



Esprit guerrier, a French concept to enhance the preparation for Belgian Land Component operations

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Major GS Trystan MATTHYS, MSc Eng is a passionate student and practitioner of the profession of arms. Eager to give something back to Belgian Defence for having had the chance to attend the Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr, he chose to write his master's thesis on increasing the disposition to fight of the Land Component, for which he was awarded the highest honours by the Helmut Schmidt University. His thesis will shortly be published by the Nomos Verlag.

History offers ample examples of small military detachments defeating quantitatively superior armies. Moreover, these Davids often did not even need qualitatively better equipment to defeat the Goliaths of their age. Although I have never been to war, I have seen these effects during exercises too. Some units will do anything to reach their objective, while others will vacillate, succumb to friction or look for excuses not to continue. An intangible force pushed them forward when others wanted to give up: their disposition to fight.

This element of an army's worth is often neglected as reorganisers focus almost exclusively on capabilities with potential disastrous consequences, i.e. France in 1940, the Soviet Union and US in Afghanistan, Iraq in 2014... This paper aims to propose practical measures to increase the disposition to fight of the Land Component that is currently undergoing a massive reform through the CaMo¹ programme.

After almost two years of brutal fighting, Ukraine is still an independent country. Parts of its conquered territories have even been liberated. This state of affairs stands in stark contrast with the assessment of most intelligence agencies at the time of the invasion: Ukraine would be overcome in a matter of weeks by the superior military capabilities of the Russian Federation. How could so many analysts be so wrong?

¹ 'CaMo' stands for French *capacité motorisée* (motorised capability).

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The United States Defense Intelligence Agency identified the exclusive focus on capabilities and the disregard of disposition to fight as the cause. This is understandable, as it is easier to quantify and analyse manpower and weapons than elusive factors such as cohesion, esprit de corps, leadership or resilience. It might also explain why neglecting disposition to fight seems to be a recurring strategic miscalculation, as the wars against ISIS and the Taliban have shown.

Van Creveld explains perhaps best the strategic importance of disposition to fight with his famous equation of an army's military worth: "quality and quantity of equipment [= capabilities] multiplied by fighting power which is the sum total of mental qualities that make armies fight [= disposition to fight]". Or, put more prosaically: of what use are a comprehensive national security strategy, a superb defence strategy, an intelligent procurement policy, brilliant operational and bold tactical plans, when the individual soldier refuses to leave cover to engage the enemy?

Considering the global security situation and especially Russia's aggression, disposition to fight is of crucial importance to NATO as a whole and Belgian Defence in particular. As more resources are spent on acquiring military capabilities, it is also imperative to prepare those who will actually have to use them. Nobody wants to be in the same position as France in 1940 or the Soviet Union in 1941, when an advantage in almost every weapon system was nullified by a lack of disposition to fight.

Although analysing and increasing disposition to fight is hard, this does not mean that it should not be attempted. The French Army (AdT) recognised its importance to win wars and developed a concept to increase it. Dubbed *esprit guerrier*, it has also recently entered Belgian doctrine through the binational training and education directives. It is therefore important for the Land Component (LC) to study it and glean lessons for improving its preparation of operations.

To achieve this, a theoretical model of disposition to fight first needs to be identified. This model is then modified to sequentially analyse the impact of *esprit guerrier* and Belgian doctrine and practices on disposition to fight. Finally, the *esprit guerrier* measures that can improve the LC disposition to fight are identified and adapted to the specificity of the LC.

