

## ABSTRACT

HELTON, BRADLEY DEAN. *Revolving Door War: Former Commanders Reflect on the Impact of the Twelve-Month Tour upon their Companies in Vietnam.* (Under the direction of Dr. Richard H. Kohn.)

The purpose of this study has been to examine the impact of the US Army's twelve-month tour individual rotation policy for officer and enlisted personnel assigned to Vietnam between 1965-72 upon the tactical performance of companies. This inquiry drew upon the views of a select group of successful career officers attending the US Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania from 1981-85 that had commanded one or more companies during the war. Their views suggested a mixed aggregate effect. The army's rotation policy adversely impacted tactical performance by creating problems with continuity that forced companies to perform below their potential and sometimes led to needless casualties. Further, the twelve-month tour hurt morale by damaging the bonds of camaraderie between soldiers. But the tour also bolstered morale by providing soldiers with a known end to their obligation to serve in combat. Therefore, the tour successfully alleviated many of the serious morale problems associated with the ineffective individual rotation policies attempted by the army during World War II and Korea.

**REVOLVING DOOR WAR:  
FORMER COMMANDERS REFLECT ON THE IMPACT OF THE  
TWELVE-MONTH TOUR UPON THEIR COMPANIES IN VIETNAM**

by  
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Born on 10 June 1972 in Denver, Colorado, and raised in the same state near the town of Kiowa, Bradley Dean Helton graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York in 1994 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He served from 1994-97 as a tank platoon leader and company executive officer in Vilseck, Germany with the Third and First Infantry Divisions, including a six-month United Nations deployment to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 1996. From 1998-2001, he served in a variety of staff positions in the First Cavalry Division located at Fort Hood, Texas, before commanding an armored cavalry troop, A Troop, First Squadron, Seventh Cavalry Regiment, for eighteen months from 2001-02. After completing a Master of Arts degree at North Carolina State in Raleigh in 2004, the author will teach military history for two years at West Point.

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We don't have twelve years' experience in this country. We have one year's experience twelve times.<sup>1</sup>

John Paul Vann, May 1972

To his dying day, famous American military advisor John Paul Vann thought that the policy for individually rotating officer and enlisted personnel assigned to Vietnam home after twelve months denied the US Army the benefits of learning from its accumulated experience, which caused American soldiers and military units to make the same mistakes year after year and ruined the army's performance in the war. Scholars have criticized the policy along similar lines. While serving as the Chairman of the Council on Vietnamese Studies of Southeast Asia in 1968, Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington observed: "We have devised a unique sort of bureaucratic machine which ensures or tends to ensure that our operation in Vietnam will always be vigorous, will never grow tired, but also will never grow wiser."<sup>2</sup> But the former Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland praised the policy during the 1970s for helping to "generate the highest morale I have seen among US soldiers in three wars."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, General Westmoreland denied the existence of any serious morale or disciplinary problems in Vietnam during his time as commander from 1964-68.<sup>4</sup> At present, the twelve-month rotation policy remains contested ground.

Controversy persists because a conclusive study into the tour's effects has never been conducted. Explaining the policy's impact is crucial for understanding the performance of

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory R. Clark, ed., *Quotations on the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2001), 206.

<sup>2</sup> Pfeffer, Richard M., ed., *No More Vietnams? The War and the Future of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 111.

<sup>3</sup> William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Da Capo, 1976), 295.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

America's military in Vietnam, and possesses important implications for future military planners. Troop rotation policy is a vital component of any strategy that anticipates a prolonged commitment of military forces. At issue is the necessity to provide adequate manpower, in terms of both quantity and quality, to meet military requirements, at a cost acceptable, both politically and economically, to the nation. Among many benefits, rotation can maximize unit performance, minimize casualties, bolster morale, and equitably distribute risk among those called upon from society to serve. Thus, a sound personnel rotation policy is essential for ensuring competent military performance. This study explores the complex impact of the twelve-month tour on the army's performance during the service's longest war through recounting the views of a select group of successful career officers, interviewed years later, who commanded companies in Vietnam.

Companies in Vietnam normally consisted of between 100 and 300 soldiers. There were different types of companies organized to perform different missions. Some infantry companies used armored personnel carriers, and others flew into battle in helicopters. Aviation companies possessed troop transport, cargo, reconnaissance, or attack helicopters. Signal companies supported larger units with communications equipment and electronics specialists. Transportation companies employed cargo trucks, fuel trucks, or even boats. Company-sized units in cavalry and artillery organizations were, respectively, called "troops" and "batteries." Three to five companies formed a battalion of 300-1000 soldiers commanded by a lieutenant colonel with between fifteen and twenty years of military experience. A company consisted of three or four subunits called platoons. Lieutenants, with only a few months' military training and time in the service commanded platoons. Noncommissioned officers, also known by their rank as sergeants, led smaller units within

these platoons that ranged in size from a handful of soldiers to a few dozen. Ideally, they complemented junior officers with experience, maturity, and expertise. The career path for becoming a company commander during Vietnam normally involved earning a commission from either a military academy, such as West Point, or from the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) at a civilian college. After graduation, the officers underwent a few months of military training, and finally served from two to four years at the rank of lieutenant in companies as platoon leaders and company executive officers. An officer could also obtain a commission through Officer Candidate School (OCS). This program required a candidate to possess the equivalent of two years of college as a prerequisite for commissioning.<sup>5</sup> A person could earn a commission after completing eight weeks of basic combat training, eight weeks of advanced individual training, and twenty-four weeks of officer training.<sup>6</sup> The young leaders and soldiers of these small tactical units, important in every modern war, most particularly carried the burden of the fighting in Southeast Asia.

Vietnam has often been characterized as a “company commander’s war.” A survey conducted by the army in 1969 about the nature of combat throughout Vietnam agreed, concluding that engagements with the enemy seldom involved more than one company at a time.<sup>7</sup> The study determined that fifty-three percent of engagements were company-sized, thirty-seven percent were platoon-sized, but only ten percent were battalion-sized.<sup>8</sup> Along with their considerable combat responsibilities, company commanders had to make crucial decisions about personnel. As soldiers departed companies due to rotation, death, wounds,

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<sup>5</sup> Email to author from Bill Paris, 1966 US Army Infantry OCS Graduate, 23 February 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> United States Army Combat Developments Command, *Dynamics of Fire and Maneuver (FIRMA III) (U) Final Report* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army Military History Institute, 15 August 1969), II-208.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

injuries, and illness, the army did its best, frequently unsuccessfully, to replace them with equivalently competent soldiers; company commanders had to decide how to assign new people to platoons, ideally in consultation with experienced noncommissioned officers. The goal was to obtain the optimum mix of experience. Because of rotation and losses from other causes, the strongest platoon one day could become the weakest platoon the next.

Compounding these problems, officers rotated after six months of command (if they survived) to staff positions in Vietnam for the remainder of their one-year tours. At the end of the personnel pipeline, company commanders ultimately had to make the difficult decisions on which the mission, the lives of their soldiers, and their own lives depended.

Despite their vital role in both directing the combat of the war and in dealing with the consequences of rotation, no compilation of the perspectives of company commanders about the impact of the twelve-month tour on the performance of their companies has ever been conducted.

Between 1981 and 1985, the US Army War College surveyed over 250 students, lieutenant colonels and colonels, who had commanded companies in Vietnam. Known as the “Company Command in Vietnam Oral History Collection,” this project sought to capture useful information using the same types of questions posed earlier to veterans of World War I and II.<sup>9</sup> Students interviewed five of their fellow officers using a standard questionnaire of some fifty questions--about personnel, organization, training, support, and operations. The questionnaire posed two questions about personnel. First, it asked for a description of the commanders’ most significant people problem(s), taking into consideration drug abuse, personnel replacements, racial strife, health, and other issues. Second, the questionnaire

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<sup>9</sup> Email to author from LTC (Ret) Martin A. Andresen, Military History Institute Chief of Oral History at the US Army War College, 1984-86, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 4 December 2003.



asked the officers to assess the impact of the twelve-month tour on the morale of their units. The War College attempted to interview as many officers as possible. Out of 248 interviews, twenty officers commanded two companies during distinctly different tours, and one commanded three companies over three distinctly different tours, for a total of 270 total “commands.” These officers served an average of 1.86 tours in Vietnam, including 165 officers with two tours, and twenty-five officers with three tours. They represented eighteen different army specialty branches, (such as infantry, armor, aviation, and artillery) and three services (including nine Marine Corps officers and one Coast Guard officer). Of the eighty-five “commands” used as a sample for this study, twenty obtained their commission from West Point, forty-five from ROTC, and twenty from OCS. Added to their impressive list of qualifications, many of the officers advised South Vietnamese units at some point during the war, and most served in more than one region of Vietnam.

Important to note, however, is the fact that these officers possessed a bias in favor of the army, and were loath to criticize the institution to which they were devoting, very successfully, their careers. Generalizing about their views is difficult, especially about a subject as controversial as the Vietnam War. Vietnam was a profoundly personal and emotional experience for most of them. They were probably less apt to be critical about the rationale for the war and the army’s conduct of the war than most other observers would have been; but they also probably shared the widespread disapproval felt in the armed services about the manner of the war’s conduct by the nation’s civilian and military leadership. Interviewed at a time when Vietnam still divided the country, critical scholarship and the ongoing Cold War may have hardened their views. Officers seemed little inclined to criticize the performance of their own companies. Their accounts were undoubtedly biased towards

success because they were considered the top five percent of the officer corps at their rank, and presumably, their units performed at an above average level. Also, they may have, understandably, desired to rationalize the war in such a way as to vindicate the deaths of their comrades. Most of the officers described their time in command, except for casualties, as a very positive, formative experience. Some of them felt a deep sense of loss knowing that they probably would never again participate in anything as intense and professionally fulfilling as commanding a company in combat. Others left bitter, depressed, and deeply disillusioned with an army, and a nation, that had invested so much, but failed. No doubt, these and other emotions affected their memories, and important details were lost to the passage of time. Adding to the confusion, they each experienced their own unique combination of enemy, terrain, leadership, and tactics. While the reflections of these officers contained valuable information about the war, their comments should be understood within the context of these many probable biases.

By selecting eighty-five of the 270 available “commands,” it is possible to reflect the diversity of the available whole in terms of year, branch, region, and source of commission. On the basis of these eighty-five representative “commands,” how did serving career officers, with experience commanding companies in Vietnam, view the impact of the twelve-month tour individual rotation policy upon the performance of their companies in combat?<sup>10</sup> How did it compare to their other personnel problems? What do their views tell us about the existing literature on the subject?

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<sup>10</sup> “Proportionately” means that roughly thirty-one percent of the available officers from each branch, year served, source of commission, and region were selected for the study. A true statistically representative sample would have required the use of at least 190 interviews due to the large number of low density demographics represented in the population, but time constraints prevented this.

The reminiscences of these officers suggest that individual rotation on a twelve-month basis produced a complex result of positive and negative effects. “Turnover,” or “turbulence,” due to the tour constituted the biggest personnel problem, excepting casualties, faced by the former company commanders. Most importantly, the tour meaningfully reduced the tactical efficiency of their companies. By depleting the pool of experienced officers and noncommissioned officers, preventing units from developing a collective knowledge of unit operational methods beyond the most basic level, and causing unnecessary casualties, rotation forced companies to perform below their potential. In other words, individual squads, platoons, and whole companies had to learn by their own experience rather than the unit gain the benefit of its collective time in battle. John Paul Vann was right, according to these successful career officers. In terms of morale, the former company commanders agreed that individual rotation bolstered morale by “giving a man a goal.” But the policy’s adverse repercussions for camaraderie and unit cohesion, along with needless casualties, also degraded morale. Finally, while the tour decreased unit cohesion, it did not threaten units--at least those admittedly commanded by many of the army’s top officers--with disintegration.

