Ethics and Motivation

How a Soldier Feels During Combat

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The soldier engaged in combat is pervaded by a tumult of feelings, often in contrast with each other, conflicting feelings where passion tends to overcome reason, motivation and sense of ethics. An alternation of rational and irrational predominance, which involves also the commanders compelled to live through even more explosive and stressing situations.

THE SOLDIER

The figure of the soldier has been socially recognized since the dawn of civilization. He distinguished himself by his strength and aggressiveness. He stood out from the rest of the group because he was able to defend territory and food supplies and take food away from other groups. He was the "prince of survival" and, for this reason, the community praised him but at the same time stood in awe of him. As Plutarch wrote in *Life of Lycurgus*, in the 8th century BC Lycurgus aimed to create a new Spartan society whose members were invincible warriors. They had to be untouched by "the superfluity and vanity; this basic general rule operated in Egypt where soldiers were kept quite separate from civil society. For many centuries, Spartan society held great fascination for all Greece and inspired Plato when he idealized "his State" in the republic. According to him, society was divided into three groups depending on the nature of each individual: philosophers, warriors, and citizens (farmers and craftsmen).

Philosophers and warriors have to lead the utopian State of Plato. Philosophers are seen as the source of all wisdom; they know what is good for the city (they know the truths of life more than anyone else in the world).Warriors have the virtue of bravery. (The military must ensure that people obey the philosophers' will, and they have to defend their territory against enemies.) These two classes rule the lower ones which consist of craftsmen and farmers who produce goods for the community. The ruling classes have to worry not only about their own well-being but also about that of the entire community. All these groups have to have two important virtues: justice, which means performing one's particular functions, and moderation.

Contemporary society, technology and new ways of looking at the military world enable us to draw an analogy between these two Platonic virtues and those virtues that lead the soldiers during peace and through war. The military draws on its strength in fighting and aims to win. However, strength can act as a powerful and effective deterrent when it proves to be potentially destructive and winning.

Fighting means being able to use violence in a sensible and effective way, killing only if necessary and allowing for the fact that one can be killed. Winning means being the ideal instrument for neutralizing attacks against the community/state.

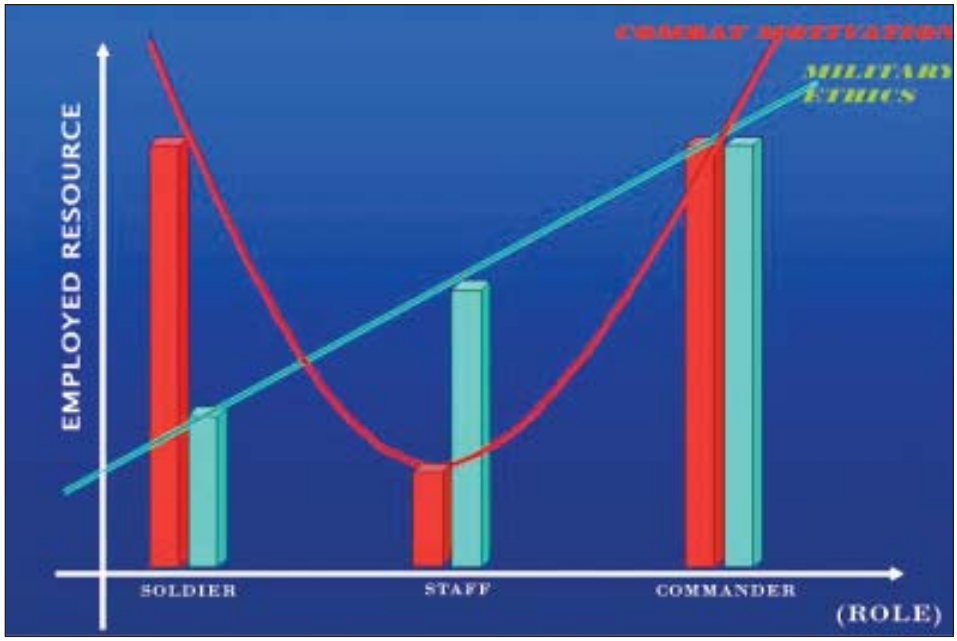
Neutralizing attacks implies aggressiveness of military spirit and moderation in order to achieve one's goals without going beyond humanitarian limits. Soldiers are experts in the use of force and have to use it avoiding any excesses.

