

Comradeship and Sex Discrimination

by

CPT Kelly M. Fitzpatrick

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These voices, these quiet words, these footsteps in the trench behind me recall me at a bound from the terrible loneliness and fear of death by which I had been almost destroyed. They are more than motherliness and more than fear; they are the strongest, most comforting thing there is anywhere, they are the voices of my comrades.

--Erich Maria Remarque

Military manuals acknowledge the indispensable role played by unit cohesion, "the bonding together of members of a unit or organization in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, their unit, and the mission" (Defense ix). Military literature not only confirms this, it also provides insight into the relationship which must first exist between soldiers for cohesion to occur, comradeship. All of what has been written about this subject, however, addresses comradeship between men; now that women are in the military there is some concern about whether women and men can be comrades. In his recently published book Weak Link, Brian Mitchell claims not only that women can't form comradeships with men,

but also that they even prevent men from forming this relationship with each other. My goal in this paper is to address this matter first by examining the nature of comradeship itself, as a relationship between soldiers; to show the necessity of the relationship; and ultimately I'll discuss the possibility of such a relationship existing between male and female soldiers.

"Military cohesion" is that term used to describe the functioning of a group of soldiers as a group; that is, how well a given set of individuals works as a unified whole toward a common goal. It further indicates something about the nature of the relationship between the members of the group. Cohesive groups not only move as single organisms toward the successful accomplishment of a given task, but also do it in such a way as to distinguish their members as having subordinated self-interest to willingly conform to certain values and norms of the group (Malone 83). The more oneness the group exhibits, the more cohesive the group is. And the more cohesive the group, the greater the likelihood that the unit will win on the battlefield. Clearly then, cohesion is not only desirable but necessary, and so military leaders should pursue those things which promote cohesion.

Leadership manuals like FM 22-103, "Leadership and Command at Senior Levels", offer guidance on how to promote

cohesion. Most of us who've spent time in the military are familiar with these concepts. First, the commander must formulate and clearly communicate her *command intent* to the unit. This element ties into yet another: a clear command intent provides common knowledge of what must be done so that everyone has a clear *focus on the future*. The commander must provide the kind of *command climate* which convinces soldiers that their leaders care about them personally and professionally. She must demand *disciplined proficiency*, excellence rather than mere competence at military skills; this creates confidence among soldiers. *Shared values and experiences*--meaningful common activities which involve working and playing together--bond unit members. Finally, *delegation* empowers subordinates, allowing them to shoulder their share of the responsibility for accomplishing the goal and to accept ownership (FM 22-103 61).

Experience proves that these six elements promote unit cohesion. But what does cohesiveness have to do with comradeship? How are they related? Cohesion is a desired end and comradeship is the means of achieving it. By way of illustrating the relationship I'd like to claim exists between cohesion and comradeship I'll use an analogy of the construction of a house and the arrangement of its bricks. The house can't be called a house unless the bricks which went into its construction conform to a certain

arrangement.¹ At the very least, they must have mortar between them and each brick must support the other bricks around it in such a way that that structure eventually does what a house should do. It's up to the bricklayer to arrange these bricks properly. In virtue of this relationship the materials are no longer merely mortar and individual bricks, nor are they just bricks held together by mortar. In this particular arrangement the fact that they are bricks becomes unimportant, though it is still true. If the bricklayer has done her job well, the materials will have become a house.

Likewise, a military unit can't be called cohesive unless its soldiers stand in a certain relationship to each other. It's not good enough for them just to work together. If the unit's leaders, like the good bricklayer, have done their job, then these soldiers will have the materials for building a relationship which involves a deep-seated commitment to other unit members and ultimately to the mission. So just as the building materials must be arranged in a certain way prior to our being able to call the house a house, so must the soldiers in a unit stand in a certain relationship to each other before they can be called "cohesive." This relationship--comradeship--is necessarily prior to cohesiveness.