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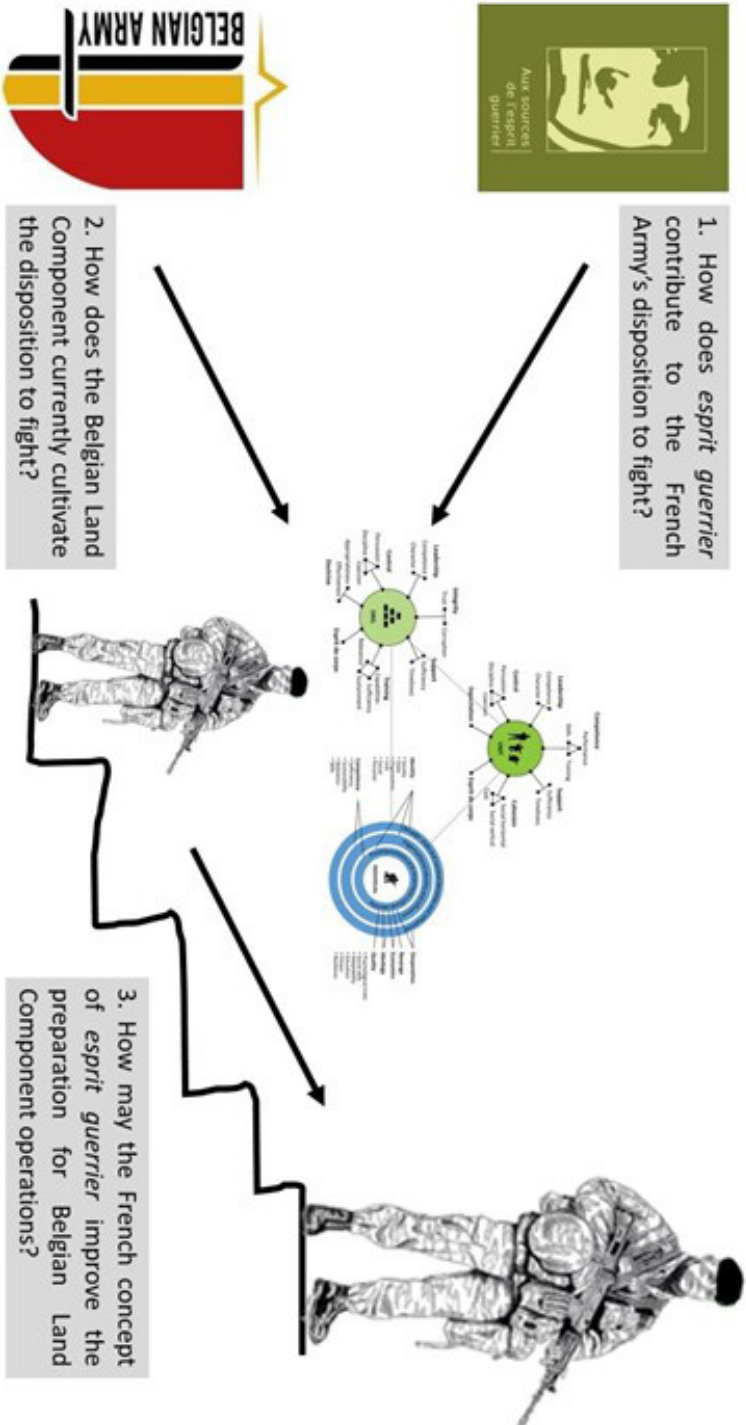


Figure 1 : methodology

There are some limitations to this study. There are profound differences between the French and Belgian armed forces. What is possible in one army is not necessarily achievable in the other. Additionally, because of the fundamental differences between motorised and special operations capacities, the study mainly focusses on the former, which constitute the bulk of the LC.

A model of the disposition to fight

Disposition to fight is essential in winning battles and wars and therefore of primordial importance in preparing for operations. Both Eastern and Western scholars and soldiers have emphasised this. Nevertheless, there is neither consensus on a definition, nor on the factors that contribute to it.

Some authors equate disposition to fight to a single factor, as Foch does in his famous equation by concentrating on morale. Others enumerate a plethora of influences, making convincing arguments for the importance of their factors, but not describing the interactions. A few try to create a comprehensive model by considering the interdependencies, but significantly reduce the number of factors.

Analysing the concept of *esprit guerrier* through such models does not seem promising. Therefore, another kind of model is needed for this study. RAND came to a similar conclusion when the US Army tasked it to research disposition to fight. Consequently, it developed a model combining the best of two worlds; it contains many factors and describes the most important relations between them across five levels: individual, unit, organisation, state and society.

As LC cannot change the characteristics of the Belgian state or society, their influence will not be analysed in depth.

Esprit guerrier's contribution to the French Army's disposition to fight

In 2019, AdT's chief of staff defined *esprit guerrier* as follows: "Combining battle hardening, traditions and mastery of high technology, *esprit guerrier* is defined as a state of mind allowing the consolidation of combativeness, endurance and hardiness, at individual and collective levels, to allow a victorious engagement in operations, whatever the conditions."

