

Understanding Desertion: A Systematic Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Desertion has been a subject of interest within both academic and military communities for over a century, largely due to its disruptive impact on military operations. However, existing literature on the topic remains fragmented, limiting the development of a comprehensive understanding of desertion behavior and its broader implications. This study sought to address this gap through a systematic review of the literature on desertion in conflict. A preliminary review of the literature suggested that desertion is influenced by a combination of individual, unit, organizational, state, societal, opportunistic, and punitive factors. To examine this proposition, a systematic review was conducted, synthesizing findings from 21 studies spanning 101 years and encompassing a range of conflicts. Reasons for desertion were extracted from each study and analyzed thematically, confirming that the data aligned with the proposed categories. The findings offer theoretical, practical, and policy insights, contributing to a more structured understanding of desertion behavior. Additionally, the study provides actionable recommendations for mitigating desertion within the U.S. military and leveraging desertion as a strategic tool against adversarial forces.

1 Introduction

Understanding the factors that increase the likelihood of desertion during war is not only critical for military cohesion and effectiveness, but also carries significant implications for strategic competition. As great power rivalry intensifies across diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains, the ability of a state to maintain the morale, discipline, and commitment of its armed forces becomes a strategic asset. Desertion, whether driven by individual, unit-level, or systemic factors, can signal broader weaknesses that adversaries may exploit in prolonged conflicts or gray zone competition. By identifying the conditions under which military personnel are most likely to disengage from service, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of internal vulnerabilities that shape a state's capacity to project power, sustain operations, and deter adversaries over time.

Desertion has been a topic of interest for the academic and military communities for over a century (Woodbury 1921), likely due to its disruptive effects on military operations and national security. The existing literature on desertion provides interesting insight into what contributes to desertion. However, the literature is fragmented, which hampers

efforts to develop a comprehensive understanding of desertion behavior and its related implications. Specifically, studies on this topic tend to focus on a single conflict, or they focus on a narrow set of variables across conflicts. The current study aims to address this gap through a systematic review of the literature on desertion in conflict. The outcome of the literature review will be a multi-faceted model of desertion that synthesizes findings from across disparate studies.

The purpose of this study is to conduct a comprehensive examination of the determinants of desertion in conflict. This study will identify and analyze the multifaceted factors that contribute to desertion through a systematic review of the existing literature. Consequently, this research will enhance the understanding of desertion causes across different historical and contemporary contexts.

1.1 Desertion

Desertion, a critically important but poorly understood human aspect of warfare, is a topic of significant importance for military policymakers and academics because it can have a direct impact on military readiness and operational effectiveness. Desertion can impact military planning: crucial billets may go unfulfilled as a result of individuals leaving their post without notice. Desertion could also disrupt unit cohesion and weaken the morale of those that remain in the unit following desertion. Additionally, and perhaps most crucially, desertion can weaken the overall strength of a military unit and could diminish combat capability, thus reducing the ability to achieve strategic objectives.

A brief retrospective review of US wars shows that desertion has been a thorn in the side of US military commanders for centuries. For instance, during the US Revolutionary War, frequent desertion of troops from Washington's Continental Army created gaps in billets, causing Washington to continually focus his attention on recruitment and retention of troops (Alexander 1949). During the US Civil War, desertion was a consequential factor that contributed to the Confederacy's loss. As noted by Ella Lonn: "... the defections weakened and sapped the strength of the Confederacy by the steady diminution of forces to oppose the foe faster than additions could be made. It should be recalled that practically each man carried off his arms, equipment, and, if mounted, his horse, with frequently additional ammunition borrowed from his comrades – all subtracted from the resources of the State (1998)." Thus, the effects of desertion on the Confederacy were twofold: it subtracted from manpower and also subtracted from available resources for soldiers who were present on the battlefield. Later, during the US-Vietnam War, desertion (in combination with draft dodging and conscientious objection) weakened the strength and morale of US troops. As noted by a Marine Colonel in the early 1970s, "by every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous (Sawyer 2017)." According to Sawyer, this widespread discontent and the disintegration of the military contributed to the US decision to pull out from Vietnam in the mid 1970s.

Understanding desertion and its contributing factors is critical for maintaining the strength of the US military. Understanding desertion could help ensure that history does not repeat itself in future US conflicts. The current study aims to aggregate and synthesize reasons for desertion with the ultimate goal of filling knowledge gaps on this topic. However, analyzing human behavior is difficult, and certain considerations should be taken before doing so.

1.2 Human Behavior and Desertion

To date, there is no broad, overarching model for causes of desertion in warfare. However, similar models have been created to explain human behavior in the context of conflict and warfare. In 2022, the RAND Corporation developed a model that is posited to represent the multifaceted variables that influence the “will to fight” in conflict (Connable et al. 2018). They defined will to fight as “the disposition and decision to fight, to act, or to persevere when needed (Connable et al. 2018).” RAND used a seven-part multi-method research effort that included a literature review, modeling, and wargames to determine consequential variables that influence will to fight. They examined factors including a soldier’s individual skill level, their motivations for fighting (e.g., revenge), and their unit’s organization. Overall, the model stated that will to fight is driven by individual, unit, organization, state, and societal factors.