It is widely believed that in wartime everything is allowed (*inter arma silent leges*). Actually, there is nothing more dangerous than holding an opinion like that, not only from a civil point of view but also in military terms. As General Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) said, war is famously "the continuation of policy by other means." By nature all human beings surrender themselves to *pathos* (passion) rather than to *logos*

Courtesy photos

Italian Army Soldiers patrol an Iraqi street.

(rationality) and *ethos* (ethics and morals). In particular, during war human beings reveal their real nature and can cause irreparable damage. For this reason, the civilized society calls for ethical behavior and principles which are transformed into regulations that guarantee humanity and justice. This process provides an effective safeguard against unjust wars. In fact, we can question the legitimacy of a war if the way it is fought violates basic human rights (the rules of *ius in bello*), the principle of proportionality (it concerns the damage inflicted), and the principle of discrimination (between fighters and non-fighters). "However just a war is, it will turn out to be unjustified if to win it the two important principles of *ius in bello* are violated (it does not matter how much and how often)."



Prevalent Emotions in a Combat Situation

THE SOLDIER, FROM INSTRUMENT TO ACTOR

We have to confront the dilemma about whether soldiers are just pawns in the government's plans or rational agents within that military continuation of policy.

If we regarded soldiers as mere instruments for attaining political objectives, lifting the burden of making important decisions from their shoulders, this would make their tasks much easier. Choosing this option means transforming a fighter into a mere war machine, which is built to win and is based on training, discipline, and leadership.

If we saw them as real protagonists of the war and able to solve knotty problems and make key decisions affecting national objectives and policies, they would be in a very delicate situation. In this case, in fact, they are no longer free to operate in accordance with international rules governing military operations (*ius in bello*), which are fundamental parts of their doctrine. In addition, they are at the mercy of public opinion and, consequently, they are burdened with responsibilities they would prefer not to have.

Considering the soldier as a "thinking" being means recognizing a change of his role: from pawn to actor, "from simple cause to intelligent cause;" he can be seen as "a cause able to produce good and bad things" and not "something produced by another cause without order and objectives."

This changes the meaning of the term "soldier."

In peacetime, the soldier is only potentially engaged in military operations and fighting. Consequently, he is able to plan his work according to his primary objectives and take into account the effects that have been produced by his own actions (effect-based operations).

However, we have to consider carefully different theaters of operations in which a soldier can operate. In fact, he could show a very rational or aggressive disposition according to the context. It is clear that our analysis is much simpler if we take into consideration the theater of operations in which the thinking and instinctive parts of the soldier come out.

WHO THE FIGHTERS ARE

Training and discipline pull soldiers in a particular direction on the battlefield (combat motivation). In the sudden quiet that follows the fighting, they stop to think about the results that have been achieved and the major objectives that must be pursued as they assess the whole situation. In this phase reason prevails (military ethics), and soldiers are able to make important decisions taking into consideration their humanity and, at the same time, the need to win.

All soldiers go through alternate periods of rationality and irrationality. The figure above shows the extreme levels of these two mental conditions: military ethics and combat motivation.

It should also be realized that the commander of large units is able to operate without getting physically involved in the fighting. The responsibility of the mission and his own troops and the respect of law require a great deal of energy. In addition, he feels a surge of pure adrenaline during the battle because he would like to be on the front line with his soldiers; to fulfil this onerous task he has to get the maximum benefit out of "his inner resources" — combat motivation and military ethics. The commander, whose soul often surrenders to the combat motivation, becomes very close to his soldiers through this emotional involvement (*pathos*), and extremes meet. This makes the structure of the Army solid, and all these elements make it an organic whole.

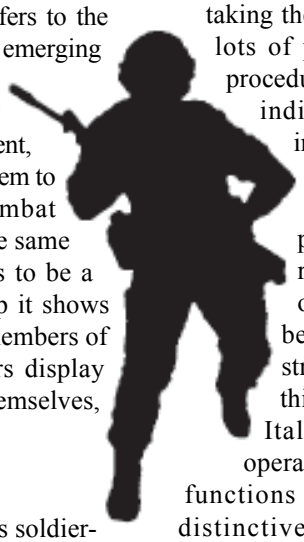
The third and last figure we can see in the virtual battlefield shows the *staff*. They work for the commander in order to transform every single decision into action in accordance with the tasks and law (*ius in bello*, military ethics). They work in a context where there is little physical and emotional involvement and where they are able to act reasonably and responsibly following "the rational path" of his heart.