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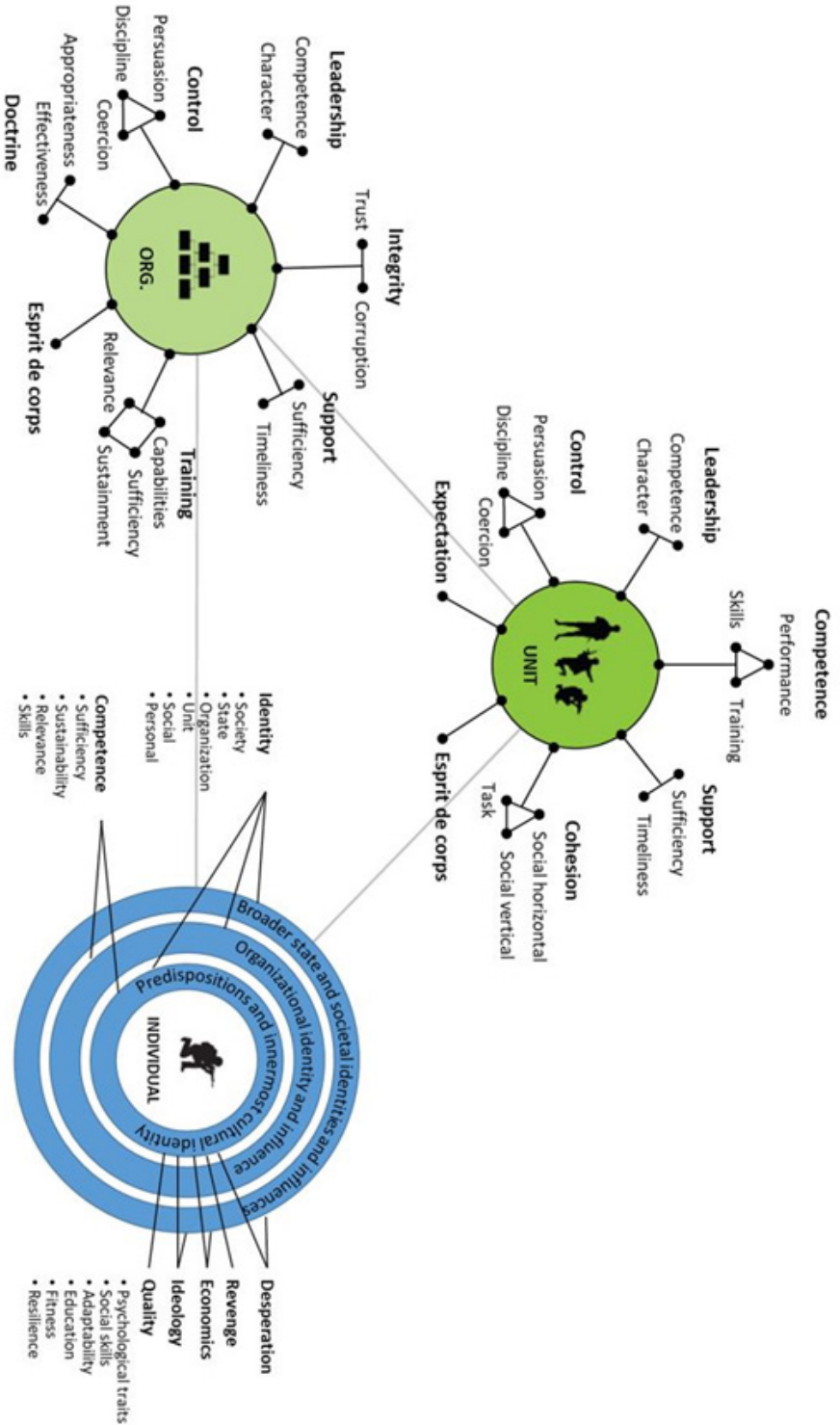


Figure 2: modified disposition-to-fight model

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The three core components are not new but revitalising and combining them was deemed necessary to increase operational efficacy because of increased internal and external threats, degraded army proficiency and societal changes. The impact of the mastery of technology concept is not yet clear, as it has just started. But the other two components are mature.

Battle hardening concentrates on making the soldier tough, capable of fighting for long periods, with or without major equipment, no matter the harshness of the environment. It compromises the lion's share of the *esprit guerrier* directives: 30 measures aiming at increasing the disposition to fight by combining general, job-specific and commando techniques in unknown and hostile environments and under degraded conditions. The emphasis on commando techniques is remarkable, when considering that even with enormous expense of resources to qualify personnel and build specific infrastructure, there is still a lack of training capacity. This has led the AdT to promote autonomous tactical exercises, preferably in civilian terrain, which can achieve – even without obstacle crossing – the same goals as commando training. Nevertheless, most units continue to rely on training centres or specialised infrastructure.