It is possible that the constructs of will to fight and desertion overlap. For instance, both may be influenced by a soldier’s psychological state and/or perceived support from their unit leaders. Still, it is not known how/whether these constructs overlap, and it is possible that they are not directly comparable. It is possible that will to fight is simply a variable that influences propensity to desert, or vice versa. To my knowledge, a study directly comparing will to fight and likelihood to desert has not been conducted. Nevertheless, the RAND model could serve as a promising initial framework for understanding the factors that drive desertion. Therefore, I posit that desertion may be driven by variables on the individual, unit, organization, state, and society levels.

Separate from the RAND study, Riley et al., developed a conceptual, broad formula of “disengagement” from a conflict (2017). To do so, the research team interviewed individuals that disengaged from the Lord’s Resistance Army, a rebel group in Northern Uganda. The interviews revealed there was a broad formula that described the typical trajectory of disengagement: $\text{Disengagement} = \text{Possibility of Escape} - \text{Commitment to the Group} - \text{Cost of Capture}$. This research introduces additional variables of interest that would not have been represented in the RAND framework, given its focus on will to fight. Specifically, this formula introduces Possibility to Escape and Cost of Capture. Possibility to Escape represents an opportunity to leave, which may happen incidentally, with the help of others, or as the result of careful planning. It could also represent a fighter’s internal calculus of disengagement success. Cost of Capture represents the repercussions of leaving, which could range from minor (e.g., being forced to re-join a unit) to severe (e.g., execution). I posit that opportunity and consequences/repercussions of leaving may both be important variables that influence likelihood to desert.

My hypothesis combines the findings of these two studies. From the RAND model, I surmise that desertion is influenced by a complex set of variables at multiple levels: individual, unit, organization, state, and societal. From Riley et al.’s formula, I surmise that opportunity and punitive factors add critical dimensions that contribute to likelihood for desertion. Therefore, I hypothesize that individual, unit, organization, state, societal, opportunistic, and punitive variables all combine to drive desertion. However, it is crucial to recognize that this hypothesis is preliminary until a systematic review is conducted. It may be possible that different or additional factors drive desertion across different contexts and populations.

2 Methods

2.1 Systematic Review

In order to develop a comprehensive model, a systematic literature review was conducted, which was appropriate for the study for several reasons. First, systematic reviews provide a comprehensive examination of existing literature, and they maximize the likelihood that a large number of relevant studies are identified. Using this method minimizes bias while enhancing the validity of findings. Additionally, systematic reviews allow for the synthesis of diverse and sometimes disparate findings. Here, it will be appropriate to do so across different historical periods, geographic regions, and conflicts. Using a systematic review will provide a nuanced picture of desertion causes.

All findings are reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al. 2021). PRISMA is a set of guidelines that provides a standardized framework for reporting systematic reviews in order to maximize transparency in research publications.

Boolean search terms were used to systematically search research databases that may contain relevant literature (e.g., Google Scholar, Scopus, Crossref, Semantic Scholar) in April, 2024. The Boolean search terms are as follows:

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(title:(desertion OR deserter) OR abstract:(desertion OR deserter)) AND (title:(warfare OR conflict OR war) OR abstract:(warfare OR conflict OR war)) AND (title:(decision-making OR determinants OR motivations OR mechanisms OR causes OR reasons) OR abstract:(decision-making OR determinants OR motivations OR mechanisms OR causes OR reasons)).
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Once the initial pool of potential studies was identified, a preliminary screening of titles and abstracts was conducted to assess relevance to the study objectives and adherence to the inclusion criteria. One reviewer (the author) reviewed studies using Catchii software. Studies that meet the initial criteria were included in the full-text review (when available). Irrelevant or duplicative studies were excluded from further consideration.

During the next stage of review, the full text of articles was thoroughly examined to extract relevant information related to the determinants of desertion. Following data extraction, the findings of the reviewed studies were synthesized in a narrative manner to identify common themes and patterns. The synthesized findings aided in the creation of an overall model that will encompass determinants of desertion.

2.2 Thematic Analysis

Macguire and Delahunt offered a six-step process for conducting thematic analysis: become familiar with the data, generate initial codes (i.e., organize the data in a meaningful way), search for themes, review themes, define themes, and write results (2017). Searching for and reviewing themes may be the most critical steps. Given this, the authors suggested the following questions be asked after themes are developed and reviewed: “Do the themes make sense? Does the data support the themes? Am I trying to fit too much into a theme? If themes overlap, are they really separate themes? Are there themes within themes (subthemes)? Are there other themes within the data (Macguire and Delahunt 2017)?” Given that this analysis was created using predefined themes from two previous studies, these questions in order to determine the appropriateness of fitting the data to the predefined themes.

