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Anthony E. Hart  
*Providence College*

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**Soldiers' Motivations to Fight in World War II: The United States Army and the  
German Wehrmacht in the European Theatre**

by  
**Anthony E. Hart**  
**HIS 490 History Honors Thesis**

**Department of History  
Providence College  
Fall 2018**



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## INTRODUCTION

The European theatre of the Second World War has often been perceived as an ideological conflict driven by nationalism and patriotism. For Führer Adolf Hitler's National Socialist party in Germany, it was a war to annihilate people who were perceived as inferior and even "subhuman." This included the Polish, Jews, Bolsheviks, and all other identities whom the Nazis believed to be a threat to the Aryan race. In addition, the loss of territory and the economic collapse that Germany faced following the First World War were fresh in the minds of Hitler and the Germany people. The "ethnic-racist nationalism" instilled in the German people by the Nazi regime, along with a patriotic fervor to fight for (and regain portions of) their country, resulted in support for the war from a large portion of the German population.<sup>1</sup> For President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the United States, World War II was a patriotic fight necessary for the security of the United States and its allies. In 1940, even prior to the United States Senate's declarations of war against Japan and Germany, FDR acknowledged the Nazis as a danger "to American civilization." In his call for the U.S. to be the "arsenal of democracy," FDR stated, "If Great Britain goes down...[the Axis powers] will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval resources against this hemisphere. It is no exaggeration to say all of us in the Americas would be living at a point of a gun – a gun loaded with explosive bullets, economic as well as military."<sup>2</sup> A patriotic fervor to defend the United States and its values became the driving force behind U.S. mobilization, as the American people embraced their role

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949* (New York: Penguin Book, 2015),

<sup>2</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Roosevelt Speaking About Cancer of Nazis and Aid to Britain (1940)," *British Pathé*, April 13, 2014, accessed November 26, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIJm8Hp4Xe0>.

as the arsenal of democracy and came to support the fight against the Axis powers. Ideology, patriotism, and nationalism may have been the motivations of leaders and citizens on the home front in Germany and the United States, but what about the men in the American and German armies fighting on the front lines? They may have been similarly motivated prior to their deployment, but what motivated soldiers in the U.S. Army and the Wehrmacht to continue fighting as the war dragged on and as they endured the horrors of combat? Were the motivational factors of American soldiers similar to or distinct from those of German soldiers? These are the questions which this paper seeks to answer.

Various historians and sociologists have analyzed the potential factors that motivated American soldiers to continuously endure combat, even after engaging in horrific bloodshed, experiencing brutal weather conditions, and reaching the point of physical and mental exhaustion. S.L.A. Marshall, chief U.S. Army combat historian of the European theatre throughout World War II, believes that “ego is the most important of the motor forces driving the soldier, and [if] it were not for the ego, it would be impossible to make men face the risks of battle.” Marshall further explains that “personal honor is the one thing [soldiers value] more than life itself,” as they loathed the thought of expressing fear in front of their comrades, something which was considered “cowardice.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, soldiers sought to maintain their personal honor and the trust of their comrades by attempting to constantly appear strong in their words and actions. Historian Francis Steckel contends that soldier motivation was even more closely linked to comrades than is argued by Marshall. Steckel claims that “many soldiers endured the horrors of combat through the sustaining bonds of loyalty, feeling of security, and

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<sup>3</sup> S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1947), 149.

sense of unit pride instilled by long service as part of a cohesive group.”<sup>4</sup> Studs Terkel agrees that, “for the typical American soldier,” it was not wanting to fail his fellow comrades which “impelled him up front.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike Marshall, Steckel, and Terkel, Samuel Stouffer believes that there was not one major factor which motivated U.S. soldiers. Rather, in his two-volume work *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life*, Stouffer argues that soldiers’ motivation derived from six major factors: coercive institutional authority, combat leaders, the “informal social group,” men’s attitudes toward the war and the enemy, “residual goals” (desire to get home, hope of victory, etc.), and prayer and personal philosophies.<sup>6</sup> Many historians have offered their take on the impact of these individual factors outlined by Stouffer. For example, in their article “Are There Atheists in Foxholes?: Combat Intensity and Religious Behavior,” Brian and Craig Wansink assert that religion played a more significant factor for U.S. soldiers than had previously been acknowledged. Nevertheless, historians generally agree that comradeship was the factor that most significantly motivated American soldiers to continue fighting. Even Brian and Craig Wansink acknowledge that “soldiers can use a number of coping strategies to gain, maintain, or regain their motivations” and religion is just “one direction that a veteran could turn,” if they turned to it at all.<sup>7</sup>

Historians have also sought to understand what drove Wehrmacht soldiers to be so steadfast in battle, even when German defeat seemed imminent. In “Cohesion and

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<sup>4</sup> Francis Steckel, “Morale Problems in Combat: American Soldiers in Europe in World War II,” *Army History*, no. 31 (1994): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Studs Terkel, *The Good War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Stouffer and Edward Suchman, *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 107.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Wansink and Craig Wansink, “Are There Atheists in Foxholes? Combat Intensity and Religious Behavior,” *Journal of Religion and Health*, 52, no 3 (2013): 769.

Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II,” one of the earliest studies seeking to discover the motivations behind the intense dedication of German soldiers, Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz counter the common public opinion that the “unity” and “tenacity” of the German Army was due to ideological motivations, specifically “strong Nationalist Socialist political convictions.” Rather, Shils and Janowitz argue that the motivation and “determined resistance” of Wehrmacht soldiers were a result of “the steady satisfaction of certain primary personality demands afforded by the social organization of the army.” In other words, Wehrmacht soldiers developed close bonds with their fellow comrades who soon became their primary group – “one’s immediate face-to-face social [circle]” – and their main source of motivation.<sup>8</sup> Martin van Creveld similarly contends that the German soldiers did not fight because of National Socialist beliefs but out of loyalty to their fellow soldiers and to the Wehrmacht system. In his book *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945*, van Creveld argues, “The average German soldier in World War II...did not as a rule fight out of a belief in Nazi ideology...Instead he fought for the reasons that men have always fought: because he felt himself a member of a well integrated, well-led team whose structure, administration, and functioning were perceived to be...equitable and just.”<sup>9</sup>

Many historians, such as Omer Bartov, disagree with the assertions of Shils, Janowitz, and van Creveld. Although Bartov recognizes the importance of comradeship, he contends that “*real* ‘primary groups’ do not fully explain combat motivation due to their unfortunate tendency to disintegrate just when they are most needed.” Rather, Bartov emphasizes the importance of

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II,” in *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1948): 281.

<sup>9</sup> Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 163-164.



ideology. He argues that, although not all soldiers were “committed National Socialists,” Hitler was able to tailor to the public’s “powerful need to believe in something or someone beyond the mundane material needs and hardships of daily life.” This was particularly necessary for Wehrmacht troops “whose dependence on belief in a cause was greatly enhanced by constant danger and fear.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, while acknowledging the importance of comradeship, Stephen Fritz claims, “World War II, especially that part of it fought in Russia, was the ultimate ideological war...with the enemy idea threatening the validity of the National Socialist concepts that a surprisingly large number of *Landsers* (common soldiers) embraced. And the staying power of the average German soldier, his sense of seriousness and purpose...depended in large measure on the conviction that National Socialist Germany had redeemed the failures of World War I and had restored, both individually and collectively, a uniquely German sense of identity.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, historians studying the Wehrmacht tend to agree on the importance of comradeship in keeping soldier motivated, but have differed in their analysis of the role of National Socialist ideology.

It is important to note that each U.S. and German soldier fighting in the European theatre was motivated differently according to their background and individual experiences. Nevertheless, there was much common ground between American and Wehrmacht soldiers in regard to what motivated them to continue fighting. Once they experienced battle, the overarching concern for soldiers on both sides was surviving the war. In their best attempt to do so, and to stay motivated during long bouts on the frontline, soldiers constantly relied on their

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<sup>10</sup> Omer Bartov, “Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich,” in *The Journal of Modern History* 63, no. 1 (1991): 50.

<sup>11</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 10.

comrades, officers, and training. Comrades represented the primary motivational factor for the majority of soldiers on both sides. As they endured training and the horrors of combat together, men formed unique, durable bonds with their fellow soldiers, the likes of which are generally unknown outside of the realm of war. Soldiers not only relied on their comrades to keep them distracted as they anxiously awaited battle, but also developed a trust in their “buddies” which gave them hope of victory and survival. In addition, for soldiers in both armies, motivation was enhanced by numerous secondary factors including confidence in their training and preparedness as well as trust in and respect for the officers leading them into battle. However, it is important to acknowledge that the organizational structure and the value system of the U.S. Army and the Wehrmacht differed greatly, meaning that the importance that the armies placed on these factors varied. As a result, although soldiers shared secondary motivational factors which were generally similar, the way and extent to which these factors affected soldiers differed between armies.

There were also motivational factors that were fairly distinct to American soldiers and others that were unique to German soldiers. For example, brutal punishments from higher authority – commonly execution – was a major factor that kept German soldiers on the frontline. Contrarily, because sentences were much less severe, punishment from institutional authority played only a limited role in motivating American soldiers. Furthermore, Wehrmacht soldiers’ hatred and fear of the Red Army was a leading motivational factor, especially toward the end of the war. As a result of the numerous atrocities committed by Germans against Bolshevik and other civilian populations, which a majority of Wehrmacht soldiers either observed or participated in, soldiers feared that defeat at the hands of the Red Army meant facing violent retribution by Russian soldiers. On the other hand, hatred or fear of the enemy was not a

significant motivating factor for American soldiers fighting in the European theatre. Rather, with victory seen as a likely prospect as the U.S. Army drove across Europe, the American soldier's desire to fulfill one's duty, win the war, and return home was constantly looming in their mind. Similarly, although "getting the job done" was not a concept communicated by Wehrmacht soldiers as it was by Americans, letters from home reminded German soldiers of a world outside of the war and boosted overall morale. Also, despite the conviction that Wehrmacht soldiers were strongly driven by National Socialist ideology, as presented by Fritz and Bartov, the typical soldier was not politically motivated. Ideology played a role in motivating German soldiers, but it was the ideas and values of the Wehrmacht – similar yet distinguished from Nazism – that were instilled in soldiers and motivated them in battle. On the other hand, there were various issues which had demoralizing impacts on soldiers of both sides, the most prevalent being combat exhaustion. Combat exhaustion was a major issue for American troops because a poor U.S. Army replacement system kept combat units on the front lines for extended periods of time. Although the Wehrmacht's replacement system proved much more efficient than that of the U.S. Army, German soldiers similarly struggled when they faced long or intense periods of combat.