Traditions provide historical and ethical references to the soldier and meaning to his commitment to the service of the nation's higher interests. They focus in particular on identity and esprit de corps, which the AdT tries to strengthen through outward display. The rich heritage of its units serves as a source of inspiration. Using the traditions of dissolved units to strengthen the identity and esprit de corps of new or specialised units seems to be an effective strategy. Unfortunately, these efforts could not reach their full potential because of budgetary constraints.

Esprit guerrier's core components influence 75% of disposition-to-fight factors. Their effect is mutually reinforced in almost 50% of the cases.

Disposition to fight in the Belgian Land Component

Disposition to fight has never been the topic of a LC publication. This does not mean that it is completely neglected, as different aspects of it can be found in separate documents. Unfortunately, these are rare, which makes a coherent overview difficult. The 2022 Belgian Defence Doctrine, with its emphasis on fighting power, should change this.

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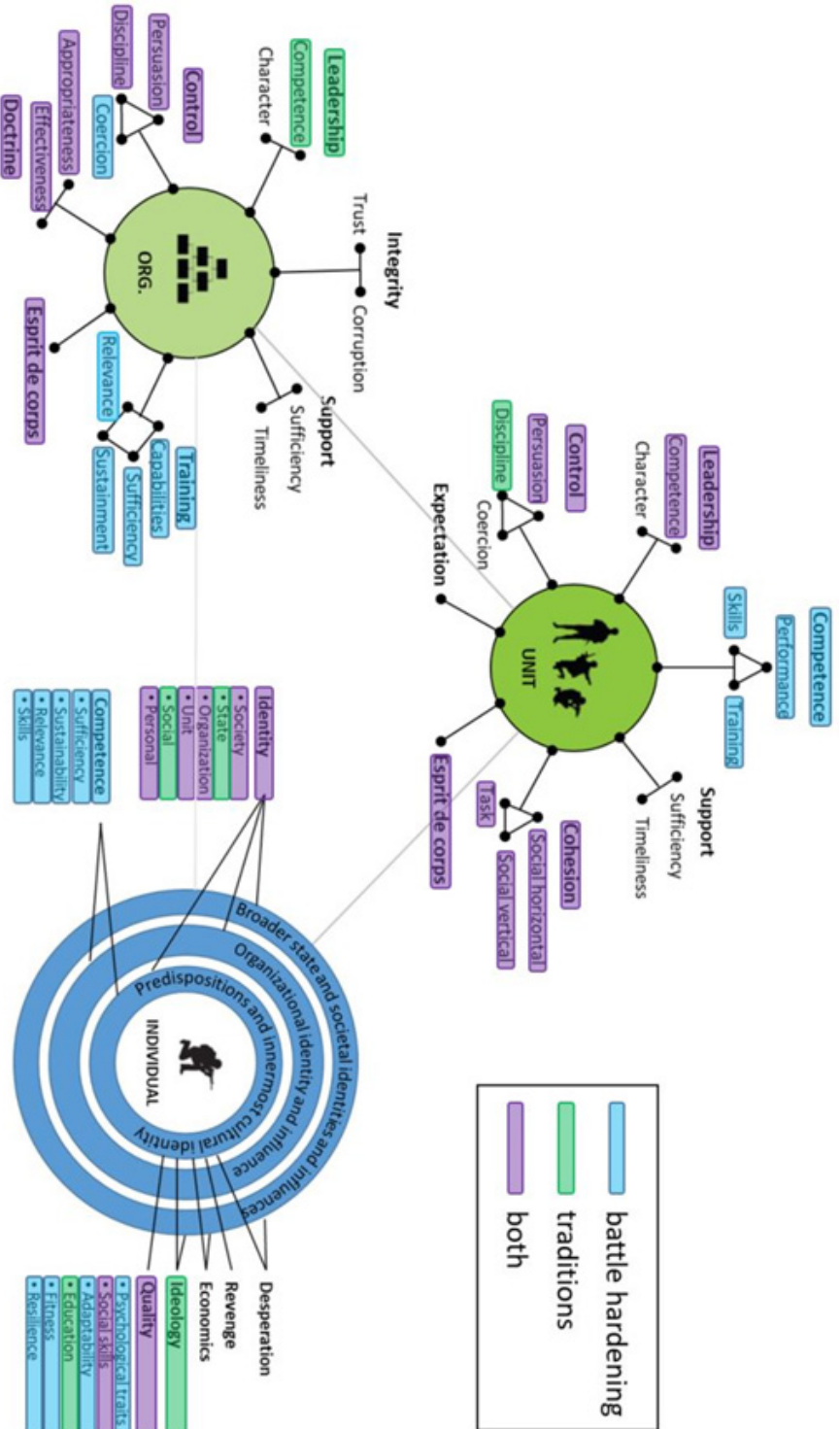