3 Results

3.1 Systematic Review

The preliminary literature review identified 1,403 potential studies for inclusion. Of those, 136 duplicates were identified and removed prior to screening. Twelve hundred and sixty-seven abstracts and titles were screened during the initial round, leading to the exclusion of 1198 studies that were not focused on the appropriate topic. Of those that remained, 69 full text reports were screened. Of those, 54 did not meet the inclusion criteria. In total, 15 studies with full text available were found to meet the inclusion criteria. Within those studies, 6 additional studies were identified in the reference sections. In total, 21 studies were included in the systematic review. The publication details of those studies are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Studies on Desertion

#	Title	Authors	Year	Conflict	Time Period	Population
1	A higher duty: desertion among Georgia troops during the Civil War	Weitz, MA	2005	US Civil War	1861-1865	Georgia soldiers
2	Absence, Agency and Empire: Desertion from the French Army During the First World War	Eldridge, C	2023	WWI	1914-1918	French Army
3	Causes for military desertion - A study in criminal motives	Woodbury, EN	1921	Multiple	1830-1921	US military
4	Desertion and Collective Action in Civil Wars	McLauchlin, T	2015	Spanish Civil War	1936-1939	Santander army corps
5	Desertion and Loyalty in the South Carolina Infantry, 1861-1865	Marrs, Aaron W	2004	US Civil War	1861-1865	South Carolina soldiers
6	Desertion as localism: Army unit solidarity and group norms in the US Civil War	Bearman, PS	1991	US Civil War	1860-1864	North Carolina soldiers
7	Desertion from the British Army during the Napoleonic wars	Linch, K	2016	Napoleonic Wars	1811-1815	British Army soldiers
8	Desertion in the American army during the Revolutionary War	Edmonson, JH	1971	US Revolutionary War	1775-1783	Soldiers under Washington's command

#	Title	Authors	Year	Conflict	Time Period	Population
9	Desertion, Terrain, and Control of the Home Front in Civil Wars	McLauchlin, T	2014	Spanish Civil War	1936-1939	Santander army corps
10	From disaffection to desertion: How networks facilitate military insubordination in civil conflict	Koehler, K, Ohl, D, Albrecht, H	2016	Syrian Civil War	2011-2013	Syrian fighters
11	Going on the run: What drives military desertion in civil war?	Albrecht, H, Koehler, K	2018	Syrian Civil War	2011-2013	Syrian fighters
12	The desertion crisis in Italy, 1944	Petey, J	2008	WWII	1944	British Army soldiers
13	The Disengagement Puzzle: An Examination of the Calculus to Exit a Rebellion	Riley, J, Schneider, MK	2022	Rebellions in South Sudan and DR Congo	2017-2018	Rebels
14	The social psychology of desertion from combat	Rose, AM	1951	WWII	1941-1945	US Army infantry
15	The Vietnam War deserter: Characteristics Unconvicted Army Deserters Participating in the Presidential Clemency Program	Bell, DB, Houstin, TJ	1976	US-Vietnam War	1965-1973	US Army infantry
16	True Believers, Deserters, and Traitors: Who Leaves Insurgent Groups and Why	Jentzsch, C, Kalyvas, SN, Schubiger, LI, Oppenheim, B, Steele, A, Vargas, JF, Weintraub, M	2015	Insurgency in Colombia	Unknown to 2008	Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), other left wing militants
17	Understanding the desertion of South Carolinian soldiers during the final years of the confederacy	Doyle, PJ	2013	US Civil War	1861-1865	South Carolina soldiers
18	What we know about AWOL and desertion	Ramsberger, PF, Bell, DB	2002	Multiple	1973-2002	US Army soldiers
19	Why armies break: Explaining mass desertion in conventional war	Lyall, J	2016	Multiple	1800-2011	Combatants

#	Title	Authors	Year	Conflict	Time Period	Population
20	Why men deserted from the eighteenth-century British army	Gilbert, Arthur N	1980	Seven Years War	1757-1762	British Army soldiers
21	Why Rebels Stop Fighting: Organizational Decline and Desertion in Colombia's Insurgency	Nussio, E, Ugarriza, JE	2022	Insurgency in Colombia	2002-2017	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)

The identified studies were published over a 101-year time span, from 1921 to 2022. Sixteen out of the 21 (76%) of the studies were published after 2000, possibly reflecting increasing interest in this topic in recent years.

The identified studies focused on deserters throughout a number of conflicts between 1757 to 2017. The conflicts included the Seven Years War, the US Revolutionary War, the US Civil War, WWI, WWII, the Spanish Civil War, the Napoleonic Wars, the US-Vietnam War, the Syrian Civil War, rebellions in the South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo, and the insurgency in Colombia. Three studies focused on desertion during multiple wars. Roughly half of the studies focused on wars that involved the US. This possibly reflects a selection bias that occurred when I excluded studies that were not in the English language.

