

**STRATEGY
RESEARCH
PROJECT**

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**FACING DEATH IN BATTLE:
CONSIDERATIONS FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS**

BY

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United States Army

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To save your world you asked this man to die:
Would this man, could he see you now, ask why?

W.H. Auden, "Epitaph for an Unknown Soldier" (1945)

ABSTRACT

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One of the most difficult problems of war in defense of a democratic society is that it must be conducted without destroying the values that give meaning and validity to that society. This requires the strategic leader to be cognizant of those values that are especially found in the young men and women entrusted to the military to be trained for combat. Achieving an understanding of this human dimension to combat must be a continuing professional commitment on the part of the military leader; most especially on the strategic level, where responsibility and accountability are critical components of global decision-making. American society is becoming more and more sensitive to the value of human life and is unwilling to tolerate mounting numbers of casualties for any military operation without the greatest justification. In addition, society bears the ultimate responsibility of ensuring that soldiers and their families are prepared for the possibility of death since it is in directly answering the martial call from society that one places oneself in that very real circumstance. This has serious implications for the strategic military leader who may be forced to rethink not only on how to train for and conduct war; but to what extent and in which situations.

In his book, The Commanders, Bob Woodward makes it a point to mention that the then-Secretary of the Army, John O. Marsh, always thought it appropriate that his office commanded a startling view of the seemingly endless rows of white tombstones of the Arlington National Cemetery. It was an unavoidable reminder of "the true, measurable price of war."¹ Today's strategic military leader cannot avoid questioning whether securing a military objective is worth the cost in terms of the American lives to be sacrificed. A case must be made to the American people, otherwise public support will quickly dissipate forcing "the plug to be pulled." Somalia was a case in point. When public consensus was achieved that too many American casualties were being sacrificed for an objective which was not sufficiently clear and deemed not in our "vital" national interests, President Clinton was compelled to withdraw all American troops. This terminated the operation without any final military resolution.

This is not surprising. One of the bequeathed legacies of the Vietnam War is that public support must be secured if there is any hope of committing American troops to a military enterprise with the expectation of an unobstructed completion. The recent congressional hearings which grilled the Secretary of Defense, William J. Perry, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John M. Shalikashvili, ensured that a case was made to the Congress and the American people prior to any deployment of troops to Bosnia. As the adage maintains: **war is too important to leave it to the military alone.**

I believe it can safely be taken for granted that the American people will never allow another unpopular war, as Vietnam was, in the foreseeable future. Nor will the people allow a depletion of our national treasure (our American youth) to be wasted without any accountability. Time magazine graphically drove home the reality by emblazoning on its front cover attention to its lead article with the query: "Bosnia, Is It Worth Dying For?"² In addition to this entrenched public mood, the unforgotten success of the Persian Gulf War with its distinction of extremely low casualty rates has not made it any easier for strategic military leaders. More than ever before in our history, the public has become increasingly intolerant of images of body bags and humiliated hostages.

General Carl Mundy, prior to retiring as the Marine Corps Commandant with forty-one years in uniform, castigated the public's expectation of a casualty-free military as unrealistic.³ There are a number of generals and admirals who now fear that this cautious mind-set may soon insinuate itself into the thinking of young officers, with disastrous implications for the quality of the American fighting force. Thomas L. Friedman writing in The New York Times intimates that this new arising attitude is beginning to separate us from our allies like the French. In France, now much more than in the United States, the fate of the state takes precedence over the fate of the individual. Friedman asserts that America cannot lead if it will not put its own people at risk.⁴

Obviously, the American public has struck a raw military nerve. The reason for this is quite apparent, for it conflicts with a military core value. In U.S. Army culture that core value takes the form of an obsessive preference for close combat maneuver. A **Rand** report not yet released suggests that army doctrine may have too long reflected the central and dominant role of maneuver forces uncritically.⁵ All other battlefield capabilities, important and effective as they may be, were always subordinated, including fire support. While precision-guided munitions cannot accomplish the essential task of seizing and holding ground- still the exclusive domain of maneuver forces- they now are able to contribute to the task of killing enemy armor- once the exclusive domain of maneuver forces. In essence, precision-guided munitions delink the historical attrition process in which the killing of enemy armor required a force to subject itself to being killed by that armor.