The army’s twelve-month rotation policy originated from an effort to avoid the mistakes of World War II and Korea. Acute manpower shortages prevented the army from considering any type of rotation policy until late in both wars. Instead, the army relied on a system of individual replacement, which meant that units continuously remained in the line. Replacement, without rotation, doomed soldiers serving on the front lines to an almost

certain destiny of wounds, mental or physical breakdown, or death.<sup>11</sup> Failing doubly, the army found that after thirty to forty days of heavy combat unit efficiency dropped below acceptable levels even when casualties were promptly replaced.<sup>12</sup> Under public pressure for a policy that fairly distributed the risk of combat, congress finally prevailed upon the army to adopt a policy that rotated one percent of the soldiers assigned to a theater per month beginning in March 1944 that lasted until June 1945.<sup>13</sup> For Korea, the army implemented a policy in April 1951 that rotated soldiers after six to twelve months, depending on their exposure to combat; but, lacking the men to support such rapid turnover, changed to a policy in July 1951 that rotated soldiers based on an uncertain formula that evaluated exposure to combat and the projected availability of replacements.<sup>14</sup> None of these policies provided much actual relief from the perspective of war-weary veterans serving in either of the wars because the policies proved inconsistent due to course of the conflicts, and never appeared to rotate more than a mere trickle of the total number of eligible soldiers, often leading to problems with morale and soldier efficiency.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, eighteen, then twenty-four, and finally thirty months of overseas service became just the minimum prerequisite for eligibility in the Southwest Pacific due to the demands of World War II.<sup>16</sup> Senior army leaders disliked these individual rotation policies as well because they significantly decreased unit combat

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<sup>11</sup> Department of the Army, *The Personnel Replacement System in the United States Army* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1954), 330.

<sup>12</sup> Department of the Army, *History of Military Mobilization in the United States Army, 1775-1945* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1955), 647-648.

<sup>13</sup> Department of the Army, *Personnel Replacement System*, 330-332.

<sup>14</sup> Terrence J. Gough, *US Mobilization and Logistics in the Korean War: A Research Approach* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1987), 42-43.

<sup>15</sup> Gough, *Mobilization and Logistics in the Korean War*, 43.; Department of the Army, *Personnel Replacement System*, 334; 430-431.

<sup>16</sup> Department of the Army, *Personnel Replacement System*, 332.

efficiency.<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, on the few occasions when the army conducted unit rotation the results pleased senior army leaders because they found that it largely alleviated the problems of morale and unit efficiency incurred under individually based replacement and rotation policies.<sup>18</sup>

From its deeply troubled experience with individual rotation and replacement during World War II and Korea, the army practically deemed unit rotation a nonnegotiable requirement for any future war because it promised the frontline soldier the best chance of survival, guaranteed a reserve, and enabled it to managed the problem of decreased combat efficiency by providing units with an all important opportunity to train newly arrived soldiers and replace equipment.<sup>19</sup> The army also considered some form of individual rotation desirable, even if it provided soldiers with just a temporary relief from combat duty.<sup>20</sup> Rotation improved morale by giving soldiers a goal, and the army thought that it could maximize individual performance, prevent casualties, and conserve manpower if soldiers received some form of relief prior to the onset of combat exhaustion.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, the army advocated individual rotation only if it were practiced in conjunction with unit rotation.<sup>22</sup> But General Westmoreland, acting within the context of greater policy set by the White House, opted to draw selectively upon these hard earned lessons when planning for Vietnam.

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<sup>17</sup> Department of the Army, *Personnel Replacement System*, 337-338; Gough, *Mobilization and Logistics in the Korean War*, 43-44.

<sup>18</sup> Gough, *Mobilization and Logistics in the Korean War*, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Department of the Army, *Personnel Replacement System*, 337.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 336-337.

<sup>21</sup> Department of the Army, *Personnel Replacement System*, 333-334; US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA. *An Army War College Study on Army "Rotation,"* 1 March 1952, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Department of the Army, *Personnel Replacement System*, 337.

Prior to the large deployment of American forces in 1965, the required tour length for personnel stationed in Vietnam ranged from twenty-four to thirty months for accompanied personnel (those stationed with their families) assigned to Saigon, fourteen months for unaccompanied personnel stationed in Saigon, and twelve months for unaccompanied personnel located outside of Saigon.<sup>23</sup> At the time, these tour lengths compared favorably with those for soldiers assigned to other non-combat overseas locations, such as Korea.<sup>24</sup> After the army evacuated family members in early 1965, twelve months remained the standard tour length for all soldiers stationed in Vietnam, excepting approximately 130 officers occupying key positions, mostly generals and colonels, for whom General Westmoreland had obtained special approval to serve extended tours of nineteen to twenty-four months.<sup>25</sup> In December 1965, he affirmed his desire to maintain the twelve-month tour, and debate over changing the policy ended.<sup>26</sup> Westmoreland later said that he endorsed the twelve-month tour policy based on his assessment of the tour's appropriateness for the local conditions in Vietnam. He "was convinced that it would be a long war," and upon taking command "saw no reason to change" the policy.<sup>27</sup> It suited the "harsh conditions" of Vietnam, especially from the standpoint of health, and strengthened morale because it "gave a man a goal."<sup>28</sup> He also argued that the tour would provide the army with "a valuable pool

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<sup>23</sup> Department of the Army, *Study of the 12-Month Tour* (Washington, DC: Defense Technical Information Center, 29 June 1970), Appendix A, 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix W, 1. Tour lengths in Korea varied from twelve to sixteen months in the 1950s; In 1965, soldiers served thirteen-month tours in both Korea and the Dominican Republic (Appendix Z, 1).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix A, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Westmoreland, 143, 295.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 294-295.

of counterinsurgency experience.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the army adopted the twelve-month individual rotation policy not only because of internal studies suggesting the worth of some of its aspects, but because its commander supported the policy, and, significantly, so did the President.

Lyndon B. Johnson’s controversial decision against mobilizing the reserves, announced on 23 July 1965, denied the army the manpower that could have enabled it to conduct unit rotation. According to General Harold K. Johnson, Chief of Staff of the Army from 1964-68, the President’s decision “came as a *complete* and *total* surprise.”<sup>30</sup> The army had based every single contingency plan for Vietnam upon a planned mobilization of the reserves.<sup>31</sup> The decision completely undercut the army’s ability to simultaneously provide trained troops for Vietnam, already in critically short supply before the war, and maintain the combat readiness of the army around the world.<sup>32</sup> The reasons behind the President’s decision were not clear to the Joint Chief’s of Staff then, and remain so today. In his memoirs, President Johnson claimed that it was to avoid making “threatening noises to the Chinese or the Russians by calling up reserves in large numbers.”<sup>33</sup> In a recent biography, Robert Dallek differed: not only did the President want to avoid antagonizing Moscow and Peking, but he also did not want to rile Congress and the public with an announcement that might appear to suggest a major change in policy, or put the country on a war footing and

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<sup>29</sup> Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (hereafter HQ, USMACV), *Command History, 1966* (San Francisco, CA, 30 June 1967), 160; See also HQ, USMACV, *General Westmoreland’s Report on the War in Vietnam* (San Francisco, CA, 30 June 1968), 47 and 238.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis Sorley, *Honorable Warrior: General Harold K. Johnson and the Ethics of Command* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 212 and 214.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 149.

thus disrupt his Great Society agenda.<sup>34</sup> While President' Johnson's desire to avoid anticipated Congressional resistance to a decision to mobilize the reserves likely explains the controversy, no conclusive evidence has survived. This "policy by default" result might also be viewed as simply a failure by both the civilian and military leaders of the Johnson administration, predisposed toward thinking about defense policy in its traditional total war terms, to evolve a coherent strategy for the newer, but less understood, challenge of fighting a limited war. Whatever the President's rationale, the decision essentially limited the army's options to some form of individual rotation.

Denied access to the reserves, the army resorted to drastic measures to expand from approximately 960,000 to over 1.5 million soldiers.<sup>35</sup> The war immediately drained the regular forces stationed in the United States, normally maintained as a reserve for a possible war in Europe. The reserve declined from 227,000 soldiers in May 1965, to 96,000 in January 1966.<sup>36</sup> Now the army had to increase draft calls and organize new units in their entirety.<sup>37</sup> In 1965, the army activated more than 500 new units, and over 600 the following year.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, entirely new recruits had to replace every cohort of draftees as they finished their mandatory two years of service.<sup>39</sup> Every month the army lost over 30,000 trained people.<sup>40</sup> Essentially, the entire force, except for career soldiers, had to be replaced every two years.<sup>41</sup> As a result, quality declined. Enlisted men received just sixteen weeks of

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 275-276.

<sup>35</sup> Sorley, 259.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers: American Generals Reflect on Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo, 1977), 118.

<sup>38</sup> Sorley, 260.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.



training prior to deploying to Vietnam, often from instructors with the same minimal amount of experience.<sup>42</sup> Enlistees could even earn commissions as officers by attending a mere six additional months at Officer Candidate School. Officers were sent to war, and instructors to the training bases, with less than a year's total service.<sup>43</sup> General Johnson likened the problem to keeping a "bathtub filled with the plug out."<sup>44</sup> Altogether, the army could expect little more than twelve months service in Vietnam from conscripts with two-year obligations. Mysteriously, General Westmoreland never seems to have felt strongly about whether or not the President mobilized the reserves, or concerned himself with the stress that individual rotation placed upon the readiness of the army outside of Vietnam.<sup>45</sup> Despite awkward, yet explicable origins, and Westmoreland's rationale, the twelve-month tour policy sparked an adverse reaction from many corners.

A number of general histories, scholarly articles, military studies, memoirs, and biographies have addressed the twelve-month tour. While most possess some merit, they also have important limitations. The army's own *Study of the 12-Month Vietnam Tour*, conducted in 1970, argued for a longer tour because of the stress the twelve-month tour imposed in the areas of unit readiness, personnel retention, and morale on units outside of Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> The study also recommended an increased tour length of either eighteen or twenty-four months for budgetary reasons.<sup>47</sup> The 1970 *Study on Military Professionalism*, investigating the ethical climate of the army officer corps, concluded that turnover

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>45</sup> Westmoreland, 143.

<sup>46</sup> Department of the Army, *Study of the 12-Month Tour*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 4.

encouraged an environment that sacrificed long-term ethical conduct for the accomplishment of short-term goals.<sup>48</sup> Again, both studies had an army-wide focus and only peripherally addressed the impact of the tour in Vietnam.

Two heated reactions to the policy, specifically *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* (1978) by Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, and *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam Era* (1981) by Cincinnatus, brought the controversy surrounding the twelve-month tour policy to the forefront of debate in military circles in the first decade after the war. Possessing military connections but no Vietnam experience, these authors focused on institutional explanations for the army's failure. Both books argued that problems, deeply rooted in the army's ethics and organization, inevitably produced an inept officer corps and unsound strategic decisions that ultimately led to the army's defeat in Vietnam. Accordingly, they asserted that the twelve-month tour policy destroyed unit cohesion and ethical conduct.<sup>49</sup> However, these authors failed to support their arguments with adequate evidence, especially relying on anonymous interviews, and scholars and soldiers quickly discredited their "strident accusations."<sup>50</sup>

Generally, scholars have neglected the effects of the twelve-month tour and allocated minimal attention to the policy. A few, have pointed out the positive effects of the tour on

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<sup>48</sup> USAWC, *Study on Military Professionalism* (Carlisle Barracks, PA, 30 June 1970), v.

<sup>49</sup> Gabriel, Richard A. and Paul L. Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* (hereafter *Crisis in Command*) (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 9 and 38; Cincinnatus, *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam Era* (hereafter *Self-Destruction*) (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 154 and 157.

<sup>50</sup> Allan R. Millett, review of *Self-Destruction*, by Cincinnatus, In *Military Affairs* 45(4) (December 1981): 288; John R. Galvin, "Cincinnatus Recidivus: A Review Essay," review of *Self-Destruction*, by Cincinnatus, In *Parameters* 11(1) (March 1981): 15-18; Anthony L. Wermuth, "Savage Invective" review of *Crisis in Command*, by Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, In *Military Review* 59(2) (February 1979): 80.

morale.<sup>51</sup> Most, however, have emphasized the tour's negative effects to the point of exclusion, blaming it for preventing institutional learning, degrading unit cohesion, decreasing the quality of unit leadership, and causing unnecessary casualties.<sup>52</sup> Some have argued that the policy reinforced a sense of loneliness, and made survival a soldier's main preoccupation.<sup>53</sup> But scholars writing broadly about the war have normally devoted only a few sentences to the subject, providing little evidence or depth, and tending to repeat sporadic combinations of the negative critiques of the tour's effects.

The best scholarly examinations of the twelve-month tour policy, though limited to the perspective of the common soldier, are *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today's Military* (1970) by the sociologist Charles C. Moskos, Jr., and *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (1993) by historian Christian G. Appy. Relying on thirty-four interviews conducted with soldiers during short visits to Vietnam in 1965 and 1967, Moskos argued that rotation degraded unit cohesion, forced units to lose the valuable experience of veterans, and fostered a "privatized view of the war" that damaged

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<sup>51</sup> Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 118; James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston, MA: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 220-221.

