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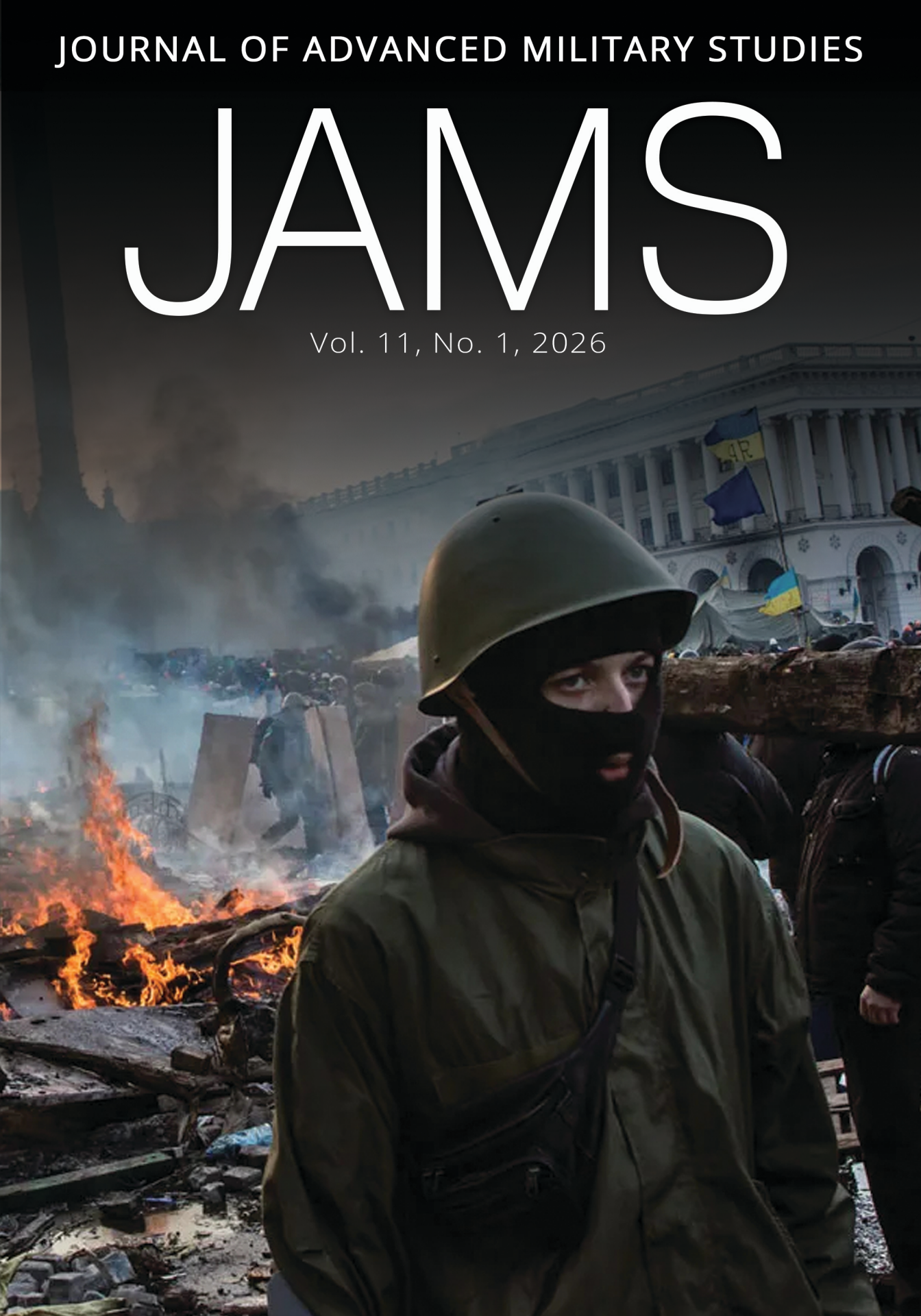

