsibility for sustaining the team. The leader guides this process and takes necessary action to cement relationships that develop over time. He assists new members as they integrate into the team and prepares the team to receive them. He acts to overcome detrimental effects of combat, such as conditions that lead to fear and panic, to ensure the sustainment of high-level team operations.