To a great extent, this is what the American public was presented as they closely followed the war in the Persian Gulf. They saw for themselves that war can be conducted intelligently and with extremely low casualties through a greater role and use of precision-guided munitions. We have the technology. Do we have the will? If army doctrine, force structure and organization appear to resist this new capability, an assumption can be made that a cultural impediment may be at work.

What is tragic about this situation is that we are placing soldiers unnecessarily in harm's way. This enlightened use of

technology has not been lost on the U.S. Air Force. Sheila Widnall, the Air Force Secretary, in a 2,000 page report, **New World Vistas**; calls for a safer Air Force in the future through the use of unmanned-remotely piloted combat planes that could do spy missions and could roam the world with laser weapons to destroy ground and air targets.⁶ This will radically alter Air Force culture. What is most important is that the lives of our military personnel will be safeguarded without surrendering combat effectiveness and dominance.

No longer can American troops be regarded, if ever they were, as expendable pawns on a chessboard; sacrificed out of expediency to gain a better advantage in the game we call "war." This super-sensitivity to the value of the life of every soldier can be traced to the all-encompassing and omni-present media which has personally entered our American homes, hearts, and consciences. We cannot and are not permitted to forget the horrible images of the cost of war: the lined body-bags, the tears of grieving parents, the devastation of the widowed spouse and the shocking numbness of orphaned children. The American public not only sympathizes but even more significantly feels responsible. Dyer states it well when he refers to the military as mostly honorable men and women "doing the difficult and sometimes terrifying job the rest of us have asked them to do."⁷ McRandle refers to them as a "spiritual burden and a source of strength."⁸

Indeed, it truly is a spiritual burden for society. Its call

not only places a soldier in proximate relation to death but also in a relatively non-supportative humane context.

The difference is not only between dying and getting killed. It is much more the difference between dying by disease or accident among people who know and cherish you and having your life cut off without preparation by someone who cares not at all for the anguish he causes. This creates the terrible hatred of war, particularly among civilian populations.⁹

Society, in addition, asks the young recruit to go against his very nature, the very values he was taught to espouse while growing up- not to harm or kill members of one's own species. Basic training and the military regimen are primarily geared to alter those values and turn one into a killing machine, capable, automatic and unreflective. This is predicated for effectiveness; but, especially for survival. "The whole vast edifice of the military institution rests on its ability to obtain obedience from its members even unto death- and the killing of others. It has enormous power of compulsion at its command, of course. But all authority must be based ultimately on consent."¹⁰

The justification and rightness of military service dwells primarily on the call and support of society which initially elicits that consent. These willing, innocent and idealistic youngsters are then entrusted to the military system. "The Armed Forces can almost take any young male(or female) civilian and turn (the person) into a soldier with all the right reflexes and attitudes in a matter of a few weeks. These young recruits barely

have 20 years of experience or less, mostly as children, while armies have had all of history to practice and perfect their techniques."¹¹ Placing one's faith and trust in society so absolutely to the point of surrendering one's life incurs a very special moral and spiritual contractual relationship and responsibility on the part of that society. The American people have refused to relinquish primary control. We see this evidenced so clearly today in the concern the American people have for the soldier; even at times over the objections of politicians and even senior military leaders.

This is especially true of the Army.

Although each of our armed services is unique and different, the U.S. Army holds a special position of significance and trust. Its ranks come from the people, the country's roots, and it is closest to the people.¹²

Carl H. Builder in his classic analysis of service cultures, The Masks of War, categorically maintains: "Of all the military service , the Army is the most loyal servant and progeny of this nation, of its institutions and people."¹³

This was not always the case as one is reminded by the Vietnam Era. Society for the most part had abandoned its soldiers. Instead of moral support; condemnation was the main fare of the day. Soldiers returning from what was supposedly a justified call to war returned disillusioned only to feel

betrayed and confirmed in their need for withheld societal absolution. "Never in American history, perhaps, never in all the history of Western civilization has an army suffered such an agony of many blows from its own people."¹⁴ A strong case may be made that after the healing and purification which came with the success of the Persian Gulf War and its rightness, an enlightened society once again has so embraced its army to preclude a rupture as witnessed during the days of the Vietnam War. Societal remorse for breaking faith and trust with a whole military generation asked and compelled to go to war may be unconsciously at work.