Before a unit can achieve the desired end of cohesiveness then, the unit commander should provide the proper materials and properly arrange them, eventually transforming a group of individuals into one whole. A significant disanalogy exists, however: military leaders don't have the same degree of control over their soldiers that a bricklayer has over her tools and building materials. Soldiers aren't inanimate bricks. Although a commander may be able to provide the ingredients for cohesion, that commander cannot herself make soldiers into comrades. Instead, it is up to the soldiers themselves to do much of the work. Building of relationship of comradeship involves a conscious choice on the part of individual soldiers, a decision to accept the other soldier as a soldier, and to become committed to him as a member of the whole. The commander can't force members to make these commitments to each other, but she must at least nurture the process so as to ensure that nothing prevents the relationship from being built.

There are other elements, elements which can't be provided by leaders, which can promote comradeship as well. Suffering and danger, as J. Glenn Gray states in The Warriors, also contribute to the construction of this relationship and have a powerful influence over soldiers (89). Gray notes that comradeship--or what he calls the "confraternity of danger"--is "unequaled in forging links

among people of unlike desire and temperament, links that are utilitarian and narrow..."(27). These factors, then, force individuals to learn the importance of subordinating their personal desires and identity for the sake of the whole. In the process of doing this they also learn the necessity of overlooking personal differences, because focusing on them endangers not only accomplishment of the mission but the survival of the unit as well. It ultimately creates ties between strangers, significantly improving their chances of defeating the enemy and avoiding getting killed themselves.

But discussion of comradeship solely in terms of its usefulness would be misleading. For it is useful only incidentally. To complete the above quote from Gray, comradeship is "no less passionate because of [its] accidental and general character" (27). Indeed, focusing on this incidental characteristic does rob it of its intimate, passionate nature. My intention in even indicating its usefulness is not to claim that men do form comradeships only because they recognize the usefulness in doing so, but to suggest that if one recognizes the incidental advantage to be gained, then someone who is otherwise reluctant may be convinced to abandon such resistance for this reason if for no other.

Despite the cynicism with which Gray views comradeship between soldiers²³, he does capture many of the features of this relationship which serve as evidence of its "passionate" nature. This passion is communal, for comrades often love each other like brothers. They also have grown to respect and trust each other as a result of having helped each other overcome hardship. Loyalties are fierce, and weld the group together. This loyalty sustains them through dangerous times as they pursue their common goal. Most noteworthy, though, is a soldier's willingness to die for his comrades, giving no thought to what this means to the self (91).

Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet in the Western Front also does a superb job of portraying this passionate relationship, especially as it exists between the novel's main character, Paul, and his comrade Kat:

We have more complete communion with one another than even lovers have. We are two men...in our hearts we are close to one another...What does he know of me or I of him? Formerly we should not have had a single thought in common--now we sit with a goose between us and feel in unison, are so intimate that we do not even speak...
I love him. (85-86)

This "communion" is compelling in both its simplicity and its depth. These two men, destined to be strangers but for the war which brought them together, seem to have become even more intimate with each other in this nonsexual relationship than either would have been within the context of a sexual relationship with a woman. And this despite the fact that they had so little in common before sharing the experience of battle. Differences in personal background become unimportant in this particular environment:

The things that existed before are no longer valid...Distinctions, breeding, education are changed, are almost blotted out and hardly recognizable any longer...It is as though formerly we were coins of different provinces; and now we are melted down, and all bear the same stamp...First we are soldiers and afterwards, in a strange and shamefaced fashion, individual men as well (229).

They put aside differences based on their lives as "individual men"; all that is essential is that they are soldiers, struggling against a common enemy--death:

Every expression of life must serve only the preservation of existence...All else is banished because it would consume energies unnecessarily.

[Death] has awakened in us the sense of comradeship, so that we escape the abyss of solitude (230).

Let me return for a moment to Paul's observation, "First we are soldiers and afterwards, ... individual men as well." This seems to capture a critical feature of comradeship: *first* we are soldiers. To prevent someone from becoming part of the whole for reasons grounded solely in his life as an individual man seems dangerously juvenile, because these reasons have become so clearly irrelevant to the matter at hand, winning and surviving. What would it be like to exclude someone in this way? "He can't enter into this relationship with us because he comes from a wealthy family" or "He can't enter into this relationship because he's not a Christian"--what does this have to do with soldiering?

