



EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is another in our recurring series of articles reprinted from previous issues of INFANTRY and its predecessors, the INFANTRY SCHOOL QUARTERLY and the MAILING LIST. This article first appeared in the MAILING LIST, Volume III, 1931-32, pages 71-83.

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Battlefield Psychology

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Psychology, as I understand it, means knowledge of the soul. Yet, how shall we speak about the soul of others, when we do not even know our own souls? Is there anyone among us who, with absolute certainty, can say how we will react to a given event? But we as soldiers, especially as leaders, must have some knowledge of the soul of our soldiers, because the soldier, the living man, is the instrument with which we have to work in war.

The great commanders of all times had a real knowledge of the soul of their soldiers. Let us, however, using a more simple phrase, call this knowledge of the soul "knowledge of men." Knowledge of men in all wars of history was an important factor for the leader. It is probable that in future wars this will be still more the case. Prior to the World War, all armies fought in comparatively close order. The psychological reaction of the individual soldier was not so decisive; the fighting was done, not by the individual, but by the mass, and the mass was held together by drill and discipline. In addition, the psychological impressions of the battle were simpler. Rifle and cannon ruled the battlefield, and the enemy could be seen. In modern war, the impressions, however, are much more powerful. We generally have to fight against an enemy whom we cannot see. The machine rules the battlefield. Now we do not fight in great masses, but in small groups, often as individuals. Therefore, the psychological reaction of the individual has become much more important. We as commanders must know how the individual will probably react, and we must know the means by which we can influence this reaction.

The knowledge of men is especially difficult for two reasons: first, because it cannot be learned from books; second, because the individual of peacetime is a changed man in war. He reacts differently to events in war than he does in peace, and must, therefore, be handled differently in war. For this reason we cannot learn, in peacetime, the psychology of war. It is my belief that no one in the world can give you a prescription for a correct application of the principle of psychology in war. The only thing of which we are certain is that knowledge of men is always especially important, and that no commander without this knowledge of men can accomplish great things.

As long as armies were small and the battlefield narrow, a leader could exert a psychological influence on his army by personal example. In modern wars, however, the high commanders are necessarily far in the rear at a general headquarters, and the majority of soldiers never see them. Consequently, the tasks of influencing the men psychologically and of understanding them have passed, in a large measure, to subordinate commanders. For this reason it is better today to deal only with the psychology of individuals and small units.

We must always think of these matters, and in peace we should do everything possible to prepare the minds of our soldiers for the strain of battle. We must repeatedly tell them that war brings with it surprise and tremendously deep impressions. We must prepare them for the fact that each minute of war brings with it a new assault on their nerves. We as soldiers of the future should fully realize that we will

be faced in war by many new and difficult impressions, because dangers that are known and expected are already half overcome.

Let us take several examples from war and see what we can learn from them. In considering them, however, certain facts should be kept in mind. These examples do not constitute a formula for knowledge of men, because they only deal with German soldiers; moreover, they deal only with particular German soldiers in certain definite situations. Whether other soldiers of other races would react similarly in similar situations, I do not know, but I believe that they would not. The mentality of the American soldier is certainly quite different from that of the German soldier; and even in America, the soldier from the North is quite different from the soldier of the South. A soldier from the city of New York is surely quite different from a soldier who has lived as a farmer in the Middle West. He will therefore react differently and will require a different method of handling.

EXAMPLE

During the battle of Tannenburg, Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and their staff were standing on a hill and observing a portion of the battlefield. While so engaged the well-known Colonel Hoffman, who was at that time G-3, came up to a young captain of the General Staff and said to him in a quiet tone, "My friend, you seem to have nothing to do. Pay attention; in the village of X there is a Landsturm battalion. Call up its commander and say to him, 'A Russian cavalry brigade has made a deep penetration in the direction of the village of X. The Landsturm battalion is to counterattack and throw back the Russians.'"

On hearing this the young general staff officer became quite excited, and said, "Oh, Colonel, that old Landsturm battalion, which consists only of old men over 45 years old, cannot defeat a Russian cavalry brigade."

The Colonel answered, "Merely give him that order quietly and if the battalion commander refuses to obey, ask him for his name and you will see that he will do it instantly."

The young captain gave the order over the telephone and the battalion commander, terribly excited, answered, "How can I attack a Russian cavalry brigade with my old men? That's impossible."

Then the captain said, "I have been directed, if such be the case, to merely ask you for your name."