There is no question that lessons learned from Vietnam have not been lost on the American public today. To the consternation of strategic military leaders, the question which always lurks behind the possibility of military involvement and the commitment of especially ground forces is: Can this turn into another Vietnam?. In order for a case to be made to the American public, the military brass have to directly and specifically point out the difference of circumstances and how any involvement will preclude a deterioration as experienced in Vietnam. This happened in the case of Somalia, Haiti and now, Bosnia.

As already pointed out, a high incidence of casualties will not be tolerated. Once military leaders begin to accept this non-negotiable condition, the better off they will be. As already intimated, the American public does not foresee in the near future any potential military situation that would require a significant cost in military lives. Humanitarian missions, peace-

keeping operations and other military operations-other-than war; significant and important as they may be, are not vital to our survival or defense as a people. Little patience will be extended to political and military leaders who attempt to disregard the will of the people in this regard or even worse, attempt to deceive them. Military leaders who are unable to accommodate to this reality would do well to consider retiring and allow a new type of military leadership to assume the helm of authority.

Technology has changed the way we wage war. The romantic obsession of proving oneself in battle is not a crying need for the men and women coming into an all-volunteer force. Many of them are seeking an opportunity of getting ahead in life through the educational benefits and the employment stability the services offer. The majority are married and are constantly pressuring the system to operate and function with as little stress on family life as possible. They are ready to go to battle if called. It is not their preference. Their preference is to be with their families and attain some type of normality previously disregarded and considered of second importance by past military leadership. No one today even jokingly makes the remark: "If the Army wanted you to have a family, they would issue you one." Contemporary wisdom would preclude any instance of placing soldiers in a situation where they have to choose between their families or the military service. It cannot be an "either-or" situation but one that allows a "both-and" reality. The only way the military could alter this situation is to restrict recruits

to single persons or persons without family responsibilities. The Marine Corps opted for this possibility but was turned down unceremoniously by prevailing enlightened minds. The type of young people coming into today's military will affect not only the structure but how and under what conditions war will be waged in the future. For the heart of the military always has been and will continue to be the people who incarnate it. It is not doctrine, not ideology nor unyielding military culture. The care and welfare of our troops and their dependents are and continue to become prime considerations. In this there is over-riding public support, because society itself is comprised of people and families.

Nothing is so destabilizing and heart-rending to families as death. While it is currently predictable that senseless and unnecessary deaths in the military will be minimized under the strong scrutiny and influence of public opinion, death can and still will take place. It is a circumstance of the type of work a soldier is engaged-in. In discharging its moral and spiritual responsibilities, society and, to a greater extent, the military itself has failed to prepare soldiers and their families for the possibility of death. We train soldiers for every conceivable circumstance, except for death. At the same time we are stunned how death suddenly takes the life of an unsuspecting youth in the prime of his youth and devastates his unexpecting family in the process. Condolences are extended. A military funeral takes place. Assurances are given that life was not wasted in vain. The

belief that the soldier died for his country is reiterated again and again, as if convincing is warranted. A marker is placed above the remains. Everyone leaves. Life continues and the bereaved family adjusts. In a matter of time, the soldier is forgotten and even his grave may cease to be cared for and even visited. We forget so easily and feel uncomfortable when reminded. If this same soldier could come back from the dead, he might wield an accusatory finger at society for not being honest with him on the real prospect of death and an accusatory finger at the military for denying the reality of death. *My thesis is that society has the ultimate responsibility of preparing soldiers and their families to face the possibility of death since it is in answering the call from society that one places oneself in that very real circumstance.* I characterize this as a *moral* obligation because of the contractual nature of the relationship which must be based on truth. I characterize this as a *spiritual* obligation due to the care and concern society must have in educating its young to understand the possibilities and limitations of life. I do not characterize this as a religious obligation, since that is deemed a personal matter. The fact that military chaplains and religious opportunities and rites are made available speaks well of societal solicitude in general.