<sup>52</sup> Lewy, 118; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 651; Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 206.; Edward N. Luttwak, "On the Need to Reform American Strategy," ed. Philip S. Kronenberg, *Planning US Security: Defense Policy in the Eighties* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), 22; Gibson, 219; Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: US Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973* (New York: Dell, 1985), 347; William Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat: Leadership and Societal Influence in the Armies of the Soviet Union, the United States, North Vietnam, and Israel* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1985), xvi; Davidson, 618; Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 114; also Thayer, "The American Style of War Made it Costly" ed. by W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak and Company, 1977), 210.

<sup>53</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2d ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 479-480; Gibson, 219, 221.

camaraderie.<sup>54</sup> Over the course of a tour, he observed that a soldier's performance steadily improved until the last few months, when a decline occurred as soldiers became "reluctant to engage in offensive combat operations."<sup>55</sup> Inequity became an issue as well because the policy made no distinction between soldiers serving in front- and rear-echelon units.<sup>56</sup> He also thought that the tour detached the soldier from the outcome of the war, because the soldier's rotation date marked the end of the war, not the war's eventual outcome.<sup>57</sup> On a positive note, Moskos credited the policy for mitigating the effects of combat exhaustion experienced in World War II, and contributing to the "usually high moral of the individual combat soldiers."<sup>58</sup>

Historian Christian G. Appy based *Working-Class War* on over 100 interviews with veterans of the war in Vietnam and an extensive study of published soldier memoirs. He dedicated about ten pages to discussing the impact of the tour. Significantly, Appy found "little evidence that the tour increased combat motivation."<sup>59</sup> In fact, he proposed that the tour may have forestalled pressure from soldiers to withdraw, or even prevented a "full-scale mutiny," because the tour made the purpose and meaning of the war irrelevant to the soldiers by inviting them to focus on individual survival over all other factors.<sup>60</sup> Appy surmised: "virtually all the oral histories, memoirs, and novels indicate[d] that soldiers were most willing to fight when they were least conscious of the time left in their tours," a reference to a

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<sup>54</sup> Charles C. Moskos, Jr. *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today's Military* (New York: Russell Sage Foundations, 1970), 137, 142, 144.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-143.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>59</sup> Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 236.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-236.

soldier's efficiency peaking in the middle of his tour.<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, Appy related morale to the degree to which soldiers "believed themselves engaged in an important and justifiable cause," and simultaneously accused General Westmoreland of not understanding this.<sup>62</sup> But Appy's assessment is not fair to Westmoreland. Westmoreland thought of the war as just, and still does to this day, and most of America agreed with him until after the Tet Offensive. Furthermore, since Westmoreland designed the policy in response to the army's problems in World War II and Korea, he did not anticipate the political and social opposition to the war that developed in 1968. Finally, if soldier hostility were as strong as Appy implied, then it is doubtful that a tour length of a full year, still a long time to be in combat far away from home, would have so successfully defused it. Appy asserted: "At every point in the war soldiers viewed their tours as 'a kind of prison sentence.'"<sup>63</sup> Appy's conclusions seem ponderously negative, especially in comparison to Moskos's nuanced observations of enlisted views of the tour conducted before 1968. It is possible that the fact that he relied, to a considerable extent, on published soldier memoirs and novels, most written after 1968, may explain this leaning.

Finally, General Bruce Palmer, Jr. provided a thoughtful interpretation of the tour's effects in his memoir, *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (1984). General Palmer, a veteran of three wars, commanded Second Field Force, Vietnam, a corps-sized organization, in 1967, served as Deputy Commander of the United States Army, Vietnam from 1967-68, became Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, and retired as the commander of the US Army Readiness Command in 1974 after thirty-eight years in the army

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

(forty-two including West Point). Palmer criticized the twelve-month tour for severely degrading unit cohesion, undermining soldier aggressiveness, purging the experience of veteran soldiers from units over time, causing unnecessary casualties among newly arrived soldiers, and creating a dearth of experienced combat leaders.<sup>64</sup> He also thought that the policy “greatly compounded the army’s problem of maintaining strength in combat units, especially rifle companies.”<sup>65</sup> He admitted that the army as of the early 1980s had yet to devise an adequate way to maintain the strength and integrity of combat units exposed to prolonged periods of combat.<sup>66</sup> None of this, however, was so clear in 1965 when the army stirred to answer the nation’s summons.

Elements of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division began to arrive in Vietnam within twenty-four hours after President Johnson announced the large-scale deployment of American ground forces on 28 July 1965.<sup>67</sup> The First Cavalry Division, which had trained together for months, immediately began to deploy by sea. Draft calls increased to provide new recruits, and under-strength regular army units began the process of receiving new soldiers. Officers stationed around the world had their tours curtailed to lead newly formed units. Obviously, officers who deployed during the initial stages of the war, from 1965-67, faced a series of difficulties that accompany the rapid expansion of an army for war. However, like the company commanders who preceded them in World War II, and unlike the company commanders who would follow them in Vietnam, the initial cohort sent to Vietnam enjoyed

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<sup>64</sup> Bruce R. Palmer, *The 25-Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1984), 204.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>67</sup> Krepinevich, 162-63.

the advantages of deploying with cohesive units that had previously trained together in the US. For a time, these company commanders enjoyed the benefits of this stability. Soon, however, the army's transition to the twelve-month tour and inevitable casualties disrupted their units.

One officer who had commanded a combat engineer company in the First Cavalry Division from July 1965 to July 1966, Lieutenant Colonel Paul G. Cerjan, reflected that "it would be difficult to pick the most significant people problem" because he had received a large number of soldiers in a short period of time, just prior to deployment.<sup>68</sup> In a single week, his company increased in strength from sixty-five percent of its authorized strength to 120 percent. So, initially, the biggest problem he had with respect to people was with their level of training.<sup>69</sup> Fortunately for Cerjan, he had the opportunity to train the new soldiers during the thirty-day ship voyage to Vietnam, and this sudden influx of personnel never harmed the operation of his unit.<sup>70</sup> Cerjan did not encounter the personnel problems, especially drug abuse and racial strife, which became a feature of the war in later years.<sup>71</sup> On the ship, the unit came to know and accept each other, so it "didn't have a racial problem."<sup>72</sup> However, almost immediately upon arriving in Vietnam, his company underwent the painful transition to an individual rotation policy that threatened its cohesion.

The transition required staggering the experience of soldiers between units with different arrival dates, a process called "infusion." "We had an infusion program for those people who were going to be with us a year. Some of these people had to be sent into other

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with LTC Paul G. Cerjan, USA, 1981, no interview number assigned, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2-3.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

units so the whole battalion, or company, wouldn't rotate on the same day the following year."<sup>73</sup> Rotation created many problems for Cerjan's unit because he constantly had to train newly arrived soldiers during the conduct of ongoing combat operations.<sup>74</sup> His replacements had not been trained to fire the newly issued M-16 rifle, or in the conduct of helicopter operations (a major deficiency in the helicopter borne, or "airmobile," First Cavalry Division), and lacked essential expertise in the use of demolitions which were employed extensively for clearing landing zones and destroying enemy fortifications.<sup>75</sup> As a result, his company diverted scarce resources to create an "internal school" while simultaneously conducting combat operations.<sup>76</sup> Cerjan also criticized the twelve-month tour for creating a distraction because many soldiers at the end of their tour worried more about their departure date than the mission.<sup>77</sup> Regardless of the problems created by infusion, Cerjan maintained, "morale was exceptionally high because about half the company knew that they were going to be departing in six months."<sup>78</sup>

A former infantry company commander who had served in the First Infantry Division from January 1965 to March 1966, Lt. Col. Edward O. Yaugo, also savored the benefits of deploying with a cohesive unit to Vietnam. "It was such a great feeling getting on over there initially, as a real firm body of people, but after the first battle, it is amazing how people get hurt, and then people actually start . . . getting killed."<sup>79</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Yaugo's company suffered a significant number of casualties soon after it arrived in Vietnam. Almost

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 10-14.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 3- 4.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with LTC Edward O. Yaugo, USA, 1981, interview 1269, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 11.



immediately, every one of his lieutenants became wounded.<sup>80</sup> Yaugo, too, had to be evacuated due to wounds within ten days of arriving, but he returned to his company just a few days later.<sup>81</sup> During his time as a company commander, one of his noncommissioned officers thrice received wounds from “booby traps, mines, and things of that sort.”<sup>82</sup> “Personnel turbulence was just a terrible, terrible thing. A lot of it was brought on by the normal rotation,” he lamented.<sup>83</sup> Yaugo singled out rotation for degrading the combat efficiency of his company because the newly arrived soldiers made mistakes out of inexperience. Soldiers would accidentally discharge a weapon while walking on patrol, or would grow anxious at night and fire their machine guns at a wild boar or a shadow.<sup>84</sup> Yaugo emphasized that “turbulence” created “frustration” because just as his company began to perform at the level of a “professional unit,” soldiers would depart and new ones arrive, forcing the company to repeat the training process.<sup>85</sup> For Yaugo, the most significant effect “turbulence” had upon his company was that it acted as a “barrier” to the efficiency of his company’s performance in combat.<sup>86</sup>

Despite the problems created by rotation and casualties, Lieutenant Colonel Yaugo felt that his company overcame these problems and maintained high morale throughout his tour.

I always felt morale was really, really super. In '65 we really felt everyone knew pretty much what was going on over there and we felt that we were winning. We felt that we were making great progress. Every time we met the enemy we bloodied his nose. We respected him. Morale was just a beautiful thing.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

Yaugo suggested that the twelve-month tour policy helped to bolster morale because he felt that an infantryman in Vietnam probably reached his point of exhaustion at around the twelve-month point.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, Yaugo would have agreed that the twelve-month tour achieved at least one of its intended effects: it helped alleviate the problems encountered with combat exhaustion among soldiers serving on the front line, as occurred in World War II and Korea.

Yaugo's statement about morale also generally reflected the optimistic outlook expressed by the other officers who had deployed and fought during the first year of the war. Every officer from the sample who commanded during the first year of the war considered morale to be high and some form of personnel turbulence, whether brought by infusion, rotation or casualties, to be their primary personnel problem. This continued into 1966 and 1967, but the frustrating cycle of rotation, and its associated problems, had already begun in earnest.

Though commanding a bit later, from April 1966 to April 1967, Lt. Col. Raoul H. Alcala had an experience comparable to Lieutenant Colonels Cerjan and Yaugo. Alcala commanded an armored cavalry troop of the Ninth Infantry Division that operated in the Mekong Delta. He began the war with a cohesive unit, in fact commanding them as new recruits through an entire cycle prior to deployment to Vietnam, and describing their level of training as "top drawer."<sup>89</sup> But later, Alcala thought "the single most traumatic experience" of his time in command came the day that "the first third of the troop had to pack up and

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with LTC Raoul H. Alcala, USA, 1983, interview 1011, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2, 4.

move” because of the infusion process.<sup>90</sup> The change proved especially unsettling to the soldiers because “the majority of the draftees had been with the unit from the day they entered the army, for all practical purposes, and all the noncommissioned officers had been with us from shortly after the completion of basic training for those folks.”<sup>91</sup> His troop then had to accept what he “could only categorize as the dregs of the rest of the cavalry troops in Vietnam.”<sup>92</sup> In sum, rotation dissolved the bonds of camaraderie and cohesion that had developed in the unit and consequently hurt morale. Alcala also thought that infusion degraded the tactical competence of his troop to such an extent that it led to the relief of his successor.<sup>93</sup> Due to the intense nature of ongoing combat operations, new soldiers assigned to Alcala’s troop never had more than two days to learn the troop’s standard methods for conducting operations before facing combat.<sup>94</sup> Sometimes they arrived, met their new squad leader, and went into combat the next day.<sup>95</sup>

Alcala also remembered having tremendous difficulties training new soldiers in his troop’s methods for conducting operations. He constantly had to train the new soldiers so that they would know the troop’s particular procedures for conducting different operations, such as reacting to enemy contact, night reconnaissance, in what circumstances to dismount from their armored vehicles, and where to locate security forces at night.<sup>96</sup> Alcala often had to describe troop battle drills in detail when briefing plans because platoons “really wouldn’t know what they were doing” otherwise.<sup>97</sup> “Standard operating procedures (SOPs),” and

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 11.