"Oh, me," came the quick reply, "I did not mean it that way; certainly we will attack. I will have my unit forward at once, and in five minutes will be on the march. Your orders will be executed immediately."

And they were.

The fear of unpleasant consequences resulted in the disappearance of all of this commander's fears. With another battalion commander in different circumstances, the effect would probably have been entirely different. Colonel Hoff-

man had correctly estimated the probable reaction of this battalion commander.

A really classic example of this art of estimating a situation psychologically was shown in 1917 by a brigade commander. This General said, "Each of our three regimental commanders must be handled differently. Colonel 'A' does not want an order. He wants to do everything himself, and he always does well. Colonel 'B' executes every order, but has no initiative. Colonel 'C' opposes everything he is told to do and wants to do the contrary."

A few days later the troops stood in front of a well-entrenched enemy whose position they were to be required to attack. The General gave the following individual orders:

To Colonel "A" (who wants to do everything himself): "My dear Colonel 'A', I think we will attack. Your regiment will have to carry the burden of the attack. I have, however, selected you for this reason. The boundaries of your regiment are so and so. Attack at X hour. I don't have to tell you anything more."

To Colonel "C" (who opposes everything), "We have met a very strong enemy. I am afraid we are not able to attack with the forces at our disposal."

"Oh, General, certainly we will attack. Just give my regiment the time of attack and you will see we will be successful," replied Colonel "C".

"Go, then, we will try it," said the General, giving him the order for the attack, which had been prepared some time previously.

To Colonel "B" (who must always have detailed orders) the attack order was merely sent with additional details.

All three regiments attacked splendidly.

CORRECT ESTIMATE

The General knew his subordinates; he knew that each one was different and had to be handled differently in order to achieve good results. He had estimated the psychological situation correctly. It is comparatively easy to make a correct estimate if one knows the man concerned; but even then it is often difficult, because the man doesn't always remain the same. He is no machine, and his reaction to certain events may be one way today and another tomorrow. Soldiers can be very brave today and tomorrow be afraid. I will give you an example from my own experience to illustrate this point.

It was the end of September 1914, just when trench warfare was beginning. We were on the Chemin des Dames. One night I, with a few men, made a patrol toward the French lines which lay a few hundred meters to our front. It was very dark, very hot, and very quiet. Suddenly I stepped on something which gave way under my weight. To determine what it was I bent down and touched it with my hand. I touched something which clung to my fingers. I could see nothing. Then I flashed my pocket lamp and saw that I had stepped on a Frenchman who had been dead for some time and whose body was disintegrating. He appeared

blue. I had touched his face and his beard had come off in my hands. I was so terrified that I ran to the rear and was unable to go out again that night in front of the trenches. I was really terrified and cowardly. This cowardice was the result of merely touching and seeing a dead man. Who can give the reasons? It was an unexplainable psychological reaction.

In September 1915, a similar thing happened to which I reacted very differently. On 13 September 1915, we had attacked the Russians and beaten them. It had been a very hard battle and we had suffered severe losses. Now night had come. It was rather cold. I found a hole in the ground sheltered with some boards, in which, however, a severely wounded Russian was lying. His bleeding intestines were hanging from his torn body. So as not to get dirty I put a blanket between us and soon went quietly to sleep. The next morning the Russian was dead. I had spent the night with a dead man in a hole. I now noticed that the dead man was still holding a piece of bread in his hand. As I was very hungry, I took this bread and ate it.

You see, therefore, that the same man reacts differently to similar events under different conditions.

HUMAN BEINGS

Let us now try to learn something from the examples that have just been given. We have to lead soldiers in war who are not machines but human beings. Each one of them reacts differently, therefore each must be handled differently. Furthermore, each one reacts *differently at different* times, and therefore, must *each time* be handled according to his particular reaction. To feel this is the art of the commander. It is the psychological estimate of the situation.

Now with regard to other matters. We who have been in war know that the hardest thing we had to do was to lie quietly under hostile fire and wait for an attack. Why?

When a soldier lies under hostile fire and waits, he feels unable to protect himself; he has time; he thinks; he only waits for the shot which will hit him. He has a certain feeling of inferiority with regard to the enemy. He feels that he is alone and deserted.