So the basis of this commitment must be in the soldier rather than in the person. But merely donning a uniform and claiming to be a soldier doesn't automatically grant one acceptance as a comrade. Acceptance is conditional. What becomes important at this point is for the soldier to demonstrate that he is a soldier. By doing this he at once establishes to others his identity and thereby earns membership into the unit. Because of the possible

consequences of the soldiers' activity, each must prove his worth as a soldier in order to give other soldiers a reason for trusting him. This is all part of developing the mutual trust so important in comradeship.⁴

So far I've made a conscious effort to discuss comradeship as a relationship between soldiers as soldiers, not as one between soldiers as men. Or to describe it in a different way, as Paul's observation above indicates, it occurs between soldiers-who-happen-to-be-men, not between men-who-happen-to-be-soldiers.

I think it's worth elaborating on this sort of dichotomy, for it exists in other relationships as well. Within the constructed relationship of "family" we could take as an example a father and son. Each shares the characteristic of manhood, yet they relate to each other first as father and son, and only secondarily as man and man.⁵ The dichotomy becomes clearer still if we look at a relationship which involves a woman and man. Such a relationship might take one of several "traditional" forms: sister-brother; daughter-father; mother-son; wife-husband, and so on. While each of these relationships may have one characteristic in common--for our purposes, simply that it exists between a man and woman--the activities these individuals may engage in are rather narrowly prescribed. Some activities which are accepted in the context of one

relationship, between a husband and wife for instance, are proscribed when the relationship is that of brother-sister. Once again, to describe any of these relationships solely in terms of the fact that it exists between a woman and man is to focus on an aspect that fails to enlighten the outsider as to the nature of the relationship.

Nowadays some soldiers are men and some soldiers are women. If comradeship is built not by regarding a soldier as a man but as a soldier first, that is, in terms of what he does as a soldier, then this rule also ought to apply in the same way to soldiers-who-happen-to-be-women. They should be accepted into or excluded from this relationship not for gender-based reasons, but for reasons strictly related to their identity as soldiers.

There are some who argue that this isn't possible, however. Brian Mitchell, in his recent book, Weak Link, claims that male soldiers are incapable of relating to female soldiers as soldiers. Moreover, the mere presence of women in the military has a detrimental impact on the behavior of men (189) to the extent that it "inhibits male bonding, corrupts allegiance to the hierarchy, and diminishes the desire of men to compete for anything but the attentions of women"(190). The latter consequence he claims is "because men like women," they have "difficulty treating women as they treat other men. They cannot be indifferent

to sex" (191). As support for this Mitchell quotes "one old soldier" who calculatingly sends his "pleasant and attractive" female NCO to brief senior officers: "'Anyone who doesn't think he's a man first and a soldier second just isn't paying attention'" (191).

The shift in priorities indicated by comments such as this one are curious for a couple of reasons. First, it is diametrically opposed to the way male soldiers depict how they view themselves in their interactions with other male soldiers (as soldiers-who-happen-to-be-men). Second, this reversal occurs not because of anything the female soldier (seen, by the way, simply as a woman, not even as a woman-who-happens-to-be-a-soldier) does; her mere presence turns the world upside-down. According to this portrayal then, we are all victims of our biology, for our hormones alone determine how we relate to each other. When the two people involved are a man and woman, their biological structure permits them to interact in no other way than in sexual terms.

There are a few problems with an argument like Mitchell's. It implies that in the absence of female soldiers male soldiers simply would become comrades; it changes the nature of comradeship from something that is earned in virtue of one's exhibiting soldierly proficiency to something that depends on hormones alone. If this were

true, then there would be no need for the types of manuals the military develops in order to help leaders build cohesive units. Biological necessity would ensure men bonded together. Instead, units must rely on training to instill the required discipline into men. This idea is related to a second deficiency in Mitchell's argument: it denies the effects of training. If training can effect comradeship among men, surely it has an impact on units consisting of both male and female soldiers as well. If nothing else, realistic training allows all soldiers to recognize that they are dependent on each other for survival. Realizing this in turn helps them to understand the need for relating to one another as soldiers first.

After all, free will plays a role in every human activity. We can and do make choices about how and with whom we interact. Although it would be futile for me to argue that biology plays no role in interactions between the sexes, biology is only one factor involved in those interactions. It can be mitigated by other factors, such as training, or in more extreme circumstances, the suffering and danger of war.

