

Understanding Fear's Effect on Unit Effectiveness

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Fear makes men forget, and skill which cannot fight, is useless.

—Phormio of Athens

ENGLISH Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill branded the World War I battlefields of the Somme as the “graveyards of Kitchener’s Army.” An entirely new weapon of war appeared on those battlefields—the British Mark 1 tank. Advancing against the Flers-Courcelette line, the 11 tanks penetrated German defenses on 15 September 1916, creating terror out of proportion to their threat. One eyewitness described the effect: “Panic spread like an electric current, passing from man to man along the trench. As the churning tracks reared overhead, [men] threw up their hands in terrified surrender or bolted down the communication trenches towards the second line.”¹ Although most of the tanks failed to reach their objectives that day, they had indeed made a frightening first impression.

While the armored vehicles might have been novel, the fear they engendered was nothing new. Warfare has undergone many changes and seen many technological advances, each of which has engendered fear.

Adversaries will continue to use fear as a weapon, especially in asymmetrical warfare, so it is prudent to reexamine fear’s effect on unit effectiveness in military organizations. In *Fight or Flight*, Geoffrey Regan says, “Fear . . . must be channeled so its control becomes the first step in becoming an efficient soldier.”² Understanding the psychological advantage that effectively led, well-trained, and cohesive organizations have over an opponent should en-

courage commanders to train their units to recognize and overcome fear.

A Historical Perspective

Warfare has always been a human endeavor. In his study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme, John Keegan notes, “What battles have in common is human: the behaviour of men struggling to reconcile their instinct for self-preservation, their sense of honour and the achievement of some aim over which other men are ready to kill them. The study of battle is therefore always a study of fear and usually of courage.”³ However, the study of fear has more often been the purview of physicians and historians than military professionals. Officer corps have traditionally focused on questions of tactics, doctrine, materiel, and logistics.

Fear, defined as a physical and emotional response to a perceived threat or danger, was an important element of French Military thinker Colonel Charles Ardant du Picq’s classic work, *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle*, on battlefield psychology.⁴ Du Picq describes how fear and hesitation could decay offensive spirit and how courage was a “temporary domination of will over instinct” that was imperative for victory. Similarly, World War I Royal Fusiliers medical officer Lord Moran (Charles McMoran Wilson) saw fear as a “response of the instinct of self-preservation to danger,” while courage was a “moral quality—a cold choice between two alternatives. . . . Courage is willpower.”⁵

Encouraging soldiers to overcome fear while moderating the effect of fear has been a task that military leaders have grappled with forever. Greek mor-

alist Plutarch relates how the Roman general Aemilius Paulus, viewing the Greek formations at the battle of Pydna in 168, “considered the formidable appearance of their front, bristling with arms, and was taken with both fear and alarm; nothing he had ever seen before was its equal.”⁶ A similar reaction occurred at the battle of Waterloo in 1815 when French General Jean Baptiste d’Erlon’s attacking corps met the British infantry’s steady fire. Of interest is that the soldiers in the least immediate danger bolted first. One French officer said, “As we approached at a moderate pace the fronts and flanks began to turn their backs inwards; the rear of the columns had already begun to run away.”⁷

For leaders to make an impression on frightened soldiers during the era of close-order formations was much simpler than it is today. Soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder gained strength from close physical contact and from their officers, whose definition of courage required them to face enemy fire unperturbed. One Union soldier advancing on Fort Donelson, Tennessee, in 1862 gained courage from General C.F. Smith, who rode calmly among a hail of Confederate minie balls: “I was scared to death, but I saw the old man’s white mustache over his shoulder, and went on.”⁸

By the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, fire and movement had largely replaced close-order tactics, and the battlefield became a much lonelier place. Long-distance weapons required soldiers to disperse, and combatants in both world wars found it increasingly difficult to maintain an offensive spirit. They were less able to physically rely on each other or their leaders. Historian Joanna Burke observes, “The longer the feelings of isolation and confusion lasted, the less likely it was that anyone would act aggressively.”⁹ U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant Philip Caputo was equally stunned by the muddled, unforgiving environment of Vietnam, but found that fear of battle was not so cut and dried: “There was a strange exhilaration in our helplessness—the feeling, half fear and half excitement, that comes when you are in the grip of uncontrollable forces.”¹⁰