In practice, this total obligation is delegated to the military itself. For the most part it has been simply avoided or consciously denied unless there was some specific military benefit to be gained as opposed to a more personal or spiritual

benefit for the individual. This position has easily accommodated the initial avoidance of soldiers to deal with the topic.

"Imagination and intellect must be operative if we are to bridge the gap between life and death, and many soldiers understandably try to avoid exercising either."¹⁵ When the military does deal with the topic it does so only as a means of maximizing its combat strength. No more than any other service is this the case than with the U.S. Marine Corps. It does not avoid the question of the "requirement to die in battle."

On the contrary, it puts considerable effort into telling the recruits why they must, under certain circumstances throw their lives away. It happens in the latter part of their training, when the emphasis is shifting increasingly to how Marines should behave in combat, and though they may not understand the logic that makes the individual's self-sacrifice good for the organization, they are by then more than ready to understand it emotionally.¹⁶

Every Marine is an infantryman. Nothing matters in the world of the infantryman more than the unit. No sacrifice for the other man is too great. According to William Manchester, "You don't love anybody who is not yours." In addition, he relates "that he was almost helpless to disobey for he had fallen into the hands of an institution so powerful and so subtle that it could quickly reverse the moral training of a lifetime."¹⁷

Basic training involves a brief but intense period of indoctrination whose purpose is not really to teach the recruits basic military skills but rather to change their values and their loyalties.¹⁸

This is consciously intended "...so that they can do things they wouldn't have dreamt otherwise. It works by applying enormous physical and mental pressure to men who have been isolated from their normal civilian environment and placed in one where the only right way to think and behave is the way the Marine Corps wants them to. The key word the men who run the machine use to describe this process is "motivation." Essentially what the marine is learning is not primarily to protect himself but how to accept danger and even death itself, for the longer he stays on the battlefield; the more likely the enemy will find its target. This perhaps accounts for the guilt that some may feel in being alive when their buddies do not survive.

James H. McRandle in The Antique Drums of War encapsules this discussion when he writes: "The soldier must be trained to accept death as a possibly unavoidable consequence of battle.... Yet the evidence is clear that, with personal reservations or not, soldiers often play out roles assigned to them even to the dismal end."¹⁹ The reality which the military and especially the Marine Corps takes advantage of is that men will do almost anything if they know it is expected of them and they are under strong social pressures to comply. It must be noted nowhere in this training is the individual asked to make a personal moral decision by considering the goals for which life is to be risked and lost. To that extent we are perpetuating a glaring moral deficiency robbing the soldier of individual dignity and honor. We owe him more than that. This moral lapse was not lost on the

National Conference of Bishops, who in their ground-breaking pastoral letter on war and peace were compelled to point out:

One of the most difficult problems of war involves defending a free society without destroying the values that give it meaning and validity. Dehumanization of a nation's military personnel by dulling their sensibilities and generating hatred toward adversaries in an effort to increase their fighting effectiveness robs them of basic human rights and freedoms, degrading them as persons.²⁰

This may have been lost on some military leaders up to this point but the days are numbered for the continuation of such basic training practices averted to above. They will not be able to withstand the public moral scrutiny that will only tend to intensify as the American public continues to look out for its soldiers.

J. Glenn Gray in The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle could not get over the lack of sympathy a French colleague exhibited at the execution of a German soldier. This French friend could view the gruesome scene with total detachment because he was convinced that the German had no thoughts at all about what was happening to him. In essence, this doomed man was nothing more than an animal without any emotions. This caused Gray to question how do men in battle consider the possibility of their imminent death? Can they gain any relation to death at all? He came to the conclusion that

The majority of soldiers in modern wars ... are able to gain only a negative relation to death. For them, death is a state and a condition so foreign and unreal as to be incomprehensible. They reject it with aversion without bringing its reality to the level of consciousness.²¹

After all, as Lord Moran reminds us: "...war is the business of youth and no young man thinks he can ever die."²² But this cannot persist long. "As the soldier's experience of war grows, ...he is forcibly reminded that death is no longer something which happens only to pets and grandparents. The death of his friends loosens his own hold on the illusion of immortality."²³ For most soldiers there is a wake-up call with the startling realization that death plays no favorites.