Figure 3: influence of *esprit guerrier* on disposition to fight

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Nevertheless, an analysis of joint and LC doctrine and directives shows that many disposition-to-fight factors are mentioned, but without practical instructions. Even though the binational concepts contain the *esprit guerrier* concept, it seems unjustified to assume that it – and the corresponding effects on the disposition to fight – will automatically become part of the LC DNA. The training periods in France are, after all, relatively few. Moreover, battle-hardening infrastructure and the pool of instructors hardly suffice for the AdT’s own needs.

Similarly, traditions are not deemed unimportant, but direct references to disposition to fight are nowhere to be found and its factors are rarely mentioned. The only document defining traditions dates from 1995. It states that traditions are “the transmission of a certain way of thinking and acting”. Discerning any links between tradition and the disposition to fight necessitates the analysis of disparate joint directives concerning uniforms, awards, badges, flags and ceremonies. This shows that the factors “identity” and “unit esprit de corps” are the most important.

This dearth of directives means that the commanding officers (COs) generally have free rein in deciding if and how they strengthen the disposition to fight. A survey shows that the focus of their efforts is mainly on cohesion, individual quality and competence. Aggressiveness is only stimulated in the combat units, but close combat is almost never practiced.

Some see training in challenging environments as conducive to increasing disposition to fight, but only two COs mention efforts to make their exercises tougher. Expensive battle-hardening courses abroad are not needed, the relative ease of organising exercises in civilian terrain offers ample opportunity to challenge leaders and soldiers alike.

Another interesting observation is the mismatch between the importance combat units attach to disposition to fight and the lack of attention given to it in combat schools. Systematically introducing external factors – such as fatigue, a thinking enemy, uncertainty, etc. – could remedy this while simultaneously enhancing the trainees’ understanding of the nature of combat.

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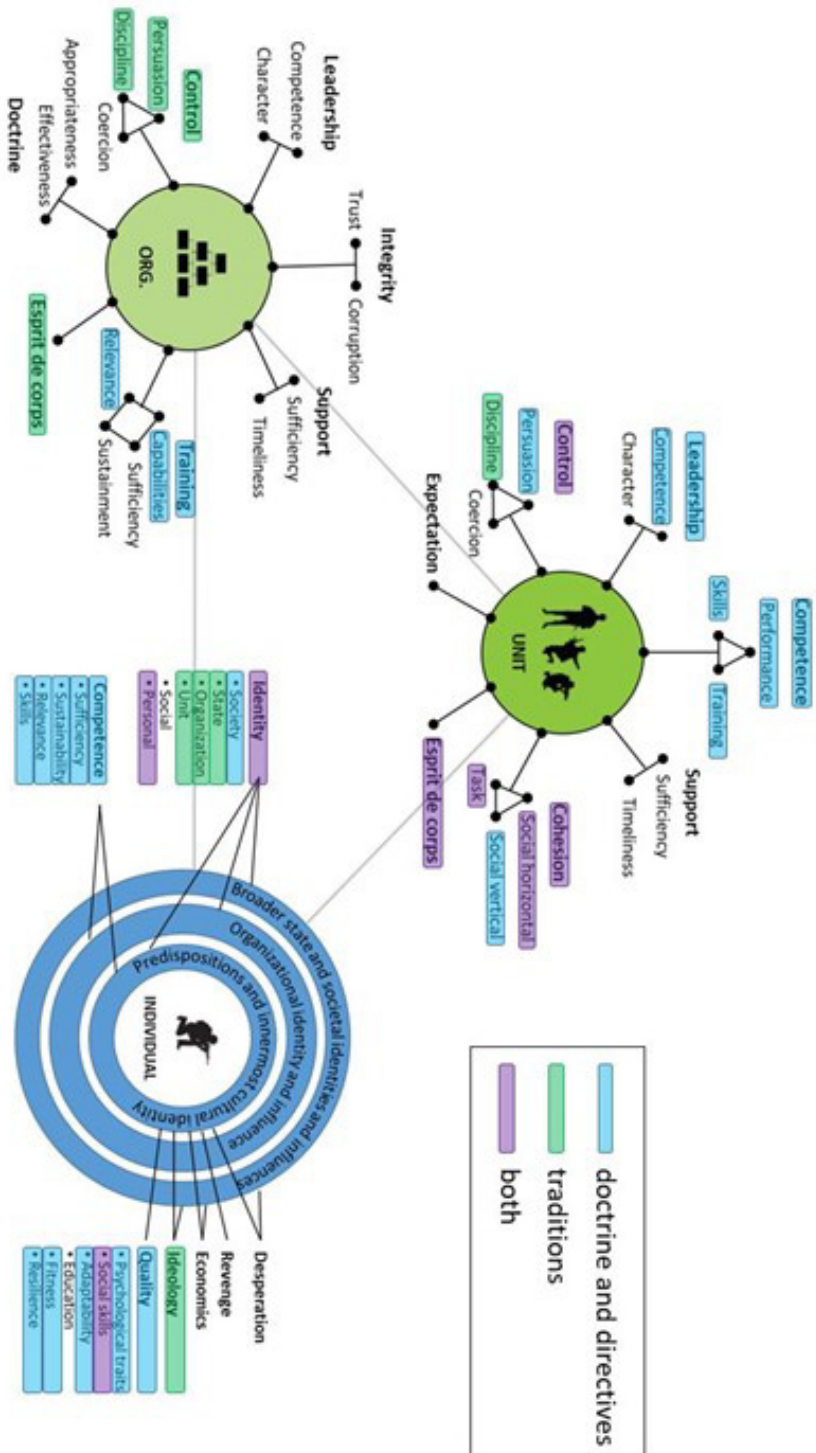