The Nature of Fear

Caputo’s statement suggests that although fear is ubiquitous on the battlefield, its source is not so readily apparent. Numerous environmental and operational factors conjoin to create physiological and psychological effects on soldiers that can ultimately lead to combat ineffectiveness. Among the most obvious of factors that wear on soldiers’ nerves is exposure to the elements, which often induces numb-

ing fatigue that can lead to cognitive deficits and even catatonia. Although technological advances counteract some effects and improve combat performance in some respects, modern soldiers receive little respite because they are practically compelled to fight at night. Writer Richard Holmes aptly notes, “The net result of this increasing activity at night has been to deprive the soldier, already physically tired after a day’s marching, fighting, or digging, of sleep.”¹¹ Cumulative lack of sleep, combined with other privations such as hunger, affect efficiency on the field of battle and the individual and organizational will to resist fear.

Individual factors can stimulate fear just as easily as the operational environment can. In his memoir, William Manchester recalls his fright while fighting in the Pacific during World War II. He felt paralyzed with fear one night in part because of his active imagination: “A fresh fear was creeping over my mind, quietly, stealthily, imperceptibly. I sat up; my muscles rippling with suppressed panic.”¹² Caputo found that men with lively imaginations are prey to fears: “A man needs many things in war, but a strong imagination is not one of them. In Vietnam, the best soldiers were usually unimaginative men who did not feel afraid until there was obvious reason.”¹³ During World War I, many officers believed that conscripts with lower intellects made better fighting men, arguing that they were less susceptible to fear.

More recent studies show that soldiers with a greater mental aptitude are more self-confident and better able to deal with ambiguous and confusing situations.¹⁴ World War II soldier-philosopher J. Glenn Gray noted how war’s randomness was frightening and beyond comprehension for even the most intelligent warriors: “The deepest fear of my war years, one still with me, is that these happenings had no real purpose.”¹⁵

Why death struck some and not others suggested that at least some aspect of war, despite technological advances, would continue to be beyond man’s control. A chapter in *Infantry in Battle* devoted to action and morale tells how forced inactivity can diminish a man’s spirits: “A soldier, pinned to the ground by hostile fire, with no form of activity to divert his thought from the whistling flails of lead that lash the ground about him, soon develops an overwhelming sense of inferiority. He feels alone and deserted. He feels unable to protect himself.”¹⁶

What we find, then, is a number of dynamics and stimuli colliding, either in short bursts of time or sustained over weeks and months, that encroach on a

soldier's physical and mental well-being. One combat analyst observes about fighting the Japanese in the Pacific jungles during World War II, "The night, [which] in itself is bad . . . , added to the jungle, produces fear that makes unaccustomed men forget all the military wisdom they have acquired."¹⁷

Added to the difficulty of assessing fear-producing elements in battle is the fact that individuals have varying capacities to deal with the stresses of combat. Within those individuals, and even units, fear and courage are often unpredictable phenomena. Soldiers who stand fast on one day might break under the strain of battle the next.

Many things can induce fear in soldiers, and there are many types of fear soldiers face. Combat is about wounding and death and produces much anxiety over anticipated physical harm. Vietnam platoon leader Michael Lee Lanning remarked, "Close brushes with death brought not a feeling that I was invulnerable but rather that my number might be due to turn up at any time."¹⁸ Participants in battle must react to identifiable threats as well as a pervasive, insidious uneasiness—differences that psychologist Sigmund Freud characterized as "objective anxiety" and "neurotic anxiety."

In a profession that places profound emphasis on the traditional value of personal courage, fear of failure weighs heavily on both leaders and soldiers. In January 1917, World War I Captain J.E.H. Neville wrote to his family before going into battle for the first time: "The only thing I'm not certain about is whether I may get the wind up and show it. I'm afraid of being afraid."¹⁹ During World War II, John Watney was similarly concerned about balancing the dread of physical harm with shaming himself in front of his comrades: "I was a coward; and the thing I feared more than anything in the world was to break up in battle and give way to that cowardice . . . ; I prayed, until a lump came into my throat, to be spared that degradation."²⁰

The contemporary battlefield also produces the anxiety of being alone. Reassurance from nearby mates, which strengthens resolve against the enemy and his weaponry, withers when friendly sights and sounds are absent. The increasing urbanization of combat only increases such seclusion. The nature of urban terrain with its walls, compartmentalization, and limited visibility enforces isolation.