3.1.1 Definitions of Desertion

The studies provided varying definitions for desertion, as described below in Table 2 (number in the first column aligning with the study in Table 1). A number of studies used doctrinal definitions for desertion, which included specific details on how long a soldier must be away from their post before being considered a deserter. Other definitions were broader, merely describing being away from one's post (or not performing a duty) for an undefined amount of time. Three studies combined desertion with Away Without Official Leave (AWOL), noting the differences between these terms are trivial. Finally, some studies did not provide any definition for desertion.

Table 2: Definitions of Desertion

#	Definition
1	Leaving the military service without authorization and intending to remain absent
2	A soldier who leaves his corps without authorisation
6	Soldiers absent from their company without official leave for more than 60 days were classified as deserter
7	A soldier that runs away from the enemy, service without leave, or runs from one regiment to another
8	The willful abandonment of the military service by a soldier or officer duly enlisted or commissioned, or in the pay of the government, without leave and without an intention to return

#	Definition
9	A soldier who failed to appear for three consecutive roll calls without leave
10	“Absence without leave” (AWOL) for an indefinite period.
14	When the individual is known to have taken leave without intention of returning, or has remained away beyond an indefinite length of time, or has taken leave when his outfit is in a critical situation
15	Those who had been convicted or charged with desertion, absence without leave (AWOL), missing movement, or similar offenses
16	Guerrillas who elected to demobilize
17	Clear repudiation of army life and an attempt to leave the military for the foreseeable future, not as a temporary respite from the stresses and strains of war.
18	Any soldier who has taken an unauthorized leave from his/her training or duty station is considered AWOL. On the 31st day of AWOL, this status is officially changed to Dropped From Rolls (DFR), or desertion
19	Mass desertion – when $\geq 10\%$ of their fielded forces abandon the fight and return home
21	The unauthorized exit from an armed organization

Table 3 displays desertion causes that were extracted from the studies. The studies identified economic factors for desertion. In some instances, deserters felt pressure from their families to return home and contribute financially. In other instances, deserters were incentivized to desert by opportunities that offered a better financial incentive than military service. There were also individual-level factors, such as demographics, that contributed to desertion. For instance, deserters tended to have mental health issues, have previous involvement in crime, or felt fear due to anticipated or previous combat scenarios. There were unit, military, and organizational reasons for desertion. Desertion occurred when fighters were not granted adequate leave, and they were more likely to desert when there was poor unit coherence or poor leadership/discipline. Geographic and environmental factors also impacted desertion. Deserters took advantage of geographic features that facilitated escape, and they also utilized local social networks for desertion options. Additionally, desertion was more likely when the combatants were close to home. Legal and punitive factors impacted rates of desertion, such that desertion tended to be more likely when desertion laws and associated punishments were more permissive. There were also ethnic and ideological factors that influenced desertion. Poor treatment of certain ethnic groups within the military increased desertion likelihood. Further, if ideological ideals of the military or home country shifted, joiners motivated by ideology were more likely to desert. Lastly, and crucially, desertion was largely influenced by opportunistic factors. Deserters took advantage of opportunities for leave and medical furlough to escape, and they were also more likely to desert when traversing an area that had easier opportunities for escape (e.g., high traffic cities with transportation infrastructure).

Table 3: Context and Reasons for Desertion (Chronological Order)