Figure 4: influence on disposition to fight in LC

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Furthermore, joint directives may regulate traditions in the LC, but they come alive at the battalion level. They seem to be so much part of daily life that COs have not mentioned their full impact. Although some cite their unit's history as contributing to their disposition to fight, its full potential is not exploited. Battle studies could increase leader competence and emulation of exemplary soldiers could reinforce identity and control.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that all but one CO state that they have received no disposition-to-fight guidance from their higher echelon.

In summary, almost 60% of the factors are influenced and they mutually reinforce each other in almost 20% of the cases. The lack of a dedicated disposition-to-fight doctrine does not therefore mean that nothing is done.

Conclusions and recommendations

Figure 5 compares effects of *esprit guerrier* and Belgian doctrine and practices on disposition to fight. The coloured boxes show the impact of the LC measures. The red borders indicate factors that are not affected by LC practices or only by one category (doctrine and directives, or traditions) but are influenced by *esprit guerrier*. This indicates that the LC can probably benefit from some *esprit guerrier* measures.

However, because of the profound differences between the LC and AdT, it is unrealistic and probably counterproductive to attempt to blindly copy the *esprit guerrier* concept. Nevertheless, it is useful to carefully select certain measures that can improve the preparation for LC operations. It is also expedient to highlight the best practices of some Belgian units so that these can be implemented throughout the LC.

This has led to the formulation of fourteen recommendations. The summarised measures are sorted according to perceived ease of implementation: from easy to hard.