These adversaries form another central category of fear—fear of the enemy. For centuries, soldiers have struggled with managing fear caused by an often seemingly invincible foe. Early in the American Civil War, Union cavalry battled cavalymen as well

their own fear that they could never match the Southerners' equestrian skills. World War II British Field Marshal William Slim, slogging through the Burmese jungles, fought to overcome his soldiers' belief that Japanese soldiers were superior jungle fighters. Not until experiencing tactical victories were the soldiers able to conquer their fears of the enemy and perform on a more equal level with their rivals.

Combating Fear

Not all soldiers magnify enemy soldiers' capabilities; many see the enemy as being like themselves—soldiers facing the stress associated with having to take other men's lives. Dave Grossman's book *On Killing* is replete with the costs entailed by the Army's expectation for the soldier to kill.²¹ He claims that the burden of killing is so great that "in many circumstances, soldiers on the battlefield will die before they can overcome" their intense resistance to killing another human being.²²

A survey of wounded combat veterans in the European Theater during World War II is telling. Of the 277 soldiers interviewed, "65 percent of the men admitted having had at least one experience in combat in which they were unable to perform adequately because of intense fear."²³ Because fear can incapacitate, it is necessary to address ways to counteract fear.

Fear can be mitigated through certain factors, but there is no single absolute way to reduce fear. Soldiers need a battery of tools to deal with fear because soldiers react individually to combat situations. German Captain Adolph von Schell said of his World War I battlefield experiences, "Soldiers can be brave one day and afraid the next. Soldiers are not machines but human beings who must be led in war. Each one of them reacts differently, therefore each must be handled differently. . . . To sense this and arrive at a correct psychological solution is part of the art of leadership."²⁴

If leaders are to understand how fear affects their units' effectiveness, they cannot lead and fight relying solely on rigid precepts from manuals and procedures. They need to take measures to integrate fear's effects into the unit's preparation for combat.

Training. Controlling fear is within reach of well-trained units. Realistic, demanding training provides a soldier advantages in the struggle of natural instincts for self-preservation against real or perceived threats. Proficiency in drill in the age of Prussian ruler Frederick the Great was a great source of confidence and, as Holmes contends, little has changed over the last 250 years: "Part of the stress of battle



US Army photo courtesy American Heritage

stems from its puzzling and capricious nature: battle drills help to minimize the randomness of battle, and give the soldier familiar points of contact in an uncertain environment, like lighthouses in a stormy sea."²⁵

Mastery of fundamentals, such as individual and crew battle drills, results in a measure of competence that leads to confidence. Israeli military psychologist Ben Shalit thought that men could train to overcome fear by handling frightening and unusual situations. While such preparation might not have guaranteed fearlessness in battle, it did develop a "trust in one's ability to handle difficult situations."²⁶ Still, mastering fundamentals has limitations. While being able to fire a weapon no matter what else is occurring is crucial in battle, the training of automatic responses is only one step in the process of preparing for combat. The World War II Stouffer study of the American soldier found that "there are very few routine act sequences which would be generally adaptive, whenever a given kind of danger was encountered."²⁷

Incorporating battlefield stimuli—the sights, sounds, and smells of a firefight—into training makes training real. Combat affects soldiers violently, and they must be conditioned to deal with their fear. If training can condition a soldier to kill, then training can condition him to cope with fear. The key is not desensitization but sensitization. Soldiers need to know how their minds and bodies will react to fear and develop a combative mindset that mitigates the psychological and physiological effects of fear.

Experiential learning is critical in sensitizing soldiers to the bedlam of combat. Leaders must create unpredictability in their training events yet allow failure among leaders and followers. Von Schell was adamant that "we must teach our men in peace that battles differ greatly from maneuvers and that there will often be critical periods when everything seems to be going wrong."²⁸ Creating sensory chaos in training (chaos that often cannot be realized in simulation centers) can only be done by creating sensory chaos during training. Soldiers must train in situations where they can learn how they individually respond to stress and anxiety. They must then be given the opportunity to discuss their emotional responses in after-action reviews. If training is to be effective in the fight against fear, soldiers must be allowed to reflect on doctrinal issues as well as human issues.

Leadership. Freud once warned that we should never underestimate the need to obey, and in times of extreme stress, men look to be led. The relationship between leader and led can moderate strain

during battle. Certain analysts allege that officers taking on a strong paternal role can exert great influence on unit effectiveness in combat. Bourke surmises that as long as the "father" is "strong, decisive, and technically competent . . . his men would feel protected . . . from overpowering anxiety and would be able to kill without qualm."²⁹ In essence, the leader is key to establishing group norms.

