

Jesse Rowe

History 195

Assignment 2

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Sense of Purpose:

A Soldiers Motivation

One theme that stuck out to me throughout the sections “Morale Boosters”, “Prisoners of War”, and “Central Highlands”, was the soldiers' sense of purpose. Whether it was a sense of obligation to use personal talents in service of their country, to tend to another man’s wounds, or feeling duty bound to keep the men in their platoon alive, these soldiers felt a sense of purpose that helped positively motivate them enough to get through the extraordinary experiences they had to endure. During the Vietnam War, morale was extremely important on both sides, but there are not very many reasons a soldier has to be upbeat when he is in combat. For most people, when they think of a morale booster for soldiers, they think of a USO show, or special food being served before they are sent into the field. In reality, a soldier has to find motivation in what some would think are very simplistic aspects, especially in extremely difficult situations. Something as simple as a leaf being taken as a sign from God, or as important as having a sense of purpose, can provide positive motivation and a boost to a soldier’s morale. However trivial this may seem to some, it is not. It is a selfless, and non-materialistic trait. Sometimes having a sense of purpose when the situation is extremely bleak, is enough motivation to stay the course, or survive against remarkable odds..

A sense of purpose may be the only light in an otherwise pitch black tunnel, so to speak. While these stories are all from Section 3: Escalations, they are not in sequence. This sequence is essential to the explanation of the theme.

- **Morale Boosters:**

Vu Hy Thieu’s Story

First, I would like to discuss a story from the section “Morale Boosters”. It is the story of Vu Hy Thieu. Vu was an artist who had studied at the School of Fine Arts in Hanoi, and he was also an NVA soldier during the Vietnam War. Vu had made a very long journey to South Vietnam in November 1966 in service to his country and cause. He used his talents to draw propaganda posters and promote Communist literature. Vu was even tasked with drawing anatomical posters for the education of field medics in the North Vietnamese Army as well as the NLF (Viet Cong). His talents did not just give him a sense purpose by feeling needed, it also helped to keep his mind occupied when it otherwise would have been difficult. When he talked of his art, and how he even used it in conjunction with booby traps to kill enemy soldiers, he seemed extremely proud. But also thankful. I believe he was thankful that he had something to focus on to help get through. Also, reading his story gave me a different perspective on how Americans were viewed by the Vietnamese soldiers they fought. Vu held a lot of animosity towards his enemy, most likely due to the carnage he had seen on the Ho Chi Minh trail when in route to South Vietnam in 1966. I think this fueled his motivation to use his art as a weapon. When I think about it from Vu’s perspective, it makes sense that he would want to destroy the ones who had caused so much pain and suffering to his people, on his land. Feeling needed for retribution for such acts certainly would have been motivation enough for me.

- **Prisoners of War**

Porter Halyburton’s Story

To further validate the idea of a soldier’s necessity for a sense of purpose as motivation is the story of Porter Halyburton from the section “Prisoners of War”. Porter was a pilot in the U.S. Navy, he flew an F-4 Phantom in 75 combat missions before being shot down over North Vietnam in October 1965. He was captured and held captive until 1973. While he was being housed in the “Zoo” facility he states that, “One day I heard a noise up near the vent. I put my bed board against the wall and climbed up to look. A tree had forced a leaf up between the shutters—a green leaf. I took that as a sign that no matter how isolated I was, God was somehow going to send me a sign”. This is exactly what I was referring to when I had stated “something as simple as a leaf” being motivation enough to keep going, to survive what I’m sure can only be described as hell. While in captivity, Porter was also given a job. His job was to take care of Fred Cherry, another pilot who was injured when he ejected at a high rate of speed (600 knots) from his F-105. Porter had raised hell with the authorities at the POW camp for antibiotics when Fred’s injuries had become badly infected. Porter later stated that, “Taking care of Fred gave me a sense of purpose outside my own survival. It was very liberating. It was really the beginning of the idea that we were all in a brotherhood. We would do anything for each other”. There are many different reasons a soldier is motivated. But having a sense of purpose is one of the most important types of motivation.

- **Central Highlands:**

Dennis Deal's Story

Another kind of motivation comes out of necessity for leadership, and it is directly related to having a sense of purpose. This motivation was demonstrated Dennis Deal in the Ia Drang Valley in November 1965. This is a very well known story. The novel *We Were Soldiers and Young* was written by Lt. Gen. Hal Moore, quite possibly one of the greatest combat leaders ever, and Joe Galloway a journalist who was there in the Ia Drang Valley that November. Their story was even the subject of a Hollywood movie production. When reading Mr. Deal's story I felt that he was highly motivated by his sense of duty and obligation to keep his men, his brothers alive. Mr. Deal states in his story that "what you have to do when you're a leader and everybody is looking at you, is to figure out a way to pull out that extra millimeter of courage. All you need is one more millimeter than the guys around you and they're ok. But if you show failure, they will stampede." In most platoons, a soldier is instructed to learn the job of the man above him, and teach their job to the man below them.

Final thoughts,

It is often portrayed in the media that our soldiers fight for freedom, country, liberty, or to defeat terrorism. In reality, after the "Great Cause" of the American Revolution in the mid-late 1770's and the Civil War that ultimately led to the freeing of slaves in the U.S., the causes to go to war became much more vague to the infantryman. A soldier will fight and die when he is asked to, that's what makes them a soldier. But most American soldiers have fought and died for a reason that is nowhere near as complex as politics, or religion. Ask any soldier why he fights, and 99% of them will tell you they fight for the man next to him. It's as simple as that. In a war that is as complicated and multi-angled as the Vietnam War, the only thing that is clear to a soldier, is that they are fighting for the man next to them. So that he might make it home. Believing and knowing in their own heart, that the man next to him is doing the same. I believe this to be the greatest sense of purpose felt by the soldiers who fought and died in Vietnam, it continues to be on the battlefield today, and will always be whenever and whenever soldiers are called upon to serve. Of course this is only my opinion. I hold the soldiers of all sides who answered the call of country and cause, in the highest regards. On either side they fought for their own way of life, Communist and Capitalist.

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