#	Context / Reason
20	Seven Years War: Deserted because they feared harsh punishment for showing up to their unit late and/or losing equipment. Deserters fled because they were not granted leave and because they lived under harsh conditions.
7	Napoleonic Wars: Deserted out of nostalgia or in response to the initial shock of a regimented lifestyle; deserted as a protest against conditions of service; deserted because of "pull" factors, including financial gain elsewhere. Desertion often happened in pairs (social/unit aspect); desertions common when crossing/stationed in big towns, places among prominent travel routes.
8	US Revolutionary War: Deserters were experiencing physical hardship (e.g., hunger, sickness, insufficient clothing); had pay problems; were ill disciplined. More likely to desert if not foreign-born (fewer opportunities to desert). Black soldiers (some free men, some slaves) were less likely to desert, because "they had less to desert to." Deserted because friends were deserting, women convinced them to leave. Fear, seeing others killed during combat. Deserted during long marches or movements, which gave them the opportunity to leave. Deserted when the enemy went near their homes/families. Left for planting (in the spring) or harvesting (in the fall). Appeals from parents or wives. Homesickness. Poor leadership: officers overstayed furloughs, left units unattended.
1	US Civil War: Desertion common among soldiers from Georgia's northern regions, which had severe economic hardship; family called for soldiers to return home. Deserters took advantage of a Union desertion policy that allowed them to desert into the Union lines, swear allegiance to the United States and then return home.
5	US Civil War: More desertions occurred as more losses in war occurred (potentially due to lowered morale or a loss in motivation); desertions occurred when opportunities arose (e.g., before or during a transfer); deserted when near home or when they had gone home (e.g., for medical furlough).
6	US Civil War: Regional effects of desertion (those from northern NC more likely to desert than those of southern NC). Early in war, men from heterogeneous units (with people who they did not know) were more likely to desert. Later in the war, the men in homogenous units (with people they did know) were more likely to desert, likely a reflection of them being from the same community, having similar localist identity and erosion in support for the war.
17	US Civil War: Deserted because of ideological and socio-economic motivations. Desertion was influenced by feelings of the deserters family and community as well.
4	Spanish Civil War: Deserters more likely to be conscripts than volunteers, those in units with social heterogeneity, and those within factions that had polarization with other factions.
9	Spanish Civil War: Deserters were often from hill country than those whose hometowns were on flat ground (evasion is easier in rough terrain).
2	WWI: Desertion prominent when there were more permissions (opportunities for leave); more desertions occurred when they realized it would be a long, bloody war; those who deserted often had been denied leave (for up to 2 years); many prioritized family over duties as soldier by leaving to contribute financially.
12	WWII: Deserted because of prolonged action, which was greatly increased by close contact with the enemy. Many deserted deliberately, preferring disgrace and imprisonment to battle, while others deserted involuntarily due to nervous breakdowns. Desertion increased when laws against desertion became more lenient.

#	Context / Reason
14	WWII: Deserters were more likely to be married than non-deserters. They also had higher instances of “nervousness” in pre-war civilian life than non-deserters. Lastly, deserters were less familiar with their unit commanders and squad members than non-deserters, potentially indicating lower comradery with fellow soldiers.
15	US-Vietnam War: Deserted because of personal/family/or financial problems.
10	Syrian Civil War: Deserted when their social networks persuaded them of the value and feasibility of desertion. Such connections also facilitated coordination with rebel networks, which allows soldiers to escape their positions.
11	Syrian Civil War: Deserters had more moral grievances and fear.
13	Rebellions in South Sudan and DR Congo: Rebels who joined due to grievances were less likely to escape opportunistically, while rebels who joined due to “greed” displayed higher sensitivity to the hardships of rebel life and the pull of alternative options.
16	Insurgency in Colombia: Fighters who joined for ideological reasons more likely to demobilize when the group deviated from its ideology.
21	Insurgency in Colombia: Desertion occurred when the unit had organizational decline (i.e., poor organizational capacity led to poorer command and control) and poor economic incentives.
3	Multiple: Deserters had drink/drug addiction, mental deficiency/weakness, discipline issues, illness/physical overtax, weakness of character, illness of a relative, dissatisfaction with treatment, dissatisfaction with environment, homesickness, poverty of dependents, lack of loyalty, cowardice, desire to marry/be with women.
18	Multiple: Deserters had lower education, lower aptitude, from broken homes, and engaged in delinquent behavior prior to joining the Army. Deserters were younger, lower in rank, combat-related MOS while in the Army. Deserters had family issues, personal, or finance problems. Deserted when there is an opportunity to leave, such as when in transit.
19	Multiple: Desertion more likely when the ruling regime treats military populations differently (i.e., the military service of certain ethnic groups is favored over others).

3.2 Thematic Analysis

In line with the hypothesis, the identified reasons were grouped into the following categories: individual factors, unit factors, organizational factors, state factors, societal factors, opportunistic factors, and punitive factors. Each category encapsulates a unique set of reasons for desertion, though there is, of course, some overlap between categories.

- **Individual Factors:**

- Substance abuse and mental health issues
- Dissatisfaction with environment or treatment
- Emotional factors like homesickness or nostalgia
- Desire for romantic relationships
- Fear and psychological stress
- Lower education, aptitude, or prior delinquent behavior
- Financial difficulties or family problems

- **Unit Factors:**
 - Lack of leave permissions
 - Issues with leadership and discipline
 - Social division within units
 - Factional polarization
 - Unit heterogeneity
 - Lack of familiarity with unit members
- **Organizational Factors:**
 - Decline in organizational effectiveness
 - Differences between conscription and voluntary service
 - Poor economic incentives within the military
- **State Factors:**
 - Regional influences on desertion rates
 - Favoritism towards certain ethnic groups in military service
 - Differential treatment under ruling regime
 - Deviation from original ideological motivations
 - Duration and intensity of warfare
- **Societal Factors:**
 - Economic hardship in soldiers' home regions
 - Pressure from family to return home
 - Influence of social connections and networks
 - Impact of familial and community sentiments
 - Appeals from parents or spouses
- **Opportunistic Factors:**
 - More leave opportunities
 - Desertion during travel, transfers, or long marches
 - Desertion near home or during medical leave
 - Desertion occurring in pairs or facilitated by social networks
 - Taking advantage of rough terrain for evasion
- **Punitive Factors:**
 - Lenient desertion laws
 - Exploiting loopholes in desertion policy for safe passage (e.g., surrendering)