### **Countering Misconceptions**

There are common misconceptions about the motivational factors for American and German soldiers fighting on the frontline during the Second World War. First, for American soldiers it is often believed that patriotism and the defense of American values were primary motivational factors. However, while some soldiers may have felt this sentiment when they first joined the Army, patriotism and ideological beliefs were insignificant in keeping combat soldiers

motivated throughout the war. As S.L.A. Marshall noted, “the pride in a uniform or belief in [the] national cause” were not sufficient motivational factors for keeping soldiers steadfast in battle.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Wesley Simon observed the Second World War as a shift in the history of combat motivation, arguing that “out went previous doctrines that men fought for moral reasons (patriotism, esprit de corps, pride and leadership, and so on) and in came the core role of small-group psychology.”<sup>13</sup> Once soldiers experienced combat, they rarely relied on politics or pride in American values. As Army veteran Robert “Bobby” Rasmus put it, “The reason you storm the beaches is not patriotism or bravery. It’s that sense of not wanting to fail your buddies.”<sup>14</sup> This shift away from patriotic fervor was common as soldiers transitioned from training in the States to combat in Europe. In fact, one study by Stouffer found that soldiers in training were far less likely to hold doubts that the War was worth fighting than soldiers engaged or previously engaged in combat, as forty-nine percent of those training responded that they had never expressed such feelings. This is compared to veteran infantry divisions where only thirty-two percent of soldiers claimed that they had never held doubts, while an overwhelming forty-three percent claimed that they “sometimes” or “very often” felt that the war was not worth fighting.<sup>15</sup>

The decrease in patriotic fervor as soldiers transitioned to life on the frontlines can be attributed to the fact that the bigger picture – the political and ideological aspects – of the War mattered little to the majority of American combat soldiers. Soldiers cared little about these

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<sup>12</sup> Marshall, *Men Against Fire...*, 153-154.

<sup>13</sup> Simon Wesley, “Twentieth-Century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown,” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41, no 2 (2006): 275.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Rasmus, in Studs Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 39.

<sup>15</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier...*, 150.

aspects because ideology and patriotism had little relevance to their immediate circumstances. Rather, they were primarily concerned with survival. As Rasmus asserts, “I was preoccupied with staying alive and doing my job.”<sup>16</sup> Stouffer similarly argues that as soldiers experienced the realities of combat, “any talk that did not subordinate idealistic values and patriotism to the harsher realities of the combat situation [was seen as] hypocritical.”<sup>17</sup> As one European combat veteran explained, “Ask any dogface on the line. You’re fighting for your skin on the line. When I enlisted I was patriotic as hell. There’s no patriotism on the line. A boy up there 60 days in the line is in danger every minute. He ain’t fighting for no patriotism.”<sup>18</sup> Although soldiers may have entered the U.S. Army motivated by patriotism or ideological beliefs, these were insignificant motivational factors for soldiers on the frontlines who were primarily concerned about their immediate situation, particularly their own survival and that of their comrades.

Another misconception about the combat soldier during WWII is that the political and ideological beliefs of National Socialism were primary motivational factors for men in the German army. There is no doubt that a majority of soldiers had been manipulated by National Socialism in some way. As Ute Frevert points out, Hitler’s government “hastened to inject institutions with the key specific National Socialist concepts intended to shape and inspire the entire population – and for men, this entailed a primary self-definition of soldiers.”<sup>19</sup> These efforts, along with Nazi propaganda and the repression of political opponents, made it incredibly

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<sup>16</sup> Rasmus, in Terkel, *The Good War*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, 150.

<sup>18</sup> Unknown, quoted in Stouffer, *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 169.

<sup>19</sup> Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Modern Germany, Military Conscription and Civil Society* (New York: Berg, 2004), 247.

difficult for German citizens, including those entering the Wehrmacht, to avoid being influenced by National Socialism. In addition, National Socialist racial ideology gave German soldiers justification for the atrocities that they committed against Jewish, Polish, Russian, and a number of other men, women, and children, and these were only amplified by the complacency of Wehrmacht command. However, for a majority of soldiers, once they got on the battlefield National Socialist political and ideological beliefs did little to motivate soldiers to continue fighting. There were a small number of soldiers who were highly motivated by National Socialist ideology, but these tended to be a minority who were raised during the Hitler Youth Generation. As eighteen-year-old paratrooper Egon Klopp stated, “I was raised as a National Socialist and I remain a National Socialist.”<sup>20</sup> However, soldiers who were committed National Socialists, like this young man, had typically grown up in what Shils and Janowitz describe as “the most rewarding period of Nazi Socialism,” making them more susceptible to National Socialist ideology. In fact, it is estimated that “Hard-Core” National Socialists made up only 10-15 per cent of enlisted men, and these were mainly junior officers who had little to no experience with other ideological systems.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, by 1944 and 1945 German victory appeared less likely as a result of the momentum gained by the Soviet victory at Stalingrad and the United States’ entrance into the war. As a result, there was new ideological imperative adopted by soldiers: “defence of the Reich.” Even so, as is mentioned by Ian Kershaw, this phrase did not

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<sup>20</sup> Egon Klopp, as quoted in Felix Römer, “Milieus in the Military: Soldierly Ethos, Nationalism and Conformism Among Workers in the Wehrmacht,” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48, no. 1 (2013): 141.

<sup>21</sup> Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration...,” 277.

simply encapsulate defense of National Socialism, but “defence of family, home, property and cultural roots.”<sup>22</sup>

Rather than National Socialism, it was the similar, yet distinct, values and ideas of the Wehrmacht that had a significant motivating impact on German soldiers throughout the war. Fritz argues that “an army – and the men within it, cannot be completely separated from the value system that produced it.”<sup>23</sup> This is true in that many National Socialist ideas such as *Volksgemeinschaft*, or peoples community, and Aryan racial superiority were embraced by the Wehrmacht in order to form universal cohesiveness beyond just the combat unit. However, in the context of combat motivation, it is important to distinguish National Socialism and the values and ideas of the Wehrmacht as separate ideologies which motivated soldiers differently.

The values and ideals which had the most significant impact on motivating combat soldiers were those instilled in them during the intense, often brutish, Wehrmacht training. Felix Römer argues that, as soldiers progressed through training, “traditional [socio-cultural] dividing lines were largely blurred” because men from all backgrounds began to identify themselves with the Wehrmacht’s “canon of values.”<sup>24</sup> The most important of these values was community and cohesiveness, both in individual units and throughout the Wehrmacht as a whole. As is mentioned by Fritz, “The Wehrmacht not only stressed the notion of comradeship but did so in a consciously ideological manner: the [frontline soldiers were] to be the kernel from which would grow the *Volksgemeinschaft*.”<sup>25</sup> Karl Fuchs’ letter to his father displays how successful this

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<sup>22</sup> Kershaw, *To Hell and Back...*, 377.

<sup>23</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten...*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Felix Römer, “Milieus in the Military: Soldierly Ethos, Nationalism and Conformism Among Workers in the Wehrmacht,” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48, no. 1 (2013): 125.

<sup>25</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten...*, 236.

effort was. He happily admits “I’ve become such an integral part of my company that I couldn’t leave it ever again.”<sup>26</sup> The success of the Wehrmacht’s effort to instill community throughout the Army became fully exposed when soldiers entered combat, as they relied on their training and their comrades to succeed in battle and stay motivated in extended episodes on the frontline.

The Wehrmacht also instilled in soldiers a sense of superiority over their opponents, echoing the National Socialist core belief in the superiority of the Aryan race. According to Fritz, the Wehrmacht gave a German soldier a sense of “individual superiority [which], he thought, resulted from his superior training, greater toughness, more resilient morale, and better leadership – all products of the Wehrmacht’s stress on camaraderie and [community].”<sup>27</sup>

Corporal Karl Behnke emphasized this feeling of superiority stating, “The morale and fighting spirit of the German infantry are incomparable. No other group of soldiers could accomplish what they have done.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, one morale questionnaire of German POWS found that more than ninety-percent of those interviewed “revealed a positive opinion of the soldierly virtues of the Wehrmacht,” while only forty-two percent “expressed themselves unreservedly positively about National Socialism.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, although the Wehrmacht was certainly not exempt from racism, soldiers’ belief in German fighting superiority is the idea more responsible for increasing their confidence during combat. The ideas and values instilled in soldiers by the Wehrmacht, primarily focused on the values of comradeship and community, echoed those of National

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<sup>26</sup> Karl Fuchs to his father, April 11, 1937, *Sieg Heil!: War Letters of Tank Gunner Karl Fuchs* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1987), 42.

<sup>27</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten...*, 236.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Behnke, quoted in Römer, “Milieus in the Military...,” 136.

<sup>29</sup> Römer, “Milieus in the Military...,” 136, 133.



Socialism, but Wehrmacht ideology was distinct and had a wider impact on soldiers than National Socialism.

### **Training & Comradery**

German and American soldiers were primarily motivated by their comrades. It was with their fellow soldiers that individuals endured training, adapted to life on the frontlines, won and lost battles, and witnessed their friends become casualties. The presence of comrades gave soldiers confidence that they would survive, that their unit would be victorious in battle, and offered a social relationship which helped ease the fears and anxieties that accumulated during long periods of combat. The role of comradery as motivation typically began during intense, rigorous training for soldiers on both sides. Training was an opportunity for soldiers to bond over the physical and mental struggles that they had to endure at the hands of (often despised) drill instructors. In addition, it was a chance to get to know one another personally and to gain an understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses. Easy Company was a part of an elite paratrooper unit of the U.S. Army which underwent rigorous training that tested each man physically and mentally. One example of rigorous training was long and constant night marches, often under difficult conditions. Former Corporal Walter Gordon remembers, "We would cut across country and crawl under fences and through gaps and go through creeks. I could see a silhouette at night and tell you who it was. I could tell by the way he wore his hat, how the helmet sat on his head, how he slung his rifle."<sup>30</sup> Gordon's keen awareness of comrades and their simple mannerisms was a result of training, where soldiers "grew intimate." Training for

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<sup>30</sup> Walter Gordon, quoted in Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992), 45.

infantrymen in nonelite units had its own difficulties, as “marching and bivouacking consumed much of an enlistee’s time,” along with various classroom lectures and additional physical training.<sup>31</sup> Dee Carl Ferguson Jr. journaled his experience at Army infantry training, which included a final twenty-mile hike “in the most horrific down-poor imaginable.” “No one had to sing lullabies to induce sleep,” Ferguson noted of the exhaustion that came with training. Although difficult, training brought men together to form the unit cohesion necessary for combat.<sup>32</sup> Easy Company paratrooper Darrell “Shifty” Powers remembers the comradery that resulted from Army training, recalling, “These people that you’re in service with, you know those people better than you’ll ever know anybody in your life. You know them right down to the final thing, you know? And that comes when you start your training, while that progresses.”<sup>33</sup> U.S. Army soldiers went into combat with an already strong personal relationship with their comrades. (This was not the case for replacement soldiers who typically found it difficult to integrate themselves into combat units, but this will be discussed later in the essay).

Wehrmacht training had an identical bonding effect for German soldiers. Fritz comments, “training aimed to build a sense of group identity and solidarity out of shared privations.”<sup>34</sup> These privations included long periods without food and/or sleep, exercises with live ammunition – during which casualties were not uncommon – and physical training that

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<sup>31</sup> Nancy Disher Baird, “An Opportunity to Meet ‘Every Kind of Person’: A Kentuckian Views Army Life during World War II,” in *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 101, no. 3 (2003): 302-303.

<sup>32</sup> Dee Carl Ferguson Jr., Letter to parents, April 6, 1943, quoted in Baird, “An Opportunity to Meet...,” 302.

<sup>33</sup> Darrell Powers, interviewed in *We Stand Alone Together*, TV Movie, directed by Mark Cowen (New York: HBO, 2001), 7:00.