It may be the death of an acquaintance in his arms, where the transition between life and death is made imaginatively visible for the first time, or it may be the rare sight of death in life-like form that startles him into self-consciousness.²⁴

Then there is the type of soldier who considers death to be a very real possibility for others but without any power over him. He has been able to preserve the childish illusion that he is the center of the world; therefore immortal and indestructible. He is many times responsible for much rashness in battle; misconstrued as courage. Highlighting the ridiculousness and amusing aspects of combat life, he is capable of buoying up the spirit of the unit. Should he become an officer or a leader, he has the capacity of inspiring troops to daring deeds of

recklessness and self-sacrifice. He is lauded as a natural born leader and one to be emulated by the system; while in fact, he is a very dangerous dysfunctional person in a state of denial. He can continue on this fantastic and perilous journey until a drastic occurrence happens to him. Indeed, his own wounding might be required to bring him into the world of reality. "The look of shock and outrage on such a soldier's face when that happens is likely to be unforgettable."²⁵ This can be attested to by many seasoned combat veterans.

In some men it is a function of an indomitable will to power which refuses to recognize ordinary mortality. "Such men have a fanatic fate in their destiny which is only strengthened by narrow escapes and the sight of death in manifold forms."²⁶ Nothing but their own death will rob these supreme egoists of their illusion of indestructibility. Indeed, it is one of unsolved mysteries of combat that they so rarely get killed. They are incapable of penetrating the mystery of death and there is nothing in their whole mentality that suggests any humanity. In effect, should they become leaders their obsession with themselves does not allow them to be concerned about others. Gray appears to have experienced this form of bizarreness when he writes:

...I was influenced more than I care to admit by the regnant recklessness with human life. Men are expendable, as the current phrase had it; life was a commodity to be doled out and used up by a superpersonal will. Probably few of us consciously reorganized our values owing to

this fact but even the simplest mind among us could sense that it mattered relatively little to the collective body whether he survived or not. Though he could not comprehend why death struck others and not us, we learned to accept it as a brute fact. As long as it did not strike one's friends, there was the great temptation to react to it no differently than one did to other occurrences. The dead began to seem both unreal and yet commonplace²⁷

Another classic form expressive of the combat soldier's negative relation to the possibility of death is to allow oneself to be governed by a feeling of fate. This is a congenial accommodation to the military mindset which feels the need to reduce the capriciousness of the world as much as possible. There is nothing haphazard about the progression of events in life. Everything is predictable if one has all the necessary data available. Death must not be shunned if the interests of duty and honor require it, however unpleasant dying may be. Death is part of life and when your number comes up, it comes up!. In the end, one's individual fate must be viewed in relation to a backdrop of a universal determinism. Men in combat have fortified themselves with this conviction which is as old as Pericles. It is admirably expressed by Shakespeare in Coriolanus:

*It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.*²⁸

Another Part of the unromantic answer to the question how young people can face an imminent death lies in the physical weariness that is usually precedent to any engagement in battle.

Loss of sleep, long gruelling marches, cold food and the nervous tension that the horrific devastation common to forward areas (in combat) evokes combine to exhaust the combat soldier... such exhaustion can induce men to welcome death as a rest and a change from what they have been tediously doing. Gray relates:

I have seen exhausted soldiers sleeping while exposed to the greatest danger of death. It might be said that these soldiers had won some positive relationship to death in conceiving it as sleep and rest I think this would be going to far. Men overcome by weariness are not relating death to rest or sleep; they have simply an overwhelming feeling that change is a necessity and death is a change. Their aversion to the incomprehensible state of death has not been altered, as a few hours' rest makes clear. It has been superseded by physical need of the most insistent kind.²⁹

What can be said about fear? Though the dread of death may continue to linger at the bottom rings of consciousness at such moments, the fear of being painfully injured or mutilated is very much in the foreground. "This fear dulls self-awareness as effectively as fatigue and routine can and has a more lasting influence."³⁰ Fear can so obsess the mind that it can render one unfit for battle. Usually, however, it rises just high enough to prevent reason from governing, and with it the detachment of self-consciousness.