WHAT LEADS THE SOLDIER

Soldiers are driven by an instinct which pushes them to act to pursue specific aims. This is referred to as military ethics and combat motivation. Military ethics is a set of rules governing the public and private conduct of the military. It consists of fundamental values such as country, discipline and honor.

In short, military ethics remind soldiers of "what they have to do and for whom." Circumstances affect our choices, but a soldier cannot let this happen during his work. He gets around this by following the rules governing the army, trying to predict the consequences of his actions during the mission, treating his comrades with great respect, and taking into consideration the current situation. This means adopting a morally correct attitude.

Combat motivation can be explained by offering a precise definition of both terms. Motivation is derived from the Latin word *motivus* which means "able to make something move," that is to say a conscious or unconscious stimulus to the action. If this stimulus refers to the individual, it can be described as "a dynamic factor of human behavior which leads an organism towards a goal." As far as the adjective "combat" is concerned, it refers to the individual aggressive behavior. It is a phenomenon emerging from the state of war and is not a feature of people who justify it. Soldiers, who have received adequate training and are under good leadership in an ideal environment, are driven by this instinctual impulse which enables them to overwhelm the enemy with determination. Combat motivation regards the individual and the group at the same time. As far as the soldier is concerned, it appears to be a willingness to win and survive. Instead, in a group it shows itself as cohesion, which is something that relates members of an organization to each other so that all members display willingness and honor, their own commitment to themselves, unity and objective.



CONCLUSIVE ANALYSIS

What I have described by referring to the roles as soldier-fighter, soldier of staff and commander is just abstract theory, whereas the reality is much more complex than it seems. A soldier does not have to see himself as a war machine; a commander should not expect him to take decisions or make choices about simple and ideal situations.

During the battle he fights bitterly and hard against the enemy and he moderates his aggressiveness adhering to simple and essential ethical principles. These principles must be easy to remember and comprehensible. For example, in the U.S. Army's Soldier's Creed, the so-called "Warrior Ethos" is outlined: "*I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade*."

Soldiers driven by their instinct and principles of honor and comradeship are able to persist in their actions even in bad conditions, trying to win the battle no matter how difficult it is. In this case, persisting in doing something is not a mere courageous action. It is moral courage; it is not only an energy that pushes them to take risky and definitive decisions, but it is an inner energy which enables them to summon the willpower to fight.

The U.S Army's Soldier's Creed stresses that modern armies tend to make the motivational aspect prevail over the ethical part of the soldier although they recognize the need to morally respect the enemy and the rules of war. Referring to the graph on page 13, in fact, we could move the parabola of combat motivation to the top of the graph (or to the bottom) depending on whether the army aims to have (especially in the front line) soldiers driven by *pathos* rather than by *ethos*.

A useful comparison will show an important point: the U.S. Army demands a lot of its troops in terms of results. The policy adopted by the Italian armed forces is quite different. As a consequence, American Soldiers put a greater emphasis on the objective that must be obtained whereas Italian soldiers lay particular emphasis on how to achieve it. This allows us to notice the different degree of trust placed in the single individual. Outlining just a few principles in the detailed checklists is symptomatic of an organization that does not exert a strict control over its members and allows them to operate free within limits. This makes them feel much more involved in the pursuit of their goals and urges them to devote themselves to the operation, even taking the initiative if necessary. On the contrary, enunciating lots of principles without classifying standard operating procedures according to their features could make the single individual feel confused and bound to comply with instructions that are given by people who have the power to decide.

Until today, this attitude towards operational problems has turned out to be able to achieve good results and it has been considered to be a good quality of Italian armed forces in the peacekeeping missions because it has allowed them to fulfil essential and strategic aims, earning universal praise. In the future, this quality could transform into a serious handicap. The Italian Minister of Defence said, "A peacekeeping operation does not have to impose limits to the military functions since the combat features of an army must be distinctive." These words warn the military against any misinterpretation of what the battlefield is — a place of violent clashes with the enemy.