<sup>34</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 19.

brought soldiers to ultimate exhaustion. “One sweated blood,” German soldier Guy Sajer remarked. “One was either hospitalized after a week of almost insane effort or incorporated into the division and marched off to war.”<sup>35</sup> These tactics, many utilized by the U.S. Army during its own training, were meant to test the will of soldiers, prepare them for combat, and build cohesiveness. Former Wehrmacht soldier Friedrich Grupe commented on training, claiming, “There was no mercy...[but] you get accustomed to it, especially the comradeship with comrades, which helps you get over very much.”<sup>36</sup> Hans Wener Woltersdorf went even further, asserting “my unit was my home, my family, which I had to protect.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, like American G.I.’s, German soldiers had strong relationships with their comrades even prior to entering combat. However, soldiers’ relationships with one another grew even deeper once they experienced life on the frontlines.

Rigorous training exercises and methods, although harsh and sometimes brutish, were a way to prepare soldiers for the horrific conditions of war on the frontlines. Remembering his mindset heading into combat, one Easy Company soldier recalled, “In the back of your mind, you’re wondering what’s going to happen [to you]. You know you’ve been trained and trained and trained on what your job is going to be and what you’re supposed to do. That’s what you’ve gotta think about.”<sup>38</sup> A common saying during Wehrmacht training was “sweat saves blood.” However, soldiers only fully understood the true accuracy of this saying once they engaged in

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<sup>35</sup> Guy Sajer. *The Forgotten Soldier* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 1990), 160.

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Grupe, quoted in <sup>36</sup> Stephen Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier During World War II* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>37</sup> Karl Fuchs, Letter of Karl Fuchs, April 11, 1937, *Sieg Heil!: War Letters of Tank Gunner Karl Fuchs* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1987), 25.

<sup>38</sup> Bill Maynard, interviewed in *We Stand Alone Together*, 3:20.

combat. Linking training to life on the Eastern front, Woltersdorf remarked, “Nothing is more burdensome than having to suffer harassment and injustice, but nothing increases self-confidence more than having withstood hardships.”<sup>39</sup> Fritz-Erich Diemke put it more bluntly, stating, “In the war, we survived...because of this hard training.”<sup>40</sup> In the end, training increased motivation because the drills and exercises put soldiers under stresses similar to those which they would experience in combat. Having experienced these stresses made it easier for soldiers to adjust to life on the frontlines and gave them confidence in their and their comrades’ abilities on the battlefield.

As was previously mentioned, survival was the ultimate and most pressing concern for soldiers. In their best attempt to make it through each day on the frontline, comrades constantly depended on one another. As result of the unbreakable bonds that they developed during training and throughout combat, soldiers trusted their comrades with their lives. Soldiers not only knew their “buddies” personally and cared about their well-being, but they trusted that the soldier next to them had the skills and training necessary to defeat the enemy and get them out of the war alive. Kershaw notes that, for Wehrmacht soldiers, “self-survival depended in great measure upon the actions of immediate comrades. Self-interest determined, therefore, that the fight for survival was also a fight for the survival of those fighting alongside.”<sup>41</sup> Stouffer similarly asserts of American soldiers, “The goal of survival [enforced] close teamwork with others in the outfit. The life of each depended as much on the feeling of close mutual dependence which has been

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<sup>39</sup> Hans Werner Woltersdorf, *Gods of War: Memoir of a German Soldier*, translated by Nancy Benvenga (Novato, California, Presidio Press, 1990), 24.

<sup>40</sup> Fritz-Erich Diemke, quoted in Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> Kershaw, *To Hell and Back...*, 175.

seen to be so important as a basis for other aspects of combat motivation.”<sup>42</sup> In both armies, the relationships that soldiers developed in their comrades during training and in combat increased motivation as they became confident that their unit would be victorious in battle and that their buddies would help safeguard their own survival.

Although every soldier was capable of experiencing combat exhaustion, it was the trust in and distraction by comrades that prolonged or even prevented many from expressing fear and anxiety. Comrades offered a way for combat soldiers to pass the immense amount of downtime that came with life on the frontlines, typically in foxholes and often under brutal weather conditions. This is opposed to spending excess time isolated and thinking about the tragic things that they had witnessed and/or done, their probability of getting injured or killed, or the uncomfortable climate which many found themselves in. Steckel argues that U.S. soldiers “endured the horrors of combat through the sustaining bonds of loyalty, feeling of security, and sense of unit pride instilled by long service as part of a cohesive group.”<sup>43</sup> Shils and Janowitz similarly contend that German soldiers’ “determined resistance” was a result of the close bond formed between soldiers as they “jointly experienced gratifications” and as they became more isolated from their “civilian primary groups.”<sup>44</sup> These relationships were significant because of the mental impact that they had on soldiers, as comrades motivated men in battle and helped them to endure the struggles that came with combat. As one Army combat veteran put it, “You know the men in your outfit. You have to be loyal to them. The men get close-knit together...They depend on each other – wouldn’t do anything to let the rest of them down.

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<sup>42</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier...*, 169.

<sup>43</sup> Steckel, “Morale Problems in Combat...,” 2.

<sup>44</sup> Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration...,” 315.

They'd rather get killed than do that. They begin to think the world of each other. It's the main thing that keeps a guy from going haywire."<sup>45</sup>

Guy Sajer similarly expressed his reliance on comrades, recalling, "I was sick of the whole thing. My stomach was turning over and felt cold. I look for Hals or some other friend, but couldn't see any familiar faces... their absence weighed on me. I felt very much alone...trying to find some excuse of hope and encouragement."<sup>46</sup> Although Sajer describes a brief period after a battle that he could not find his comrades, his account displays how heavily many Wehrmacht soldiers relied on one another to endure the struggles brought about by combat. An anonymous Wehrmacht soldier put it more simply, claiming, "Many times my nerves want to get the better of me. Then you think you must throw all the crap away, you can't hold on any longer, and only in the circle of comrades, with a glass of beer can you again find diversion."<sup>47</sup> Comrades were there for one another during what was, for many, the most demanding time of their lives both mentally and physically. Soldiers were away from family and friends, many for the first time, in a hostile environment where death could come upon them at any moment. They had no one to lean on except for the man in the foxhole next to them. Under these conditions, comrades became the primary element that kept soldiers motivated throughout their time on the frontlines.

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<sup>45</sup> Unknown, in Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, 136.

<sup>46</sup> Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier*, 250.

<sup>47</sup> Letter of Anonymous Soldier (18 May, 1941), quoted in Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 166.

## Officers

Officers played a strong role in the motivation of American and Wehrmacht soldiers during World War II because their unique, authoritative position allowed them to have a significant effect on the morale of combat troops. However, whether officers had a positive or negative effect on morale depended on their ability to obtain the trust and respect of their troops, both of which were correlated to an officer's experience on the battlefield and how well they led their men during combat. As the War dragged on, American officers who had experienced combat in previous campaigns, typically non-commissioned officers (NCOs), were respected far more than junior officers, also known as commissioned officers (COs). In fact, when a study by Stouffer asked a group of American combat veterans to "pick out some man who you would say was one of the best combat soldiers you have known," only ten-percent selected a CO, while fifty-five percent selected an NCO and thirty-four percent selected a private or private first-class (PFC).<sup>48</sup> This is because newly commissioned officers coming in from the States typically entered leadership positions prior to their baptism of fire. On the other hand, in the Wehrmacht "nearly all non-commissioned and commissioned officers of the company grade level were regarded by the German soldier throughout the Western campaign as brave, efficient, and considerate."<sup>49</sup> This was the case until the final few months of the War, when the Wehrmacht rushed men into combat as it became desperate for troops and German defeat seemed imminent. A soldier in the U.S. Army became a CO either by graduating from a military college or Officer Candidate School (OCS), while officers in the Wehrmacht went through a *Kriegsschule*, a military war school similar to OCS.

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<sup>48</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier...*, 134.

<sup>49</sup> Shils and Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration..." 298.

Stouffer argues that there were two ways an officer in the U.S. Army gained informal power to influence and motivate soldiers. First, an officer had to prove, through past experiences, to be “a source of guidance and strength” for soldiers. Second, in order to gain the respect and admiration of his men an officer must have “shared the dangers and hardships of the men successfully.”<sup>50</sup> For enlisted soldiers who became NCOs, they typically had already proven their leadership skills during training and in previous campaigns. As one replacement soldier recalls, “We were in awe of [the veterans]...they were like heroes to us. And they were good, furthermore they were good. We had good officers for the most part, but we had excellent NCOs – they looked after you.”<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, newly commissioned junior officers had to prove their leadership abilities to veteran soldiers during their initial combat experiences. In his memoir *Company Commander*, Captain Charles MacDonald recalls the difficult task of taking control of the veteran Company I as a twenty-one year old replacement CO. When “Mac” joined Company I, many the unit’s soldiers had already seen action in France, beginning when they stormed Normandy beach on D-Day plus one (June 7, 1944). After joining the company, MacDonald remembers thinking, “They could boast a glorious combat record already and I knew nothing...If only I knew what [combat] was like. It seemed incredible that his group of hardened combat veterans could accept an inexperienced youth of twenty-one to lead them into battle simply because he happened to come to them wearing a set of flashy bars on his shoulders.”<sup>52</sup> However, as was feared by MacDonald, it was difficult for junior officers to gain the respect of veteran soldiers and the authoritative power necessary to positively motivate soldiers.

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<sup>50</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier...*, 123-124.

<sup>51</sup> Lester Hashey, interviewed in *We Stand Alone Together*, 32:15.

<sup>52</sup> Charles MacDonald, *Company Commander* (New York: History Book Club, 2006), 5.



For officers in the U.S. Army, gaining the respect of their troops came only after they proved their leadership and combat abilities on the battlefield. NCOs typically had the respect of their men, as those under their command had either fought beside them during previous campaigns or were replacement soldiers that admired their combat experience. Contrarily, COs who were unable to display such leadership ability as they entered veteran units not only failed to gain the respect of their men, but also risked decreasing overall morale. Charles Gates, a member of the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion – the first black tanker group to be used in combat – recalls one colonel of an infantry regiment. According to Gates, “All the combat experience he had was as a finance officer back in the United States. He didn’t know a thing about combat.” After suffering one fatality and losing a few other men to injuries, Gates decided to ignore the colonel and began giving orders himself, claiming “I could give less than a damn what their rank is.”<sup>53</sup> Major Dick Winters of Easy Company even remembers a period during the Battle of the Bulge when “I looked at the junior officers and my company commanders and I grinded my teeth.”<sup>54</sup> During the company’s attempt to capture the German town of Foy, Easy Company began taking a high number of casualties as leadership began to fail.<sup>55</sup> Lieutenant Norman Dike, a CO who had recently been assigned commander of Easy Company, was leading the assault when he began panicking and making heedless, dangerous decisions. It was then that battalion commander Winters ordered Lieutenant Ronald Spiers – a well respect NCO who had seen action in Normandy and Holland – to “take over the company and relieve Dike.”<sup>56</sup> Dike’s

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<sup>53</sup> Charles A. Gates, in Studs Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 269.

<sup>54</sup> Dick Winters, quoted in *Band of Brothers*, 204.

<sup>55</sup> Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 209.