“battle drills” are similar to the “fundamentals” and “plays” from play books that sports teams practice repeatedly. They were the most common operations that Lieutenant Colonel Alcala’s cavalry troop had to conduct, and, as he pointed out, they “differ enormously between units.”<sup>98</sup> His troop should not have had to think “consciously” about battle drills to perform them properly.<sup>99</sup> Yet individual rotation prevented Alcala from ever gaining complete confidence in the training level of his soldiers. Time did not always allow Alcala the luxury of managing operations to this level of detail. Sometimes he had as few as five minutes to plan an operation, which might involve a task as complex and dangerous as simultaneously maneuvering his troop, adjusting artillery fire, directing air support from F-100 jets, and controlling the fire of helicopter gun ships.<sup>100</sup> No wonder Alcala concluded that rotation “was a very significant problem in the unit. It was more than just individual morale. It really affected the cohesiveness and *esprit* of the troop.”<sup>101</sup>

Another officer, Lt. Col. William P. Collier, Jr., experienced similar problems with rotation in his artillery battery during the period from October 1966 to October 1967. “The personnel replacement was a problem,” he recalled, because after approximately four months in Vietnam “they came along and said, ‘Since all of you guys will be going home at the same time, we can’t allow that, so we’re going to break you up.’”<sup>102</sup> Subsequently, the army moved his most experienced soldiers to units with less time in Vietnam, and “infused” his company with soldiers who had less time, “so that, in effect all of us would leave and there

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 25, 28.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with COL William P. Collier, Jr., USA, 1984, interview 1056, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 6.

would still be stability with those that remained.”<sup>103</sup> He added, however, that his unit only lost between fifteen to twenty percent of the original group, so his company managed to maintain its integrity “very well.”<sup>104</sup>

Collier’s airmobile artillery battery supported the First Cavalry Division, and normally found itself deployed on the tops of mountains and moving every few days.<sup>105</sup> The nature of the unit’s mission apparently contributed to its high morale. As Collier related, “morale was up because ‘the unit was up,’” a reference to the fact that his unit always had to be ready to put “a round in the air inside of two minutes.”<sup>106</sup> The mission of artillery batteries required a very high level of technical proficiency. The centralized nature of their deployment and daily requirement to fire, according to Collier, an average of 500 to 700 rounds per day, facilitated teamwork, repetitive training, and supervision.<sup>107</sup> Unlike some unit missions, the nature of Collier’s lent itself to mitigating the problems of continuity incurred from rotation. Collier characterized the morale in his battery as “good,” and, in fact, stated that his unit “really didn’t have any morale problems beyond the fact that we were on top of mountains, that we ate C-rations for most all our meals and there was no entertainment at all.”<sup>108</sup>

Rotation caused unnecessary casualties, recalled one officer who had commanded an infantry company in the Twenty Fifth Infantry Division from October 1966 until March 1967. “So, in effect,” summarized Lt. Col. John P. Otjen, “what we did is we traded six

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 9.

months seasoned combat veterans for brand new, once again inexperienced troops.”<sup>109</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Otjen felt that he generally received well-trained and highly motivated soldiers who were “ready to go.”<sup>110</sup> But he also thought, “Unfortunately, we ran into a big fight and I lost several of them [new replacements] as a result of their inexperience.”<sup>111</sup> Few of the other interviewed officers made explicit references to unnecessary casualties. This is surprising because statistical analyses conducted by the army and scholars has indicated an increased incidence of casualties among new replacements in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, making individual rotation certainly appear to have been a significant cause of unnecessary casualties.<sup>112</sup> Increased casualties would also seem to have been a logical result of the degraded unit performance that officers most often connected to individual rotation.

The Marine Corps experienced similar problems with individual rotation using a thirteen-month tour, but this included two weeks of processing at Okinawa, en route both to and from Vietnam.<sup>113</sup> On 1 November 1969, the marines changed to a twelve-month tour.<sup>114</sup> After deploying to Vietnam, the Marine Corps also swapped personnel between units to make the transition to individual rotation, a process derisively referred to by marines as the “mixmaster.” A former rifle company commander in the First Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, Col. Marshall B. Darling, related that he commanded “several rifle companies in succession,” between April 1966 and January 1967, because many commanders had been

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<sup>109</sup> Interview with LTC John P. Otjen, USA, 1982, no interview number assigned, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 8.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>112</sup> Department of the Army, *Personnel Replacement System*, 333-334; US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA. *An Army War College Study on Army “Rotation,”* 1 March 1952, 5; Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam*, 114; also Thayer, “The American Style of War Made it Costly”, 210.

<sup>113</sup> Department of the Army, *Study of the 12-Month Tour*, Appendix A, 2.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

“wounded, killed or relieved there for various reasons, but mostly wounded and evacuated.”<sup>115</sup> “We went in country with a very well-trained herd the first tour, and then about June, I guess, of 1966, we were taking some casualties by then, and it became apparent to the powers that be that our whole battalion was going to rotate the same day.”<sup>116</sup> Darling explained that after three months in Vietnam, his unit received a number of marines with a few months remaining in Vietnam, and a second group of brand new marines to balance experience between units, and to get the individual, instead of unit, rotation started.<sup>117</sup>

Colonel Darling’s rifle company immediately suffered from the rotation policy. His company, like many army and marine units, had trained together prior to deployment, and had developed a high degree of competence and cohesion. As a result, the unit initially “paid very great attention to things like immediate action drills and how to do things.”<sup>118</sup> For example: “Everybody knew what the commander’s intentions were because he had been with him for a long time. And it was really easy to command.”<sup>119</sup> Because “people understood what was going on,” Darling could count on his company to react to enemy contact according to his expectations, and he could dedicate more attention to the enemy’s actions.<sup>120</sup>

Rotation, however, drastically changed the combat efficiency of his rifle company.

Unfortunately, a lot of those guys would be new guys and from then on, with the individual replacements, a great deal of our time was consumed in training new replacements. The guys knew how to fight, and they were tough and they were in

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<sup>115</sup> Interview with COL Marshall B. Darling, USMC, 1985, interview 1069, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 5-6.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

shape. What they lacked were the techniques and procedures and the local SOPs and the what to do under circumstances sort of things.<sup>121</sup>

According to Darling, rotation undermined the company's ability to do basic "unit-cohesive-type things, like immediate action drills: who goes where if you get shot at, what to do if you get shot at, what to do if you're not shot at, you know, all the little techniques."<sup>122</sup> The change forced Colonel Darling to become "considerably more autocratic in some areas."<sup>123</sup> Suddenly, he "discovered that you had to have rules and you had to enforce them with iron, just iron discipline, to force these people to take care of themselves."<sup>124</sup> Along with the decline in the quality of the supervision provided by the unit's leaders came a decrease in the unit's level of expertise. "But as we got mix-mastered, every one of those five paragraph orders started taking on the tenor of a class in whatever it is we're doing . . . in addition to being a patrol order, it's also a little class in patrolling."<sup>125</sup> Therefore, after rotation occurred, planning and preparation for operations took more time, and his confidence in the knowledge of the company's leaders also deteriorated. Darling's experience is a good example of individual rotation forcing units to operate below their potential level of combat efficiency. When the interviewer commented, "We learned the lessons time and time again," Colonel Darling replied: "because of that damn individual replacement [policy]."<sup>126</sup>

Westmoreland projected 1967 to be the final year of the war. The officers who were interviewed suggested that had the war ended on schedule, the twelve-month tour policy probably would have been the most memorable, but still manageable, personnel problem of

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 102.



the war. The views of the officers who had commanded in 1967 indicated that they continued to struggle, though successfully, to overcome the policy's adverse effects. According to them, the army remained effective and motivated in 1967 despite some of the most intense combat of the war, and operating under the disruptions created by individual rotation. A major crisis over the twelve-month tour might have been averted had the war ended in 1967. Officers who had commanded in 1967 seemed to feel that, excluding casualties, personnel rotation comprised not only their primary, but also their only serious personnel problem.

The comments of Lt. Col. Wayne J. Scholl, a former commander of a company in the Thirty-ninth Engineer Battalion, attached to the Twenty-third Infantry Division during the time of his command from September 1967 until June 1968, typified the sentiment of officers serving at the time. "I had only one personnel problem and that dealt with personnel replacements. The problem was trying to keep the key spots filled with qualified personnel, particularly in the support area, such as supply and maintenance, and a few leadership positions."<sup>127</sup> The rotation policy created additional work. "It kept me active because I think that the key leadership challenge was to be able to forecast such losses, to train the replacements, or when the replacement couldn't come at a time like that, then to compensate for that by temporarily assigning someone else to keep those functions going at all times."<sup>128</sup> However, Scholl labeled the morale of his unit as "outstanding."<sup>129</sup> His company maintained and improved important roads, and he attributed the company's high morale to the "unit mission" because it was "very visible," and "progress was demonstrated on a day-to-day

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<sup>127</sup> Interview with LTC Wayne J. Scholl, USA, 1984, interview 1211, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 3.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 6.

basis.”<sup>130</sup> He also touted the twelve-month tour policy for strengthening morale because “everyone could see light coming at the end of their individual tunnels.”<sup>131</sup>

A former artillery battery commander, Lt. Col. John E. Robbins, shared Scholl’s experience. “The major problem we did have was personnel replacements. I think at times we fluctuated in personnel. I know at one period of time I got under forty percent strength on the fire base in the battery and that’s pretty serious when you’re trying to fire quite a bit of ammunition.”<sup>132</sup> Robbins commanded a battery of the First Cavalry Division from September 1967 until April 1968. In the second full year of the war, situations like his were not uncommon. The effects of rotation had begun to accumulate. Lieutenant Colonel Robbins’s experience illustrated that the army had difficulties maintaining many company-sized units at minimally acceptable levels of strength, a problem exacerbated by frequent individual rotation.

Another artillery officer, Lt. Col. Paul T. Weyrauch, experienced a related problem during his time in command of a battery from April 1967 until October 1967 that supported First Field Force, Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Weyrauch recalled: “The first thing that I encountered was the twelve-month rotation basis.”<sup>133</sup> Weyrauch explained: “I was the third battery commander to take command of that unit since it had been in-country which meant that the majority of the soldiers in my unit were just about to complete their one year tour when I had arrived. Thirty days after I took command, a major percentage of the battery, about eighty percent, got out and left to rotate back to the United States. All this had

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with LTC John E. Robbins, USA, 1983, interview 1207, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 3.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with LTC Paul T. Weyrauch, USA, 1982, interview 1256, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 3.

transpired in about a two week period.”<sup>134</sup> In this case, Weyrauch received new personnel who had never been trained on the type of howitzers that his unit operated.<sup>135</sup> Fortunately, the slow pace of combat operations allowed time to train these new soldiers.<sup>136</sup> Through the eyes of these officers, the army’s personnel shortages, in terms of both quantity and quality, appear to have become more pronounced in 1967. And most other personnel problems also seemed to have remained largely unknown. Lieutenant Colonel Weyrauch ascertained that, while he did encounter some marijuana, drug problems in the battery remained “minor,” and his battery had “no racial problems of significance.”<sup>137</sup>

Lt. Col. John F. Connolly, who commanded an airborne infantry company in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division throughout 1967, also considered personnel replacement his “main problem.”<sup>138</sup> The strength of his infantry company sometimes reached critically low levels. Connolly’s company, authorized 150 soldiers, sometimes witnessed its strength in the field dwindle to as few as ninety.<sup>139</sup> Due to casualties, Connolly explained, he might have had as many as 150 to 200 soldiers in the hospital.<sup>140</sup> Not only did the army find itself unable to keep up with Lieutenant Colonel Connolly’s replacement requirements, incurred from casualties and rotation, but also the large numbers of soldiers assigned to his company (but unfit for duty) sometimes prevented him from obtaining needed replacements. Connolly did not recall having any problems with drug abuse or racial strife during his service in 1967.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with LTC John F. Connolly, USA, 1984, interview 1059, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 3.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

Individual rotation deeply frustrated the officers who had commanded in the first few years of the war. Lt. Col. Barry S. Baer, in command of an infantry company of the Ninth Infantry Division from January until August 1967, vented:

So all the team-building that we had done . . . was shot to hell and we had to start from scratch . . . we had two infusions within a three-month period and that just disrupted everything, not counting the casualties and all that, which in itself. So we lost a third of our unit within two months. That was pretty hard.<sup>142</sup>

Rotation dissolved the combat teams formed in stateside training and the soldiers' social support structure. The resultant turnover also degraded unit combat efficiency and cohesion, and reduced the soldiers' chances of survival.

