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The Human Element in Operations: Combat Bonding in the National Security Guard



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Many defence analysts and researchers have studied the human element in combat and leadership. SLA Marshall's *Men Against Fire* and Aubrey 'Red' Newman's *Follow Me*, are classics that more than one generation has grown up with. This article looks at the issue of the human element in combat with the perspective of a unique force, India's National Security Guard (NSG). The NSG is a federal contingency force for combating terrorism under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Raised in 1984, this is a force which is a mix of the Army and police in the ratio 53:47. The police element is from a number of different cadres: Indian Police Service (IPS), Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) [Border Security Force, Central Reserve Police Force, Central Industrial Security Force, Sashastra Seema Bal, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Assam Rifles (BSF, CRPF, CISF, SSB, ITBP, AR)] and in very limited numbers, the state police forces. All personnel in the NSG are on deputation for a period of between two-five years. This throws up a challenge for forging combat

Key Points

1. The nature of the NSG organisation – which is a mix of the army and police – throws up a challenge for forging combat bonding and group cohesion. Combat Bonding is easier to build in a military organisation built on the basis of the 'Regimental System'.
2. However, 'all India, all class, mixed units' are the modern ideal for integration in a democratic country. In such forces bonding requires to be built up with a different paradigm.
3. Bonding is a social construct with roots in primeval history. In military units it is built through group and unit cohesion. Unit cohesion is the product of several factors. These are leadership, training, familiarity, continuity, morale and discipline. Shared dangers and hardship, uniforms, symbols, traditions, physical proficiency standards etc. build up unit cohesion and group bonding.
4. Given the current reality of terrorism being the dominant form of waging war, we need to be aware of the importance of combat bonding in the NSG.
5. Through various methods the NSG has built up cohesiveness. We need to do more. Among the suggested methods are supportive personnel policies for which the contributing forces especially the army have to be sensitive about.
6. The feeder organisations to the NSG (which includes the army in a major way) must understand the importance of combat bonding in the NSG. Only then will they be able to identify and send the most suitable personnel for induction into the NSG.

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bonding and group cohesion. The operational units in the NSG are the Special Action Groups (SAGs), Special Ranger Groups (SRGs) and some specialised units (Support Weapons, Technical Support, Electronic Support, Communication, Bomb Disposal, K9). All these units are mostly pure Army or pure CAPF. The Special Composite Action Groups (SCAGs) which have been raised at five metro cities post the 2008 Mumbai attack are fully mixed units, commanded by Army officers.

Combat bonding is a process which is easier to achieve in units where the men belong to one region. This is the basis of the 'Regimental System' in almost all the infantry units of the Indian Army. Single-class or "pure" regiments were raised during the British colonial rule, based on the classification of certain communities as "martial races".¹ However, in most arms and all services of the Indian Army, and also in the CAPFs, this concept is not followed. They follow the concept of "all India, all class, mixed units". This is considered the modern ideal for integration in a democratic country. In such forces, bonding requires to be built up with a different paradigm. This is also the concept more suitable for large industrial age Armies (or forces).²

The NSG is a Special Force. No force can become "special" without a strong sense of belonging and bonding which makes the whole stronger than its parts. This is because Special Forces' operations take place in situations where implicit trust and faith in one's team are imperative. It is a common motivational saying that we need to work as a T.E.A.M because "Together Everyone Achieves More!" Teams cannot be formed without bonding. Bonding can be described as a shared 'group identity'. Bonding is a social construct which has roots in primeval history. This is because humans had evolved as tribes. Tribes were, and are, self-sufficient social groups living

outside the construct of a state. As a member of a tribe, a person had benefits such as assurance of food and protection. Being a member of a strong group which had abundant food and assured protection, conferred a higher status as well. A distinct status created a feeling of superiority, which bred confidence and greater strength... and motivation to achieve more. Tribes formed kingdoms and kingdoms created empires.

Teams are formed to achieve a common objective. However, in the most extreme stressful situations – and the highest such situation is where there is a likelihood of death – teams can disintegrate. This is because self-preservation is a basic instinct. The psychological reaction of fleeing bodily harm can render the best of teams ineffective unless they are bonded through the cement of unit and group cohesion.