Becoming, Not Joining
Belongingness as the Core Driver of Will to Fight

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Abstract: This analysis argues that belongingness is the most durable driver of will to fight. While will to fight is often attributed to nationalism, ideology, religion, or political legitimacy, these factors alone cannot explain why individuals continue fighting despite fear, deprivation, and self-preservation. Drawing on psychology, sociology, and military studies, the analysis identifies combat motivation as rooted in an individual's fused identity with a small, tightly bonded group. Belongingness is examined as a fundamental human need and as an organizational product that generates cohesion, resilience, and combat effectiveness. The U.S. Marine Corps serves as the central case study, illustrating how identity transformation, shared hardship, institutional culture, and leadership climate sustain enduring combat motivation. The analysis also addresses how strategic narratives can distort external assessments of adversary will to fight, emphasizing the need to focus on internal cohesion and perceived obligation. The analysis concludes that in battle it is not abstract allegiance, political rhetoric, or symbolic identity that most reliably compels action, but the unbroken bond to the person fighting beside you. How military institutions cultivate, sustain, or erode that bond remains essential to understanding combat endurance, organizational retention, and battlefield effectiveness.

Keywords: will to fight, belongingness, combat motivation, unit cohesion, military culture, U.S. Marine Corps, social identity, leadership climate, retention, combat effectiveness

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Introduction

The concept of the will to fight has long occupied a known, yet abstract position in military theory and practice. Strategists routinely acknowledge its importance, often elevating it above logistical advantages, mathematical manning superiority, or technological dominance. Yet despite these very tangible items, will to fight remains difficult to define, measure, and deliberately develop, especially when trying to account for requirements that must be built into a training routine readily scalable in the event of a major conflict. Most frequently, will to fight is framed in terms of nationalism, ideology, religion, or political correctness. While these factors undeniably influence motivation, they do not adequately explain why individuals continue to fight when survival instincts, rational cost-benefit calculations, and loyalties fail.[1]

To succeed on the modern battlefield, military forces must cultivate a sense of belonging that assures high unit cohesion, resilience, and ultimately sustained combat effectiveness. Belongingness, not merely ideology or rhetoric, provides the most durable foundation for will to fight because it fuses individual identity with the group, gives hardship meaning, and sustains action when fear, uncertainty, and scarcity would otherwise prompt withdrawal. In that sense, the will to fight is best understood through three reinforcing levels: the psychological need of the individual to belong, the sociological power of the community to bind self-identity, and the military responsibility to create cultures and leaders capable of preserving that bond in a time of conflict or war.

This argument matters because combat motivation does not emerge in the abstract. It emerges in human beings shaped by relationships, trust, and shared experience. Humans are not primarily motivated to fight for flags, governments, or ideologies at the moment of violence. They fight for the people beside them in the trenches or foxhole. This phenomenon is not by accident, but rather an expression of deeply embedded human social psychology.[2]

Using interdisciplinary research from psychology, sociology, and military studies, the following analysis treats belongingness as a core human need and demonstrates that organizations that intentionally cultivate belonging produce

[1] S. L. A. Marshall, *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (New York: William Morrow, 1947); Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023); Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949); and Sebastian Junger, *War* (New York: Twelve, an imprint of Hachette Livre, 2010).

[2] A. H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954); Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497–529; Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 7–24; Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Marshall, *Men Against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

disproportionately high cohesion, resilience, and combat effectiveness. The U.S. Marine Corps is presented as a primary case study for institutionalized belongingness. Through deliberate identity destruction and reconstruction, the Marine Corps does not merely socialize recruits into an organization but transforms them into members of a distinct warrior culture. The summary that would best explain these experiences would be: "Marines do not join the Marine Corps. They become Marines."[3]

This article also addresses a related strategic problem: the tendency to misread will to fight during time of war. Prevailing interpretations of will to fight in modern conflicts, particularly those that characterize Russia's performance in Ukraine as evidence of national weakness or moral failure, often drift toward narrative convenience rather than disciplined assessment. While such interpretations may be politically convenient, they obscure the powerful influence of narrative framing, strategic communication, and tactical information operations in shaping public perception. The potential analytical error is subtle but significant: observers begin to treat tactical friction, flawed execution, or divided setbacks as proof of a weak adversary, rather than as characteristics of a complex campaign conducted under political constraints and organizational tradeoffs within an evolving operational environment. Once the narrative manifests into a "Russia is weak" hypothesis, it is no longer an analytical conclusion but a filtered perception. Rather than offering insight into the adversary, it produces a distorted strategic understanding of the conflict.[4]

Taken together, these observations suggest that will to fight cannot be fully understood through material assessments, moral framing, or external narrative interpretation alone. It must be examined where motivation is actually formed and sustained, which can be characterized and summarized by the bond between individuals and the groups to which they belong. The sections that follow proceed accordingly, beginning with the psychological roots of belongingness, then turning to its sociological and organizational implications, and finally showing how the Marine Corps has historically converted belonging into combat effectiveness.

