Reducing Atrocities in Modern Combat Through Military Discipline and the Warrior’s Code of Honor

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How do you teach people to kill without losing control of exactly whom they kill, how, and when? It is an ancient question, as old as human conflict, which is to say, as old as humanity itself. Still, the answer remains elusive. Yet there has to be an answer, because the vast majority of modern combat troops never commit atrocities. What restrains them? Military discipline? Personal honor? Yes.

The crucial point our military and political authorities must understand is that both discipline and honor can either be developed or undermined. Leadership and command climate matter more than we care to admit. True, some atrocities are the isolated acts of disturbed or damaged individuals who would probably commit similar crimes in a non-combat setting. Most violations of the laws of war, however, cannot be traced conveniently back to someone with pre-existing psychological or physical pathology. The conditions of war itself produce war crimes, and no amount of pre-screening of combat troops will ever prevent them all.

As Lt. Col. Dave Grossman illuminated in his groundbreaking book, On Killing: The Psychological Costs of Learning to Kill in War and Society, we can take some solace from the fact that it is actually not that easy to train troops to kill swiftly and efficiently. Whether from nature, nurture, or both, non-sociopaths are very hesitant to end the life of a fellow human being. Grossman notes how Civil War rifles have
been discovered with as many as 23 rounds jammed into their barrels, unfired.¹

Soldiers would reload and reload without actually firing. Grossman also cites the now-famous post-WWII study by Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, which concluded that only 15-20% of soldiers attempted to shoot to kill. ²

Following the Marshall study, the U.S. military altered its training methods to endeavor to improve so-called “kill ratios” – that is, to increase the lethality of our troops. Grossman illuminates some of the methods that were used to help troops achieve emotional distance from their enemies. Troops were drilled over and over to fire on human-shaped targets but not to think about the act of killing itself. The focus was on the mechanics of aiming and firing. Troops were taught to “neutralize targets,” and the word “kill” was avoided. A less formal approach that may not have been officially sanctioned involved dehumanizing the enemy through the use of abusive or euphemistic language. This is a historically common and effective tool for increasing aggression and breaking down inhibitions against killing:

> It is so much easier to kill someone if they look distinctly different than you. If your propaganda machine can convince your soldiers that their opponents are not really human but are “inferior forms of life,” then their natural resistance to killing their own species will be reduced. Often the enemy’s humanity is denied by referring to him as a “gook,” “Kraut,” or “Nip.”³

In other words, there are typically two distinct forms of dehumanization of the enemy: one that equates enemy troops with some sort of inanimate objects (“targets” to be “neutralized”), and one that equates enemy troops with animate but “lesser” beings (animals). We can refer to these as mechanistic dehumanization and animalistic dehumanization. Both are extremely dangerous.
Animalistic dehumanization is generally what we associate with atrocities that spring from rage and hatred. They are often acts of revenge, and may trigger vicious cycles of reprisals. WWII combat veteran J. Glenn Gray brings home the agony of the warrior who has become trapped in such a cycle in his modern classic on the experience of war, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*:

The ugliness of a war against an enemy conceived to be subhuman can hardly be exaggerated. There is an unredeemed quality to battle experienced under these conditions, which blunts all senses and perceptions. Traditional appeals of war are corroded by the demands of a war of extermination, where conventional rules no longer apply. For all its inhumanity, war is a profoundly human institution.... This image of the enemy as beast lessens even the satisfaction in destruction, for there is no proper regard for the worth of the object destroyed.... The joys of comradeship, keenness of perception, and sensual delights [are] lessened.... No aesthetic reconciliation with one’s fate as a warrior [is] likely because no moral purgation [is] possible.  

Homer’s timeless war epic the *Iliad* explores this theme in searing detail. The work begins with the rage of the great Greek warrior Achilles, who has been treated disrespectfully by King Agamemnon. Later, when Achilles’ best friend Patroclus is killed by the Trojan Prince Hector while wearing Achilles’ armor, Achilles’ wrath becomes focused on Hector. When Achilles and Hector exchange words before engaging in single combat, Hector tries to remain civilized, suggesting that they strike a bargain for the winner to return the body of the loser to his next of kin for a proper burial. Achilles not only rejects this offer, he says that if he has the stomach for it, he will personally tear Hector’s remains apart and eat them.

Homer crafts compelling imagery to show us how, in failing to respect Hector’s humanity, Achilles has sacrificed his own. He is now a beast who kills and
destroys without pity or remorse. Achilles’s heart, as Hector observes shortly before his own death, is a “lump of iron.” Achilles no longer has the capacity to experience the full range of human emotions. He is a creature of rage alone.