Articulating clear group norms is just as important as establishing them. British Field Marshal A.P. (Earl) Wavell contended, "There is one quality above all else . . . essential for a good commander, the ability to express himself clearly, confidently and concisely, in speech and on paper."³⁰ Individuals and units need specific goals and objectives in times of stress to provide purpose and direction, not to micromanage their actions. British General Sir John Hackett noted how "a group of people can often be dominated by the one person who sees most clearly, and can best explain, the issue. Bewildered men turn, as children do to grown-ups, towards anyone who can help clear the confusion in their minds."³¹

Leaders have a responsibility in training to understand and prepare for the human aspects of war, recognizing their soldiers' limits, needs, and motivations while remaining tactically and technically proficient, which is a tall order for younger officers. While they must manage their own fear in combat, they must also cope with subordinates' fears. Most important is setting the right example—what Napoleon viewed as keeping a cool head—despite good news or bad. The other essential task is providing soldiers with as much information as possible, for it reduces uncertainty and anxiety: "The 'absence of information' is one of the conditions that fosters panic in troops: 'fears arise from matters they don't understand—keep men informed.'"³²

Developing unit bonds. While a leader plays a significant role in reducing fear in combat, so do soldiers themselves. Commanders and historians recognize comradeship as an ingredient for combat effectiveness. Fighting for a cause has less influence on behavior than fighting for messmates. Du Picq says, "Self-esteem is unquestionably one of the most powerful motives which moves our men. They do not wish to pass for cowards in the eyes of their comrades."³³ Group pressures can validate norms set by leaders who, in turn, must ensure that organizational expectations match the goals and aspirations of those within the organization.

With regard to fear, the key for military leaders is to build strong, personal bonds among soldiers to develop trust horizontally and vertically within the

unit. Military historian S.L.A. Marshall offers his soundest arguments in *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War*, where he discusses tactical cohesion and why men fight.³⁴ Marshall asserts that personal honor is a powerful motivator in battle and that soldiers rarely aspire to unworthiness. Still, either through physical or social isolation, men fall prey to their fears and provide no combat value to the organization. Underscoring the importance of unity, Marshall emphasizes the “inherent unwillingness of the soldier to risk danger on behalf of men with whom he has no social identity.”³⁵ Leaders must temper the fostering of unit bonds with individual responsibility, of course, for at its basest level, fear is personal.

What cohesion and group interdependence impart is a sense of belonging for soldiers dealing with fear. Group membership can by itself provide an impetus for behavioral changes. Isolated individuals act quite differently once they rejoin their original groups. In building unit training effectiveness, leaders must realize that individual proficiency, while critical to battlefield successes, does not guarantee sanctuary from the effects of fear. Collective training must focus on mastering tactics, techniques, and procedures and understanding the human aspect of fighting within a group. A commander’s goal should be to develop bonds that provide a sense of cohesion, as a British 71st Regiment soldier experienced during the Peninsula War in Spain. In his first charge, he felt his “mind waiver,” but when he “looked alongst the line; it was enough to assure me. The steady

determined scowl of my companions assured my heart and gave me determination.”³⁶

A Human Endeavor

In the search for the path to success in an army transforming for the future, the Army must not forget that warfare has always been and shall always be a human endeavor. Despite advances in the conduct of war, fear is an ever-present feature on the battlefield, and to combat fear and its effects, leaders must realize fears’ sources and consequences. Unit trainers should recognize the importance of integrating fear into mission-essential task training because few things are more vital than maintaining individual and unit presence and composure under fire. In short, leaders must prepare units to deal with fear.

Stating that a unit is trained to standard according to mission training plan checklists is not sufficient if a leader is to be a good steward of his soldiers. His challenge is to evaluate tactical and technical competence and his soldiers’ level of psychological preparedness for combat. Soldiers need to be sensitized to the effects of fear and have tools to master their fears. The goal of integrated mental training should be to increase each soldier’s threshold and, by extension, the entire unit’s threshold to the physical and psychological rigors of being afraid. If Napoleon was correct in stating that in war the morale to the physical is as three is to one, than preparing soldiers to deal with fear is indispensable for maintaining unit combat readiness. **MR**

NOTES

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27. Stouffer, 222. See also Bourke, 72-73.
28. Von Schell, 38. See also on-line at <www.statisticalinnovations.com/products/goldminer_tutorial1.html>, accessed 20 May 2004.
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