In a deputationist force such as the NSG, there must be unit cohesion before achieving group cohesion. Unit cohesion involves a bond that can sustain mutual commitment, not just to the mission, but to each other, and to the group as a whole. Within the overarching concept of a unit, group cohesion is built up from the 'primary group'. A primary group ranges from a buddy pair up to the largest sub-unit which in our organisational construct is a company or squadron. Some people opine that a buddy pair is not a 'group', however, they do agree that between two buddies flows the primordial chemistry of cohesion. It is generally agreed that a primary group is generally the smallest group with which a soldier will identify. This bond enables teamwork under conditions under which a civilian organisation might break down. SLA Marshall had said, "I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war, that the thing which enables a [...] soldier to keep going with his weapons is the near presence or presumed presence of a comrade."³

Unit cohesion is the product of several factors. These are leadership, training, familiarity, continuity, morale and discipline. All of these are self-explanatory, except familiarity. Familiarity makes the soldier afraid of displaying fear in front of his group, or letting them down. It also gives him confidence that his group is with him and he is not facing danger in isolation. These factors endow a unit with synergised capabilities. Unit cohesiveness is also greatly aided through a uniform. A uniform is a sign of organised military forces equipped by a central authority. The uniqueness of the uniform and the emblems worn on it give a distinct identity which aids cohesiveness within a unit. Unit cohesion is achieved over a period of time after the groups within the unit have undergone mutually shared experiences. The more difficult the experiences shared, the better is the cohesion. Difficult experiences remembered through recorded history and ceremonial recall of successes (and, at times, heroic defeats) helps in building *esprit de corps*. This is all the more important in organisations like the NSG where rotations take place constantly.

Esprit de corps is a French phrase which translates as the 'morale of a group'. In a way, it is also group cohesion. It is a feeling of pride, fellowship and common loyalty shared by members of a group. Its level is some notches higher and on a slightly different plane than unit cohesiveness. *Esprit de corps* is the capacity of a group's members to maintain belief in an institution or goal, particularly in the face of opposition or hardship. An armed force, to be effective, requires group cohesion at the unit level and *esprit de corps* at the organisation level.

A number of forces are deputationist. These include the Rashtriya Rifles (RR) of the Army, but unlike the NSG, cohesiveness has been brought

in – after learning from experience – by affiliating RR battalions to regiments of the Indian Army.⁴ This has helped overcome the challenges in bonding and cohesion which, in the case of the NSG, still exists. In the NSG they exist because of the following reasons:

- It is a deputationist force in which officers and men rotate after a fixed tenure; and in which the Army and police personnel have variable tenures.
- It is a unique military/police amalgamation of two fairly different cultures and ethos.
- It is a force made up of officers and men from every arm/service and regiment of the Army and from every police force in the country. The challenges for cohesion are compounded.
- The extreme situations which require action by the NSG are few and far between. In the intervening period, the men may feel that they are being underutilised, or that their rigours in training have been in vain.
- The 'contingency' nature of the force implies that a part of it must be on immediate readiness 24x7, 365 days a year. This is a mentally exhausting situation.

The pros and cons of having a military/police deputationist force construct is beyond the scope of this paper. While it brings the strengths of two organisations together, it also requires greater effort and understanding of the need for, and measures to, evolve bonding of the NSG into a strong cohesive organisation. Given the current reality of terrorism being the dominant form of waging war, we need to strengthen the NSG unit and group cohesion. This is not to say that the NSG does not have a unique *esprit*



de corps. The founding fathers had the foresight to bring in distinctive features which have helped to bond the NSG.

The NSG personnel wear a black uniform. Black is a mysterious colour that is typically associated with the unknown. It also represents authority, strength, seriousness, and power. Practically, it enables NSG commandos to be one with the night when carrying out hazardous operations; typically, hostage rescue. The operational units of the NSG were given a shoulder patch with the head of a black panther on it to reinforce the external as well as self-image of the NSG commandos of being swift and silent predators. No terrorist will escape them even if he takes shelter of the hours of darkness. The term 'Black Cat' has, in a way, become synonymous with NSG commandos and its usage has added to the bonding within the force. With the black dress and the black cat association, the NSG has built up a brand image of a commando wearing black. In the manner that the maroon beret of paratroopers is an international symbol of being a paratrooper, the 'Black Cat' in his black dungarees is the face of the Indian internal security commando. This is evident from the trend of many state police forces making their commandos wear uniforms of this colour; as also a number of private security agencies for their personnel.

The training standards of the NSG by themselves also bond the men. These are the everyday hardships—when there cannot be everyday operations—which foster unit cohesion. A NSG commando takes pride in achieving higher and better standards of physical fitness and use of his weapons and equipment. He is made to be in competition with himself in case he has reached the highest levels of the standard battle physical efficiency tests. In this manner, the NSG copes

with mental disincentive and stagnation after the highest standards have been achieved.

