An Intimate History of Killing Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare

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The characteristic act of men at war is not dying, it is killing. For politicians, military strategists and many historians, war may be about the conquest of territory or the struggle to recover a sense of national honour but for the man on active service warfare is concerned with the lawful killing of other people. Its peculiar importance derives from the fact that it not murder, but sanctioned blood-letting, legislated for by the highest civil authorities and obtaining the consent of the vast majority of the population.

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a military padre in France during W.W.I

The soldier's business is to kill the enemy ...

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two senior American officers in 1955

" the killing of an individual enemy with a rifle, grenade, bayonet - yes, even the bare hands - is the mission of the Army ...

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William Broyles, former Marine and editor of Texas Monthly and Newsweek, 1984

Broyles recognized, there were dozens of reasons why combat might be attractive, even pleasurable. Comradeship, with its bittersweet absorption of the self within the group, appealed to some fundamental human urge. And then - in contrast - there was the awesome power conferred upon individuals by war. For men, combat was the male equivalent of childbirth: it was the 'initiation into the power of life and death'. Broyles had little to say about the 'life' aspect, but argued that the thrill of destruction was irresistible. A bazooka or an M-60 machine-gun was a 'magic sword' or a 'grunt's Excalibur':

all you do is move that finger so imperceptibly, just a wish flashing across your mind like a shadow, not even a full brain synapse, and poof! in a blast of sound and energy and light a truck or a house or even people disappear, everything flying and settling back into dust.

In many ways, war did resemble sport - the most exciting game in existence, Broyles believed - which, by pushing men to their physical and emotional limits, could provide deep satisfaction (for the survivors, that is). Broyles likened the happiness generated by the sport of war to the innocent pleasures of children playing cowboys and Indians, chanting the refrain, 'bang bang, you're dead!', or to the seductive suspense adults experience while watching combat movies as geysers of fake blood splatter the screen and actors fall, massacred.

There was more to the pleasures of combat than this, said Broyles. Killing had a spiritual resonance and an aesthetic poignancy. Slaughter was 'an affair of great and seductive beauty'. For combat soldiers, there was as much mechanical elegance in an M-60 machine-gun as there was for medieval warriors in decorated swords. Aesthetic tastes were often highly personal: some Marines favoured the silent omnipotence of napalm which made houses vanish 'as if by spontaneous combustion' while others (such as Broyles) preferred white phosphorous because
it 'exploded with a fulsome elegance, wreathing its target in intense and billowing smoke, throwing out glowing red comets trailing brilliant white plumes'. The experience seemed to resemble spiritual enlightenment or sexual eroticism: indeed, slaughter could be likened to an orgasmic, charismatic experience. However you looked at it, war was a 'turn on'.

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The psychology of military training

'Charms to ward off fear' were deliberately manufactured within the armed forces by a new group of professionals. As has already been hinted, the empty, dehumanized battlefield created by the physical sciences (and rejected by the arts) had provided a political and logistical space for a 'human science': social psychology. Whereas physical scientists (in their terminology and by distancing combatants from each other) attempted to deny that warfare was concerned with killing human beings, men at the front were all too conscious of this fact. For them, the great instruments of destruction were not impersonal tools, but intimate weapons. Thus, while the physical scientists pretended that emotion was irrelevant, the social scientists took the experiences of combatants seriously and placed excitement, fear and fantasy centre-stage. They attempted to convince the military hierarchy that unless officers were trained in psychology and were able to counter the effects of mechanization and anonymity, all their expertise with guns, ranges, and ballistics was useless.

The role of behavioural scientists in enabling men to kill is only very rarely, and then extremely obliquely (under the heading 'soldiers' morale'), mentioned by historians. This is not really surprising: it does not mark a proud moment in the history of the profession and it is not a particularly marketable skill. The impression most modern commentators convey is that intelligence testing, manpower allocation, and man-machine efficiency regimes consumed the energies of psychologists in wartime.