Belongingness as a Fundamental Human Need

The argument that belongingness reinforces the will to fight begins with the

[3] Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

[4] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," Expert Insights, Rand, 11 July 2016; and Jonathan Morley-Davies, Jem Thomas, and Graham Baines, *Russian Information Operations Outside of the Western Information Environment (Revised Version)* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2024).

recognition that humans are inherently social beings. Psychological research consistently identifies the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation. Abraham H. Maslow placed belongingness immediately after physiological and safety needs in his hierarchy, emphasizing its centrality to human functioning and well-being. Subsequent scholarly publications have refined and reinforced this insight.[5]

Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary's seminal work on the "need to belong" argues that humans possess a pervasive drive to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships. This need is not merely emotional but cognitive and behavioral, influencing perception, decision-making, and risk tolerance. When belongingness is threatened or denied, individuals experience anxiety, reduced self-regulation, and diminished resilience. Conversely, when belongingness is strong, individuals demonstrate increased willingness to endure hardship and personal risk.[6]

Social identity theory further explains how group membership becomes integrated into self-concept. Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner argue that individuals derive a significant portion of their identity from the groups to which they belong, particularly when those groups are important, distinctive, and emotionally meaningful. When group identity is strong, threats to the group are experienced as threats to the self. In such conditions, self-preservation and group preservation become psychologically inseparable.[7]

Anthropological and evolutionary perspectives reinforce these findings. Early human survival depended on group cohesion for protection, resource acquisition, and reproduction. Those who prioritized group loyalty over individual safety were more likely to survive and pass on their genes. This evolutionary legacy persists, manifesting in modern contexts as a readiness to sacrifice for one's group, particularly under conditions of shared danger.[8]

Then, at the psychological level, belongingness is not a sentimental add-on to combat motivation. It is the tool that makes sustained sacrifice possible. Belongingness operates most prominently at the small-group level. While individuals may identify conceptually with large collectives such as nations or religions, emotional intensity and personal obligation are strongest within immediate social units. This distinction has profound implications for understanding will to fight. While national narratives may initiate participation in conflict, sustained combat motivation emerges from bonds formed within units.[9]

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[5] Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*; and Baumeister and Leary, "Need to Belong."
[6] Baumeister and Leary, "Need to Belong."
[7] Tajfel and Turner, "Social Identity Theory," 7–24.
[8] Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*.
[9] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

Belongingness, Culture, and Organizational Performance

Organizations that intentionally cultivate belongingness consistently outperform those that rely solely on formal authority, motivations, or ideology. Sociological research demonstrates that high-performing teams exhibit strong shared identity, mutual trust, and a sense of collective purpose. These characteristics bolster coordination, adaptability, and resilience under stress.[10]

In military contexts, unit cohesion has long been recognized as a critical factor in combat effectiveness. Studies from World War II onward reveal that soldiers' primary motivation for continued fighting is loyalty to comrades rather than ideological commitment or fear of punishment. Samuel Stouffer's research on American soldiers during World War II found that men fought primarily to avoid letting down their fellow soldiers. Similar conclusions emerged from later conflicts, including Vietnam, where small-unit cohesion often sustained combat motivation even when strategic objectives were unclear or unpopular.[11]

This sociological element is essential. Individuals do not merely carry private motivation into war; they are shaped by communities that define what is honorable, expected, and worth enduring. A military organization therefore does more than issue orders or assign missions. It establishes the shared language and expectations that transform isolated individuals into a successful fighting unit.

Belongingness-driven cultures also demonstrate greater tolerance for hardship and uncertainty. When individuals perceive themselves as integral members of a group, they are more willing to endure discomfort, risk, and doubt. This dynamic is particularly relevant in modern warfare, where operational environments are increasingly complex, morally ambiguous, and psychologically demanding.[12]

Equally important, organizations that fail to cultivate belongingness often struggle with morale, discipline, and retention. The collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces provides a contemporary example. Despite significant investment in training and equipment, Afghan forces frequently lacked cohesive identity and loyalty at the unit level. Allegiance to local, tribal, or familial networks often superseded commitment to the state or military institution, especially when those commitments were funded and driven by Western

[10] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

[11] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* (New York: Hill and Wang, an imprint of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

[12] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*; and Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*.