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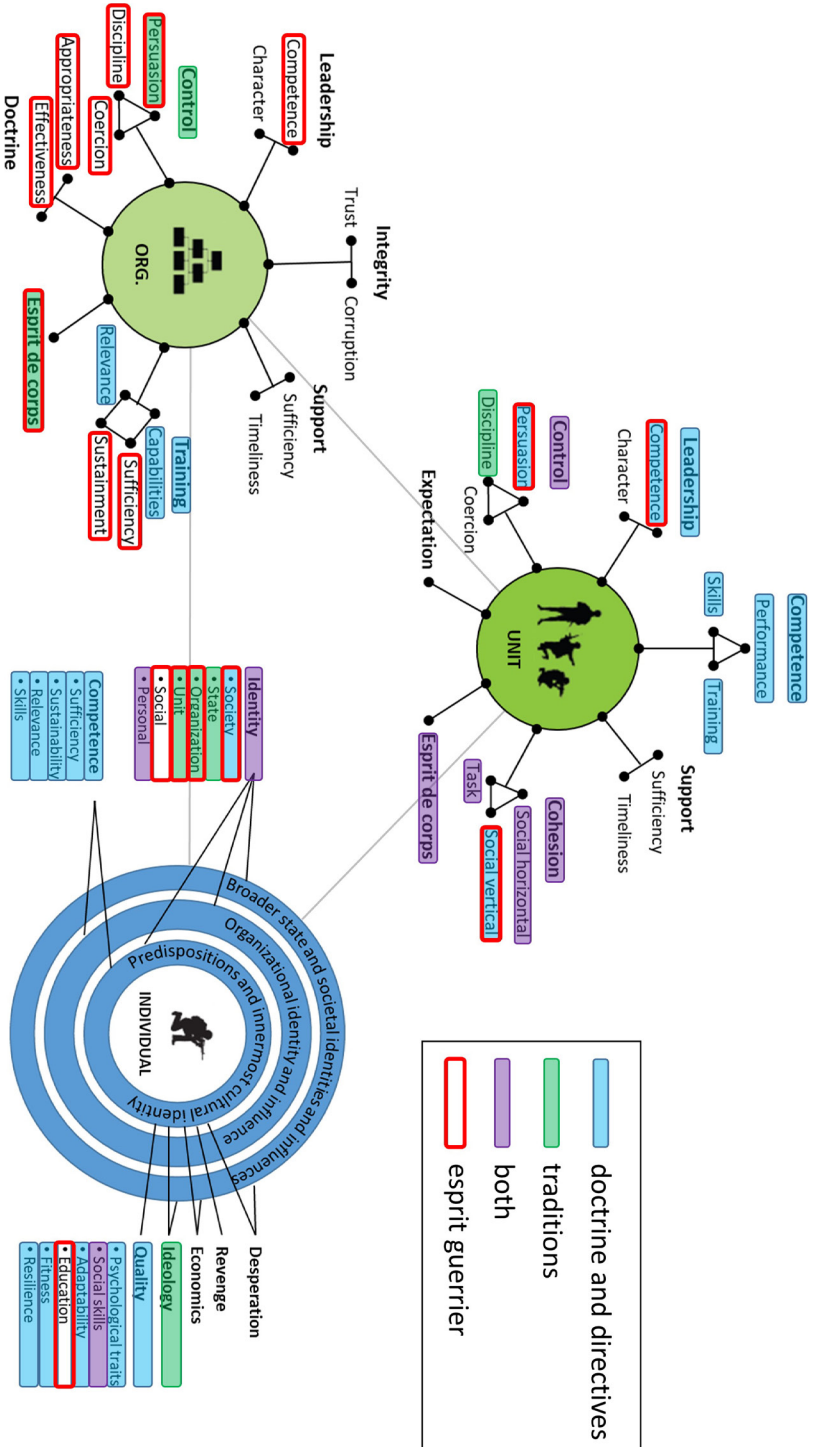


Figure 5: comparison of the influence of LC practices and *esprit guerrier* on disposition to fight

1. Make battle hardening standard practice for every field training exercise in units and schools

Job-specific training can best be executed in realistic circumstances. Field training exercises should combine as many battle-hardening elements as possible: fatigue, unpredictability, challenging circumstances, prohibition of the use of personal electronic devices, a thinking enemy, close combat and a complete integration of CSS units while avoiding as much real-life support as possible. The inclusion of these elements does not impair training. On the contrary, it enhances it.

2. Name basic training platoons after exemplary soldiers

Each platoon starting basic training is named after a fallen or deceased soldier, who can serve as an example for the recruits. Training should integrate his particular virtues. Contact with his former comrades-in-arms or family could strengthen the effect.

3. Organise family events at the subunit level

Many units already organise an open door, but these involve too many people to increase mutual support between soldiers' families. Family events at the subunit level (company or below) would be more effective at creating closer bonds. This is analogous to the concepts of esprit de corps (unit) and social cohesion (subunit).

4. Create an annual unit-specific collective battle-hardening event

This event should focus on unit-specific battle-hardening skills and incorporate elements of the unit's history (name, defining skills, famous exploits, etc.). For recruits, this should be a rite of acceptance, and for current unit members, an affirmation of their belonging. It could be a competition inciting emulation or an unrated event aimed at esprit de corps.