However, if modern social scientists have averted their eyes from theoretical and applied research on how to encourage 'effective combat behaviour', social scientists in the past have been far less bashful. As the psychologists, E. F. M. Durbin and J. Bowlby explained in their book Personal Aggressiveness and War (1939): 'just as it is the task of the physicist to study the general laws governing the behaviour of forces, such as electricity or gravitation', so too it was the task of social psychologists 'to describe and analyse the general psychological forces lying behind the timeless and ubiquitous urge to fight and kill'. While it is true that squeamish psychologists, and those with pacifist inclinations, could easily find themselves a bloodless niche within which to employ their talents, those who wholeheartedly embraced the militaristic enterprise were no small group of warmongers. Indeed, during both of the world wars, it was the psychologists and their professional representatives who pleaded with an initially reluctant officer class that they be allowed to prove themselves in inciting high combat motivation.

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The introduction of psychology into military training regimes was a gradual process which began in the first decade of the twentieth century and was strongly influenced by the writings of Fuller who (as we have seen) read widely in crowd and instinct psychology. Fuller made some headway in the interwar years with amendments to the British Army Regulations which introduced training in psychology for officers. In these years, military manuals slowly began to introduce psychological factors, but psychology did not carve out a secure niche within the armed forces until the Second World War by which time military heavyweights such as Field Marshal Earl Wavell (in Britain) and William C. Westmoreland (in the United States) were
arguing publicly for increased psychological training and support for officers and men. During the Second World War, a majority of professional psychologists were involved in war work and social scientists replaced natural scientists on the boards of important research organizations such as the National Research Council and the Research Information Service. Military psychology courses sprang up in colleges throughout Europe and the United States; and the media popularized their research. Many psychologists believed that warfare had been fundamental to the growth and status of their profession by enabling them to 'connect scientific psychology to life'. As Lewis M. Terman put it in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1923, war had transformed their discipline from a 'science of trivialities' into a 'science of human engineering'.

In the words of the philosopher William James in his renowned 'The Moral Equivalent of War' (1910): 'Our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow, and thousands of years of peace won't breed it out of us." Since pugnacity was one of the primary instincts, combat training was aimed at stripping the civilized veneer from the individual psyche. The 'beast within' was encouraged to find expression in bayonet drill and dehumanizing rituals.

There was a problem, of course: the instinct of self-preservation was as liable to lead to 'flight' as to 'fight'. To overcome this, military psychologists coupled instinct theory with the crowd psychology of men like Gustave Le Bon and his English popularizer, Wilfred Trotter. Humans were herd animals, with strong gregarious impulses. In a crowd - and the army was only a trained crowd - the 'group mind' would take over, endowing the individual with a sense of almost limitless power and immortality. Group solidarity led to a return to primitive forms of behaviour, including reliance on the leader as the father substitute. Crowd psychology also promoted automatic movements: group drills, with emphasis on monotony and everyone doing the same thing together, enabled men to carry out the required movements almost without conscious thought, all the time feeling 'supported by the formidableness of the group'. This was the training regime that one Canadian soldier of the First World War was praising when he wrote: 'Mechanically we stabbed a dummy figure. Mechanically we would stab and stab again a breathing human frame.'

Instinct theory remained powerful, but primarily as a justification for the gruesome training enterprise, rather than as a practical way to encourage men to kill. This was summed up nicely in an article published in 1965 by Captain P. P. Manzie of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps. He noted that the resolve of the army leader could be weakened by a feeling that his task was 'unnatural and immoral; that he has to pervert a peaceful being into ways of violence'. Not so! he reassured his readers, killing was part of every man's natural inheritance. The job of the military instructor was, in fact 'already half done - the polite bank-clerk strips down, not to a peaceful individualist, but to a soldier born'. Similarly, crowd theories had a long life. In the period leading up to the First World War, the ability of the crowd to instigate actions that were antithetical to individuals was regarded as a justification of the army's emphasis on leadership or the 'father figure' who could 'sway' the unit by his personality. The character of the leader was the central feature: he had to embody aggression, courage, strength of mind and physique, and responsibility.