influence. Without a unifying culture of belonging, will to fight proved weak and situational.[13]

These observations suggest that will to fight cannot be manufactured through material investment alone. It must be cultivated through deliberate cultural practices that bind individuals to one another and to the institution they serve.[14]

The Marine Corps as a Culture of Belonging

The U.S. Marine Corps represents one of the most deliberate and effective examples of institutionalized belongingness. Unlike many organizations that emphasize functional integration or contractual obligation, the Marine Corps prioritizes identity transformation. From the moment a recruit enters training, the goal is not simply to teach skills or enforce discipline, but to dismantle civilian identity and reconstruct it around a shared Marine identity.[15]

This process begins with separation. Recruits are physically and psychologically removed from familiar social networks, stripped of personal markers of individuality, and immersed in an environment governed by Marine Corps norms, language, and core values. This initial breakdown serves a critical function. By destabilizing prior identity structures, the institution creates psychological space for new identity formation.[16]

Recruits are then systematically exposed to Marine Corps history, mythology, and tradition. Battles, heroes, and sacrifices are not presented as abstract historical facts but as a shared lineage to which recruits are now connected. The message is clear: you are not learning about Marines, you are becoming one.[17]

The transformation is reinforced through shared hardship. Physical exhaustion, stress, and adversity are experienced collectively, forging bonds through mutual suffering. Research indicates that shared adversity accelerates group cohesion by increasing emotional reliance and mutual trust. During recruit training, hardship is not incidental but intentional, serving as a catalyst for belongingness. Incidentally, the Marine Corps inherently continues this shared misery into active service, furthering and strengthening the bond among Marines; however, this can be detrimental to retention, as addressed later in this article.[18]

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[13] Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
[14] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[15] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[16] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[17] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[18] Victor Chung et al., "Social Bonding through Shared Experiences: The Role of Emotional Intensity," *Royal Society Open Science* 11, no. 10 (2024): 240048, https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.240048.

Language plays a critical role in this process. Recruits are consistently referred to as "recruit" until they earn the title Marine. The moment of transition is ritualized, marking not merely the completion of training but the adoption of a new identity, a shared identity. This distinction reinforces the idea that being a Marine is not a profession but an actual state of existence.

This is why Marines do not describe their affiliation in transactional terms. One does not join the Marine Corps in the same way one joins an organization or vocation. One becomes a Marine. The distinction is subtle but profound. Becoming implies permanent transformation and collective identity fusion. That is why if you ask any Marine, active duty or not, what their birthday is, more often than not you will get the obligatory 10 November 1775. Joining implies an association or choice that has the safety net of reversibility.

The result is a baseline will to fight that exists prior to combat exposure. Even before entering battle, Marines possess a deeply ingrained sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, yet intimate enough that the feeling is almost tangible. This baseline does not guarantee tactical success, but it provides a psychological foundation upon which combat motivation can endure.[19]

The historical record strengthens the point of Marine cohesion, belonging has been the difference maker in warfighting across the Corps' history; whether the defensive posture that was upheld at Belleau Wood, the shared hardship and endurance of the Chosin Reservoir campaign, or the small-unit cohesion that characterized urban combat in Fallujah. In each case, material conditions mattered, training mattered, and leadership mattered, but the force multiplier was the same: Marines continued to act under extreme pressure because identity and belonging had already fused the individual to the unit. The Marine Corps' warfighting reputation, then, is not merely a product of lore. Lore survives because it has been repeatedly validated in combat by cohesive Marines fighting for one another.[20]

The Marine Corps Retention Challenge

While the Marine Corps is exceptionally effective at creating belonging, it is less immune to losing it than Marine Corps lore would sometimes suggest. Retention challenges across eras point to a critical truth. Belongingness, once established, must be continuously reinforced within the operating forces. When Marines encounter leadership environments characterized by neglect, disgrace,

[19] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.
[20] Steven Pressfield, *Gates of Fire* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976); Marshall, *Men against Fire*; and Junger, *War*.

or persistent disregard, the sense of connection that once bound them to the institution can erode. In such cases, the identity that was carefully constructed during initial training and continued service becomes strained, and the will to fight may narrow from institutional commitment to an oversimplified, mere obligation.