<sup>56</sup> Winters, quoted in *Band of Brothers*, 209.

failure to lead the company during combat resulted in distrust amongst his own company. First sergeant C. Carwood Lipton expressed his concern about the junior officer's leadership abilities, bluntly telling Winters, "Lieutenant Dike is going to get a lot of [Easy] Company men killed."<sup>57</sup> Lieutenant Dike and the CO described by Gates are just two examples of the negative impact that officers, particularly inexperienced junior officers, could have on combat units.

Whether an NCO or a CO, officers who led by example were the ones that gained the trust and respect of their men and, as a result, positively motivated soldiers on the frontlines. As one U.S. Army Lieutenant noted, "In combat you have to be out in front leading them, not directing them from the rear. The men say, 'If the officer's going to stay back a hundred yards, then I'm going to stay back with him.' You can't direct them – you have to lead them."<sup>58</sup> Winters similarly asserted, "If you're a leader, you lead the way. Not just on the easy ones, you take the tough ones too."<sup>59</sup> In fact, in one study performed by Stouffer on veteran infantrymen, the largest percentage of men surveyed claimed leading by example to be the "officer leadership practice" that most increased their confidence during "tough or frightening situation(s)."<sup>60</sup> For officers, leading by example nearly always meant putting themselves in harm's way. D-Day veteran Sergeant Warner Hamlett recalled a tremendous display of leadership by an officer on the beaches of Normandy as a group of soldiers was pinned down behind a seawall. Despite the "deafening roar of explosions and bullets," Lieutenant Wise of F-Company continued "directing his team behind the seawall, when a bullet hit him in the forehead. He continued to instruct his

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<sup>57</sup> C. Carwood Lipton, quoted in *Band of Brothers*, 204.

<sup>58</sup> Unknown, in Stouffer, *The American Soldier...*, 124.

<sup>59</sup> Winters, interviewed in *We Stand Alone Together*, 6:00.

<sup>60</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier...*, 125.

men until he sat down and held his head in the palm of his hand before falling over dead.”<sup>61</sup> Despite his death, it was officers like Lieutenant Wise who led by example – often putting themselves in harm’s way during battle – that gained the trust and respect of their men. The NCOs and COs who were able to do so had a significant, positive impact on group morale and motivated their soldiers to follow suit.

Wehrmacht officers had a similar impact on the combat motivation of troops under their command. However, soldiers in the Wehrmacht tended to have a stronger regard, or even “a fixation,” on *both* NCOs and COs.<sup>62</sup> As a matter of fact, in a questionnaire of German prisoners of war (POWs), Wehrmacht soldiers claimed two-thirds of their junior officers had been “good,” and gave NCOs a seventy-five percent approval rating.<sup>63</sup> The approval rating of junior officers – much higher than COs in the U.S. Army – is partly due to the fact that “the junior officers of the Wehrmacht were, in general, very well selected. They were better educated than the average German and had received extensive preliminary training.” This is contrary to many COs in the American Army who were rushed through OCS because replacements were needed in combat units. Even so, similar to the U.S. Army, NCOs “were everywhere appreciated as the most solid asset of the Wehrmacht.”<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, as former Wehrmacht soldier Hans Werner Woltersdorf noted in his memoir *Gods of War*, every CO and NCO “who led a unit had to be the

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<sup>61</sup> Warner Hamlet, quoted in Gerald Linderman, *The World Within War: America’s Combat Experience in World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 66.

<sup>62</sup> Römer, “Milieus in the Military...,” 139.

<sup>63</sup> Römer, “Milieus in the Military...,” 136.

<sup>64</sup> Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration...,” 299.

best man in his unit as well; not the uniform, not being in command, but example made the leader.”<sup>65</sup>

As Woltersdorf mentions, like the U.S. Army, it was Wehrmacht officers who led by example that gained the respect of their men and increased soldiers’ willingness to fight. Michael Schu was a Wehrmacht soldier who constantly expressed admiration for one of his lieutenants, claiming that he was “a great guy” who “was always at the front.”<sup>66</sup> However, leading by example to gain trust and respect necessarily meant putting themselves in danger. As is mentioned by Robert Citino, “if there is one thing we can say with assurance about German officers, it is that they were absolutely fearless, and they proved it by leading from the front and dying in great numbers.”<sup>67</sup> Along with showing leadership in battle, it was important to Wehrmacht soldiers that their officers were strong in character. Specifically, they admired officers who embodied and balanced the ideas and values of the Wehrmacht, which had been engrained in soldiers during training. These included *Gemeinschaft*, feelings of superiority over enemies, and toughness. In fact, officers were specifically trained to emphasize these values. As is mentioned by Frevert, “Established officers too received reminders that comradeship did not only stop with the rank of Lieutenant, but ought to be extended to the troops, who all deserved the same comradely treatment.” This meant that officers were to be cautious when it came to beating down on soldiers in their unit, as many of these men needed to be “schooled” and “led.”<sup>68</sup> The presence of such officers “provided models for weaker men” and helped facilitate

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<sup>65</sup> Woltersdorf, *Gods of War...*, 206.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Schu, quoted Römer, “Milieus in the Military...,” 139.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Citino, *The Wehrmacht’s Last Stand: The German Campaigns of 1944-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 4.

<sup>68</sup> Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks...*, 253.

new soldiers into the Wehrmacht and their individual units.<sup>69</sup> Friedrich Grupe spoke in high regard of one sergeant who constantly screamed at and pushed soldiers to their physical limits, but who also understood the importance of comradeship. Grupe wrote, “I will not soon forget my drill instructor, ‘big mouth’ Schmidt, as he shooed us up the heights of the training area...[But] in the evenings ‘big-mouth’ Schmidt comes into the barracks room, sits informally with us, and laughs and jokes and sings with us just like a good comrade.”<sup>70</sup> Therefore, it was officers who led by example and carried out the ideas and values of the Wehrmacht on and off the battlefield that gained the admiration of their men. Officers who had this admiration were able to motivate their men to continue fighting throughout the war.

### **Institutional Punishment**

Although officers were encouraged to breed unit cohesiveness, officers and the higher institutional authority of the Wehrmacht often used coercive measures to prevent desertion and intimidate soldiers into fighting. Wehrmacht soldiers knew that the alternative to fighting was to desert their comrades, which put them at risk of becoming a POW – which was a terrifying thought for those on the Eastern front – or of receiving punishment from higher authorities. As is mentioned by Kershaw, “German soldiers, in particular, could expect no mercy from their own side for refusal to fight, or for desertion.”<sup>71</sup> Soldiers who lost their weapons in a retreat, were caught stealing, or were deemed guilty of desertion or *Wehrkraftzertzung* – “undermining the fighting spirit of the troops” – often faced execution, or were sent to the “punishment battalion.”

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<sup>69</sup> Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration...,” 286.

<sup>70</sup> Friedrich Grupe, quoted in Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 18.

<sup>71</sup> Kershaw, *To Hell and Back...*, 375.

The punishment battalion was “widely feared and resented as a virtual death sentence” because its tasks included searching for and clearing mines and burying the dead under enemy fire.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, the Wehrmacht was not afraid to make an example out of its own men by executing criminals and deserters. Former soldier Helmut Altner insists, “There were only two possibilities. Death by bullet from the enemy or by the ‘thugs’ of the SS.”<sup>73</sup> However, SS soldiers were not always the executioners. In fact, officers were instructed “not to refrain from using their weapons” against their own men if necessary.<sup>74</sup> One “special order” by a German division stated, “Lance-Corporal Aigner...was sentenced to death by court martial on the charge of cowardice...Although he had seen his unit marching forward, he entered a house, drank a bottle of schnapps...and fled to the rear without cap or weapon, where he was seized in this ragged and drunken condition. Every case of cowardice will be severely atoned for with death. The troops are to be instructed on this by the company commander personally.”<sup>75</sup> Omer Bartov estimates that “at least 15,000 German soldiers were executed” by the Wehrmacht during the Second World War and that “many more were shot on the spot while trying to cross over to the enemy, fleeing in panic, or simply failing to carry out orders on the battlefield.”<sup>76</sup> Executions

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<sup>72</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 90-91.

<sup>73</sup> Helmut Altner, *Berlin Dance of Death*, translated by Tony Le Tissier (Havertown: Casemate, 2002), 117.

<sup>74</sup> As quoted in Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 97.

<sup>75</sup> As quoted in Bartov, *Hitler's Army...*, 101.

<sup>76</sup> Omer Bartov, “The Conduct of War: Soldiers and the Barbarization of Warfare,” in *The Journal of Modern History*, no. 64 (1992): S32.

became more customary as the war dragged on, as the Wehrmacht attempted to keep its soldiers fighting even when defeat was imminent.

Although penalties were extremely harsh and rarely justifiable, the Wehrmacht's goal of using punishments to instill fear in its men was, overall, a success. In fact, the fear of punishment, especially execution, was a form of motivation for soldiers to continue fighting. Bartov argues that the fear of disciplinary actions not only "played a major role in preventing any large-scale revolts and in keeping the majority of men at the front...[but also] both encouraged compliance with combat discipline and enhanced the troops' sense of a common destiny, purpose and guilt."<sup>77</sup> Guy Sajer admits that "fear of...the [punishment] battalion" kept soldiers on the front line.<sup>78</sup> He also recalls the effect that executions could have on men: "Two sacks were dangling from [a tree]...suspended by two short lengths of rope. We walked under them, and saw the gray, bloodless faces of hanged men, and recognized our wretched friend Frösch and his companion...Lindberg hid his face in his hands and wept."<sup>79</sup> With executions and other disciplinary action so widespread, even among comrades, soldiers understood that they were not exempt from such punishments. As a result, soldiers like Sajer were typically unwilling to risk desertion or committing other punishable offenses, which meant that they remained on frontlines even when German victory was unlikely.

In addition to receiving punishment from institutional authority, soldiers who failed to embrace the values of the Wehrmacht – especially comradeship and toughness – faced informal

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<sup>77</sup> Bartov, "The Conduct of War..." S33.

<sup>78</sup> Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier*, 111.

<sup>79</sup> Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier*, 257.

reprimand from their peers. As is mentioned by Shils and Janowitz, “For those for whom their charisma did not suffice and who were accordingly difficult to incorporate fully into the intimate primary group, frowns, harsh words, and threats served as to check on divisive tendencies.”<sup>80</sup> In a letter written to his parents during Wehrmacht training in 1944, a sixteen-year-old, among those rushed into the Wehrmacht towards the end of the war, wrote, “I have a request of you. I got my pocket knife stolen, perhaps you could get a hold of one somewhere...Then could you send me some writing paper, I still had some in my pack, but now it is gone...P.S. I lost my watch.”<sup>81</sup> Although the boy does not specify why his things were stolen, it seems that his peers were picking on him because they perceived that his age made him inferior to themselves. His youth meant that he lacked manliness and toughness, two things which were celebrated in the Wehrmacht. Nevertheless, comradeship was embraced so universally throughout the Wehrmacht – instilled through training, battle, and frontline hardships – that informal punishments were uncommon and relatively unnecessary until the end of the war. In fact, because comradeship was a primary motivation for soldiers during training and combat, isolation from peers was widely feared. One soldier expressed “how totally alone...a man is placed here immediately on the front,” and that “there is no relying anymore on your own strength or the power of your weapons,” so a man must turn to his comrades.<sup>82</sup> For soldiers in the Wehrmacht, isolation from their peers meant isolation from the only personal contacts that were able “to lessen the feeling of loneliness.”<sup>83</sup> As was mentioned prior, one anonymous soldier admitted that it is “only in the

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<sup>80</sup> Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration...” 285.