The fact is that comradeship does exist between some male and female soldiers. Judging from my own experience, what seems to be the real stumbling block on the path to comradeship isn't an inability to relate as soldiers, but

more a fear of what might develop if a male soldier were to become as intimate with a female soldier as he is with his male counterparts. The passionate caring and concern shared by male comrades, they fear, would seem to lead inevitably to sexual intimacy. I think this fear indicates a search for a model to follow in establishing the "right sort of intimacy". In this case I'd like to point out that the familial intimacy which characterizes comradeship between male soldiers also characterizes the comradeships I've experienced and witnessed between male and female soldiers. That is, men often describe comradeship in terms of brotherhood: "I felt closer to everybody in that unit at the time than I do my own blood brothers and sisters. Because it was us...It was THE family" (Malone 11).

The characteristics of comradeship described by both Gray and Remarque fit such a familial model for this relationship. Gray even refers to it as the "confraternity of danger"(27). There do seem to be strong similarities between comradeship and brotherhood. Brothers are born into a family, they don't have the opportunity to leisurely discover and choose each other. There is a sort of recognizable necessity which binds them together--the preservation of the family. Brothers frequently are intimate in the way Remarque's character Paul describes his intimacy with Kat: they share secrets, they work and play together, they challenge each other. But perhaps most

important of all is the mutual trust close brothers have in each other, which, like comradeship, in the face of adversity often inspires a willingness not only to fight for the other's sake but also, if necessary, to die for the other's sake. These characteristics of brotherhood also characteristic of comradeship.

The comradeship I've had the good fortune to experience strongly resembles this familial relationship; I thought of (and still do think) of these men as more than fellow officers; we were like brother and sister. My thinking of them in this way did not diminish my professional opinion of them, nor did it diminish their professional opinion of me, for this relationship had come about as a result of the professional respect we had for each other. This indicated the extent to which we were willing to go to ensure the other's personal and professional safety and well-being. We were committed to each other and to the unit; this commitment was in addition to--not instead of--other personal relationships each of us had.

In closing, comradeship can and does exist between the sexes, and when it exists, this is the way it works: male and female soldiers accept each other as soldiers, have respect for and trust in each other's skills, and become committed to each other as "family members." Just as comradeship between men resembles brotherhood, comradeship

between men and women resembles a brother-sister relationship. Soldiers-who-happen-to-be-men and soldiers-who-happen-to-be-women sometimes are physically attracted to each other. This is not a "natural outcome" of seeking comradeship; sexual intimacy is altogether different. When this happens, they are not seeing each other as soldiers first. Whether soldiers pursue sexual intimacy or familial intimacy depends on conscious choices they make. For we are not victims of biological necessity, as Brian Mitchell and others would have us believe. Instead, we do have the ability to form commitments to each other in a meaningful, passionate way, a way that we can model after yet another "traditional" relationship, that of the family. Furthermore, we must work to form these commitments to each other in order to ensure the success of the unit and, ultimately, the survival of every soldier in that unit.

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NOTES

¹This is an Aristotelian notion, to be sure.

²These elements, while present to some very limited extent during training exercises, aren't experienced as acutely in peacetime as in war. War makes the need for establishing comradeships all the more obvious.

³Gray's claim is that the common experience of the dangers of war has only a temporary effect on men, and that once they are no longer "under the influence", the comradeship eventually disappears. Occasionally they can regain these feelings, but only by putting themselves under the influence of something else--alcohol. This portrayal certainly doesn't do justice to the strength of this relationship, which many veterans (my own male relatives included) will attest is just as strong between them and their comrades today as it was in wartime.

⁴Malone states that, "When a new soldier joins the team, he won't be accepted automatically. He'll have to earn membership in the team. The team will check him out, mostly on military skill. When the team sees he's *trying* and *learning*, they'll accept him as a 'pro'"(118).

⁵The best illustration I can offer for this is the way we tend to use the language: when introducing his father to a friend Hoss Cartwright says, "*This is my father, Ben.*" The father-son relationship takes precedence over the man-man relationship. And what the latter might entail, I'm not sure. Without some context as a frame of reference, I don't know how they would relate to each other. Wouldn't they have to search for some common ground even as a minimal foundation for their interactions?