This reality places an unavoidable responsibility on small-unit leaders. Noncommissioned officers (NCO) and company grade commanders become the most immediate custodians of belongingness after the transformation process is complete. Through their daily conduct, consistency, and treatment of subordinates, they either reinforce the Marine identity or gradually fracture it. Yet, this burden does not rest on them alone. The Marine Corps as an institution bears equal responsibility for the conditions in which Marines and their leaders operate, from NCOs and staff noncommissioned officers (SNCO) to company grade and field grade officers alike. Belongingness is therefore not sustained by leadership presence alone, but by the combined effect of leader behavior and an institution willing to support the environments in which that identity can endure.

When living conditions deteriorate, barracks fall into disrepair, food quality becomes persistently substandard, and daily life begins to resemble confinement rather than service, the cultural lore of the institution alone cannot withstand those pressures.[21] In such environments, belongingness erodes not because Marines lack resilience, but because the organization fails to reinforce the very identity it seeks to preserve. Under these conditions, the willingness to fight narrows from collective commitment to individual endurance.

In this sense, the willingness to fight does not reside solely in doctrine, training pipelines, or institutional values. Nor can it be sustained by NCOs, SNCOs, and commanders acting in isolation. It is sustained, or degraded, through the combined effect of leadership behavior and institutional stewardship, expressed daily in the lived experiences of Marines. When the Marine Corps fails to provide environments that support dignity, connection, and purpose, even the strongest leaders are forced to compensate for systemic shortcomings. Belongingness, and the will to fight it produces, must therefore be treated not only as a leadership responsibility, but as an organizational one.

For leaders, the implication is both simple and sobering. The environments they create matter. They can be the reason Marines flourish, remain committed, and are willing to endure hardship for their respective units and the mission. They can also be the reason Marines disengage, detach, and ultimately choose

[21] See, for example, Riley Ceder, "Barracks 2030 Isn't a 'Fix It and Forget It' Effort, USMC Leaders Say," *Marine Corps Times*, 1 May 2025; and Carla Babb, "A New Barracks Task Force Aims to Improve Military Living Conditions," *Military Times*, 10 October 2025.

to leave the institution entirely. In extreme cases, the erosion of belonging does not merely affect retention. It undermines the very cohesion on which will to fight depends.

If belonging is the psychological engine of combat motivation, then leadership climate is the fuel that keeps it running. Leaders who fail to recognize this relationship risk becoming the decisive factor not in why Marines fight, but in why they stop.

Will to Fight and Narrative Framing in Contemporary Conflict

Modern assessments of will to fight often rely on external observation filtered through political and media narratives. While such assessments can identify trends, they risk oversimplification when separated from cultural and emotional context. The characterization of Russia's performance in Ukraine as evidence of inherently poor will to fight illustrates this risk.[22]

Western discussion frequently frames the conflict as a moral binary between good and evil, democracy and authoritarianism. While this framing serves political and informational purposes, it can obscure the complex strategic, historical, and geopolitical factors driving Russian behavior. More importantly, it merges perceived legitimacy with actual motivation.[23]

Will to fight is not determined solely by moral alignment with external observers. It emerges from internal cohesion, identity, and perceived obligation. Russian forces operate within a different cultural and institutional framework, one shaped by conscription, hierarchical distance, and varying degrees of identity union. These factors influence unit cohesion and combat motivation in ways that simplistic moral narratives fail to capture.[24]

Additionally, strategic communication and information operations play a significant role in shaping public perception, with direct downstream effects on individual will to fight. In the modern information environment, images of retreat, internal conflict, or abandonment can be amplified and disseminated globally at the speed of an individual's internet connection, while equally consequential acts of resilience, cohesion, and sacrifice receive comparatively little attention. This imbalance does more than distort external narratives and perceptions. It bleeds back into the force, influencing how servicemembers interpret their effectiveness, legitimacy, and prospects for success. When unchecked, this constant exposure to "world noise" via an individual's social networking

[22] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*.
[23] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*.
[24] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; and Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*.

timeline can erode confidence, weaken collective identity, and quietly undermine the psychological foundations on which will to fight depends.[25]

A more useful starting point is to separate moral preference from strategic explanation. Russia's decisions can be interpreted, in part, through a security competition framework: the belief that its strategic prowess is shrinking, that it is slipping into defeat, and that time is not on its side. In this view, the question is not about virtue or villainy, but about perceived encirclement, lack of buffer space, homeland/regime security, and the acceptable balance of risk. Whether any single individual accepts that rationale is irrelevant to the point being made here. What matters is that nation states often act most aggressively when they perceive their strategic position deteriorating. That observation is useful not because it excuses aggression, but because it cautions strategic leaders against confusing moral preference with analytic rigor. Essentially, their belongingness becomes the catalyst of will to fight to preserve those elements among their citizenry. If analysts dismiss that logic as mere incompetence or evil, they risk misunderstanding what the adversary thinks it must do to survive.[26]