Once again, our attention is drawn to the concept of the warrior defined by Plato in the "Republic." This concept is valid even in the contemporary society because it clears up any doubts about what view the armed forces have to hold on the figure of the soldier in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding about some fundamental concepts that have meanings which are often twisted.

Peace considered as absence of military conflict cannot be guaranteed forever. This resource must be safeguarded constantly by adopting an adequate policy of security, which says an appropriate use of force should be used only if necessary.

The equation security-inability to communicate violence represents the cornerstone of being a warrior. In order to avoid any possible misunderstanding, when the military operates in peacekeeping missions it should face the situation with its usual military mind supported by adequate professional training and moral creed.

Former American Secretary of Defense Les Aspen said, "We have to carry out a mission, we have to fight and win the wars of

Italian Army Special Forces Soldiers prepare for a mission in Iraq.

our Nation. For whom do we do it? For the American population. This "twofold ethics" justifies the American armed forces ... Since we are able to fight and win all the wars of our Nation, we are much more capable than others of facing different kinds of mission such as peacekeeping and relief operations ..."

Soldiers must be regarded as "combat ready" instruments; they are trained and equipped to further strategic aims. However "we cannot give a weapon to anyone. Consequently, a well-chosen selection and a rigorous moral and disciplinary training of people who pursue a military career are needed." Adequate moral "training" must be considered an unequivocal point of reference in all situations, when they are on garrison duty or during a military operation, when they undertake a combat or a peacekeeping mission.

To meet this objective it is necessary to explain simple and basic principles to the soldier concerning the figure of the fighter. They must be regarded as consistent and clear principles, to give examples:

* "I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills" (U.S. Army, Warrior Ethos);

* "I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat" (U.S. Army, Warrior Ethos);

* "...the ethos of the Army is sustained by all soldiers doing their duty with an implacable will to succeed; accepting their grave responsibility and legal right to fight and kill according to their orders and their unlimited liability to give their lives for others; confident that in return the nation will look after them and their families" (British Army);

* In combat: you will act without relish of your tasks, or hatred; you will respect the vanquished enemy and will never abandon either your wounded or your dead, nor will you under any circumstances surrender your arms (The French Legionnaire's Code of Honour);

*A mission once given to you becomes sacred to you; you will accomplish it to the end and at all costs (The French Legionnaire's Code of Honour).

This is important to face the difficult situations of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. At strategic level, the commander has to face delicate and controversial questions. This requires a higher standard of competence.

The shift of organizational leadership towards real strategic leadership involves the development of new abilities and habits. At an organizational level, tasks and objectives are really clear and this requires specific competence. Consequently, tasks and standard of performance must be clear and easy to understand.

The commander finds himself in a difficult situation because he has to manage the most delicate resource, which is the matter of ethics. He cannot adopt an immoral attitude towards the enemy, because he is a human being and has power to think logically. In other words, he has the ability to think in an intelligent way because reason is peculiar to man. He realizes that everyone is born equal.

His behavior will be ethically correct if he considers the enemy exactly like him. His behavior will be immoral if he views him as an instrument to serve military interests. The principle must be independent of specific goals everyone strives for. In this way, it is universal and ethically valid.

The commander always finds himself in a delicate situations which could affect his soldiers and civilians' life as well as success and failure of strategic and political objectives of the nation. In addition, these situations are surrounded by an aura of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Commanders do not play a key role only in saving others' lives but also in guaranteeing deterrence. They have to be ready to conduct military operations involving the killing of people and destruction of property. Since soldiers have to face difficult situations in many cases, the commander is not allowed to be in a state of inertia and paralyzed with fear. A commander could make mistakes when he makes decisions, which are often subjected to revision. However, this possibility does not have to inhibit him. On the contrary, he has to give much more vigor to his conduct and adopt an attitude that seems to be wise and correct in that particular situation.

In any case, taking an ethically wrong decision means increasing the number of choices that they will have to face, as well as the future impact of those choices. A bad ethical decision could catch the commander in a trap showing him the wrong way.

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