

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *Connected Soldiers: Life, Leadership, and Social Connections in Modern War*

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Connected Soldiers: Life, Leadership, and Social Connections in Modern War.
By John Spencer.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. 280 pages.

John Spencer provides a glimpse into Soldiers' lives in combat during the Global War on Terror as well as the leadership challenges of building a team in the era of the internet. He underscores the importance of cohesion in the military. Spencer repeatedly quotes Audie Murphy, the most decorated Soldier of World War II, who told a reporter that he fought bravely because his friends were being killed.¹ The internet complicates the task of building a team; as Soldiers increasingly immerse themselves in the outside world, they become less inclined to bond with their comrades. Spencer proposes a basic solution: good leadership.

Good leadership, according to Spencer's book, is characterized by proficiency in influencing others towards the right standards and fostering teamwork.² He illustrates this through his personal experiences and testimonies on fostering cohesion during his first deployment in 2003 as a platoon leader. Spencer later recounts how he transformed an incohesive company into a champion team within the battalion during his second deployment in 2008, despite the challenges of maintaining Soldier connections in the digital age.

Unit cohesion is a function of good relationships that grow organically. Spencer provides numerous insights into the natural development of cohesion. His focus on boredom is particularly interesting. He writes: "Research indicates that strong bonds are actually forged through social cohesion during the long hours of boredom that characterize soldiering."³ His

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¹ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 5, 71.

² Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 108.

³ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 69.

experience during his first deployment supports this, as the downtime allowed Soldiers to share their experiences and lives, fostering deeper relationships. Mail call provides another important occasion for the development of relationships. Spencer observes how Soldiers bond over sharing their care packages with one another.⁴ He uses these and other examples to explain why his Soldiers fought together even when injured during his first deployment.

Spencer's positive experience with a cohesive platoon in 2003 contrasts sharply with the challenges he faced as a company commander in 2008. The company's lack of cohesion stemmed from the poor leadership of his predecessor. Soldiers lacked a sense of group identity and were reluctant to endure hardships together. Spencer also attributed the lack of cohesion to technology, noting that "Soldiers now talk to each other less, especially about their shared experiences from patrols and missions, and instead fill their hours of boredom with Facebook updates, real-time messaging, and phone calls home."⁵ He poses a series of questions that challenge the benefits of integrating technology into Soldiers' daily lives in combat: "How would this work in a world where Soldiers are more connected to their outside social networks than to each other? How did they cope with the stresses of combat through Facebook posts and phone calls to people who were not there with them?"⁶

To restore unity within his company, Spencer reverted to his proven strategy: facing challenges together, maintaining standards, fostering sharing during downtime, and instilling the company's identity and self-esteem in the Soldiers. As he puts it: "Similar to a parent or coach who imposes rules and discipline and are loved more by their children or athletes for that strictness, a military leader who enforces military standards is followed more readily by Soldiers who are accustomed to such standards."⁷ Even though the internet was almost always available to Soldiers, Spencer directed them to focus on their teams. He writes: "Soldiers need to talk to other Soldiers to process what they have seen, hear how others perceived it, understand why it bothered them, and to grasp that they are not alone in struggling to cope."⁸

Spencer's journey with his company concludes positively. His company earned the highest respect within the battalion, achieving a significant milestone by capturing Abu Omar, a high-value target.⁹ This could have been the end of his story, but that wouldn't do justice to the internet. He

⁴ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 57.

⁵ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 95.

⁶ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 134.

⁷ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 134.

⁸ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 161.

⁹ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 185.

acknowledges that the internet has both advantages and disadvantages in connecting Soldiers with the outside world during deployment.¹⁰ While it can be a distraction, it also provides significant benefits. Soldiers stay in touch with family and prepare for their post-deployment life through social media and other supportive networks made possible by the internet.

The last chapter of the book presents Spencer's reassessment of the internet, spurred by his wife's military deployment to Kuwait. He maintains that no amount of technology can replace the feeling of someone's physical presence.¹¹ He acknowledges that modern technology enabled his wife to be part of their daily lives despite the distance.¹² Spencer adeptly demonstrates how technology can be a double-edged sword. However, the book concludes without providing a way to leverage technology for the needs of unit cohesion. Spencer leaves the challenge of balancing Soldiers' online private lives with their social lives within their units to further studies.

As an Army Reserve chaplain for 14 years, I agree with Spencer that cohesion is optimal up to the company level, around 150 Soldiers.¹³ However, after reading his book, one might question the role senior leaders play in building cohesion in the Army. Spencer does not delve deeply into this topic and highlights instances where senior leaders had counterproductive effects. For example, a two-star general falsely promised Soldiers a quick end to the war;¹⁴ a battalion command sergeant major immediately left the combat zone when attacked;¹⁵ and a colonel prioritized internet connectivity over the safety of Soldiers.¹⁶

I believe that senior leaders also play a crucial role in fostering cohesion. They have both broader access to information and resources from both military and non-military sources and possess the authority to implement impactful policies. For instance, my current commanding general has tasked the chaplain section with leading a care council, which gathers assessments from first-line leaders about their Soldiers, focusing on various risk factors like financial and relationship issues. The general's policy requires first-line leaders to participate in this process, with the Soldiers' data remaining anonymous and accessible only to the chaplain section. The confidentiality upheld by military chaplains ensures that first-line leaders can provide honest

¹⁰ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 189.

¹¹ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 208.

¹² Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 212.

¹³ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 182.

¹⁴ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 36.

¹⁵ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 47.

¹⁶ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 131.

assessments without fear. In collaboration with the general, the chaplain section then compiles information about available resources for the first-line leaders, empowering them to build stronger bonds within their units.

My final reflection on the book is from a chaplain's perspective. Spencer's statement, "I am not a religious man and never found comfort in talking to the military chaplains assigned to all units in the army," serves as a valuable reminder to military chaplains.¹⁷ Chaplains can play a crucial role in promoting unit cohesion; however, they are often underutilized because Soldiers tend to view them only in the context of religious matters. To change this perception, chaplains should continuously strive to remain relevant in Soldiers' units and their personal lives.

At the outset, Spencer describes this book as a personal memoir. Beyond recounting his combat experiences, he effectively sheds light on some significant challenges to team building and potential solutions. His concerns about the impact of the internet and social media on team cohesion are well-founded. Building a cohesive unit requires addressing technology's role in Soldiers' lives. A key takeaway from the book is that good leadership is more critical than ever, as today's Soldiers face greater distractions.

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¹⁷ Spencer, *Connected Soldiers*, 182.