I remember one day in 1916 in Russia. During the night we had relieved the Austrians. On the following morning the Russians began a strong artillery preparation. We did not know the terrain; we did not know what troops were on our right and left; we did not know what artillery we had. With my own company alone, I was in the midst of an Austrian battalion. I did not know my superiors. The Russians had already been firing for hours, but no shots came from our own artillery. I went constantly from dugout to dugout to see my men and speak with them. They should at least see that they were not alone. Repeatedly they asked me, "Are we really entirely alone here; haven't we any artillery?" It continued this way for hours. Our telephone wires had been shot to pieces. Finally a tremendous noise came from the rear. Our own artillery was firing. At once

high spirits returned. The soldiers did not now feel deserted. Each could see and hear that we, on our side, were doing something. Each saw that he was being supported, and that everyone was ready to repulse the attack. In great defensive battles one will constantly hear the remark, when the enemy artillery is firing, "Where is our own artillery?"

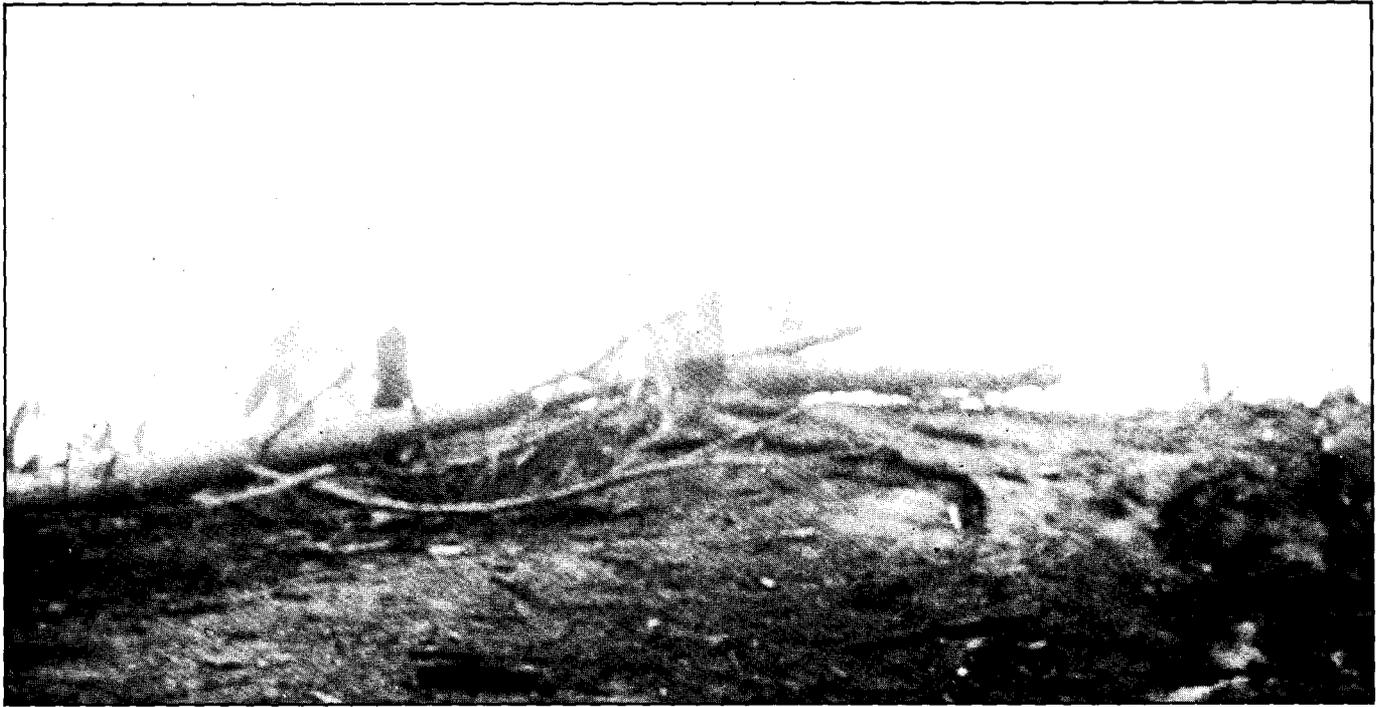
It was the same with our aviators. If a hostile flyer was over us for merely ten minutes, the soldier would begin to question, "Have we really no flyers? Where are our flyers?" If our antiaircraft guns then began to shoot at the hostile aviator, the soldier at once became satisfied; he saw that they were doing something.

It is different during the attack. Here the soldier himself does things; he has something to do; he moves forward and he fires; he assaults and dictates the action of the enemy. He never questions at the moment of the attack, "Where is our artillery?" In the attack he feels himself, from the beginning, as victor; he storms forward. He believes he can do everything by himself; he needs no support. As soon as the attack slows down, the cry for artillery is heard again.

