# MICHIGAN WAR STUDIES REVIEW

Christopher H. Hamner, *Enduring Battle: American Soldiers in Three Wars, 1776–1945*. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2011. Pp. xi, 281. ISBN 978–0–7006–1775–3.

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Why do soldiers fight? What motivates individuals (overwhelmingly men) to endanger their lives in battle? These questions, which are the subject of Christopher Hamner's excellent book, have long preoccupied professionals and academics reflecting on war. The core of battle for ground troops is the clash of forces in which they suffer violence themselves and inflict it on others. Hamner (George Mason Univ.) examines the experiences and social organization of American combat units during three conflicts: the War of Independence, the Civil War, and World War II. He charts broad historical continuities and traces how combat changed over the course of these wars. Especially notable were intensified industrialization, increasing numbers of soldiers at war, and the growing sophistication of motivational methods. Hamner wisely concentrates on infantry soldiers, who both confront and mete out violence most directly.

Unlike most earlier studies, Hamner's highlights the experience of individual soldiers rather than groups. In so doing, he rejects two "master theses" regarding soldierly motivation. The first maintains that commitment to an ideology impels troops to enter and remain in firefights.[1] The second accentuates the role of the small group or "band of brothers" and its cohesion as the critical combat motivator. Hamner persuasively argues that new incentives to fight have emerged as battles have undergone diffusion from close-rank formations firing volleys at enemies to small squads and even individuals advancing or "digging-in." Increasingly dispersed battlefields mean soldiers no longer act as automatons (part of the large machine) but more as autonomous individuals scanning their environment and acting on their own initiative. Further, as Hamner points out, Revolutionary War battles often lasted only an hour. In the Second World War, battles could last days or weeks. The preparation of soldiers for the supposedly irrational act of fighting in battles centered on teaching them to make rational choices to assure their own survival. As a consequence, soldiers began to be believe they had some control over the firefight, especially given the more varied arsenal of weapons available to them.

> Soldiers often found that the weight and bulk of their arms rendered them slower and more vulnerable targets. Even an act as basic as firing a weapon suddenly involved a trade-off on the dispersed battlefield, since the noise and flash of the shot threatened to betray a hidden position to a waiting enemy. At the same time the variety of these weapons and their ever-increasing lethal punch provided the individual foot soldier with more decision-making capability. The choices available to the World War II GI (what weapon to use, what kind of ammunition to deploy, where to aim his weapon, when to fire) increased the individual's sense of potential control over the battlefield environment—and that sense of control in combat (whether real or illusory) provided an important boost to morale as the demands of dispersion removed many of the tangible motivators that had operated to such great effect with the linear systems of tactics. Encouraging a soldier to view the battlefield as a controllable environment with which he and his weapons interacted provided critical opportunities to channel individual and small-group behavior in militarily useful directions. (153)

The book's various chapters explore changes and continuities in training, leadership, weaponry, and comradeship over the time span of the three wars. Especially valuable is an early chapter on fear in warfare. Hamner shows that technological advances in weaponry, protracted firefights, and the dispersal of ground forces intensified the fear of battle. By the Second World War, soldiers were often isolated from the support of peers and commanders and thus more frightened.

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1. American sociologists discredited this line of reasoning shortly after the Second World War: see Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12 (1948) 280–315.

The chapter on training explores how it inoculated men against the effects of fear in battle. It first identifies the lessons that soldiers learned during their training and the emotional, physical, and cognitive tools with which they entered firefights. Major changes that Hamner detects in the effect of training on twentieth-century soldiers include a reduced fear of sanctions by superiors and a heightened sense of control over the circumstances of combat. A chapter on changing patterns of leadership shows that the greater distance between troops and even mid-level commanders increased the importance and responsibilities of small-group leaders.

The chapter on weapons contends that improvements in technology and reliability gave troops more confidence in their equipment and thereby a greater sense of control over battlefields. The chapter on comradeship looks at interactions between soldiers and small-group behavior; it assesses the effect of battlefield dispersal on ties between buddies.

Hamner's compelling arguments have led me to rethink a number of issues. He makes a thought-provoking case for the centrality of fear in infantry combat in the context of changing social organization and military technology. But he might have devised a more nuanced model, one more cumulative than linear in nature.[2] As Hamner well knows, lasting aspects of combat include not only risk and danger but continuities in social control, comradeship, and headship. To be sure, change occurred over the course of two centuries, but we may still perceive in the new circumstances of the Second World War certain constants in the social organization and motivation of military violence that were apparent already in the War of Independence.

First, twentieth-century combatants cite dread of being branded cowards as a (negative) motivator: that is, even though the dispersed battlefield meant some could not see their commanders, as Hamner points out, the force of social control by peers persisted in the behavior of infantry soldiers. In World War II as in previous wars, the sight of commanders still inspired confidence in subordinates, as did the proximity of comrades, as many of those who fought have amply attested.[3] One difference is that the voices as well as the sight of commanders or peers have became significant in linking troops: think of soldiers talking to each other between foxholes, or leaders shouting to troops around corners of buildings or between rooms of a house. Voices of commanders heard over communications networks serve a similar function: even in the absence of nonverbal, physical expressions conveying stoicism, the sound of a leader's steady voice may reassure and impel individuals to act.[4] The enduring aspects of battle, then, include not only the stresses and anxieties of fighting, but some very basic building blocks of unit-solidarity, such as peer ties or the tangible presence of leaders.

*Enduring Battle* is also a useful corrective to certain models of behavior in combat. Hamner argues that the universal models prized by psychologists and sociologists are ahistorical and should be adopted cautiously. Thus, for instance, the significance of unit cohesion varied according to the cultural and historical circumstances of his three selected wars. One can also contrast the collective orientation of the "buddy system" in the American and Canadian armies, "mateship" in the Australian armed forces, and the "comradeship" of the British military[5] on the one hand with the preference in the Israeli military for small-group "camaraderie" over dyadic ties on the other. To extend this insight, we may say that while cohesion is central to fighting armies around the world, it exhibits a specific cultural expression in each national historical

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2. See Eyal Ben-Ari, Z. Lehrer, U. Ben-Shalom, and A. Vainer, *Rethinking the Sociology of Combat: Israel's Combat Units in the Al-Aqsa Intifada* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011).

3. See Thomas Schrijvers, *The GI War against Japan: American Soldiers in Asia and the Pacific during World War II* (NY: NYU Press, 2002).

4. See Eyal Ben-Ari, *Mastering Soldiers: Conflict, Emotions and the Enemy in an Israeli Military Unit* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998).

5. See Charles Moskos, "The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam," *Journal of Social Issues* 31.4 (1975) 25–37; Malcolm Van Gelder and Michael Ely Anzacs, "Chockos, and Diggers: A Portrait of the Australian Enlisted Man," in *Life in the Rank and File: Enlisted Men and Women in the Armed Forces of the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom*, ed. David R. Segal and H. Wallace Sinaiko (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1986) 212–31; F.M. Richardson, *Fighting Spirit: A Study of Psychological Factors in War* (London: Cooper, 1978).

setting. I would add that the significiance of weaponry also differs from one national context to the next. Thus, the valorization of technology inherent in the American Way of War may be context specific. Hamner devotes a full chapter to this issue as regards faith in one's weapons as a motivator for infantry soldiers.

Given its well-advised grounding in the experience of soldiers in war and its marrying of solid historical analysis to insights from the social sciences, *Enduring Battle* will appeal to and richly reward a wide readership.