<sup>81</sup> Letter of an Anonymous Soldier (22 Sept. 1944), quoted in Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 29-30.

<sup>82</sup> Letter of Harry Mielert (27 Nov. 1942), quoted in Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 166.

<sup>83</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 166.



circle of your comrades and with a glass of beer can you again find a diversion.”<sup>84</sup> Therefore, fear of formal and informal punishment motivated many German soldiers to continue fighting because the alternatives to doing so – brutal punishment from higher authorities and isolation by their comrades – were viewed as worse.

On the other hand, fear of formal punishment from officers and institutional authority was less of a motivating factor for soldiers in the U.S. Army. American soldiers were not as affected by threat of punishment because the penalties given by the Army were much less severe than those carried out by the Wehrmacht. Unlike German soldiers, “the combat man did not in fact face a choice of possible death if he refused combat.”<sup>85</sup> In fact, Under Secretary of War Robert Patterson declared in 1945, “During the entire length of this war, the Army has executed 102 of its soldiers. All executions but one were for murder or rape. One was for desertion, the first execution for a purely military crime since the Civil War.”<sup>86</sup> This is an incredibly small number when compared with the estimated fifteen-thousand executions that were carried out by the Wehrmacht. Private Donald Slovik was the one American soldier executed for desertion during WWII; shot on January 31, 1945. According to Aaron and Peggy Saagri, Slovik’s execution was an effort by General Dwight D. Eisenhower “to stop American troops from deserting...Eisenhower hoped that by making an example of Slovik, the desertion rate would decrease.”<sup>87</sup> In fact, in a letter to General Eisenhower, Assistant Judge Advocate General E.C. McNeil acknowledges that “the sentence adjudged was more severe than [Slovik] had

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<sup>84</sup> Letter of an Anonymous Soldier, (18 May, 1941), quoted in Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 166.

<sup>85</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier...*, 113.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Patterson, quoted in Stouffer, *The American Soldier...*, 112-113.

<sup>87</sup> Aaron Saagri and Peggy Saagri, *The Holocaust and World War II Almanac* (Farmington Hills: Gale Group, 2001), Volume 2: 198-199.

anticipated, but the imposition of a less severe sentence would only” lead Slovik and other deserters to feel that they were “[free] from the dangers which so many of our armed forces are required to face daily.”<sup>88</sup> With the U.S. fighting at the Battle of the Bulge at the time and taking heavy casualties, Slovik’s sentence was meant to motivate men to remain on the line as opposed to deserting or going Absent Without Leave (AWOL) – failing to show up for a given duty. However, the effect that one execution could have on an entire American Army was limited. In fact, Alvin “Tommy” Bridges, former military policeman (MP), claims that the only effect Slovik’s execution and other executions for “minor things” had on him was greater discontent toward the Army: “That’s what burns me up...The son-of-a-bitches.”<sup>89</sup>

Although executions were rare, there were other punishments and informal factors attached to these punishments that allowed coercive authority to play a minor role in motivating U.S. soldiers. If a soldier was accused of deserting his unit or of going AWOL, he faced a trial by court-martial. Although punishments varied between divisions, those most commonly handed down to soldiers who had gone AWOL were “dismissal and total forfeitures,” meaning a dishonorable discharge from service and “a total forfeit of allowances due or to become due.”<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, if a soldier was found guilty of deserting or attempting to desert service, they were typically sentenced to a dishonorable discharge, total forfeitures, *and* “hard labor for life” at

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<sup>88</sup> E.C. McNeil, Letter to General Dwight D. Eisenhower (6 January, 1945), “Court Martial Case 290498 (Private Eddie Slovik), Correspondence File, Volume I of III (folder 1 of 2),” *National Archives Catalog*, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/6231405>.

<sup>89</sup> Alvin (Tommy) Bridges, in Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 392.

<sup>90</sup> War Department, Board of Review: Branch Office of the Judge Advocate General, European Theatre of Operations, *Holdings and Opinions* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Judge Advocate General, 1945), volume 30: 53-54.

a penitentiary in the United States.<sup>91</sup> However, Stouffer argues that it was the “informal factors” attached to these sanctions that most influenced soldiers to remain on the line. According to Stouffer, there were three informal factors attached to coercive sanctions: “the fear of losing pay, family allotments, etc..., family ties and the reactions of a man’s buddies were involved in the feeling that being convicted and confided was a disgrace, [and] a man’s own established reaction to punishments” including varying degrees of shame and guilt.<sup>92</sup>

Contrary to Stouffer’s assertion, although money may have been a concern for men when they left combat, losing pay and family allotments were not a significant motivating factor for soldiers fighting for their lives. As was mentioned previously, soldiers on the frontlines were primarily concerned about their immediate circumstances and survival. Similar to ideology and patriotism, monetary benefits were not of primary concern for soldiers like Bill Guernere, who were just “trying to get through the next phase [and] the next phase” alive.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, as is argued by Stouffer, guilt and shame were likely factors keeping men from going AWOL or deserting because both actions would damage the only social connection that they had at the time: their comrades. As is mentioned by Marshall, “personal honor is the one thing [soldiers’ value] more than life itself,” and they loathed the idea of failing or expressing fear in front of their comrades because it was considered ‘cowardice.’”<sup>94</sup> Veteran Robert Rasmus explains the importance of this connection, stating, “The reason you storm the beaches...is that sense of not

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<sup>91</sup> Board of Review, Branch Office of the Judge Advocate General, European Theatre of Operations, *Holdings and Opinions*, volume 30: 19.

<sup>92</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, 113.

<sup>93</sup> Bill Guarnere, interviewed in *We Stand Alone Together*, 30:40.

<sup>94</sup> Marshall, *Men Against Fire...*, 149.

wanting to fail your buddies. There's sort of a special sense of kinship."<sup>95</sup> Even with the role of these informal factors, the threat of punishment from higher authority had a much less significant effect in keeping soldiers on the frontline than those of the Wehrmacht. As was mentioned by Bridges, "Toward the end of the war, they wasn't a guy in any of those outfits, black or white, that wouldn't go AWOL. They had a damn hard job keepin' those guys up in front as they did winnin' a war."<sup>96</sup> Institutional authority of the U.S. Army played a role in motivating soldiers, but it had a more minor role than the authority of the Wehrmacht. This was due to the fact that the U.S. Army used much less severe authoritative and coercive measures, relying more so on the informal factors attached to punishments.

### **German War Crimes & Fear of the Enemy**

For many Wehrmacht soldiers, even those on the Western front, hatred and fear of the Red Army motivated many to continue fighting to the very end. As is argued by Ian Kershaw, soldiers genuinely feared that losing the war meant facing a "vengeful victory" at the hands of the Soviets, who "would surely bring the destruction of all they hold dear."<sup>97</sup> German soldiers feared that the troops of the Red Army would seek revenge for the multitude of atrocities that Wehrmacht soldiers – not just the SS – committed on the Soviet civilian populace. However, these atrocities were not limited to Soviet populations. Historian Karl-Heinz Schoeps focuses on the mass murder of Jews and Communists in the Jewish ghetto of Vilnius, claiming, "while many soldiers of the Wehrmacht were disgusted by the crimes committed by the Einsatzgruppen

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<sup>95</sup> Robert Rasmus, in Terkel, *"The Good War,"* 39.

<sup>96</sup> Bridges, in Terkel, *"The Good War,"* 389.

<sup>97</sup> Kershaw, *To Hell and Back...*, 377.

(the SS), only very few of them came to the aid of those persecuted by the SS.”<sup>98</sup> In this case, although some soldiers were “disgusted” by the atrocities committed and may not have been the ones pulling the trigger, the Wehrmacht was not exempt from committing war crimes. In fact, Robert Citino argues, “The notion that the army fought a clean fight, while the Waffen-SS carried out battlefield atrocities and the SS-Einsatzgruppen (“SS action teams”) shot civilians wholesale, is no longer credible. The German army murdered its way east, then did so again as it fought its way back west.”<sup>99</sup> Omer Bartov even claims, “As long as they fought well, the soldiers were allowed to ‘let off steam’ both by transgressing accepted civilian norms of behavior and by acting illegally even according to the far from ‘normal’ standards of the front.”<sup>100</sup> Of course, there were some Wehrmacht soldiers who rebelled against these atrocities but these were a minute few. In fact, Kershaw asserts that the number “who behaved so nobly has been estimated at perhaps a hundred...compared with the figure of over 18 million who served in the Wehrmacht.”<sup>101</sup>

The atrocities committed by Wehrmacht soldiers include, but are not limited to, mass murder, rape, armed robbery, and indiscriminate shooting. Many soldiers justified their participation in these atrocities with racial and ideological convictions. According to Kershaw, what many soldiers “thought they were fighting for amounted to an opaque vision of a future utopia, a ‘new order’ in which German racial superiority and dominance over crushed enemies

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<sup>98</sup> Karl-Heinz Schoeps, “Holocaust and Resistance in Vilnius: Rescuers in Wehrmacht Uniforms,” in *German Studies Review*, 31, no.3 (2008): 497.

<sup>99</sup> Citino, *The Wehrmacht’s Last Stand*, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Bartov, “The Conduct of War...” S34.

<sup>101</sup> Kershaw, *To Hell and Back*, 376.

would guarantee their families and descendants peace and prosperity.”<sup>102</sup> One soldier justified his participation in a mass execution of Jews, claiming, “Partisans are enemies and blackguards must vanish.”<sup>103</sup> Some of this hatred derived from National Socialist ideology, but the brutality of the war on the Eastern front only increased resentment and the desire for revenge between the German and Soviet forces. Wehrmacht soldier Matthew Jung recalls one instance when Russian civilians killed eighteen German soldiers. According to Jung, “The whole place, everything [was destroyed]! Totally! The civilians who had done it, all the civilians who were in the place. In each corner stood a machine gun, and then all the houses were set on fire and whoever came out – In my opinion with justice!”<sup>104</sup> In addition, apart from racial and ideological motivations, it is important to recall that soldiers faced brutal disciplinary consequences, often execution, if they failed to comply with higher authorities. Nevertheless, at the very least, the majority of German soldiers were complicit bystanders in war crimes as they “were aware of the atrocities committed under their eyes.”<sup>105</sup> Soldier Herbet Selle recalls one execution of Jews in Zhitomir in 1941 when troops were “sitting on rooftops and platforms watching the show. The execution was arranged as a form of popular entertainment.”<sup>106</sup> Another soldier stated, “We watched the show and then went back to work, as if nothing had happened.”<sup>107</sup> Even if many soldiers were simply

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<sup>102</sup> Kershaw, *To Hell and Back*, 377.

<sup>103</sup> Unknown, quoted in Kershaw, *To Hell in Back*, 375-376.

<sup>104</sup> Mathias Jung, quoted in Fitz, *Frontsoldaten*, 58.

<sup>105</sup> Schoeps, “Holocaust and Resistance in Vilnius...,” 497, 496.

<sup>106</sup> Herbert Selle, quoted in Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Reiss, eds. “*The Good Old Days*,” *The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders*, trans. Deborah Burnstone (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1991), 108-111.