The broader lesson is not that one must accept Russian claims, but that will to fight in any conflict should be assessed objectively and in relation to the bonds, identities, and narratives that sustain a force internally. The earlier examples in this article, from World War I to Vietnam to urban combat in Iraq, point in the same direction: under fire, forces endure not because outside observers find their cause compelling, but because belonging, cohesion, and shared obligation make endurance possible. This hypothetical does not excuse Russian behavior, nor does it require agreement with Russian claims. It does something more important for the strategic reader: it forces an objective shift in perspective. When analysts treat Russia as weak because they have accepted a morally clean storyline, they risk confusing "how we want to understand the war" with "how the adversary is actually reasoning through it." That confusion produces misclassification. It assigns the enemy a smaller appetite for risk, a lower endurance capacity, and a lesser ability to adapt than may be true in reality.[27]

The warning is straightforward. If you are strategic enough to recognize how narratives can shape perception, you would be foolish to ignore the operational impacts and consequences. Seeing an adversary through a minds-eye of weakness encourages complacency, invites miscalculation, and creates the classic conditions for underestimation. In war, underestimating the enemy is not simply an academic mistake, it can lead to a complete tactical failure where

[25] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Paul and Matthews, *Firehose of Falsehood*; and *Russian Information Operations Outside of the Western Information Environment (Revised Version)*.
[26] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*.
[27] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*.

loss of life is realized on a large scale. It is one of the oldest ways militaries lose.

Ultimately, this article returns will to fight to its most elemental truth. In battle, belongingness to the unit is the decisive motivator. At the point of contact, it is not theoretical allegiance but shared identity, mutual dependence, and loyalty to comrades that sustain the will to fight. Understanding and cultivating this reality remains essential for modern military organizations to evolve while confronting increasingly complex and ambiguous conflicts.[28]

Belongingness at the Point of Contact

At the point of violence, abstract motivations shrink at a rapid pace. When rounds are exchanged and survival is uncertain, individuals do not calculate geopolitical implications or ideological purity. They act based on immediate social bonds and obligations. This reality has been documented across conflicts and cultures for quite some time. Combat veterans consistently report that their primary motivation in battle was loyalty to their fellow men. Fear of letting the ones around you down outweighed fear of death or punishment. This phenomenon persists regardless of nationality, ideology, or era. Whether in the trenches of World War I, the jungles of Vietnam, or the clearing of buildings from town to town in Iraq, the pattern remains consistent.[29]

Belongingness operates as a psychological anchor in chaos. When cognitive overload and fear threaten decision-making, the presence of trusted comrades and appropriate training provides stability and purpose. Fighting becomes an act of mutual preservation rather than required duty.[30] Importantly, this dynamic does not weaken the importance of national or ideological narratives. Such narratives often initiate participation in conflict and sustain public support. However, they do not replace the immediate, visceral bonds that sustain individuals in combat. At the most basic level, war is fought by small groups of humans relying on one another for survival.[31]

This is where the psychological, sociological, and military elements of the argument meet. Psychologically, belonging reduces fear's isolating effect. Sociologically, it binds the individual to a community of obligation. Militarily, it gives commanders and units a durable basis for action under stress. This reality has implications for force design, training, and leadership. Units that prioritize cohesion, shared identity, mutual trust, and training are more likely to sustain will to fight under stress. Leadership that understands and reinforces belong-

[28] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.
[29] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; Gabriel and Savage, *Crisis in Command*; and Junger, *War*.
[30] Marshall, *Men against Fire*.
[31] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

ingness enhances combat effectiveness more reliably than leadership that relies solely on authority or rhetoric.[32]

Implications for Military Leadership and Strategy

Understanding belongingness as the core driver of will to fight carries significant effects for military leadership and strategy. First, it suggests that investments in technology and training must be matched by investments in culture. Advanced weapons systems cannot compensate for fractured identity or weak cohesion. This principle is echoed in how the U.S. Air Force articulates its force structure ethos. The Service often emphasizes that its most important weapon system is not aircraft or missiles, but its airmen, referring to airmen as the human weapon system whose performance, resilience, and cohesion ultimately determine operational success. This perspective reinforces that no platform, no matter how capable, can substitute for a force whose members have strong connectedness and commitment to each other.[33]