A former marine rifle company commander, Lt. Col. James L. Williams, claimed that the rotation process "tore the unit apart."<sup>143</sup> "Invariably, we ended up going to war with a bunch of strangers."<sup>144</sup> Foreshadowing future difficulties, an officer who commanded an infantry company in the Twenty Fifth Infantry Division from May until November 1967, Lt. Col. William W. Hartzog criticized the army's practice of assigning "randomly selected people who came out of the pipeline" to his company.<sup>145</sup> "The problem was to insert them directly into a unit committed to combat and have them survive long enough to learn the tricks of the trade or develop the cohesion that was going to let them survive."<sup>146</sup> This summed up the grave burden that the twelve-month tour placed squarely on the shoulders of all of the company commanders who served in Vietnam.

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<sup>142</sup> Interview with LTC Barry S. Baer, USA, 1985, interview 1017, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 7-8.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with LTC James L. Williams, USMC, 1983, interview 1261, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 4-5.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with LTC William W. Hartzog, USA, 1981, interview 1116, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

Other officers also mentioned that the twelve-month tour had a negative impact upon morale because it disrupted the camaraderie of the soldiers. As one officer commented, “There was also another problem with morale—a significant problem—and that’s when we did the infusions, because all the buddies left and then even though the super guy would come in, they still had to break the ice.”<sup>147</sup> Another officer called rotation “perhaps the biggest thing that affected morale of our unit.”<sup>148</sup> He blamed the policy for creating the discipline problems experienced by the commander who followed him because the “new people . . . didn’t look out for one another like the ones I had when I started.”<sup>149</sup>

Morale in the army in Vietnam appeared to be high in 1967 based on the reflections of these officers. Out of the thirty-one “commands” studied for 1966 and 1967, twenty-nine rated morale as good or better in their units. Unusually severe casualties sustained in an ambush, and frustration resulting from casualties caused by booby traps, accounted for the two cases of poor morale. More typically, the view of the war in 1967 remained optimistic. As one former cavalry troop commander noted: “I think that morale was good. I don’t think we had a lot of people problems.”<sup>150</sup> Of the forty-one commands examined for the period 1965-67, twenty-seven considered turnover to have been their primary personnel problem. Five officers said that they had no personnel problems, six did not answer the question clearly, and the remainder considered some combination of the tour, boredom, drug abuse, and racial strife as their primary problem.

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<sup>147</sup> Baer, 12.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with LTC James M. Winters, USA, 1983, interview 1263, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 3.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with LTC Peter F. Scott, USA, 1982, interview 1212, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 76-77.

Overall, the opinions of the interviewed officers indicated that at the end of 1967 the army's individual rotation policy probably could have been declared a success. From the standpoint of the individual morale of the soldier, most of the officers agreed that it had a positive effect. Company commanders seemed to have been able to manage the worst challenges with combat efficiency created by the policy. But, clearly, the policy possessed the potential to create serious problems in the future. Specifically, the army had relied heavily upon the regular forces to provide leadership in the form of officers and noncommissioned officers in its companies. But how many times could the army expect its regulars to return to Vietnam? How would, or could, the army replace its experienced leaders at the company level? Would the quality of replacement soldiers sent to Vietnam remain adequate? In this regard, the Tet Offensive of 1968 marked an important turning point in shaping American views toward war and appears to have fundamentally changed attitudes toward the twelve-month tour in the process.

Tet shocked many Americans and diminished support for the war at home. Prior to Tet, the war was largely viewed as coming to a conclusion within a finite number of years, with an occupation policy separate from the combat period. After Tet, the war came to be viewed as an open-ended commitment, with no real end in sight. Not surprisingly, as public opinion in the United States polarized, many of the same lines emerged between soldiers and the army in Vietnam. Drugs and racial conflict also increased in Vietnam during 1968. Political and social events aside, the military created many of its own problems. That the long-term effectiveness of General Westmoreland's strategy appeared dubious, despite his optimistic assessments to the contrary, created a significant problem for the military. The seemingly futile nature of some military operations and tactics produced doubt in the ranks.

As a result, support for the cause among the army in Vietnam began to decline, and the twelve-month tour became a target of criticism as Americans sought to explain the failure of its approach. Doubt surrounding the conduct of the war raised doubt about the effectiveness of the rotation policy. Thus far considered a problematic but manageable obstacle to combat effectiveness, the tour came to be perceived by frustrated enlisted men and emboldened scholarly critics as an unnecessary evil. Reinforcing these views, and perhaps compounding the problem, the difficulty of finding adequate personnel increased as the war endured beyond Westmoreland's expectations, with evermore-present adverse consequences for units in the field. Returning to the views of these former company commanders, personnel turbulence not only remained their primary personnel problem after the Tet Offensive, despite the emergence of drug abuse, racial strife, attempts to assassinate officers known as "fraggings," and other grave problems on a dramatic scale, but also became much more pronounced. Published memoirs and critiques by enlisted veterans and scholars seemed to have preserved the tour's worst effects as they appeared during this period of this period of the war, leaving a skewed perception of the tour's impact. They have also largely ignored or underemphasized rotation's worst result from the perspective of these officers, the erosion of capable leadership at the company level.

Sometime in mid-1968, experienced officers and noncommissioned officers at the company level appear to have become alarmingly scarce in many companies in Vietnam. After being wounded during his first command in 1967 with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Lt. Col. John F. Connolly returned in June 1968 to command a company in the 196<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade and witnessed this astonishing decline first hand. To Lieutenant Colonel Connolly's amazement, he had "all draftees and no noncommissioned officer chain of

command to speak of.”<sup>151</sup> “Often times, I’d find myself with all second lieutenants in my officer positions and no actual noncommissioned officers, with the exception of the first sergeant [the senior noncommissioned officer assigned to a company]; he was the only actual noncommissioned officer in the company.”<sup>152</sup> Connolly resorted to drastic measures to compensate for the shortage of noncommissioned officers “by picking the tallest, toughest, hardest individuals out of the ranks and put[ting] them in charge of the various squads and platoons.”<sup>153</sup> These junior leaders often proved unequal to the task because they did not have enough experience to understand what he wanted them to accomplish.<sup>154</sup> Connolly said that as a company commander in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division he often would not request an officer replacement for a lieutenant because he “had so much confidence in the noncommissioned officer that was running the platoon.”<sup>155</sup> In contrast, in his second company he needed officers so that he would have someone to talk to who was “intelligent enough to understand exactly what I wanted and to accomplish it.”<sup>156</sup>

Leadership shortages had a “direct impact” upon how Lieutenant Colonel Connolly fought his company.<sup>157</sup> Connolly said that he would receive missions that called for a full strength company, but found him with “two rings full of platoons.”<sup>158</sup> As a result, he could not trust the competence of his depleted platoons enough to employ them on missions independent of his supervision.<sup>159</sup> Often, his platoons did not have enough noncommissioned

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<sup>151</sup> Connolly, 4.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 6.



officers and soldiers to form their subordinate maneuver elements called squads.<sup>160</sup> And when the platoons did have a squad or two, they lacked the competence required to conduct missions independent from the supervision of the platoon.<sup>161</sup> In effect, Connolly had to personally command each of his platoons and squads.<sup>162</sup> “I never sent a squad out to accomplish anything because I did not have the confidence that the squad as an entity could accomplish something.”<sup>163</sup> He spent more time “helping the platoon leaders,” and actually took over a portion of their responsibilities, becoming the “super platoon leader” himself.<sup>164</sup> He also changed his method for briefing plans for operations. During his first command, Connolly said that he could brief the key leaders and have full confidence that they would accomplish their missions. But in the 196<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade, he had to bring all of the soldiers in the unit together and brief them at once.<sup>165</sup> Casualties among his lieutenants exacerbated Connolly’s problems because the lieutenants stayed until they were “wounded or killed,” and he “did not have that many lieutenants who did not fall into those two categories.”<sup>166</sup>

Surprisingly, Connolly thought that the morale in his second company compared favorably to that of his previous one. He expected that “there would be a real difference, an appreciable difference” between the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, an elite airborne unit, and the 196<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade, a regular infantry outfit.<sup>167</sup> Instead, he discovered “the only difference . . . was that I had to take more time with the company in the 196<sup>th</sup> and explain to

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 7.

the soldiers what our purpose was and how we were going to accomplish it . . . but when it got time to go and do it, they had just as much get-up-and-go and desire as long as they thought it was reasonable and that there was some chance of success.”<sup>168</sup>

“Instant” or “Shake and Bake” noncommissioned officers became commonplace. To lead the soldiers in the platoons, the army identified people during basic and advanced individual training who appeared to possess some leadership skills. Those selected subsequently attended an additional eight weeks of noncommissioned officer training, and, if they graduated in the top twenty percent of their class, the army promoted them to staff sergeant prior to sending them to Vietnam.<sup>169</sup> One officer lamented: “These unfortunate individuals had been promoted far in advance of their capabilities to command and control.”<sup>170</sup> Commanders had to undertake extraordinary measures to compensate for this problem. Lt. Col. Thomas G. Rhame, commanding an infantry company of the First Cavalry Division from November 1967 until March 1968, recalled: “In those days, my noncommissioned officers consisted of an E-8, company first sergeant, and one E-7, platoon sergeant. Everybody else was on the accelerated promotion schedule to grades E-4 and E-5. Even under the accelerated rules, by the time a soldier was promoted to sergeant E-5, he was going home.”<sup>171</sup> Before the war, Rhame counted on having an “E-7” or “sergeant first class” with at least twelve years of experience in every platoon; each squad would have had an “E-6” or “staff sergeant” with over five years of experience, and each of the teams in those squads would have had an “E-5” or “sergeant” with at least three years of time in service.

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Email to author from Bill Paris, 1966 US Army Infantry OCS Graduate, 23 February 2004.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with LTC Ted A. Cimral, USA, 1985, interview 1051, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 6.

<sup>171</sup> Interview with LTC Thomas G. Rhame, USA, 1981, interview 1200, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 3.

Instead, the noncommissioned officers in Lieutenant Colonel Rhame's company consisted predominantly of soldiers promoted to the ranks of sergeant and staff sergeant with less than two years in the army.<sup>172</sup> Rhame resorted to using his single sergeant first class platoon sergeant "to break in the newest OCS lieutenant . . . simply to keep people from getting killed."<sup>173</sup> Rhame's soldiers were "very aware of what I was doing with my only sergeant first class. I was abusing the guy to train lieutenants."<sup>174</sup>

Despite this acute shortage of leadership, his company managed to find a way to continue to fight successfully because the inexperienced junior leaders quickly adapted.