<sup>107</sup> Unknown, quoted in Kershaw, *To Hell and Back*, 375-376.

witnesses, the Wehrmacht was complicit and often played an active role in war atrocities alongside the SS, particularly on the Eastern front.

The crimes and atrocities committed or witnessed by Wehrmacht soldiers kept men fighting as they feared the vengeance of the Soviet forces in the case of defeat. Bartov claims that these actions even had “a unifying element” as they “bound troops together by creating a keen awareness of their shared responsibility of horrific crimes” and “the enemy’s vengeance in the case of defeat.”<sup>108</sup> Citino put it more bluntly, asserting, “One thing that kept officers fighting was their fear of the Red Army’s revenge if it broke into Germany. They knew exactly what they had done to the Soviet Union and had good reason to be worried.”<sup>109</sup> As one Wehrmacht soldier wrote, “May God grant us victory because if [the Soviets] get their revenge, we’re in for a hard time.”<sup>110</sup> As a result of their fear of Soviet vengeance, soldiers were even relieved to become American POWs. American soldier Richard Prendergast recalled his time in a German POW camp: “a guard came in around midnight...He says, ‘The Russians are not far away. We propose to pack up and take off toward the American lines...We need you for when we get to the Americans, you can tell ‘em we didn’t treat you so bad.’ If the Russians ever found ‘em, goodbye, Charlie.”<sup>111</sup> In addition, Erhard Dabringhaus, a military intelligence officer and interrogator with the U.S. Army during WWII, remembers, “Whenever a German was especially stubborn I’d always call Sergeant Kaminski. The German starts talkin’ at once. He knew

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<sup>108</sup> Bartov, “The Conduct of War...,” S34, S35.

<sup>109</sup> Citino, *The Wehrmacht’s Last Stand*, 16.

<sup>110</sup> Anonymous soldier, quoted in Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Reiss, eds. “*The Good Old Days...*,” 38-44.

<sup>111</sup> Richard Prendergast, in Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 55.

Kaminski was a Polish name and he knew what they'd done to Warsaw."<sup>112</sup> As a result of their involvement in war crimes, Wehrmacht soldiers were motivated to continue fighting to the very end, or until they were able to surrender American forces. Like the soldier mentioned by Prendergast, Wehrmacht soldiers understood that the American Army, in contrast to the Red Army, would treat ordinary German soldiers somewhat humanely and refrain from using torture or taking other vengeance-seeking actions.

Americans did not hold the same hatred and fear toward the German Army as Wehrmacht soldiers did toward Soviets, and vice versa. After all, it was not American lands that the Wehrmacht had pillaged, houses that they had burned, civilians whom they had executed, or women whom they had raped. Stouffer similarly indicates that the American combat soldier "had not, like the Russians, seen his country devastated and his family perhaps wiped out in cold blood. Neither had he, like the British, seen his home cities bombed and his country's national existence hanging by a thread."<sup>113</sup> Still, there were a number of American soldiers who expressed utter hatred and disgust toward the Germans. After witnessing a small portion of German war atrocities when his unit liberated the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945, veteran Timuel Black recalls, "I got more passionately angry than I guess I'd ever been. I said, 'Let's kill all the sons-of-a-bitches. Kill all the goddamn Germans. Anyone who would do this to people, they're not worth livin.'"<sup>114</sup> In the heat of the war, one American soldier even called for the "complete extermination of the German people."<sup>115</sup> Angry and disgruntled feelings were

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<sup>112</sup> Erhard Dabringhaus, in Terkel, *The Good War*, 471.

<sup>113</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, 156, 157.

<sup>114</sup> Timuel Black in Terkel, *The Good War*, 281.

<sup>115</sup> Unknown, quoted in Linderman, *The World Within the War...*, 6.



especially directed toward elite German forces, most notably the SS. As is mentioned by Studs Terkel, “The SS were, of course another matter. Even the most gentle and forgiving of our GIs found few redeeming attributes there.”<sup>116</sup> Elliot Johnson expressed similar feelings, recalling, “The SS. They were elite. They were so brainwashed they were impossible to reason with. Those people made me angry.”<sup>117</sup>

Despite these reactions, most Americans on the Western front tried to suppress any emotions toward ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers, and to killing in general. In fact, as the war went along and American troops came in contact with German forces, they began to acknowledge that they were fighting against an army of young men who were not much different from themselves. One American paratrooper recalls this change in feelings, stating, “I think we thought that the Germans were probably the most evil people in the world. But, as the war went along, we found out also that it was not the [German soldiers] per say. It was the SS and special troops.”<sup>118</sup> Dee Carl Ferguson Jr., a college educated infantry man fighting in Italy, even wrote, “I sensed that we shared a common sense of humanity and a common tragedy...Although the U.S. army had trained me to kill, it had not trained me to hate.”<sup>119</sup> Veteran Elliot Johnson explained this feeling in more depth, claiming, “We recognized that we were at war, but we recognized that [the German soldiers] came from families like we came from families and that they had loved ones and they were good guys and they were bad guys. We were called on by our government, that our country was in jeopardy. Therefore, we had to fight for it. Personally, I had no malice

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<sup>116</sup> Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 5.

<sup>117</sup> Elliott Johnson, in Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 259.

<sup>118</sup> Earl McClung, interviewed in *We Stand Alone Together*, 103:35.

<sup>119</sup> Dee Carl Ferguson Jr., “The Battle of Mt. Sammucro,” quoted in Baird, “An Opportunity to Meet...,” 314-315.

at any time toward the Germans.”<sup>120</sup> Robert Rasmus similarly remembers, “Looking at the individual German dead, each took on a personality. These were no longer an abstraction. These were no longer the Germans of the brutish faces and the helmets we saw in the newsreels. They were exactly our age. These were boys just like us...Once the helmet is off, you’re looking at a teen-ager, another kid.”<sup>121</sup> Despite what they had been told or the propaganda that they had seen, this was the feeling of most U.S. soldiers toward ordinary German soldiers once they faced combat. Regardless of how they may have felt toward the Germans entering the war, American soldiers, overall, respected and understood that the majority of Wehrmacht soldiers were in a similar position as themselves. Therefore, fear and the desire for vengeance toward the enemy had much less significant roles in motivating American soldiers as they did for German soldiers.

### **Ending the Task & the Home Front**

Once American soldiers experienced the horrors of combat, the majority simply wanted to get the War over with and return home to their families. Many understood that by the time the U.S. entered the war, Hitler’s Army was on the retreat and Allied victory was probable. As the U.S. Army began to march across France, veteran artillery man Elliott Johnson recalls, “The ordinary Germans, the boys we took prisoner, were so glad to be out of it...The last thing they’d do is come back and either shake hands with us or embrace us.”<sup>122</sup> This reaction is likely because many German *Landsers* had already withstood horrific combat conditions on the Eastern front by the time the U.S. made its run across France, and they feared that they would be

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<sup>120</sup> Johnson, in Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 259.

<sup>121</sup> Robert Rasmus, in Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 44-45.

<sup>122</sup> Johnson, in Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 259.

captured by the Soviets. An additional number of these soldiers were among the young and old replacements thrown into combat by the Wehrmacht at the end of the war. With the end of the war in sight, the typical American soldier simply wanted to “do their job” and return home to their loved ones. In fact, in one study performed by Stouffer, thirty-nine percent of enlisted soldiers cited “ending the task” as the most important incentive that made them “want to keep going and do as well as you could,” fifteen-percent higher than the next leading category.<sup>123</sup> C. Carwood Lipton of E Company, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne explains, “when men are in combat, the inevitability of it takes over. They are there, there is nothing they can do to change that, so they accept that...There is still work to be done, a war to be won, and they think about that.”<sup>124</sup> David Webster explained the necessity of his job as a paratrooper more simply in a letter to his mother, “Somebody has to get in and kill the enemy. Somebody has to be in the infantry and the paratroopers.”<sup>125</sup> The necessity of performing one’s job was motivation for soldiers because, aside from getting wounded, it was viewed as the key to returning home to their families and ending the war.

Unlike American soldiers, German soldiers did not express doing their job and ending the task as constant motivation. However, word from friends and family at home, most often through letters, were morale boosters for soldiers seeking to grasp a world outside of the front. Combat soldier Harry Mielert wrote in 1943, “A few lines can throw a rosy, invigorating light in this desolate realm...When I think of October-November 1941, where we occasionally would go

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<sup>123</sup> Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, 108.

<sup>124</sup> Lipton, quoted in Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 111.

<sup>125</sup> David Webster, quoted In Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 111.

a week without receiving mail, how did we hold out?”<sup>126</sup> Martin Pöppel similarly noted that mail delivery “cheers everyone to no end” as home is “made reality again by letters.”<sup>127</sup> However, when German cities became the victim of the Ally powers’ aerial bombardments, soldiers’ homes became “a real front” which only “piled another layer of concern on top of the *Landsers*’ almost insurmountable daily struggle just to stay alive.”<sup>128</sup> Writing from the Russian front in 1942, Jürgeb Mogk expressed the anxiety he felt about “the home front”: “A third year of the Russian campaign looms, but that means nothing when one considers the wider future. It is not the insufficient bread that is wearing down the German people, but rather something far more terrible: the bombardment of German cities by the English! Each of us would rather go hungry than lose his house and home, and yes his loved ones”<sup>129</sup> Therefore, thoughts of home and returning to loved ones acted as similar fighting motivation for German soldiers as it had for American soldiers. However, American soldier’s motivation primarily derived from the achievable prospect of ending the war and doing so quickly, while the end of the war was never very much in the Wehrmacht’s grasp. Furthermore, the destruction of German cities and towns by Ally attacks made word from home only a demoralizing aspect for many Wehrmacht soldiers toward the end of the war.

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<sup>126</sup> Harry Mielert, Letter of Harry Mielert (January 21, 1943), quoted in Fritz, 83.

<sup>127</sup> Martin Pöppel, *Heaven and Hell: The War Diary of a German Paratrooper*, translated by Louise Willmot (Tunbridge Wells: Spellmount Limited, 1988), 223.

<sup>128</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 84.

<sup>129</sup> Jürgeb Mogk, Letter of Jürgeb Mogk (September 7, 1942), quoted in Fritz, 85.

## The Role of Alcohol

Although often ignored, the consumption of alcohol played a significant role in easing soldiers' fears and anxieties following battle, despite this being a punishable offense in both armies. In addition, alcohol was a form of "liquid courage" for some soldiers who consumed it prior to or during battle maneuvers. Michael C.C. Adams claims that the result of an American army that "tried to keep its ranks dry...was an army obsessed with obtaining booze. Whiskey became a form of currency, with a fixed value in trading for other items."<sup>130</sup> Elliot Johnson remembers "one colonel who was a great instructor. He helped a lot of us. But he couldn't take combat. Long before we ever landed, he was just stoned out of his mind. He came walking by, hanging on to his command car because he was so drunk." In fact, Johnson himself almost lost his life trying to obtain alcohol. He recalls, "I had to cross a road and I was already learning about the German 88. You could tell from the sound when it was pointed at you. I heard this *chok!* And I knew it was mine. I was right in the middle of this road. I gave a dive over this hedgerow and went straight down into a moat all covered with green slime. That killed any desire I had for wine."<sup>131</sup> Some soldiers even consumed alcohol when on the move or during battle. In fact, American veterans, like Paul Fussell, have claimed that soldiers in the European theatre had canteens that contained alcohol almost as much as they did water.<sup>132</sup> Veteran Joe Hanley acknowledges that his drinking habit began after losing "many, many buddies" including one of his best friends in the service who "died in my arms." Hanley admits, "I never drank

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<sup>130</sup> Michael C.C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 94.