Second, it underscores the importance of leader behavior at all levels. Leaders shape belongingness through consistency, fairness, and shared hardship. When leaders are perceived as part of the group rather than above it, trust and loyalty increase. Conversely, perceived distance or hypocrisy erodes cohesion and motivation. However, leadership behavior alone is not sufficient. The organization bears responsibility for enabling leaders to succeed in this role.[34]

Belongingness cannot be sustained in environments where leaders are expected to compensate for systemic shortcomings. Training, equipping, and caring for units must extend beyond readiness metrics and material capability to include the human length of service. Units are not interchangeable components but collections of individuals whose motivation, identity, and resilience are shaped by how they are supported. When organizations invest in the development of leaders, resource units appropriately, and demonstrate institutional care for the well-being of their people, they reinforce the conditions under which belongingness can thrive. In this way, the will to fight becomes not only a function of individual leadership, but a reflection of how seriously the institution treats its units as human systems rather than abstract force elements.[35]

Third, it highlights the risks of rapid force expansion or integration without sufficient cultural grounding. Organizations that grow faster than their ability to teach identity risk weakening belongingness and diminishing the cohesion

[32] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[33] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*; and SSgt Mikaley Kline, "Command Chief Outlines Top Priorities, Shares Leadership Philosophy," U.S. Air Force Life Cycle Management Center, 8 August 2024.
[34] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[35] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

on which will to fight depends. This challenge is particularly acute during large-scale mobilization, rapid force regeneration, or partner strength development efforts. In such contexts, training is often treated as a static requirement to be completed rather than a dynamic process designed to shape identity, reinforce belonging, and adapt to evolving mission demands.[36]

Training should not be viewed as a fixed curriculum or a one-time gate to operational employment. It is a living, iterative system that must continuously evolve alongside mission requirements, operational environments, and the composition of the force. When training stagnates, units internalize outdated practices, shared meaning becomes meaningless, and confidence is lost in their relevancy. Conversely, when training is intentionally designed, regularly assessed, and deliberately adapted, it becomes a primary mechanism through which belongingness is reinforced. Well-designed training creates shared experiences, shared language, and shared standards that bind individuals to the unit and to one another.

Finally, it underscores the necessity of maintaining an objective stance when assessing the will to fight of any adversary. Reliance on external indicators alone risks misrepresenting internal cohesion, motivation, and endurance. When analysis is shaped by narrative preference rather than disciplined assessment, adversaries are more easily underestimated. History repeatedly demonstrates that strategic failure often follows not from a lack of capability, but from misjudging an opponent's capacity for sacrifice and cohesion when belongingness within their force is strong.[37]

Conclusion

Will to fight is not an abstract quality inherited through biological lineage, imparted by philosophy, or transferred through a training plan alone. It is a deeply human phenomenon rooted in belongingness. Humans fight hardest when their identity is bonded to the group in shared experience, when survival is a collective effort, and when loyalty transcends self-interest.[38]

The U.S. Marine Corps demonstrates the power of institutionalized belongingness. By transforming individuals rather than merely enrolling them, it establishes a baseline will to fight that endures under extreme conditions. Marines do not fight because they were told to. They fight because they belong.[39]

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[36] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*; and Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*.

[37] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; and Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*.

[38] Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*; Baumeister and Leary, "Need to Belong"; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

[39] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

More broadly, the lesson for warfighters and commanders is plain: belonging cannot be assumed once created. It must be cultivated, protected, and renewed through culture, leadership, training, and institutional care. Contemporary conflict analysis must move beyond simplistic moral virtues and material metrics. Understanding the psychological and cultural foundations of belonging can provide pieces to analyzing a more accurate and actionable framework for assessing an adversary's will to fight.[40]

At the end of the day, wars are not won by national flags, holy scriptures, or ambiguous moral merits. They are fought and endured by individuals in close proximity to one another, bound by shared identity and mutual obligation. In foxholes, trenches, and buildings clouded by indistinguishable insurgency, it is not the nation's flag, religious belief, or even the instinct for self-preservation that ultimately compels action, but the unbroken bond to the person fighting beside you.[41]

[40] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; and Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*.
[41] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.