It's remarkable what E-4s [soldiers with less than two years in the army] learned to do in Vietnam with very little time and training. They were able to adjust artillery fire. They were able to conduct night ambush patrols. They were capable of conducting night patrols in and out of hamlets. They knew how to establish ambushes. They could read maps with proficiency.<sup>175</sup>

However, "there were definite[ly] times when I became very apprehensive because of the lack of 'hard' sergeant experience."<sup>176</sup> Rhame had no problems with drugs or racial strife during the time of his command and evaluated the morale of his company as "very high."<sup>177</sup>

Lt. Col. Robert L. Powell, who commanded an infantry company in the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade from February 1968 until September 1968, experienced similar problems with the experience of the leadership in his company. "The only real significant problem was a shortage of senior noncommissioned officers. [In] all three rifle companies, I very seldom ever saw an E-7. Platoon sergeants were usually young E-6s, for the most part, so that was

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 4.

by far the most significant problem.”<sup>178</sup> He often had to relieve officers and noncommissioned officers for “various reasons of inefficiency” that he “could have put up with longer in peacetime, but not in war time.”<sup>179</sup> Over the period of his command, Lieutenant Colonel Powell relieved six lieutenants for incompetence.<sup>180</sup> He found that his officers tended to become too friendly with the soldiers because of youth and immaturity.<sup>181</sup> To Powell, his officers lacked the requisite tactical expertise, and, even after working with them repeatedly, they still made decisions that would “get people killed” if he did not take some corrective action.<sup>182</sup>

The shortage of mature leaders at the platoon level caused other officers significant problems as well. Lt. Col. John C. Speedy, III had the unique experience of commanding both an airborne infantry company in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division from June until April of 1968 and an armored cavalry troop in the Eleventh Armored Cavalry Regiment from March until August 1970. Reflecting on his time with the infantry, Speedy felt the

limitation generally . . . to be in the area of mission orientation versus people orientation. [An] experienced NCO could understand, put two and two together. There were so many younger shake and bake E-6s. They would tend to be a little too protective of the troops and a little quick to back off the mission. They couldn’t see the bigger picture.<sup>183</sup>

Operating under the twelve-month tour, the army often proved unable to provide mature and experienced leaders. Speedy called the “continuous destruction “ of his “crews, squads, and

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<sup>178</sup> Interview with LTC Robert L. Powell, USA, 1984, interview 1195, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Interview with LTC John C. Speedy, III, USA, 1984, interview 1226, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 18.

platoons” his “biggest single personnel problem.”<sup>184</sup> He also ran into the problem of having his company or cavalry troop regarded as a complete entity, when his company’s actual “foxhole strength” was below fifty percent of its authorized number.<sup>185</sup> “And they’re giving me all these full missions. Well, I needed a truncated mission, which I never got.”<sup>186</sup> But Speedy also thought that the twelve-month tour “had a positive effect on the morale” and “that a lot of critics in the army have overrated the problem of the twelve-month tour.”<sup>187</sup> According to Lieutenant Colonel Speedy’s experience, rotation eclipsed all of his other personnel problems during both commands. With respect to drugs, the “incidence of marijuana usage was increasing at the time, but it was not a major problem.”<sup>188</sup> However, when he returned in 1970, he found that “drug abuse had become very serious.”<sup>189</sup>

When it was really bad, all I remember in the field was I had a couple of druggies and they were despised by their peers, and they would come to me and tell me about, hey, watch this guy. We don’t want a guy on pot standing guard for us. I had a lot of good boys out there, and the percentage in the field, my gosh, might have been two or three percent. And once the guys were located, they were kept under tremendous pressure. Where most of it was, I think it was in the rear.<sup>190</sup>

He summed up the effect of drug abuse on combat operations in both tours: “If you went down the cutting edge, I maintain the cutting edge was good to the end.”<sup>191</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Speedy experienced some problems with racial strife as well. Approximately sixty percent of his company in 1968 was black. He related that he had a very racist soldier from the south assigned to his company who would call the black soldiers

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 7.

“niggers.”<sup>192</sup> However, the brotherhood that developed in the field broke down those barriers because they had no choice but to live and fight together.<sup>193</sup> Speedy related that “pretty soon, he’d call him you know a ‘nigger son of a bitch’ and smile, cause he loved him.”<sup>194</sup> Speedy emphasized that in the field they became “brothers in arms.”<sup>195</sup> But he labeled racial strife in the rear areas a “whole different story.”<sup>196</sup>

Lt. Col. David C. Johnson commanded an infantry company of the Ninth Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta from October until December 1968, when a booby trap ended his tour. Yet, for two months he commanded in some of the most difficult circumstances of the war. Referring to his first tour in Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel Johnson remarked, “I don’t think I heard the word marijuana.”<sup>197</sup> But during his second tour, he said that drugs were “pretty widespread.”<sup>198</sup> Though Johnson called it “atypical,” one of his soldiers on drugs fell into six feet of water while walking across a swampy area and drowned.<sup>199</sup> Johnson remembered that the Ninth Infantry Division had a significant problem with racial strife.<sup>200</sup> He also had a few soldiers refuse to participate in operations.<sup>201</sup> Additionally, Johnson’s company operated in some of the most frustrating tactical circumstances of the war. For instance, booby traps inflicted seventeen of the twenty casualties his company

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 5.

suffered during his sixty-days in command.<sup>202</sup> But the significant decline in the quality of leadership at the company level stood out as the biggest problem from his account.

Lieutenant Colonel Johnson recalled that during his previous tour, from 1965-66 in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, all of his squad leaders had six, and eight, or ten years of experience, and each platoon in his company had excellent platoon sergeants.<sup>203</sup> In contrast, during the second tour he discovered that he “was the only person in the company who’d had over two years in the army.”<sup>204</sup> His noncommissioned officers simply did not know how to do their jobs.

They did not know the basic minimum stuff about tactics. They had no experience, however, in dealing with people and they had no experience, had no knowledge about what you had to do when you came back from an operation in terms of maintaining weapons and equipment.<sup>205</sup>

Consequently, Johnson had to supervise his noncommissioned officers constantly.<sup>206</sup> He “did not have the confidence in these people in a combat situation that I did the first tour, mainly because they lacked experience.”<sup>207</sup> While Johnson thought they were “fairly dedicated people and wanted to do the right thing,” he could not trust them, because of their low level of experience and expertise, to operate in the absence of his supervision.<sup>208</sup> To his astonishment, his platoon sergeants did not know how to adjust artillery fire.<sup>209</sup> Whereas during his first tour any noncommissioned officer in the company could have “done a good

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with LTC David C. Johnson, USA, 1983, interview 1130, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 6.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

job of it.”<sup>210</sup> Johnson’s officers were “so weak and so young” that they did “stupid things.”<sup>211</sup> One lieutenant threw a grenade into a bunker during a patrol without notifying anyone in advance and “scared hell out of everybody.”<sup>212</sup> The lieutenant “just . . . didn’t know better.”<sup>213</sup> As a result of this incompetence

I had to give very detailed instructions to these inexperienced leaders on what I wanted them to do and then I had to check to make sure they had done it and I was never really sure that what I told them to do was gonna get done because they might not know how to do it and didn’t want to tell me that they didn’t.<sup>214</sup>

Not surprisingly, Johnson found “no comparison” between the morale of the troops during his first and second tours.<sup>215</sup> “The people in the second tour were all there—had all been drafted. Few, if any, wanted to be there and by that time, to be honest with you, many of us were questioning I think whether we should be there or what we were doing or how effective we were being.”<sup>216</sup> Yet, in his opinion, the twelve-month tour worked in the favor of the morale of the troops because it gave a soldier a goal during a a protracted war with no apparent end in sight.<sup>217</sup>

The army continued to fight many bloody battles in 1969 and 1970. When asked, Lt. Col. Miguel E. Monteverde, Sr., who had commanded an artillery battery in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division from June to October 1969, considered “without a doubt rotation” as his primary problem.<sup>218</sup> He lamented: “The one-year rotation just kept people coming and

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Interview with LTC Miguel E. Monteverde, Sr., USA, 1984, interview 1174, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 8.



going all the time, which was . . . particularly difficult for a unit in constant contact.”<sup>219</sup> Monteverde concluded that his battery was largely able to overcome the problems of continuity because the battery had a “built-in training scenario,” meaning that it performed routine missions on a daily basis that facilitated teaching new soldiers the skills they lacked.<sup>220</sup> He criticized the tour because it created a “constant drain of expertise out of the battery.”<sup>221</sup> But morale was “very, very good.”<sup>222</sup> The twelve-month tour provided soldiers with something to look forward to, but hurt morale by tearing soldiers’ friendships apart.<sup>223</sup> In conclusion, Monteverde thought that a unit rotation policy would have helped the soldiers’ morale an “awful lot” by maintaining the camaraderie of a “close-knit organization” like his battery.<sup>224</sup> Monteverde’s experience with drugs and racial strife was minimal.<sup>225</sup>

The old problem of continuity appeared to remain surmountable in 1969. Army units continued to function, but below their potential. Mission often made a big difference. Lt. Col. Joseph D. Armistead commanded an artillery battery of the First Cavalry Division from February to July 1969 and felt that his troops had stayed motivated because they “had a real enemy.”<sup>226</sup>

They were getting to put into practice what they had been trained to do. . . . They were coming to Vietnam where the threat was high. They were taking incoming two and three times a week. Where they were seeing people hurt by the various aspects of the war. It was real to them. . . . And I think, because of that, that was one of the biggest motivating factors to them.”<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>226</sup> Interview with LTC Joseph D. Armistead, USA, 1983, interview 1016, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 5.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

Armistead thought that the twelve-month tour “helped” morale because the soldiers knew “that they were going to get home in twelve months.”<sup>228</sup> He did not believe that it affected the willingness of the soldiers to fight. On the contrary, “They stayed on the guns pretty well every time that we had a serious threat and fired and returned fire when we were taking incoming at the same time.”<sup>229</sup> While the primary personnel problem of company commanders appeared to remain the same in 1969, the mood in Vietnam had changed significantly after the Tet Offensive.

In 1969, Armistead noticed a change in the soldiers’ attitude toward the war that contrasted with his experience during a previous tour in 1966-67. “The first tour, I think we felt like we were really doing something that the country wanted us to do. The second tour it was not so clear.”<sup>230</sup> Armistead explained: “The war had drug on by that time for approximately six years that we knew about it. And for the First Cavalry Division, we were in our fourth year of actual fighting.”<sup>231</sup> He concluded: “So there was some degradation I guess, of morale because of the question as to whether we were really doing what our country wanted us to do. But the soldiers for the most part stayed motivated.”<sup>232</sup> Into 1969, these former commanders indicated that their companies remained capable of performing successfully in combat despite the erosive effects of the twelve-month tour, the changed mood toward the war, and other factors.

For some, the twelve-month tour may have even gained new legitimacy during the seemingly futile latter years of the war. When asked to comment on the effectiveness of the

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

twelve-month tour, Lt. Col. Jimmie Quinn, a troop commander in the Eleventh Armored Cavalry Regiment from March 1968 to January 1969, reflected: “I have thought about that a lot since those days. I’m not sure that extending the command tour or extending the soldiers’ tour would have made any difference in Vietnam.”<sup>233</sup> Quinn doubted whether the tour affected the army’s strategy: “Had we had a well defined mission as an army, or a division, or a regiment, or a troop, maybe it would. But since we never really had more than maybe a day’s worth of mission, longevity and maybe cohesiveness, I don’t think it would have made much of a difference.”<sup>234</sup> In this case, Quinn believed that the repetitive nature of many of the army’s operations, which called for conducting patrols and “search and destroy” missions into many of the same areas year after year, only to see the enemy return to reoccupy those same areas year after year, meant that unit performance was not necessarily tied to strategy. Therefore, he did not think that the twelve-month tour had much impact on the prospects for success of the army’s strategy one way or the other. Quinn connected morale to the immediate circumstances of the war, rather than its larger progress. “So, morale was kind of a fleeting thing, kind of, at least in my unit, hinged on how well you did in the last fire fight. And since we did well in the few that we had during my command, the morale in my company was, and I never had one man killed in a fire fight, our morale was very high.”<sup>235</sup> Many other officers expressed views that essentially mirrored Quinn’s comments.

A former helicopter company commander, Lt. Col. Jack E. Easton, rationalized the policy in similar terms. Easton commanded during the final year of the war, 1971-72, and remarked: “I’ll tell you, I didn’t know any different. And considering that a lot of the folks

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<sup>233</sup> Interview with LTC Jimmie Quinn, USA, 1985, interview 1198, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 6.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

that we had were draftees, considering that we didn't have a national purpose, considering that these draftees were . . . select draftees . . . I think it was the best policy."<sup>236</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Easton may have been making an allusion, rare among the sample, to the tour atomizing dissent by soldiers during the frustrating last years of the war. When asked about his worst personnel problem, he commented, "Probably with most people it was personnel turbulence and training due to that turbulence, and along with that probably drugs."<sup>237</sup> This comment best summarizes the state of personnel problems at the end of the war as expressed by the officers in the sample. Drugs and racial strife had become prominent features of the latter years of the war, and turnover, caused by the twelve-month tour, continued to handicap the performance of army units. But even an extremely technically oriented organization, such as an aviation company, managed to keep itself functioning.

Even after the Tet Offensive, the obstacles created by personnel rotation persisted as the most severe personnel problem, excluding casualties, faced by these company commanders until the end of the war. Of the fifty-four "commands" studied for the 1968-72 period, sixteen officers explicitly identified turnover as their primary personnel problem. Six officers called drug abuse their biggest problem, and two considered racial strife their biggest challenge. Two said that they did not have any personnel problems. Eight did not answer the question clearly. And the remainder did not distinguish sufficiently between some combination of turbulence, drugs, racial strife, or boredom as their primary problem. While far from conclusive, their responses convey some sense of the importance of the twelve-month tour to the conduct of the war, at least at the company level. However, they do not

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<sup>236</sup> Interview with LTC Jack E. Easton, USA, 1985, interview #1077, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 19.

<sup>237</sup> Interview with LTC Malvin L. Handy, USA, 1985, interview 1113, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 3.

provide insight into some of the wide differences of opinion held by the officers about the overall appropriateness of the twelve-month tour policy.