Use of psychoanalytic concepts in training was highly controversial. Some military
psychologists (particularly in the American forces) embraced them. For example, in the 1940s, Major Jules V. Coleman argued that psychoanalytic principles and frustration-aggression theories were crucial in enabling men imbued with the commandment 'Thou Shalt Not Kill' to 'move in on the enemy and destroy him'. Patriotism and idealism would never provide sufficient incentive. Effective training required the mobilization of 'free-flowing aggression' and the control of anxiety and guilt. These two principles were related, since anxiety and guilt inhibited aggression, and the harnessing of aggression helped to control inner tensions. Important ways of maintaining morale involved the provision of competent leadership, training for discipline and skill, instilling pride in the unit, promoting an aggressive attitude, and taking care of the troops. Killing the enemy would thus resemble a mythical rite in which the death of the father (represented by the company commander) could be celebrated in 'an orgy of displaced violence' Coleman argued that this slaughter would satisfy deep-seated, primitive unconscious strivings derived from early childhood fantasy . . . The enemy is a sacrificial object whose death provides deep group satisfaction in which guilt is excluded by group sanction. Combat is a ritualistic event which resolves the precarious tensions of hatred created by the long drawn out frustrations of training. Without these frustrations, a group would not be a military force.

In combat, the 'hatred which has been carefully nurtured and encouraged through the irksome indignities associated with long military training' would be displaced from the men's leaders to the enemy. In other words, killing the enemy became an act of vengeance and the enemy's dehumanization helped allay feelings of guilt.

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Lieutenant William L. 'Rusty' Calley. commanding officer, My Lai massacre, March 1968

"... what the hell is war than killing people?"

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The massacre had begun just after eight o'clock on the morning of 16 March 1968, when 105 American soldiers of Charlie Company, 11th Brigade of the Americal Division, entered the small village of Son My (known to the Americans as My Lai and thought to be the base of the 48th Viet Cong Local Forces Battalion) in the San Tinh District, Quang Ngai Province, on the north-eastern coast of South Vietnam near the South China Sea.

By the time Calley and his men sat down to lunch, they had rounded up and slaughtered around 500 unarmed civilians. Within those few hours, members of Charlie Company had 'fooled around' and laughed as they sodomized and raped women, ripped vaginas open with knives, bayonetied civilians, scalped corpses and carved 'C Company' or the ace of spades on to their chests, slaughtered animals, and torched hooches. Other soldiers had wept openly as they opened fire on crowds of unresisting old men, women, children and babies. At no stage did these soldiers receive any enemy fire or encounter any form of resistance save fervent pleadings. Yet, they were 'only' obeying orders, doing their duty, and - they reasoned - even little babies could be Viet Cong ('I thought,' Paul Meadlo testified, 'they had some sort of chain or a little string they had to give a little pull and they blow us up'). After the massacre, the men of C Company burned their way through a few other villages, eventually reaching the seashore where they stripped and jumped into the surf A year later, Private First Class Michael Bernhardt remembered that there had been no sense of hangover in the company, no brooding over rights and wrongs. If you had told them a year ago that they were going to be on trial, maybe for their lives, they wouldn't have believed you. It would have been so fantastic.
Of course, some men had been shocked by what they had done or seen, but 'war was war' and there were other battles to fight. However, Lieutenant Calley was very definite about his duty to obey orders. A useful insight into Calley's attitude can be taken from his autobiographical account of the massacre, Body Count (1971). He recalled that at one stage during that bloody morning, he came across Dennis Conti forcing a young mother to give him oral sex. Calley ordered Conti to 'Get on your goddam pants!', but admitted that he did not know 'why I was so damn saintly about it. Rape: in Vietnam it's a very common thing.' He continued:

I guess lots of girls would rather be raped than killed anytime. So why was I being saintly about it? Because: if a GI is getting a blow job, he isn't doing his job. He isn't destroying communism. . . Our mission in My Lai wasn't perverted, though. It was simply 'Go and destroy it;. Remember the Bible: the Amalekites? God said to Saul, 'Now go . . . and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass. But the people took the spoil -' and God punished them. No difference now: if a GI is getting gain, he isn't doing what we are paying him for. He isn't combat-effective.

What Calley omitted to say in his memoir was that he immediately murdered the mother and her child: he was obeying orders. Calley was not alone in this belief: all the participants in the My Lai massacre claimed that they were 'only' doing what they had been told. In the briefing prior to entering My Lai, Colonel Henderson had taunted the officers for their poor performance in earlier attacks and their lack of aggression which enabled 'men, women, or children, or other VC soldiers in the area' to escape. Men left the briefing feeling resentful and furious. William Calvin Lloyd recalled 'we knew we were supposed to kill everyone in the village' and Robert Wayne Pendleton remembered that as they cleaned their weapons the night before the attack people were 'talking about killing everything that moved. Everyone knew what we were going to do.'