4 Discussion

4.1 Summary of Findings

The hypothesis of this study was derived from two previous models of wartime behavior. The first study was conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2018. RAND created a model that encompassed factors that influence the will to fight (Connable et al. 2018). RAND stratified these factors into multiple categories: individual, unit, organization, state, and societal. Separately, Riley et al. conducted a study focusing on the calculus to disengage from a conflict (2017). This study brought two additional variables into view. Those variables were Possibility to Escape and Cost of Capture. I distilled these two variables and labeled them as “opportunistic factors” and “punitive factors.” I combined the factors from those two studies to create my hypothesis. Specifically, I hypothesized that individual, unit, organization, state, societal, opportunistic, and punitive variables all combine to drive desertion.

To test this hypothesis, I conducted a systematic review of the literature. I distilled a large body of literature into 21 studies that focused on desertion behavior over a span of 101 years and covered a range of conflicts: Seven Years War, the US Revolutionary War, the US Civil War, WWI, WWII, the Spanish Civil War, the Napoleonic Wars, the US-Vietnam War, the Syrian Civil War, rebellions in the South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo, and the insurgency in Colombia. I extracted reasons for desertion from each study, conducted a thematic analysis, and confirmed that the data fit into the hypothesized categories. These results provide a first-of-its-kind (to my knowledge), comprehensive model of what drives desertion behavior during conflict.

4.2 Implications of Findings

4.2.1 Practical Implications

There are practical implications of these findings at each level of behavior that was studied. On the individual level, this study found that pre-military variables (e.g., existing incidence of poor psychological health, previous illegal activities) coincided with desertion. This study also found that motivations for joining the military mattered: many were motivated by ideology, and a mismatch or shift in military ideology impacted desertion likelihood. Therefore, during the military recruitment process, it is important to examine factors related to psychological health and previous criminal activities. It may also be wise to determine motivations for joining the military during the recruitment stage. That could help ensure that individuals with a genuine commitment and alignment with military values are selected. Screening for these factors could reduce the likelihood of desertion due to disillusionment or mismatched expectations.

Once individuals have joined the military, continuous support for psychological health is crucial. Though the US military already has robust psychological services in place, it is important to continue supporting service members, both in garrison, while deployed, and while in combat. These services could play a role in mitigating likelihood to desert.

At the unit level, the findings demonstrate the importance of fostering strong unit cohesion and leadership. Units with low levels of camaraderie and mutual support may experience more desertion. This could be because soldiers in cohesive units feel a stronger sense of belonging and loyalty to their peers. It could also be because unit cohesion buffers the impact of military service on psychological health (an individual-level factor

previously discussed) (Jones et al. 2015). Leadership also plays an important role in preventing desertion. The findings of this study showed that desertion likelihood was higher when leaders were poor or absent. This may be because approachable leaders that create a psychologically safe environment can reduce feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction among soldiers, thus decreasing likelihood to desert (David & Shih 2024).

There are a number of practical implications for these findings at the organizational level. The findings of this study showed deserters often cited organizational policies as reasons for desertion. First, desertion likelihood was influenced by wages and incentives. Service members with poor pay – or those who could receive better compensation elsewhere – were more likely to desert. Previously, it was shown that when soldiers feel their financial needs are met and that their hard work is rewarded, they are more likely to remain loyal to the organization (Asch et al. 2010). Thus, adequate pay is important for reinforcing loyalty. Additionally, this study found service members who were not granted leave were also more likely to desert. When troops feel they are entitled to leave but are not granted it, they may take leave on their own accord. This finding is at odds with one that will be discussed later – that desertion is more likely to occur during leave. Therefore, organizations must be sure to instill fair leave policies while also being vigilant of potential desertion risk during leave.

This study found that the societal context in which soldiers operate is related to desertion. The findings showed economic hardship at home is related to desertion (complementing previously discussed findings about economic incentives for service members). Soldiers may come from unstable financial backgrounds, and their military income may be their only source of support for their family. When economic conditions deteriorate, or if a soldier's pay is insufficient to meet their family's needs, the soldier may feel pressure to leave service. The US military may not be able to change a soldier's financial background, but they can provide fair and consistent wages that will support a soldier's family at home.

This study found family pressure is another motivator for desertion. Families may urge soldiers to return home due to a variety of reasons (e.g., financial difficulties, to help care for loved ones). Emotional appeals from family members may create personal conflict for soldiers, who may become torn between duty to their country and their responsibility to their family. Again, it is important to have sufficient pay policies and leave policies so that soldiers can return home to attend to these types of issues and not feel compelled to desert in order to support their family.