General Westmoreland claimed that morale remained high throughout his tenure as the senior American military commander in Vietnam from 1964-68. Of the forty-one oral histories studied of officers who had completed their commands prior to General Westmoreland's departure from Vietnam, thirty-nine rated the morale of their units as good or higher. This might suggest that Westmoreland was correct or that the officers expressed a biased view of the state of morale in their own units. It may also mean that these officers successfully bridged the gap in leadership created by rotation over the course of a prolonged war. As successful career officers, the answer is probably a combination of leadership ability, retrospective bias, and an indication of a latently positive effect that the twelve-month tour had upon morale.

Westmoreland also thought that the twelve-month tour policy "gave a man a goal" and "that was good for morale." Many officers shared this point of view. One commented: "I suspect that it helped the morale of the soldier in that he came into country and he could see when he was going to leave. It wasn't like World War II for the duration. And so I think from that standpoint, it was a positive force on the morale of the unit."<sup>238</sup> Another said: "It probably had an overall good effect on morale, because soldiers had the feeling, I guess that although that was a nasty little war, there was an end, a definite end to it."<sup>239</sup> Another remarked candidly:

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<sup>238</sup> Interview with LTC Michael C. Baker, USA, 1984, interview 1019, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 11.

<sup>239</sup> Interview with LTC John W. Hendrix, USA, 1984, interview 1118, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 23.

I know for myself that if I had to spend greater than twelve months in Vietnam at any one shot, my morale would have been lower than snake shit on the bottom of the ocean. . . . I would say . . . the twelve-month tour was almost a morale enforcer, because . . . guys had something to hang their hat on. They knew they were going home.<sup>240</sup>

One officer thought, “Of course, we did not do it the other way so we cannot be sure. Morale in my unit seemed to be high, and that had to be a contributing factor.”<sup>241</sup> These comments directly contradict Christian G. Appy’s observation that “he found little evidence that the tour increased motivation.” The key is to put this issue into the appropriate context. Had there been no rotation policy, or a longer tour, then presumably, and as the army’s experience with rotation in World War II and Korea suggested, morale would have been much lower than it eventually became in Vietnam after the onset of the effects of the Tet Offensive. The tour appears to have legitimately improved morale over that experienced in those previous wars. Therefore, General Westmoreland may have accurately ascertained that that morale in Vietnam during his command had been the best he had witnessed in three wars.

General Bruce Palmer believed that the twelve-month tour policy “undermined soldier aggressiveness.” Some commanders agreed with Palmer. In a typical assessment, one stated: “Yeah. When they got short, that got to be a problem. . . he mentally backs off.”<sup>242</sup> The same officer admitted: “That was a problem. They got funny. . . there’s no question that even the best kids got nervous when they got short—I got nervous when I got short. It does affect you.”<sup>243</sup> Aviation units often experienced the most pronounced cases of this “backing off syndrome.” One aviator recalled:

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<sup>240</sup> Handy, 11-12  
<sup>241</sup> Interview with COL John R. McQuestion, USA, 1983, interview 1162, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 7.  
<sup>242</sup> Bramlett, 68-69  
<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

We tried to keep their flying to a very minimum the last three or four months in country. Because, frankly, they were just not effective. When you get a man who is afraid to fly, not that he would not, but he's always concerned about going home and then he's not nearly as effective.<sup>244</sup>

In other types of units, the phenomenon did not appear to have as much of an effect as it did in aviation units. An engineer officer rendered a more typical description: "most of them were getting towards the end of their normal twelve-month tour and there was a tendency, perhaps not a large one, for a guy to want to take a little bit more care of himself toward the tail end of that twelve-month tour."<sup>245</sup> "Backing off syndrome" may have even had a parallel effect on operational planning. One artillery officer recalled: "Everybody looked forward to going home. And when you look forward to going home, maybe you don't do things as well."<sup>246</sup> He also said that some commanders became "reluctant to commit their troops in the kind of operations that would have been war winning type operations."<sup>247</sup> Instead, "they committed troops to more, shall we say, operations designed to make the unit look good without sustaining many casualties."<sup>248</sup> The same officer contended: "If it had been an all win or nothing situation early on, I think people would have maybe perceived that they could try harder and would have done a better job."<sup>249</sup>

At least one officer, Lieutenant Colonel Speedy, thought that the policy fit the controversial strategy pursued during the war, because it detached the officer corps from the cause, as it did the soldiers. Or, as Charles C. Moskos argued, the policy meant that the

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<sup>244</sup> Interview with LTC Leighton O. Haselgrove, USA, 1982, interview 1117, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 12.

<sup>245</sup> Interview with LTC Wilbur T. Gregory, Jr., USA, 1984, interview 1104, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 13.

<sup>246</sup> Interview with COL Harold F. DeBolt, USA, 1983, interview 1072, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 9.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 10.

soldier's individual rotation date, not the outcome of the conflict, marked the end of the war. Perhaps alluding to the arguments of Cincinnatus or Gabriel and Savage, Speedy agreed: "I think that a lot of the critics in the army have overrated the problem of the twelve-month tour. If we had gone beyond that, I think we'd have run into very serious civil and military problems. . . . The officer corps would probably have said, 'Take your strategy and stuff it.'"<sup>250</sup> He believed that a different policy would have been beneficial because it would have increased the collective stake of the officer corps in the conduct and outcome of the war. Rotation "sort of neutered us [the officer corps]. . . . If they'd kept us over there for the duration, we'd have never tolerated that strategy."<sup>251</sup> He concluded: "In anything else in that type of war in those political circumstances, I am the two percent minority that says it's stupid to do anything else."<sup>252</sup> Though an uncommon reference, Lieutenant Colonel Speedy's comment insinuates that the tour may have served at some level to dispel organized discontent among the officer corps with the war's strategy.

This detachment may explain why some officers expressed ambivalence about the twelve-month tour policy.

[The] soldiers really had no concept of anything else. They knew that they were going to be there for twelve months, and at the end of twelve months, they were going home, assuming they survived. The noncommissioned officers had the same perception, especially the junior noncommissioned officers. But, I don't think that the twelve-month tour had any adverse either positive or negative effect on the soldiers at the time that they were there.<sup>253</sup>

Another officer recalled: "I don't really know. I was a young man, with young kids and a wife, and obviously I was ready to go home as soon as we could. Didn't want to be in a

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<sup>250</sup> Speedy, 20.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>253</sup> Interview with John H. Tilelli, USA, 1983, interview 1233, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 10.



war—like most people.”<sup>254</sup> These neutral views demonstrate the complexity of opinions that these officers, and no doubt many other veterans of the war, held about the effect of the policy. Scholarship on the subject has generally avoided exploring this complexity.

Rotation also created a problem with integrating individuals into units of varying cohesiveness. It is apparent from the views of these officers that rapid turnover decreased the cohesion of their companies, or “primary group ties” between soldiers, as argued by Moskos and many other scholars, but all of their units apparently continued to find a way to adequately function. Their reflections suggested that Moskos’s assertion that soldiers entered into “a rudimentary social contract” out of the “mandatory necessities arising from immediate life-and-death exigencies” may be on target.<sup>255</sup> None of the views expressed in the sample remotely supported Gabriel and Savage’s claim that the army became “an undisciplined, ineffective, almost anomic mass of individuals who collectively had no goals.”<sup>256</sup> Individual integration appeared to be most difficult in the most cohesive units, such as those units that initially deployed to Vietnam. The morale and competence of these units declined noticeably after individual rotation began, but eventually stabilized at a level that still allowed them to conduct combat operations in an effective manner. One officer remembered the problem of integrating new people. “They learned real quick. It was just that they hadn’t been with the unit. . . . Soldiers didn’t like them, so they’d almost ignore them until they were forced not to ignore them.”<sup>257</sup> Another officer recounted: “So it had to have a hell of a morale factor. But I must say that once you got to the woods and once you had kind of gone through the first minor scrape and it didn’t have to be major, then you were

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<sup>254</sup> Collier, 11.

<sup>255</sup> Moskos, 156.

<sup>256</sup> Gabriel and Savage, 9.

<sup>257</sup> Baer, 13-14.

more or less accepted.”<sup>258</sup> He suggested that integration became an awkward process tied to time and experience: “But as you know, until you’ve heard your first shot fired in anger and you’ve kind of had that little commonality of experience there, then you’re the FNG and that doesn’t stand for Foolish New Guy, and everybody’s checking you out.”<sup>259</sup>

Moskos’s description of the rise and decline of a soldier’s effectiveness over the course of his tour was confirmed by the former company commanders. Commented one: “there are two periods of time when an individual becomes less effective than he should be, and of course, that’s on any incoming individual, he’s less effective for the first several weeks, and then toward the end of his tour . . . [when] their focus is going home in fifteen or twenty days.”<sup>260</sup> An artillery officer commented: “By the time an individual came in, he would spend three months getting used to his job, would be useful for six months and then he’d have three months that he was getting ready to go home.”<sup>261</sup> As one put it, “It meant that I got about ten and a half effective months out of people.”<sup>262</sup>

In some units, casualties and exposure to combat defined the effectiveness of the policy. The army had concocted the limited tour to mitigate the problems of exhaustion experienced in World War II and Korea—conventional, high intensity conflicts.

Commanders of units that experienced combat of similar intensity (and many did) often expressed support for the twelve-month tour.

The twelve-month tour for the air cavalry troop, I think, was probably about right, if not a little bit too long. As I mentioned earlier, we were in combat on a daily basis.

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<sup>258</sup> Interview with LTC Ralph L. Hagler, Jr., USA, 1985, interview 1111, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 10.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Tilelli, 9-10.

<sup>261</sup> Robbins, 4-5.

<sup>262</sup> Interview with LTC Robert B. Franklin, Jr., USA, 1983, interview 1093, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 14.

We weren't actually engaged, but in fact out looking for a fight. . . . We had men who were exposed to ground fire on a daily basis.<sup>263</sup>

This same officer remembered, “two or three of my warrants who were in fact shot down two and three times in a day.”<sup>264</sup> When turnover due to casualties exceeded turnover due to rotation, the twelve-month tour policy may have been most appropriate. One officer experienced this problem: “In the infantry, because we were employed in a reinforcing role, our battalion was constantly being put into what we referred to [as] a Shit Sandwich Situation, and as a result, we took a lot of casualties.”<sup>265</sup> “Therefore, personnel replacement was the most serious problem we had as far as personnel. We just couldn't keep up with the casualties we had. It was particularly serious for officers and noncommissioned officers.”<sup>266</sup> Lt. Col. Barry R. McCaffrey counseled his soldiers that “sometime during their tour, they were going to get hit. They were probably going to be only slightly wounded but if they followed every one of my rules, that they would almost without exception go home alive.”<sup>267</sup> Many scholars have criticized rotation for inhibiting institutional learning that would have benefited the army's effectiveness, especially in the area of counterinsurgency. However, the twelve-month tour may have been indispensable for maintaining the morale in units engaged in grueling conventional combat, especially among soldiers fighting an unpopular war in which only a proportion of American youth served.<sup>268</sup>

By disrupting continuity, cohesion, and draining the army's pool of experienced junior leaders, the most significant effect of the twelve-month tour appears to have been

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<sup>263</sup> Haselgrove, 10.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>265</sup> Williams, 3.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> Interview with LTC Barry R. McCaffrey, USA, 1982, no interview number assigned, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 6.

<sup>268</sup> Lewy, 118; Sheehan, 651; Krepinevich, 206; Luttwak, “On the Need to Reform American Strategy,” 22.

lowered combat efficiency at the company level and below. Gabriel and Savage argued that the army failed to maintain unit cohesion, especially at the squad, platoon, and company levels, to such an extent that it “virtually destroyed” combat effectiveness.<sup>269</sup> The former company commanders almost unanimously condemned the policy for disrupting the “teamwork” of the unit, which distinctly lowered the proficiency of their companies. While they regretted that rotation degraded cohesion, and felt that it had varied positive and negative effects upon morale, nothing that they said suggested the tour threatened either their units, or any others, with disintegration. Commanders had to become more autocratic and spend ever-increasing amounts of time re-teaching the most basic skills to their soldiers. Commanders also had to find creative ways to compensate for their units’ lowered level of proficiency. Of course, casualties would have made some of this phenomenon unavoidable, but rotation policy self-inflicted turbulence. One officer recalled in frustration, “It was the most obvious, I believe, the most significant [problem], and that was the problem of turbulence, of trying to put together teams and having them continually torn apart.”<sup>270</sup> A marine officer with extensive combat experience agreed. “I suppose that a new unit coming into a theater, a replacement unit, would have to learn a lot of things. . . . But knowing what I know now, . . . a company at fifty percent that’s been together and trained together, you know, like my first company there, was way more effective than a hundred percent company made up of fifty percent people that showed up in the last two or three months.”<sup>271</sup> Another officer admitted: “Well, it limited our capability . . . a company could not do what really

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<sup>269</sup> Gabriel and Savage, 7.