5. Issue battle-hardening guidance

Specific LC guidance is necessary, but a separate directive is not. Battle-hardening directives could easily be incorporated in the new training concept. Focus points can then be promulgated through the LC annual management directives. Every unit

and branch school should then adapt these measures to their specificity. The CO's freedom to interpret the best way of implementing them is essential for ensuring success, as is the exemplary behaviour of the higher echelons.

6. Participate in battle-hardening training abroad

Although the availability of battle-hardening training abroad is too limited to ensure a durable increase of disposition to fight, every opportunity should be taken to participate in these events. The unfamiliar circumstances (terrain, weather, training concept, culture, etc.) contribute not only to the disposition to fight, but are also perceived as a reward by the participants and increase motivation.

7. Promote LC specific physical fitness

The joint physical fitness test is relatively easy. Therefore, the LC has introduced complementary tests, but these are non-statutory. The military sports certificate is too easily obtained, resulting in few people proudly wearing the badge. The LC could promote physical fitness by making the complementary tests more relevant to the profession of arms and grading every event. To incite emulation, the conditions for wearing the sport certificate within the LC should be toughened or if this proves impossible due to its joint nature, a new badge should be created.

8. Replace close range techniques with close combat in all combat and certain CS units

Every soldier who can expect to be in direct contact with the enemy should not only be able to use offensive and defensive techniques, but also have the will to use violence. Close combat increases the level of aggressiveness, which is necessary for high-intensity warfighting. Training in full combat gear with all available means (hand-to-hand, bayonet, assault rifle and sidearm) should be the norm. The use of non-lethal weapons would better be relegated to pre-deployment training for those missions that require it. The capacity of the close combat instructor course should be increased and a training system similar to CRT should be established.

9. Create a branch-specific testing event and corresponding performance badge

Each branch determines the individual job-specific skills that define success on the battlefield and develops testing criteria for excellence. The criteria should be sufficiently tough so that exclusivity is guaranteed. A performance badge distinguishing these expert soldiers should be allowed to be worn on the combat uniform. A service dress badge would have less effect, as soldiers rarely wear this uniform.

10. Attach streamers to the regimental flags

The battle honours on regimental flags recall moments in war where units distinguished themselves. However, there are no active-duty soldiers left who were present when these citations were bestowed. To increase the affinity of soldiers for their flag, streamers with the names of foreign deployments could be attached to the flags. The flags themselves should not be embroidered with these names, that should remain reserved for war citations.

11. Introduce military history education in the LC branch schools and units

Branch schools should integrate military history education into the curriculum. Foreign examples can be used, but Belgian historical examples should be preferred. For units, their history can serve as an inspiration for exercises, increasing the soldier's involvement.

Battlefield tours should be organised and reading lists should be established. A good start is the study of those battles mentioned on the unit's regimental flag. Battlefield visits can be incorporated into exercises, where lessons learnt can be directly implemented. The obligatory participation of every LC unit in the Four Days of the Yser is an opportunity to increase soldiers' knowledge of unit history.

Reading lists are only useful when the entire target audience reads the same book and a lively discussion ensues to collectively glean lessons from the book. Afterwards, these lessons should be incorporated into exercises to prove their value.

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Although a unit-specific approach offers the greatest benefits, Competence Center Land could support units and schools by developing packages if units lack expertise.

12. Use military history for doctrine development

At least some officers working on doctrine should be selected for their practical knowledge of relevant military history and every officer should be encouraged to study this field.

13. Restart the commando course for all candidate officers

The Commando B course hardened the candidate officers and taught them how to cross obstacles. This is useful, but it benefits only a limited audience. If the course is revived, it should be adapted so that graduates can organise simple gap crossing on an autonomous basis within their units. A less expensive option is to only teach simple gap crossing techniques, without the hardening part.

14. Reinforce LC identity

Although most tradition directives are at the joint level, specific LC guidance is necessary to steer its traditions and reinforce its identity. This could help reduce the risk of the motorised and special operations capacities growing apart.

As the experts on their unit's history and traditions, a council of regimental sergeants major could advise on the way to create a common identity. The identification of common elements in unit histories could be a starting point. The creation of a central repository of unit traditions could also help in this endeavour.

These proposals are certainly not meant to be the alfa and omega on the disposition to fight. Their aim is to incite a discussion within the LC that will hopefully result in addressing this much neglected aspect of our army's military worth.

**Key words: *Esprit guerrier*,
disposition to fight, enhance Land Component operations**