<sup>131</sup> Johnson, in Terkel, "*The Good War*," 257, 258.

<sup>132</sup> Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 101-102.

before I went into the service. But after walking from Marseilles to the Rhine River, most of it on my belly, I got to the point that my canteen never contained water. Always cognac, the best that I could find. I lived on cognac.”<sup>133</sup> The consumption of alcohol to ease anxiety, fear, and battlefield memories, as described by Hanley, was not unique among American soldiers.

Nor was alcohol consumption unique throughout the Wehrmacht. Like American soldiers, the German soldier consumed alcohol “to forget the war, the death and destruction all around, the anxiety of his own fate” as well as “to summon courage for yet another day of fighting.”<sup>134</sup> Guy Sajer acknowledges, “beer played an essential role” and vodka “is the easiest way to make heroes... We drank everything we could get hold of, trying to blot out the memory of a hideous day.”<sup>135</sup> In addition, like Johnson, German soldiers would go to deadly lengths to obtain alcohol of any kind. Harry Mielert recalls a Russian military bombardment, noting, “Everything rumbled, blazed, trembled. Cattle cried, soldiers searched through all the buildings, barrels of red wine were taken away in small *panje* wagons, here and there men were drinking and singing, in the meantime explosions again and new roaring fires.”<sup>136</sup> As these soldiers admit, alcohol kept both American and German soldiers fighting by blocking out dreadful memories of combat and, for some soldiers, acting as liquid courage during battle.

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<sup>133</sup> Joe Hanley, in Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 274, 275.

<sup>134</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 73.

<sup>135</sup> Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier*, 75, 367.

<sup>136</sup> Harry Mielert, Letter of Harry Mielert (20 September, 1943), quoted in Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 73.

### **Combat Exhaustion, Replacements, and Unit Rotation**

In addition to factors that kept American and German soldiers motivated on the frontlines, there were a number of aspects which negatively impacted morale and, consequently, decreased soldiers' drive to fight. Combat exhaustion was a prominent feature in both armies which had a significant, negative impact on morale. Following World War II, it became universally acknowledged that every soldier has a "breaking point" at which they can become mentally overwhelmed with the strains of combat. As psychiatrist Simon Wessely points out, with World War II "opinion shifted away from a belief in prevention [of combat exhaustion] to the view that 'every man has his breaking point.'" Studies began to show "a robust link between the number of physical and psychiatric casualties. As one increased, so did the other."<sup>137</sup> One such study on combat exhaustion undertaken by the U.S. Army found, "There is no such thing as 'getting used to combat.' Each moment of combat imposes a strain so great that men will breakdown in direct relation to the intensity and duration of their exposure...psychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gunshot and shrapnel wounds in warfare."<sup>138</sup> American and German soldiers who were left on the frontlines for extended periods of time, witnessing and withstanding horrific violence and brutal weather conditions, were especially prone to exhaustion.

In the U.S. Army, there were a large number of soldiers who experienced combat exhaustion. This can partially be attributed to a poor unit rotation system that kept entire units in combat for extended periods. As Francis Steckel points out, "With little unit rotation, men faced

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<sup>137</sup> Wessely, "Twentieth Century Theories...", 274.

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 335-336.

prolonged periods of danger, physical exertion, emotional anxiety, and mental stress without rest or relaxation.”<sup>139</sup> Longer periods on the frontline meant more exposure to physical danger, killing and violence, and poor living conditions along with deprivation of the physical and mental rest that they needed to recover before returning to combat. The U.S. Army’s study on combat exhaustion previously mentioned, found, “Most men were ineffective after 180 or even 140 days [of combat]. The general consensus was that a man reached his peak of effectiveness in the first 90 days of combat, that after that his efficiency began to fall off, and that he became steadily less valuable thereafter until he was completely useless.”<sup>140</sup> Despite this report, combat units were kept on the frontline well beyond ninety days. Easy Company, for example, spent 116 days on the frontline in its first three campaigns alone – Normandy, Holland, and Belgium.<sup>141</sup> One wounded Infantry man, whose unit was on the frontline for forty-seven consecutive days, described men who suffered from combat exhaustion: “Sometimes they pushed a fellow so long, they are too tired before they even start fighting. They don’t give a damn whether they get killed or not. They lose courage...They’re scared alright but they don’t care.”<sup>142</sup> The General War Board of the United States Army in the European theatre even acknowledged that the Army had an insufficient number of combat units which kept men on the frontline for as long as possible. In a report conducted in 1945, the Board acknowledged, “Under the former operation of the replacement system, divisions fought until losses so depleted their ranks that they were incapable of further sustained action...During World War II, it was

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<sup>139</sup> Steckel, “Morale Problems in Combat...,” 4.

<sup>140</sup> Quoted in Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 336.

<sup>141</sup> Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 203.

<sup>142</sup> Unknown, quoted in Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, 189.



decided to provide a lesser number of divisions and maintain these divisions at fighting strength by a constant flow of replacements in proportion to battle losses.”<sup>143</sup> A lack in unit rotation due to an insufficient number of combat units amplified risks of combat exhaustion and, consequently, decreased morale for those units who remained on the frontline for extended periods.

Motivation was so hindered by combat exhaustion that non-fatal wounds became welcomed. Soldiers were so desperate to get off the front as their time in combat increased that they viewed wounded comrades as “lucky,” referring to a non-fatal injury as a “million-dollar wound.”<sup>144</sup> Paratrooper David Webster gloomily wrote, “the only way out [of the Army] is to be wounded or evacuated.” Recalling an artillery shelling in Veghel, Holland, Webster describes, “I felt sick inside. I said I’d give a foot to be out of that place. We smelled the gunpowder as a rancid thunderhead enveloped our hole...Three more. And then three, and then three. No wonder men got combat exhaustion.”<sup>145</sup> Dick Winters even goes as far as to say, “When a man was wounded, we felt glad for him, we felt happy for him. He had a ticket to get out of there, and maybe a ticket to get home.”<sup>146</sup> It was continuous shellings like that described by Webster, along with the other stresses of combat, that took a toll on soldiers mentally and physically, decreasing morale throughout the U.S. Army. Moreover, self-inflicted wounds were common amongst soldiers desperate for relief from fighting. Veteran Robert Rasmus affirmed, “I’m sure

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<sup>143</sup> “Types of Divisions – Post-War Army,” in Report of The General Board, United States Forces, European Theater, G-3, no. 17.

<sup>144</sup> Walter Gordon, quoted in Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 194.

<sup>145</sup> Webster, quoted in Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 132, 170.

<sup>146</sup> Dick Winters, interviewed in *We Stand Alone Together*, 55:10.

our company was typical. We had  $x$  percent of self-inflicted wounds. There's no question that a guy would blow his toe off to get out of combat."<sup>147</sup> Instances like this were, in fact, "typical," especially as combat became more difficult to endure. American soldiers were especially prone because of a unit rotation system that kept them in combat for extended periods with little to no rest.

In addition to the rotation system, the U.S. Army's replacement system was an organizational issue that had a substantial, negative impact on the morale of combat units. The replacement system assigned untried, poorly trained replacement soldiers to veteran combat units without making significant efforts to implement these men into these units. Steckel similarly mentions, "there was seldom time for thorough training in scouting, patrolling, night combat operations, first aid, and all the other skills in which the replacements were typically deficient."<sup>148</sup> The General War Board reports,

...the replacement system as operated proved costly in lives. Faced with continuing missions even after sustaining heavy losses and with no reserve of manpower, divisions were forced to commit replacements to front line action the moment they passed to division control. As a result many recruits were killed or seriously wounded before they knew their squad mates or their commander; before they were inculcated with their unit's history or esprit, and most important, before they had absorbed the battle lore necessary for survival.<sup>149</sup>

As this report indicates, a result of this insufficient replacement system, there were a high number of casualties among new soldiers entering combat units. In fact, Steckel estimates that

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<sup>147</sup> Rasthmus, in Terkel, "*The Good War*," 44.

<sup>148</sup> Steckel, "Morale Problems in Combat...", 2.

<sup>149</sup> "Types of Divisions – Post-War Army," in Report of The General Board, United States Forces, European Theater, G-3, no. 17.

“more than half the replacements sent directly into combat became casualties in the first few days of fighting.”<sup>150</sup>

High casualty rates among replacements can be attributed to a failure to properly incorporate replacements into their new units – specifically insufficient training, little to no time to learn from experienced veterans, and failure to build the comradeship that was so vital for combat motivation. Veteran Clifford Snyder, a replacement himself, admits, “It was very hard” to make a replacement part of the unit. “Cause war is so different from training...they came in so fast...you try to encourage the guys who have experience to work with these guys...but once they got experience, you know, once they got fired at a few times, then they realized what the situation was.”<sup>151</sup> However, many replacements did not make it through their first combat missions to gain this experience. Referencing his time in the 83<sup>rd</sup> division of the 330<sup>th</sup> infantry, Snyder recalls, “We had a lot of replacements that, after a while, I never really learned many first names. I just knew the last name. They’d be here today and gone tomorrow, you know? But the division had over 11,000 casualties during the war. I think there was close to 3,000 that were killed.”<sup>152</sup> It was not uncommon that experienced soldiers, like Snyder, failed to offer the same comradeship to new replacements as they had developed with their fellow veterans. This was because of disdain toward replacements but, rather, for their personal well-being. Paratrooper Earl McClung admitted, “I got [to the point] where I didn’t want to be friendly with replacements coming in because, God, I didn’t like seeing them get killed. It just tore me up...I

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<sup>150</sup> Steckel, “Morale Problems in Combat...,” 3.

<sup>151</sup> Clifford Snyder, interview in “An Infantryman Recalls the Battle of the Bulge,” *West Point Center for Oral History*, <http://www.westpointcoh.org/interviews/an-infantryman-recalls-the-battle-of-the-bulge>, 1:07.

<sup>152</sup> Clifford Snyder, interviewed in “An Infantryman Recalls...,” 1:15.

don't know why but they were the first ones killed.”<sup>153</sup> Replacements coming in had less confidence partially because they lacked “the sustaining bonds of loyalty, feeling of security, and sense of unit pride” which were so vital for combat motivation.<sup>154</sup> One replacement claimed, “We want to feel that we are a part of something. As a replacement we are apart from everything...You feel totally useless and unimportant...Being a replacement is just like being an orphan. You are away from anybody you know and feel lost and lonesome.”<sup>155</sup> However, as replacements endured and learned the ropes, they were implemented into combat units and enjoyed the benefits of comradery. Replacement Lester Hashey noted, “The ones that was there at the very beginning, they are very close. And they accepted people like myself coming in as a replacement. But you also had to prove yourself.”<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, when replacements first entered combat units, they had insufficient training and lacked the comradery that veteran soldiers enjoyed, mostly due to a poor replacement system. This made it difficult for soldiers entering combat units to gain the confidence and skills that they needed to survive their initial combat experiences.