This semi-state of consciousness with its concomitant extreme tiredness accounts for the dazed condition and acute loss of self-awareness most combat troops experience on the battlefield. In such a state it is understandable how they can be

caught up into some form of collective or communal ecstasy, forgetting death by losing their sense of individuality and function like cells in a military organism, doing what is expected of them in an automatic fashion. Thinking tends to become not only painful but increasingly unnecessary. In such a situation, one's mind can become so pre-occupied with the mechanics of activity that larger issues are blocked-out and any self-awareness is dimmed to a near vanishing point. A psychologist would suggest that this propensity for routine and obsession with detail is the mind's escape from its fear of extinction. If this is true, the escape is usually effective. "It is astonishing how much of the business of warfare can still be carried on by men who act as automatons, behaving almost as mechanically as the machines they operate."³¹ If death does come, it comes like a narcotic stealing men almost in their sleep, without the awareness of the moment or its significance.

Is this the only way soldiers face death? Negatively, by relegating oneself to a state of denial through an entrenched mindset of one's indestructibility? Or negatively again, through the acceptance of a gracious invitation to enter a state of oblivion where feeling and thought are suspended and death has no reality? What can be said about a positive relation?

Usually, the first suggestion, lauded in history and in myth, is that a soldier is capable of dying for an ideal beyond himself. We are inundated by memorials, monuments and artifacts that supposedly celebrate this reality. Every family that

receives the remains of a loved one collected from the field of battle is told how proud our Nation is and how consoled the family should be by an heroic display of ultimate self-sacrifice for one's country. Is this simply form or is it reality? The Country can say whatever it wants. The family can believe what it prefers. Our concern is the individual soldier. Can he consciously, willingly and freely give up his life for his country? The literature appears to be mixed on this question.

The U.S. Marines, who have had a great experience in battle deaths, assert:

What really enables men to fight is their own self-respect, and a special kind of love that has nothing to do with sex or idealism. Very few men have died in battle, when the moment actually arrived, for the United States of America ... or even for their homes and their families; if they had any choice in the matter at all, they chose to die for each other and for their own vision of themselves.³²

The problem with this position is that it is a result of rigorous and intense conditioning (some would use the term: brainwashing). There is a question whether a true and free moral act ever takes place in this circumstance, despite how laudable it is to die for your buddies.

Captain John Early, referring to this bonding of comrades to the point of death, describes it by telling us that: "It's a hell of a lot stronger than man and wife- your life is in his hands, you trust that person with the most valuable thing you have."³³ So intense can this reality become that combat can become in and

of itself an aphrodisiac pursued for the sake of friendship.

On the other hand, the testimonies, witnesses and experiences gleaned from countless battlefields attest to soldiers who have willingly died for ideals or persons that were beyond them. Gray makes the salient point that

A soldier like this steps into death, as it were, with his eyes fixed elsewhere. He has not thought much or at all about what it is like to be dead or what dying signifies, because he is overcome by enthusiasm for some living ideal or person sufficient to render his own independent existence of lesser value.³⁴

Such a soldier can enter death in self-forgetfulness and treat it merely as an incident compared to the reality that fills his being. In this situation, death becomes a means by which he can prove his love and devotion to something beyond himself. It is important to note that death is not welcomed for itself, but as a sign of utter faithfulness. One's belief systems come into play. Seldom in my experience has the military challenged soldiers to articulate for themselves what they truly believe and to what extent they would go to witness and uphold those beliefs.