It was February 1917 in the Carpathian Mountains. My company was in position at the top of a high mountain which controlled the terrain in all directions. In places, the Rumanians were only 20 meters away. One day we were surprised by an enemy attack and pressed back to the edge of the top of the mountain. A very difficult hand-to-hand fight took place with bayonets and hand grenades which lasted about an hour. Finally we succeeded in pushing the Rumanians down the mountain. Inasmuch as I had seen the artillery observer, who had been in my trench, fall at the very beginning of the fight, I had the feeling, during the entire time, of having fought alone with my company without any support by the artillery. In consequence I called our regimental adjutant on the telephone and complained that the artillery had not helped us. The battery commander concerned, whom I knew very well, soon afterward came to me and told me that his battery, during the fighting, had fired about 300 rounds in my support; that is, about five rounds every minute. I had not heard one of them. We had fought, acted, and in the excitement of the fighting I had not noticed at all that our artillery was firing.

OWN DESTINY

This being able to act is, in my opinion, the reason why soldiers go so willingly on patrol. I repeat that to lie in hostile fire and wait is very difficult, because one feels exposed to blind chance. One can only wait but can do nothing. On a patrol it is very different. The soldier has the feeling that he has his own destiny in his hand. He feels that he is not dependent on blind fate, that he is not forced to go this way or that, but can himself decide what to do. He feels that he is himself ruler of the situation. For example, he may have this feeling: "That path over that hill seems to me to be dangerous; I do not know exactly why, but I have that feeling very definitely; therefore, I prefer to go through the valley."



He has the feeling that his action depends on his own will, and in consequence he can act in accordance with that will.

Here are two examples to show that this feeling of security is a decisive factor. It is not a question whether security actually exists.

It was a few days after the events on the Chemin des Dames in September 1914. We were on a hill near Berry au Bac. At our immediate right was a road and a canal leading down to Berry au Bac which was occupied by the French. On this road there was a small stone house. One day I happened to be in this house in which I had placed a picket of five or six men to guard the road. Suddenly the French began to fire on the house with heavy artillery. A shell came every minute. Everyone knows that these single shells are much more unpleasant than a barrage, because one has time to wait and think. The first shell fell about 50 meters short; the second, about 100 meters long; the third, also was short; then one arrived which was close to the house.

I noticed that my men were rather uneasy; they were now waiting for the shell which would fall in the middle of the house. I could not leave my men at this minute, although my place was really not there. So we waited together. This waiting and this uncertainty made us nervous. We sat in the house and listened for every shell which came. We could tell exactly whether it was too short or too long, or whether it would fall to our right or to our left.

Finally the following thoughts began to form in my head: "The walls of this house are very thick, in fact about a yard. If a shell bursts outside the house and we are in it, nothing can happen to us. If, however, a shell bursts in the house, then it would be better to be outside it. Therefore, the best thing to do is to sit in the door and watch the shells. We can hear where the shells are going, therefore, we will be in a position to go either into the house or out of it." So I sat

down on a chair in the door and was soon perfectly satisfied—so satisfied, in fact, that I went to sleep. This action on my part calmed my men to such an extent that they began to play cards. After a few hours the firing ceased.

You may, perhaps, laugh at my action in this case. I also am ready to laugh at it. The conviction which I had at that time was nonsense, for one cannot decide whether a shell will land three or four yards to the right or to the left. I have only mentioned the point to illustrate that it is not a question of whether the security is real, but of whether one has the feeling of security.

Still another example. It was August 1916. The great Russian offensive under General Brusilov had thrown the Austrians far to the rear. We were brought up by rail and then approached the front in rapid marches so as to help the Austrians. For a few days we bivouacked in a forest behind our artillery. Then one night, we moved up close to the front as a reserve and were scattered over the terrain by companies. As we did not know anything about the terrain, an Austrian noncommissioned officer conducted the company to the front in the darkness. Arriving at a very large shed, we halted. We were happy to have a roof over our heads and slept until morning.

When it became light, I saw that this shed was entirely in the open and was located about 200 meters from an Austrian battery. This placed us in such a position that, if the Russians began firing at this battery, we would be right in the middle of their concentration. Furthermore, I could see a Russian observation balloon, therefore, we could not move out of our shed. My fears were soon confirmed; the Russians began to fire on the Austrian battery with heavy artillery. One of every three or four shots fell short and burst very close to the shed in which my company was lying in close formation. So long as it was light, or so long as the Russian balloon stayed up, we could not move.