For bonding, it is important that during their tenure, NSG personnel forget that they are from the military or the police. Though their uniform unifies them, years of being encultured in different organisational cultures are difficult to shake off. This is where symbols and signs are important. The national flag is the prime unifying symbol of a country's identity. A national anthem is generally a patriotic and inspiring musical composition that evokes and eulogises the history, traditions, and culture of a country. It, along with certain other lesser symbols, bonds a country. Similarly, the NSG flag and NSG song bond the NSG. They are required to be very visible and their importance in achieving bonding should be known to all. For achieving bonding in the NSG, they are as important as the national flag and national anthem in unifying the country into a cohesive whole.

Longer tenures for Army personnel, especially the officers in the cutting-edge units, is a long pending request of the NSG to the Army. So far, a viable solution has not been found due to the peculiarity of the Army's career progression system. Any extension of tenure can lead to an officer missing certain milestones which are essential for his career growth. This is an issue which can be resolved only through some out of the box thinking and deviation from ingrained personnel policies. The Army commanding officers of the units should ideally command NSG units as a second command. This is because the nature of their tasks and the nature of their units are very different from the mainstream Army. This is much more pronounced in the case of the SCAGs which are smaller units with an almost 50 per cent police component. Theoretically, this should not make a difference as to whether the commando is an Army soldier

or a police constable, once he is 'blackened'⁵ he is going to perform the same task. In practice, the ingrained ethos (since all entrants to the NSG are trained personnel who have already served in their respective forces) does create friction, which needs matured leadership. Certain intake differences need tact and adaptation to handle. For example, unlike the Army, the CAPFs have entry into the Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) rank directly also. From this, to Sub-Inspectors (DASO-Directly Appointed Subordinate Officers) and through promotion of eligible Head Constables and Assistant Sub-Inspectors (Departmental Entry Subordinate Officers). In the Army, entry to the JCO rank is only through consecutive promotions over a prolonged time which makes the person very experienced in practical soldiering. Culturally, the Army soldier accepts a subaltern with a few months service exercising command over him, but he finds it difficult to get used to taking orders from a CAPF JCO, with say, five years of service. In a regimental system, these problems can be alleviated, but in a non-regimental organisation like the NSG, a conscious effort requires to be made to instil regimentation.

In a study on how a smaller British force could beat the Argentinians in the Falklands War in 1982, while deployed 8,000 miles from their home bases (versus 900 miles for the Argentinians), it was found that among the important factors was the British regimental system. This system encouraged its members to think of themselves as a family. Each member had shared the arduous training process and had faith in the others. The members are bonded as a family through effective socialisation of the primary group. "Horizontal bonding is facilitated by the regimental messes where the members can socialise together rather

than in centralised clubs".⁶ The rationale for a permanent cadre for the NSG exists on account of the continuity, regimentation and bonding it can provide. However, the size of the force and attendant administrative problems preclude this at this point of time.

The NSG, more than any other force, needs professional and social interaction among its members to strengthen its bonds. Hard training, enjoyable sports competitions, and social and cultural occasions, when the families of its members can bond, are all equally important. Extra allowances that the NSG personnel earn are motivating factors for them to get to serve in the NSG by meeting its tough selection standards. However, to gain and retain an "elite force" tag is not possible only through extra allowances. If that was so, mercenaries should be equally motivated. Dedicated cohesiveness is only possible through the sort of strong bonding that an ideal can imbibe. That ideal for the NSG is that the Black Cat Commando (as he is called) is the last line of the country's internal counter-terrorism defence. The NSG *jawan* must believe that he is a part of the best organisation in the country for safeguarding its people from the ultimate armed internal threats – the terrorists. The citizens of India dial 100 when they have a threat to their security or the security of others and want help from the police. The NSG *jawan* must know and believe that his organisation is the one that the police forces of our country will dial for when a security situation arises which is beyond their capability. The feeder organisations to the NSG (which include the Army in a major way) must understand the importance of combat bonding in the NSG. Only then, will they be able to identify and send the best personnel for induction into the organisation.

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Notes

1. Rajat Pandit, "Army Rejects Calls to Make Regiments based on Class or Religion," *The Times of India*, January 30, 2013. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Army-rejects-calls-to-raise-new-units-based-on-caste-or-religion/articleshow/18248941.cms>
2. "The Regimental versus the Continental System." Accessed October 15, 2017 from www.oocities.org/frank249/regiment.htm
3. S.L.A Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), p. 42.
4. Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Innovations in Counter-insurgency: The Indian Army's Rashtriya Rifles," *Contemporary South Asia* 13(1), March 2004.
5. 'Blackening' is a term used in the NSG prior to the final initiation of a newly trained commando into an operational commando unit.
6. n.2.

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