The first article of the **Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Services of the United States** (Executive order, 15 August 1975, amended April, 1988) states: "I am an American. I serve in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense." This is the oath by which all members of the American military are bound to conduct themselves. The insertion of the phrase:"our way of life" is

problematic since we all do not experience the same "way of life;" thus being subject to varying personal interpretations. There are ways of life that are clearly marked by societal inequalities and racial prejudice; hardly a fitting moral object worthy of the sacrifice of one's life. Sidney Axinn in his A Moral Military notes that political ideology as a moral object is a rather new element in the history of warfare.³⁵ One wonders whether it is so crucial and valued that it is worthy of the sacrifice of human life, especially when it is so ambiguous and undefined in the minds of those asked to sacrifice themselves. Even "country" which as an ideal is generally associated with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; may in practice deny those very espoused values in a given situation. The blind acceptance as characterized by "**my country, right or wrong**" no longer is tenable, nor should it be if proper moral judgment is exercised.

Another phrase that many times rings hallow could be found engraved at one time on every cornerstone of every parochial school built in the United States was: **For God and Country**. It might also be noted that this motto in its classic Latin form (**Pro Deo et Patria**) serves as the official motto of the United States Army Chaplains' Corps. The problem with this rallying cry is the clear lack of discrimination between two separate moral objects. They are not one and the same. Every effort must be expended to reinforce that point if moral integrity is to survive. Each must be judged on its own basis. All throughout the

history of warfare, states and nations have attempted to cloak themselves in a mantle of blessed righteousness and holiness. Sacred and religious symbols have been appropriated to promote indivisibility between the will of man and the will of God. Biblical and ecclesiastical terms have been usurped to confer a self-proclaimed benediction not only one's cause but on one's weapons as well. In reality, this is an unconscionable use and blatant exploitation of religion. A case in point.

During the Second World War the British army apparently subscribed to the belief that religion raises and strengthens morale. For awhile a cult grew up around the historical figure of Cromwell, whose excellent troops had been inspired largely by religious sentiment. A good deal of reference was also made to the Crusades: the Eighth Army wore a "Crusader Cross" flash, one desert offensive was code-named "Crusader," and a tank was named the "Crusader." The ecclesiastical echo was continued in a family of self-propelled guns- the Sexton, the Priest, the Deacon, and the Bishop and in the name of another tank, the Covenantanter.³⁶

The presence of "the peacemaker" in our own American arsenal simply contributes to this aberration and underscores the point.

Holmes brings up an undeniable sore point by his assertion that "the linking of religion to the cause for which a war is fought arouses bitter controversy and brings military chaplains into the moral firing line."³⁷ Each military chaplain must answer for himself why he serves in the military and how he allows himself to be used by the system. It is not the scope of this paper to enter into this specific discussion. For the purpose of

this paper, it must be asserted that the chaplain can be an invaluable asset to the soldier who seeks a positive relation to the possibility of death in battle. Not only through soul-searching and heart-rending dialogue, but especially, through sacramental ministrations which to the believer conveys a universal hope that can transcend the anxiety and lack of meaning encountered on the battlefield and yield to *a peace beyond all understanding*.³⁸

The adage that **there are no atheists in a foxhole** at times seems capable of unquestioned validation due to the large numbers of troops who mob religious services and engage in prayer prior to combat operations. Prayer is not of itself a sufficient indicator of religious faith. It may be adopted as an instrument of psychological self-defense in much the same way talismans and good luck charms are utilized. Once the danger dissipates, so does the heightened religious activity. This is not to say that there are no deeply religiously-committed soldiers on the battlefield. It is to say that there are far less than frenzied religious activity might suggest.

For the deeply religious soldier death can truly be a fulfillment in a very different sense from self-sacrifice. If he happens to be of a faith that espouses eternal life, physical death is simply a portal leading a greater and more meaningful life beyond. Physical death is the final stage in a continued struggle to overcome oneself and the world- which beclouds true eternal existence. Death is only an enemy for this soldier if he

has not discovered the purpose of being alive. The intensity of battle and the proximity of death can intensify the faith and the spirituality of the majority of these kinds of soldiers. On the other hand, soldiers whose religious faith might be described as chiefly "this world", i.e., social and ethical in content, often find the cruelty and devastation of war playing havoc with their belief. Moreover, there can be a minority whose faith is shattered by their experiences, and who emerge from this crucible: cynical and atheistic. This only confirms the truth that Faith itself must be strong if it is to remain viable.