Ultimately, after Achilles cruelly desecrates the body of the fallen Hector, Homer has the god Apollo deliver this harsh judgment:

His twisted mind is set on what he wants,
As savage as a lion bristling with pride,
Attacking men’s flocks to make himself a feast.
Achilles has lost all pity and has no shame left.
Shame sometimes hurts men, but it helps them, too.
[...] But this man? After he kills Hector,
He ties him behind his chariot
And drags him around his dear friend’s tomb.
Does this make him a better or nobler man?
He should fear our wrath, good as he may be,
For he defiles the dumb earth in his rage.5

Initially, mechanistic dehumanization may seem like the lesser evil. We imagine that it must be a little better to view our enemies as mere things, like cogs in a wheel or blips on a computer screen, than to hold on to the “image of the enemy as beast,” to borrow Gray’s language. History warns us otherwise. Although Nazi propaganda made liberal use of both forms of dehumanization, the horrifyingly efficient mass murder of the Holocaust may have been enabled most by cold, mechanistic dehumanization.

Where does this all leave us? It sounds like we should focus our efforts on ensuring that our troops no longer dehumanize their enemies. Clearly, there is a lot to be gained by improving our troops’ knowledge of and respect for those they fight. When they lose that respect, they experience even greater combat trauma. In his excellent work *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character,*
psychiatrist Dr. Jonathan Shay stresses how important it is to the warrior to have the conviction that he participated in an *honorable* endeavor:

> Restoring honor to the enemy is an essential step in recovery from combat PTSD. While other things are obviously needed as well, the veteran’s self-respect never fully recovers so long as he is unable to see the enemy as worthy. In the words of one of our patients, a war against subhuman vermin “has no honor.”

As I have argued elsewhere, by setting standards of behavior for themselves, accepting certain restraints, and, yes, even honoring their enemies, warriors can create a lifeline that will allow them to pull themselves out of the hell of war and reintegrate themselves into their society, should they survive to see peace restored. That is the purpose of the warrior’s code of honor. It is a shield that guards the warrior’s humanity.

Our troops must resist regarding their enemies as inanimate objects, mere figment of virtual reality, or “subhuman vermin.” This does not mean, however, that they should be pressed to feel deep and sincere empathy for the people they have to kill *while* they are trying to kill them. That is too much to ask. It may even be literally impossible for the human mind to achieve. In order to do their jobs – what we ask them to do on our behalf – warriors must establish and maintain some emotional and psychological distance from those they fight.

A colleague from the Cognitive Science Department at Case Western Reserve University, Dr. Anthony Jack, has recently produced some remarkable insights into the workings of the human brain that are relevant to this issue. Coming from a background in philosophy and psychology and now working in the emerging field of neuroethics, Dr. Jack has employed fMRI technology to gather brain-scan data that
demonstrate, vividly, what happens in our brains when we dehumanize people, classifying them as either animal-like or machine-like. From this data, he has been able to draw striking conclusions about how either empathy or moral callousness is produced in the human brain.

Intuitively, we know that a sense of oneness produces empathy, while the more we dehumanize others and distance ourselves from them, the more callous we become (the more likely we are not to care if they are harmed or even to harm them ourselves without remorse). Dr. Jack’s work reveals these relationships playing themselves out in the way our brains actually work. To put it crudely, when we see or experience something that causes our brains to register another person as less than human, the functions in our brains that produce empathy get turned down, and moral callousness increases. (Luckily, our brains are quite agile, and empathy can return as soon as we have the opportunity to view the same person in another light.) More studies are needed in this area, but what we have seen thus far suggests that not only is it unfair to ask our troops to empathize with their opponents in the midst of combat, at the very time that their humanity is masked by brutality, but also that it may be virtually impossible for them to do so.

Thankfully, warriors do not need to empathize with their opponents in order to obey the rules of engagement. There are at least two other elements capable of restraining them that do not depend in any way on how they feel about the enemy. I referred to both at the start of this article: military discipline and personal honor.

In Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, King Henry delivers a decidedly intimidating (and effective) speech to the governor of the French town of Harfleur, demanding the
town’s surrender. Henry asserts that his ability to maintain discipline among his troops is limited, and that there is no way for him to prevent them from committing atrocities once their siege of the town is successful:

What rein can hold licentious wickedness
When down the hill he holds his fierce career?
We may as bootless spend our vain command
Upon the enraged soldiers in their spoil
As send precepts to the leviathan
To come ashore. Therefore, you men of Harfleur,
Take pity of your town and of your people,
Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command;
Whiles yet the cool and temperate wind of grace
O’erblows the filthy and contagious clouds
Of heady murder, spoil and villainy
If not, why, in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dash’d to the walls,
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds,...