<sup>270</sup> Speedy, 5.

<sup>271</sup> Darling, 102.

would be considered a company sized operation.”<sup>272</sup> Little from the opinions expressed by these officers support the bold allegations of Gabriel and Savage about unit cohesion. The twelve-month tour policy hobbled company commanders, institutionalized amateurism, and needlessly killed people, but the army preserved enough cohesion to continue to conduct combat operations until the end of the war, at least in those companies commanded by men who were outstanding enough to one day be selected for the US Army War College.

In revisiting the impact of the twelve-month tour on the performance of companies in Vietnam, the views of this select group of officers suggested that “turnover” or “turbulence” due to individual rotation posed the biggest personnel problem, not including casualties, faced by company commanders. Significantly, rotation led companies to perform below their tactical potential and had some positive, and other, negative effects upon morale. In some instances, rotation might have either temporarily prevented some units from conducting their missions or threatened units with disintegration, but none of the interviewed officers ever mentioned such an occurrence. Instead, they pointed out that the policy limited the tactical options available to the commander, increased the amount of time required to plan and prepare for operations, diminished unit self-confidence, and forced units to train for the most fundamental of tasks to achieve a basic level of proficiency, only to repeat the entire cycle again and again.

Degraded combat efficiency occurred for two reasons. First, the twelve-month tour prevented the army from providing competent junior leadership on a consistent basis at the company level. By the end of the war many company commanders had to do the jobs of

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<sup>272</sup> Interview with LTC Frederick J. Hillyard, USA, 1983, interview 1124, transcript, CCIV, USAWC, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 4.

their platoon leaders, and so on down the chain of command. Company commanders lost increasing amounts of time explaining operations to subordinates who simply lacked the maturity, experience, and expertise to do their jobs. Poor leadership possessed the potential to adversely affect every aspect of a company's operations. Second, rotation reduced unit cohesion. As soldiers left their companies, the collective knowledge and familiarity with the company's methods for conducting operations went with them. Therefore, newly arrived soldiers did not know the "team's playbook," and due to ongoing combat operations, often did not get the opportunity to learn it. This reduced combat efficiency, repeated errors, and unnecessarily killed soldiers. Some degree of turbulence would have been unavoidable due to casualties, illness, inexperience and other reasons under any conceivable policy of rotation; but individual rotation nonconcurring with unit rotation meant that many soldiers met with a potentially avoidable end as a result of a conscious and flawed logistical decision by army planners.

With respect to morale, the twelve-month tour produced both positive and negative results. Many officers stated that the ability to project in advance an end to their trials in Vietnam benefited both the soldiers' and their own morale. This assessment of the policy positively influencing morale by "giving a man a goal" contradicts the observations of Christian G. Appy, and most scholarship on the subject, which has tended to deny any positive effect at all. Morale may not have been as high, per se, as it might have been under a rotation policy that sought to maximize cohesion at the company level, such as a unit rotation policy augmented by individual rotation during noncombat periods. But the tour seemed to produce General Westmoreland's desired result of avoiding the problems experienced with poor morale and battle fatigue under the failed rotation policies of World

War II and Korea. Then, it is not surprising that the policy appeared to be most appropriate for units that incurred casualties at levels approximating the experience in those previous wars. The twelve-month tour has to be evaluated within the context of the army's prior experience with rotation policy to fully appreciate this positive aspect of the tour.

Negatively, the twelve-month tour clearly hurt unit morale when it caused unnecessary casualties and disrupted camaraderie. Units were like families far away from home; soldiers developed relationships and took care of each other, to the benefit of both the mission and the men.

Rotation on an individual basis especially generated deep frustration among the interviewed officers for undermining unit cohesion and camaraderie. Their frustration in this aspect should not be left under appreciated. Many commanders expressed a visceral contempt for the policy. Reflecting a common degree of aggravation, one commented:

Devastating. I cannot, in retrospect, imagine how we ever did that to ourselves. . . . The first tour, the first year I was in Vietnam, I went through five battalion commanders. And the second tour I went through four battalion commanders in one year. Now, I mean that shows you how ludicrous it is to—you talk about destabilization.<sup>273</sup>

The officer conducting the interview responded, “Yeah, that’s organizing for failure.”<sup>274</sup>

Though discussing the six-month command tour, a separate rotation policy with similar effects, this comment suggests that longer command tours and a unit rotation policy may have helped to ameliorate some of the problems which occurred with the twelve-month tour by allowing commanders to function together with their units.

A different officer attacked the policy's effects on his soldiers' motivation along Moskos's lines. He considered two factors paramount to the motivation of his soldiers.

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<sup>273</sup> Hagler, 16.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

First: “He was motivated by success in the unit mission. Troops got very, very high and stayed that way, but it wasn’t due to making kills, it wasn’t a bloodthirsty type of thing, it was just success in a mission.”<sup>275</sup> Second:

Friendship, I guess is the best way to say it. It is cohesion; it is teamwork. It’s knowing and caring for each other. That became very, very important when you were in a unit that was isolated and away from all those factors that normally are associated with building morale for long periods of time. To have something to do and someone to count on; someone to care about you or to really give a damn about whether you lived or died the rest of that day. In the field things became very elemental. And so, the value of friends was very important.<sup>276</sup>

The twelve-month tour directly undermined both of these important motivational factors.

What advantages and disadvantages an alternative personnel policy that deliberately promoted cohesion at the company level would have produced is subject only to speculation. However, this comment by an artillery officer, fortunate enough to have commanded an exceptionally stable unit, provides a potential clue. “The battery that I took could have functioned under a month [long] policy of command tours, they didn’t really need a commander, they were a pretty stable unit.”<sup>277</sup> In other words, his cohesive unit possessed such a high degree of leadership and tactical knowledge that it practically operated without the supervision of the battery (company) commander.

Scholars and other observers have raised valid criticisms about the twelve-month tour over the years; however, they have also overlooked some of the most important consequences of the policy. General Bruce Palmer and sociologist Charles C. Moskos have most successfully conveyed the complexity of its significant positive and negative effects, but their interpretations have important limitations. Specifically, Palmer’s views possessed a

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<sup>275</sup> Hartzog, 15.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>277</sup> Robbins, 5.



heavy command bias, and he failed to go into much depth. Moskos relied on a small number of interviews for his conclusions, and by conducting his research in the early years of the war, did not describe the negative extremes of the policy as well as Appy. The reflections of these former company commanders seemed to corroborate Moskos's observations about tour's beneficial effect upon morale, the rise and decline of a soldier's efficiency over time, and the loneliness rotation fostered by inhibiting camaraderie.

Christian G. Appy, while basing his book on the most substantial body of evidence of any of the scholars, captured the worst effects of the policy from the soldiers' point of view after the Tet Offensive. In contrast to Appy's assertion that the twelve-month tour did not improve the combat motivation of soldiers, the interviews of the former company commanders used in this study indicated that having a fixed departure date had a positive effect on soldiers' morale. These officers also pointed out that the tour had negative effects on morale by hurting unit camaraderie and efficiency. Appy does not explore these issues, but his correlation of morale to the soldiers' understanding of the overall purpose of the war might be valid. To a man, the officers in the sample felt that morale was good or better until sometime in mid-1968. This indicates that changes in morale were more tied to America's changed, now futile, view of the war that occurred in response to the Tet Offensive than due to any negative impact of rotation. Additionally, while a few officers postulated that the tour may have atomized dissent about the war's conduct, this opinion neither figured prominently in the views expressed by this sample, nor seemed to warrant Appy's allegation that the tour prevented a "full-scale mutiny."<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Appy, 235.

In general works about Vietnam, scholars have raised some of the same valid points as these authors but have tended to address the rotation policy peripherally and relied heavily on a random selection of the most negative manifestations of the policy from the perspective of the enlisted man, covered in the greatest depth by Moskos and Appy. The most inflammatory critics of the policy, such as Cincinnatus and Gabriel and Savage, have overstated their cases. With few important exceptions, most interpretations of the impact of the twelve-month tour have emphasized the negative perspective of enlisted soldiers' as it materialized after the Tet Offensive, and by ignoring the policy's roots in previous wars have, therefore, treated the subject too simplistically.

But the conclusions of this study do more than just add to the existing literature about army's experience with rotation in Vietnam; they suggest that the severely maligned policy was not the complete failure that it has often been made out to be by scholars. In fact, company commanders, at least as represented by the successful career officers in this sample, shared the assessment of the army's senior leadership, such as General Westmoreland, that the twelve-month tour was a measured success given the serious impediments to troop morale in Vietnam. Further, the results imply that the policy may have been exactly what Westmoreland said it was during and after the war: a substantial improvement over the initially nonexistent, then inconsistent, individual rotation policies of World War II and Korea, which produced severe problems with soldier morale and exhaustion. Until the end of the war, these officers considered the tour a surmountable challenge. Thus, individual rotation yielded mixed results: it varied by time, place, leadership, and type of unit, had positive and negative effects, and was without a clear solution that would have worked in all circumstances of the war. The outcome of this inquiry, based on a small sample, strongly

recommends further inquiry along these lines with important implications for scholars and military planners alike.

Scholars seeking to explain the army's failures appear to have focused on the tour's faults without well accounting for its merits. The source of this discrepancy might be explained by the changed attitudes towards the appropriateness of the tour that developed in the wake of the Tet Offensive. In the case of the twelve-month tour, these attitudes seem to have led scholars to overwhelmingly emphasize the negative aspects of a policy that, after all, successfully enabled the army to fight for several years beyond its own expectations under some of the most trying circumstances imaginable. Moreover, the army's increasing difficulties in meeting manpower requirements made the problems of rotation more starkly pronounced during the war's latter years, and undoubtedly shaded post-Tet critiques of the tour. Seen in this light, it may be time for historians to re-examine the tour.

Military planners have an interest in a more sophisticated assessment as well. The March 2003 war in Iraq has elevated troop rotation planning to a prominence not witnessed since Vietnam. The army has chosen to rotate division-sized (10-15,000) and brigade-sized (3-5,000) units, rather than individuals as in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. While this encourages cohesive combat units, it also creates a number of difficulties because the regular army is not large enough to replace units on a one-for-one basis. Thus, the Pentagon has had to deploy large numbers of reserve and National Guard units, augment the war effort with forces usually kept in reserve for sudden interventions (such as airborne units and marines), and request a temporary increase in the army's authorized strength of 30,000 soldiers.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Vince Crawley, "Iraq Relief Coming Soon: More Reservists, Marines Alerted for Deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom II," *Army Times*, 17 November 2003, 8; Rick Maze, "30,000 More Soldiers: Temporary Boost Could Affect Deployments, Promotions and Careers," *Army Times*, 9 February 2004, 8.

Also, to keep units intact throughout their training and deployment cycles, the army has implemented a “stop-loss” policy, which indefinitely prevents soldiers from either leaving the army or moving to a new unit, causing morale problems.<sup>280</sup> These challenges illustrate the complex implications of personnel rotation planning, and underscore the importance of the army understanding its own experience with rotation during Vietnam, the service’s longest war.

The twelve-month tour individual rotation policy in Vietnam condemned company commanders to fight a frustrating “Revolving Door War.” Writing in August 1969, in *The American Enlisted Man* Charles C. Moskos contended: “in many ways our American nation has a much better military than it deserves.”<sup>281</sup> When the unnecessary cost in blood, treasure, morale, and unit performance incurred by the twelve-month tour policy are fully taken into account, scholars may conclude that the company grade officers, noncommissioned officers, and soldiers that served in Vietnam deserved a better rotation policy. But scholars should also seek to capture the tour’s beneficial aspects. The service will face, as it is experiencing today, the challenge of mitigating battle fatigue and fairly distributing combat risk over the course of a prolonged war. These problems, and others associated with rotation, have no perfect solution. The army should make every effort to learn from the full depth of its experience with individual rotation in Vietnam and adopt an appropriate policy for any future war.

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<sup>280</sup> Maze, 8.

<sup>281</sup> Moskos, 185.

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