Another positive relation to death on the part of some conscientious Christian soldiers can be couched in terms of atonement. Gray speaks about this type of soldier when he writes:

There is another element that commonly makes death easier for such a soldier. For the otherworldly Christian, at least, there is a contradiction in combat and a fearful moral peril. He is conscious of the pacifistic injunctions of his faith and has not been able, in all likelihood to make the easy distinctions between destroying life in peace and in war that governments insist upon. Even though he may have privately determined that no one shall fall by his hand, his conscience seldom leaves him in peace. The Biblical dictum that "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" has persuaded him, perhaps, that it is no more than just that he should leave his young life in this unholy war.³⁹

Only God knows how many soldiers actually come to the first realization that they are, in fact, conscientious objectors once they have taken a life in combat. This can also relate to a non-believer, a person of strong moral fiber and character, who

calmly and inwardly can greet death with a mind at peace with itself; for he offers his life in atonement for what he comes to regard the crime of warfare.

The perceptive among these kinds of soldiers know that dying itself does not erase guilt but they also know that it is the most that conscience and religious faith can demand in given situations where more appropriate atonement is not available.

Less loftier and on a more mundane plain is the type of soldier who is intoxicated by war's promise of intense and forbidden experience. War for this soldier is a game, exciting and dangerous. One may strike out or foul out at any time. Such possibilities make life and war all worth it. In essence, he values adventure and experience more highly than life itself. He consciously may not know why he is so reckless and obsessed with this experience of combat. All he knows is that he is willing to play the game to the bitter end.

Another intoxication is an intimacy with death available only to most highly imaginative of soldiers. Anyone who has picked up war poems written by soldier-poets is taken aback by their obsession with death. Nor is this relation negative. For the most part they look to death to give life its authenticity and creative power. Rupert Brooke is such a poet. "The heightened awareness of man's transience, vulnerability and proud courage, which the poet experiences in warfare can reconcile him to his fate and even promote a love for it."⁴⁰

The poet, Robert Browning, in his well-known poem:

"**Prospice**" goes even one step further when he suggests that he wants to undergo the struggle of dying for the sake of finding what lies beyond. "One fight more, the best and the last!"⁴¹ There are some soldiers who can resonate with this insatiable curiosity about what it is like to be dead. Their relationship to death becomes an eager anticipation for knowledge as well as an heroic acceptance. They are not fearful of death. To them it is mystifying and interesting and must be passed through if any answers are to be found as regards the great and ultimate questions that face man in terms of existence and finitude. Such soldiers will find that they are not alone. They march in the footsteps of some great philosophical soldiers that have preceded them as Socrates and Descartes.

In summary, soldiers can relate to possible death in battle in a positive manner if given the opportunity. Acceptance of one's death has to be a personal and conscious act if it is to be deemed fully moral and human. When we prevent or render our soldiers incapable of exercising this most basic human right for whatever reason, we degrade their very humanity. Since death is a very real possibility for the combat soldier, it should neither be trivialized nor denied. It should be dealt with in combat training itself as it truly is, robbed of its romantic mystique or dreaded finality. There is no evidence to suggest that a soldier who has resolved this question in his mind and with his family is any less capable of meeting his obligations on the battlefield. In fact, there is every reason to believe that he

will be a better soldier for the peace and equanimity he brings. The bottom line is that no one can take responsibility for his death in battle, not even the Commander-in-Chief; even though he recently offered to take that responsibility as he sanctioned the deployment of troops to Bosnia. The soldier, he alone retains that right.

If we truly care for the soldier and value his life, society will continue to ensure and insist that all measures be taken to minimize combat deaths in the future. Should death come, it will be blunted; for its sting would have been removed through realistic preparation. This we owe our soldiers. It is the awesome task of the strategic military leader and his staff chaplain as his advisor in matters of religion and morality to make it happen.

ENDNOTES

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