Henry V, Act III, Scene III

Although this is a work of fiction, Henry’s grim description of the fate of civilians trapped in a town taken by siege warfare is disturbingly accurate for many historical periods. For example, there are many blood-chilling accounts of the rape, slaughter, and torture of civilians in towns that fell to sieges in the Napoleonic Wars, centuries after Shakespeare’s day.

Modern military leaders thankfully are not permitted to take the attitude of Shakespeare’s Henry V and simply wash their hands of the behavior of the troops under their command. Even more importantly, the troops of today are highly trained, deeply committed professionals who volunteered for the opportunity to
serve their nation with honor. They were not scooped up by press gangs or lured to battle with the promise of ill-gotten gains acquired through looting and pillaging.

Still, even with the best troops in the world, leadership matters. The command climate that is established by military leaders – from NCOs (non-commissioned officers) to senior officers – plays a significant role in guiding the behavior of deployed troops. By their actions and inactions, by giving commands or failing to say a word, and most of all by their example, officers and NCOs help to calibrate the moral compasses of their units.

Some leaders are jaded cynics who think the rules of war are foolish, written far from the front lines by people who have never seen combat themselves (a point that can be both true and irrelevant). Worse than these are leaders who actively pollute the minds of their troops with hateful speech and behavior that speeds the process of dehumanizing the enemy and pushes it to an extreme. Such leaders reject the warrior’s code of honor all together, embracing war as an opportunity to act outside the norms of society, seemingly with impunity. Corrupting leaders can contaminate the moral reasoning of their subordinates. This can cause troops to question even their most basic values.

The best leaders, by contrast, champion the warrior’s code and encourage honorable behavior even at the most difficult times when acting under the restraint of doing the right thing increases physical risk. Taking a proactive stance, such leaders talk to their troops in advance of the most challenging engagements, acknowledge the temptation to set the code aside, either out of anger or for
expediency’s sake, and reaffirm the importance of holding on to core principles that define the difference between warriors and murderers.

Great leaders acknowledge and understand the full range of emotions combat troops may experience, but make it clear that intentional deviations from the code will not be tolerated. Experience has taught these leaders that preserving the humanity of their troops ultimately enhances the safety of those same troops. Excessive dehumanization of the enemy only clouds warriors’ judgment, making them greater targets of hatred themselves, and causing them to underestimate their enemies through lack of respect.

The following is an excerpt from a celebrated speech given by Col. Tim Collins of the British Army, before taking his troops into Iraq in 2003:

Iraq is steeped in history. It is the site of the Garden of Eden, of the Great Flood and the birthplace of Abraham. Tread lightly there. You will see things that no man could pay to see and you will have to go a long way to find a more decent, generous and upright people than the Iraqis. You will be embarrassed by their hospitality even though they have nothing. Don’t treat them as refugees for they are in their own country. [...] If there are casualties of war then remember that when they woke up and got dressed in the morning they did not plan to die this day. Allow them dignity in death. Bury them properly and mark their graves. [...] It is a big step to take another human life. It is not to be done lightly. I know of men who have taken life needlessly in other conflicts. I can assure you they live with the Mark of Cain upon them. If someone surrenders to you then remember they have that right in international law and ensure that one day they go home to their family. The ones who wish to fight, well, we aim to please. If you harm the regiment or its history by over-enthusiasm in killing or in cowardice, know it is your family who will suffer. You will be shunned unless your conduct is of the highest for your deeds will follow you down through history. We will bring shame on neither our uniform or our nation. [...] Let’s bring everyone home and leave Iraq a better place for us having been there. Our business now is north!

It may not be possible at all times to love our enemies. It is possible, however, to maintain military discipline at all times. A warrior’s sense of honor
should be constant, as well. A Marine should not need to feel any empathy for a member of the Taliban or recognize his fundamental humanity in order to refrain from urinating on his corpse. Desecrating the fallen is as shameful today as it was millennia ago when Homer composed the *Iliad*. Warriors have a duty to act with honor, regardless of whether their enemies do the same. This is duty they owe to themselves and to each other. Most fulfill it faithfully, sacrificing without complaint, and, to paraphrase Col. Collins, bringing shame on neither their uniforms nor their nation.

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