The influence of social networks was also found to be related to desertion. Soldiers are embedded within broader social networks, either at home or where they are stationed. Though having a robust social network of friends is important for the psychological health of service members (Hatch et al. 2013), it is possible that social networks may have a negative influence on their decisions. Social networks can amplify both positive and negative sentiments about military service. For instance, supportive networks can encourage soldiers to persevere. But, on the other hand, networks critical of the military could persuade soldiers to abandon their posts (or even facilitate their escape). Clearly, additional research is needed on both the positive and negative effects of networks on service members.

Lastly, this study found a relationship between the broader community and desertion. Separate research has found community support fosters positive engagement and resilience of military families (Hoshmand et al. 2007). It is possible that in communities where military service is highly valued, soldiers and their families feel a stronger sense

of pride in military service. On the other hand, in communities without support, soldiers may feel alienated from community members, which could potentially increase their propensity to desert. It is therefore important that soldiers have the opportunities to access positive support networks in their community.

This study found opportunistic factors are also related to desertion. As mentioned, providing adequate leave opportunities can serve as a preventive measure against desertion. However, soldiers often use leave opportunities to desert. This presents a dilemma – should leave be granted or not? The optimal answer is not clear from these data. Therefore, more research must be done in this area in order to determine the “ideal” amount of leave that minimizes risk for desertion.

Outside of leave, desertion is also more common during travel or during transfers to another location (particularly when traversing a busy location with transit infrastructure). During times when desertion is likely to be higher (e.g., during combat operations), the military could enhance monitoring and support during travel. The military could also introduce accountability measures (e.g., check-ins at various points, escorts during transfers), that could help ensure that soldiers remain on track to their destination.

Desertion near home is particularly common. This study found soldiers stationed close to home are more likely to desert. This may be because they face heightened pressure from family and friends to return home (as previously discussed). Alternatively, it may simply be easier to desert if they have a “safe haven” nearby. To address this, the military could consider stationing soldiers further from their homes when feasible. However, that is a double-edged sword, as being further from home may cause additional psychological issues (Flach et al. 2000).

Lastly, this study found that terrain could facilitate desertion. The findings showed that soldiers are more likely to desert when terrain provides easy escape routes or concealment. To mitigate this risk, particularly if desertion is anticipated, the military can enhance surveillance and security measures in such areas. The use of technology (e.g., drones, GPS tracking), can help monitor movements and detect unauthorized departures.

Finally, this study found that punitive factors were related to desertion. The findings showed that desertion is higher when desertion policies are lenient or inconsistently enforced (or when soldiers perceived them to be). If soldiers feel they will not be harshly punished for deserting, soldiers may feel emboldened to leave. To counter this, the military must ensure that desertion laws are strict and uniformly applied. Doing so may deter soldiers from deserting. Loopholes in desertion laws present another challenge. In one case, during the US Civil War, Confederate soldiers in Georgia claimed allegiance to the Union and then returned home (Weitz 2005). In other words, they exploited a loophole presented by the enemy. It would be difficult to deter soldiers from exploiting these loopholes, as the loopholes are built into the enemy’s legal system (not the US legal system). Still, the US should be aware that these programs exist and should take steps to deter soldiers from utilizing such programs.

4.2.2 Policy Implications

A number of the practical implications discussed above have direct translation to policy implications. First, as noted, strong psychological health and resilience of service members can reduce the likelihood for desertion. The US military should continue providing psychological and social services that increase soldier wellbeing. Additionally, the military should continue focusing on leadership development and team cohesion, as both of

these factors may be protective against desertion. Next, the military should have policies that allow for sufficient leave and adequate pay to support service members and their families. These policies may alleviate family-related issues that could lead to desertion. Maintaining strict penalties for desertion is also necessary. Service members should be explicitly warned about consequences for desertion, and penalties for desertion should be harsh enough to deter them from leaving if the opportunity presents itself. Lastly, the US military should continue to create policies that provide positive community support for the service member (e.g., the Morale, Warfare, and Recreation program). These actions, collectively, could reduce the risk for desertion, thus leading to a strong force with adequate readiness.

4.3 Inducing Desertion in Adversarial Forces

As noted, preventing desertion is critical for maintaining US military effectiveness and readiness. So far, this paper has only discussed preventing desertion for the US military members. This section will translate the findings of this study into potential avenues for inducing desertion in the adversary. Inducing desertion in adversarial forces could weaken the enemy, thus creating advantages for the US.

Understanding the factors that contribute to desertion provides insight for strategic operations in the information environment (OIE), previously known as information operations. According to Joint Publication 3-04 (Information in Joint Environments), OIE are “Military actions involving the integrated employment of multiple information forces to affect drivers of behavior by informing audiences [and] influencing foreign relevant actors... (Joint Staff 2023)” OIE could possibly be exploited to encourage desertion behavior in adversarial forces.