In addition, the U.S. Army's replacement system was poorly designed in that wounded veterans returning to combat were not always reimplemented into their original units. Rather, if their unit had already been replenished with replacements, the U.S. Army policy shuffled these soldiers into new combat units. This policy proved “disastrous because the desire of casualties to return to combat stemmed largely from a sense of loyalty to one's comrades and pride and one's

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<sup>153</sup> Earl McClung, interviewed in *We Stand Alone Together*, 32:30.

<sup>154</sup> Steckel, “Morale Problems in Combat...,” 1.

<sup>155</sup> Unknown, quoted in Stouffer, *The American Soldier...*, 273.

<sup>156</sup> Lester Hashey, interviewed in *We Stand Alone Together*, 4:45.

unit.”<sup>157</sup> Therefore, many of these men lost motivation to fight because they were not beside their comrades – those who most motivated them to continue fighting. Marshall put it best, claiming that wounded men assigned to different combat units were unwilling “to risk danger on behalf of men with whom [they have] no social identity.”<sup>158</sup> Steckel, similarly contends “many soldiers endured the horrors of combat through the sustaining bonds of loyalty, feeling of security, and sense of unit pride instilled by long service as part of a cohesive group.”<sup>159</sup> Therefore, when wounded veterans were not returned to their original unit but were assigned to new ones, their motivation to fight was hindered. In fact, wounded men were so desperate to return to their comrades that it was not uncommon for these soldiers to go AWOL from military hospitals in an attempt to link up with their unit if they believed that they would be placed in a replacement depot. Jim Alley was one such soldier who went AWOL from the twelfth Replacement Depot and hitched two separate rides from England to return to his company in Mourmelon le Grande, France, just four days before they left for the Battle of the Bulge.<sup>160</sup>

This was not the case in the Wehrmacht which, until the very end of the war, had a much more efficient replacement and unit rotation system. Fritz describes the Wehrmacht replacement system and how it differed from that of the U.S.: “the Army attempted to recruit and keep men together from specific regions and even to supply replacements from the same area of the country...Moreover, replacements never traveled to their units as individuals – as in the American army – but as coherent groups....This practice gave divisions an incentive to look after

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<sup>157</sup> Steckel, “Morale Problems in Combat...,” 3.

<sup>158</sup> Marshall, *Men Against Fire...*, 153.

<sup>159</sup> Steckel, “Morale Problems in Combat...,” 2.

<sup>160</sup> Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 170.

their own replacements' training, and replacements themselves could begin the process of generating group loyalty even before they arrived at the front."<sup>161</sup> Therefore, unlike the U.S. Army, replacement soldiers were trained and looked after by veterans prior to and during entering combat. In addition, they were placed in units with men who had similar roots as themselves. This meant that replacements already had something in common with one another and gave veterans an incentive for embracing their new comrades. Nevertheless, toward the end of the war, the effectiveness of the Wehrmacht's replacement system deteriorated.

The Wehrmacht, having suffered immense casualties on both fronts, became desperate for fighting men toward the end of the war. As a result, combat units' time on the frontlines increased in duration and unqualified replacement soldiers, often under or over the typical ages of combat men, were thrown into these units. Bartov argues that a "new sense of existential comradeship" was formed toward the end of the war in place of "the old, more traditional groups." Soldiers, according to Bartov, continued to depend one another but a greater portion of their motivation came from their belief that they had to fight for the good of their "family, friends and relations, nation and culture."<sup>162</sup> This may have been the case for a brief period, but this feeling deteriorated after what Shils and Janowitz describe as "total mobilization" – when units became comprised of "new recruits, dragooned stragglers, air force men who had been forced into the infantry...men transferred from the navy into the infantry to meet the emergency manpower shortage, old factory workers, concentration camp inmates, and older married men who had been kept in reserve."<sup>163</sup> U.S. Army surgeon Alex Schulman recalls performing

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<sup>161</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 157-158.

<sup>162</sup> Bartov, "The Conduct of War...", S37-S38.

<sup>163</sup> Shils and Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration...", 288.

surgery on one young recruit: “This German youngster was brought in. He was fourteen, fifteen. Looked like a lost little boy. Hitler was takin’ the kids and the old men...As I took him to the operating room, he started crying. A little kid.”<sup>164</sup> The German replacement system was much more efficient than the American Army but only until the end of the war, when the Wehrmacht began relying on poorly trained teenagers and older men to fight in combat units.

Despite having better replacement and rotation systems, Wehrmacht soldiers fought a long war with horrific violence and brutal conditions, especially along the Eastern front. This was able to drive any man to the brink of mental and physical exhaustion. Although the Wehrmacht emphasized discipline and toughness, every Wehrmacht soldier was susceptible to combat exhaustion, like men in the U.S. Army. As is argued by Fritz, “Despite the motivation and self-discipline that spring from the tight-knit nature of the small *Kameradschaft*, and the general high level of confidence and cohesion between officers and men, the prolonged stress and dreadful casualties led almost inevitably to breakdown in these invisible threads of discipline.”<sup>165</sup> Shils and Janowitz similarly acknowledge that even comradeship could not sufficiently motivate soldiers “in situations where the tactical prospects were utterly hopeless, under devastating artillery and air bombardments, or where basic food and medical requirements were not being met.”<sup>166</sup> Guy Sajer describes combat exhaustion as he witnessed it: “When danger...continues indefinitely, it becomes unbearable...After hours and then days of danger...one collapses into unbearable madness, and a crisis of nerves is only the beginning.

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<sup>164</sup> Dr. Alex Schulman, in Terkel, “*The Good War*,” 282-283.

<sup>165</sup> Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 89.

<sup>166</sup> Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration...,” 291.

Finally, one vomits and collapses, entirely brutalized and inert, as if death had already won.”<sup>167</sup> One soldier fighting in Stalingrad even called his life at the time “a psychological monstrosity” after destroying two Soviet tanks and witnessing one of the tank drivers on fire, “burning up to his knees.”<sup>168</sup> Combat took such a toll on Wehrmacht soldiers that, for many men, death appeared imminent and the world outside of war seemed nonexistent. In his final diary entry before his death, Ewald H. wrote, “At any moment I am prepared. You see, I have seen life. I can no longer experience the happiness and the misfortunes of this world. War, you monster, this time you have crushed the whole earth.”<sup>169</sup> Max Aretin-Eggert similarly wrote, “we stagger in a whirlpool...From the ‘outside’ no comfort and no relief and escape is possible...[for] one doesn’t know if he is among the living or the dead.”<sup>170</sup> For fighters in the Wehrmacht, like American soldiers, combat exhaustion was an inescapable threat that decreased soldiers’ motivation to fight. Soldiers could only take so much of life on the frontline – killing, artillery attacks, loss of friends, and poor living conditions – before they began to breakdown. For many combat veterans, injury or even death seemed more attractive alternatives than continuing to fight.

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<sup>167</sup> Sajer, *Forgotten Soldier*, 261.

<sup>168</sup> Anonymous soldier, quoted in Franz Schneider and Charles Gullans, eds. and trans., *Last Letters from Stalingrad* (Westport: Praeger, 1974), 111-112.

<sup>169</sup> Ewald H., Diary entry of Ewald H, 17 November 1943, quoted in Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 88.

<sup>170</sup> Max Aretin-Eggert, Lettr of Maz Aretin-Eggert, quoted in Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 88.



## CONCLUSION

More links can be drawn between American and German soldiers of World War II than has previously been acknowledged. They may have been on opposing sides of a war that meant something very different for their governments, but American and Wehrmacht soldiers fighting in the European theatre were motivated by many identical factors while facing similar obstacles that decreased morale. Despite counter arguments from various historians, neither patriotism nor ideology were common motivating factors for these soldiers. Rather, the American and German soldier fighting for their life on the frontline were primarily focused on their immediate circumstances and concerned with their survival. In their best attempt to survive, soldiers constantly relied on the men with whom they had endured training and battle – their comrades. Men leaned on their fellow soldiers when the war seemed too much to handle mentally and physically, and they trusted that comrades would help safeguard their own survival. Therefore, comrades were the primary factor that kept American and German soldiers motivated and fighting throughout the Second World War.

In addition to their comrades were a number of secondary motivational factors. Despite a general distrust among American soldiers for untried commissioned officers, officers played a key role in motivating soldiers in both armies. As the leaders directing them throughout training and battle, a soldier's trust and respect for their officers was directly affected to their confidence heading into combat. Trust in their own training and preparedness and that of their comrades was also vital for confidence on the frontlines. Although training was grueling for many soldiers, it proved essential once soldiers entered combat. After experiencing life on the

frontline, soldiers in both armies would likely agree with the common Wehrmacht saying, “sweat saves blood.” One may understand the consequences of under trained soldiers on unit morale by examining the U.S. Army replacement system – undertrained and unprepared for combat, replacements lacked confidence and veterans distrusted new soldiers entering their units. This resulted in high casualty rates for replacement soldiers and diminished unit cohesion. The Wehrmacht Army faced similar consequences when, toward the end of the war, it flooded combat units with unqualified soldiers, many of whom were either teenagers or older men. Thoughts of home also increased fighting motivation as American soldiers sought to do their job, end the war, and return to home. Similarly, until Ally aerial bombardments increased anxiety amongst soldiers, letters from home were crucial in boosting morale throughout the Wehrmacht. Along with poor replacement systems, combat exhaustion was an extremely common occurrence in both armies which significantly hindered combat motivation. Soldiers could only endure so much combat and poor living conditions before their drive to fight was hampered. Combat exhaustion played such a significant role that injury or even death seemed better alternatives for soldiers desperate to escape the frontlines. It is also important to acknowledge one critical motivating factor that distinguished Wehrmacht from American soldiers: hatred and fear of a vengeful Red Army victory. This fear kept soldiers fighting until the end of the war or, when they felt defeat was imminent, drove them to seek surrender to a less resentful American Army.

Although many secondary motivational factors for American and German soldiers were nearly identical – including the impact of officers, training, and thoughts of home – the American and German armies functioned and emphasized these factors differently. Therefore, the impact that they had on combat motivation differed according to the emphasis that each army placed on them. For example, the Wehrmacht was determined that each German C.O.,

regardless of social status, embodied Wehrmacht values and was hardened and combat ready. On the other hand, the U.S. Army began pushing men through OCS and shuttling West Point graduates to the European Theatre in order to fulfill the need for C.O.s on the frontlines. Although American C.O.s still had an impact on soldier motivation, they did not boost morale as significantly as German C.O.s were able to. Rather, it was N.C.O.s that had the most positive impact on soldier morale in the U.S. Army. Similarly, institutional punishment influenced soldiers in both armies. However, the Wehrmacht's willingness to execute its own men at high rates, compared to the U.S. Army's reliance on less severe and informal penalties, resulted in punishment playing a greater role in motivating German than American soldiers. Likewise, combat exhaustion was a factor that decreased motivation in both armies but stemmed from different institutional issues that were unique to each army. For the U.S. Army, this included a poor replacement and unit rotation system that persisted throughout the War. For the Wehrmacht, combat exhaustion was a result of its desperation for fighting men toward the end of the war, which caused the Army to push unqualified men and boys into combat. Therefore, the American and German soldiers shared common secondary factors that influenced their drive to fight, but the impact that each of these factors had differed between each army.

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