The shells continued to fall around our shed. No one said a word. I noticed that my men were exceptionally nervous. Several men came and asked permission to go outside, giving more or less trivial excuses. I refused, for it was clear that they only wanted to reach a place of safety. The nervous excitement was intense. Suddenly a shell came down right in the middle of the company, but it did not burst. The men became now even more nervous. We were like a kettle which would soon boil over.

In order to obtain a feeling of security somebody had to act. Then I had a good thought; I called the company barber and sat down in front of the shed with my back toward the front and told him to cut my hair. I must now say, that in my whole life, no haircut has ever been so unpleasant. Every time a shell whistled just over our heads, and I jerkily pulled my head down, the barber tore out a few hairs instead of cutting them. But the effect was splendid; the soldiers perhaps had the feeling that if the company commander let his hair be cut quietly, the situation could not be so bad, and that they were probably safer than they thought they were. Soon conversation began in one group or another; a few jokes were played; a few men began to play cards; someone began to sing; and no one paid any more attention to the shells, even though a few minutes later, two men were wounded by a shell which struck in the vicinity.

TWO POINTS

Now, what can we learn from this? Two points stand out:

Give the men a feeling of security; by doing so you can easily help them to overcome their impressions.

Do something to induce action among your men. If they have been a long time on the defensive, send patrols out, even if there is no special reason for patrols.

This patrolling gives the men a feeling of self-confidence and superiority. I had, for a long time during the war, a regimental commander who demanded that each night one patrol from each company go out. Each was required to come back with clear-cut evidence of its activity. There had to be either a prisoner or a piece of hostile wire. Soon there was a regular competition among the companies. Everyone wanted to go on patrol.

In the German army we have what we call "mission tactics"; that is, orders are not written out in the minutest detail, but a mission is merely given to the commander. How he shall carry it out is his own problem. This is done because only the commander on the ground can correctly judge existing conditions, and is thereby able to act correctly if a change in the situation occurs.

There is also a very strong psychological reason for these "mission tactics." The commander, who can decide for himself within the limits of his mission, feels that he is responsible for what he does. He will, consequently, do more and be more successful, because he will act as his nature requires in accordance with his own psychological individuality. Give this same independence to your platoon

and squad leaders. You certainly know from training in peace that the more independent a group or platoon leader is in his training, the better the result is. Why? Because he can act in accordance with his own personality, which he knows best of all.

A few more examples at random will illustrate other aspects of this interesting subject of soldier psychology.

In August 1914, we marched singing through Belgium toward Liege. It was a beautiful morning; we were young, healthy, and we had the feeling of power and strength. On the road we saw the first dead. Singing ceased. Soldiers gazed at their dead comrades. The seriousness of the war suddenly appeared before their eyes; perhaps they, too, would soon lie dead by the edge of the road. Absolutely quiet, the company marched on. Then suddenly someone called to a dead man, "Seems to suit you to sleep; get up, it is breakfast time." All laughed. The seriousness of the moment had vanished in a joke. High spirits returned.

ATTACK

It was 1917. The battle of Cambrai. A lieutenant with 20 men was defending a little piece of woods. He repulsed several attacks. Another attack commenced. Only a few Germans could continue the fire. They were out of ammunition. What should be done? The lieutenant commanded, "Fix bayonets, attack, hurrah." The 20 men attacked. Eighty English soldiers were taken prisoners. Why did the English surrender? Why didn't they merely laugh at the 20 Germans who were attacking?

February 1917. It was in the same close combat on the mountain peak in the Carpathians previously described. Fighting had lasted an hour. We had not been able to drive the Rumanians back. In one place about six men were fighting. In their midst was a noncommissioned officer. Suddenly the noncommissioned officer was shot dead. One of his men jumped up. "The Rumanians have killed our corporal," he yelled, and charged into the midst of the enemy, knocking several of them down. The Rumanians ran to the rear, the Germans after them. In five minutes we recaptured the mountain peak.

In both these last cases we have examples of unexpected acts which, through their surprise effect, brought success. One cannot teach these things in peace. One can never say in such and such a decision in peace that it is the correct one. In both of the above cases it was the moral impression which was the decisive factor.

We know that psychology is tremendously important in war. It is a field unlimited in extent, to which every conscientious soldier should give much time and study. Yet it cannot be *learned* as one learns mathematics. It must be *sensed*. Unfortunately, we cannot formulate a set of rules, because it deals with human reactions which cannot be reduced to an exact science. War is governed by the uncertain and the unknown. The least known factor of all is the human element.