As discussed, psychological hardships, economic hardships, poor unit cohesion, and poor leadership are related to desertion behavior. I propose that using OIE, the US could push strategic messaging to adversarial troops that target psychological health, dissatisfaction with leadership, social division, and economic hardships. In general, these campaigns should amplify existing grievances that fighters have. Reminding troops about these hardships or selectively introducing information that worsens these hardships could push a service member that is considering desertion toward that behavior.

OIE could also be used to target the family, community members, or social network of the adversarial service member. I propose that providing information to those individuals about potential harm or mistreatment of their family or community member could induce them to pressure the individual to leave the military. Additionally, messaging about financial hardship or impending financial hardship could lead them to pressure the troops to desert for more lucrative opportunities.

The findings of this study showed that desertion is more likely when an opportunity to desert presents itself or when the adversary presents an opportunity for “safe” desertion. The US could create opportunities for desertion among adversarial troops that can increase the likelihood for fleeing. For instance, the US could establish safe passage channels or could offer incentives for desertion (e.g., promises of better treatment or asylum). These campaigns would be more successful if information about opportunities for escape were amplified through OIE channels.

An example of one of these campaigns can be seen in the present-day Russia-Ukraine conflict. Ukraine created a program of this nature for Russian soldiers who want to desert. The “I Want to Live” program was created in 2022 by the Ukrainian intelligence

agency (Watling 2024). The program allows Russian soldiers to become prisoners of war (messed as an alternative to dying on the battlefield), which is consistent with the findings of this study. The I Want to Live program is messaged through social media channels, including Telegram (which is heavily utilized by Russian troops). Reportedly, the program has been successful in aiding the desertion of Russian soldiers. It is not clear whether there is a Russian equivalent to this Ukrainian program, as Ukrainian desertion numbers have only been reported by Russian news outlets and are thus unreliable. Still, this example shows that when insights into human behavior are combined with existing OIE methodology, they can be used to induce enemy desertion. The US should pay close attention to desertion during this conflict and should leverage insights accordingly.

4.4 Limitations of this Study

The findings of this study should be interpreted in the context of the study limitations. There are a number of limitations inherent to the systematic meta-analysis process. Systematic reviews are subject to selection bias, which is a bias that occurs due to the inclusion/exclusion criteria defined at the beginning of the article identification process. Though inclusion/exclusion criteria are established to scope the review appropriately, there is always the risk that these criteria are too inclusive or exclusionary. As noted, many of the included studies focused on conflicts with US involvement. This was likely the impact of a selection bias focused only on English-language manuscripts.

Additionally, systematic reviews are subject to time lag bias. Given that many journals have a lengthy publication process, there may be relevant articles undergoing the review or publication process that were not identified during the article search. This bias underscores the importance of continually studying this topic, as additional articles on this topic will surely be published in the near future.

Finally, systematic reviews are subject to paywall bias. There were a number of potentially relevant articles that were not accessible because they were published in journals that do not grant broad access to researchers. This bias is an unfortunate reality of academia, and it may have resulted in the unnecessary exclusion of relevant articles.

In addition to the limitations described above, there are also limitations associated with studying this particular topic. Desertion is not a straightforward concept; the definition for desertion may differ between military justice systems, or the definition may even evolve over time within the same military justice system. The identified studies used a number of definitions for desertion, as described above in Table 2. Some studies used a desertion definition described in the military laws/regulations of a particular conflict, while other studies lumped deserters with those that were AWOL. Other studies simply did not provide a concrete definition for desertion. Consequently, this study cannot directly compare the findings between studies due to a lack of a common definition.

Finally, it is important to note that the methodology in these studies differed greatly. A number of studies used military records to retroactively pinpoint “common” factors between deserters, with the assumption that these factors make individuals more likely to desert. In other studies, interviews were conducted with deserters, and deserters were directly asked to describe the reasons for desertion. The former type of methodology is limited by assumptions made that link those variables with desertion, and the latter type of methodology is limited by biases and potential lapses in memory by the interviewee. It is not clear which of these methodologies provides a more accurate representation of war desertion causes, and it is not ideal to combine these methodologies into one dataset.

Still, I believe collectively examining these studies provides preliminary information on the broad range of factors underlying desertion behavior.

4.5 Conclusions

In summary, this study synthesized findings from 21 studies on desertion behavior using gold standard systematic meta-analysis and thematic analysis methodology. The study showed that desertion behavior is driven by factors on multiple levels. Specifically, desertion is driven by a combination of individual, unit, organizational, state, societal, opportunistic, and punitive factors. Therefore, to my knowledge, this study provided the first comprehensive model of desertion behavior. Though there are inherent limitations in studying desertion behavior, there were a number of strengths of this study, including breadth and depth of the research. Therefore, this research stands as a significant contribution to understanding military desertion. The findings of this study provide a foundation for future research on this topic. They also provide actionable information on how to prevent US military desertion and how to induce desertion behavior in adversarial forces.

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