The Hague Conventions (1899 and 1907), the Nuremberg Principles (1946), and the Geneva Convention (1949) are the most important. According to the Hague Conventions, the life of an enemy combatant who had 'laid down his arms, or having no longer means of defence' was to be spared. Every prisoner of war 'must be humanly treated', they decreed. The sixth Nuremberg Principle defined a war crime as including murder and the ill-treatment of civilian populations or prisoners of war. The Geneva Convention of 1949 also insisted that 'persons taking no part in the hostilities, including members of the armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanly' and it specifically forbade 'violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment, and torture'.

In addition to international law, the armed forces had their own regulations. All armed forces during the two world wars prohibited the gratuitous slaughter of civilians and unarmed or wounded personnel. The situation in Vietnam was more complex. Prior to 3 March 1966, the US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV) which was responsible for the command, control and support of US personnel in Vietnam, had only published war crime directives designated to apply to violations of Geneva Conventions inflicted by forces against the Americans. In 1966, however, MACV Directive 20-4 was published to include war crimes committed by American personnel. It unequivocally stated that the wilful killing, torture, or inhuman treatment of, or wilful causing great suffering or serious injury to the body or ( health of persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of
the armed forces who had laid down their arms or who were not combatants because of sickness, wounds, or any other cause, was a war crime.

In addition, the maltreatment of dead bodies, firing on localities which were undefended and without military significance, and plunder, were defined as war crimes and it became incumbent upon all military personnel who had knowledge that a crime had been committed to report it to his commanding officer 'as soon as practicable'.

The most difficult issue to be resolved, however, was not what constituted a major war crime but who was responsible. The plea of respondeat superior ('just obeying orders') was commonplace: but was it valid? In Britain, the military code of 1749 had decided that troops were only compelled to obey lawful orders. However, the first edition of Lassa Oppenheim's International Law (1906) stated that 'in case members of forces commit violations ordered by their commanders, the members cannot be punished, for the commanders alone are responsible' and paragraph 433 of the 1914 edition of the Manual of Military Law required combatants to give absolute obedience to all commands issued by superior officers. This remained unchanged until 1944 when the idea of lawful orders once again became mandatory, making individual combatants liable for actions which violated 'unchallenged rules of warfare' and outraged 'the general sentiment of humanity'. In America, the military code did not refer to the issue of superior orders until the 1914 edition of the Rules of Land Warfare which granted immunity to individuals within the armed forces who broke the laws of war under orders from their government or commanders. Again, this decision was reversed in 1944 when a new Section 345.1 declared that individual combatants were liable, although the fact that a particular action had been carried out under orders could be 'taken into consideration in determining capability.' The US Army Field Manual of 1956 agreed that the defence of superior orders could never be valid unless the accused individual 'did not know and could not reasonably have been expected to know that the act was unlawful.' The US Manual for Courts Martial (1969) similarly commented that homicide 'committed in the proper performance of a legal duty' was justifiable, but not when the acts were 'manifestly beyond the scope of his authority, or the order is such that a man of ordinary sense and understanding would know it to be illegal'. On an international level, the Nuremberg Principles (1946) decreed that 'any person who commits an act which constitutes a crime under international law is responsible thereafter and liable to punishment' and 'the fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law, provided a moral choice was in fact possible to him.'

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Racism in all its forms (cultural ethnocentrism, scientific racism and broadly-based ideas about 'national character') was a key factor in the prevalence of atrocities in certain theatres of war. The most vicious and widespread atrocities carried out by British, American and Australian troops occurred in circumstances, in all three conflicts, where the enemy was considered to be racially very different (as in the war in the Pacific between 1939-45 and in Vietnam). Prejudice lay at the very heart of the military establishment (for instance, during the Second World War, drill instructors told recruits: 'You're not going to Europe, you're going to the Pacific. Don't hesitate to fight the Japs dirty' and, in the Vietnam context, Calley was originally charged with the premeditated murder of 'Oriental human beings' rather than 'human beings'), and undeniably, men who carried out atrocities had highly prejudicial views about their victims. Calley recalled that on arriving in Vietnam his main thought was, 'I'm the big American from across the sea. I'll sock it to these people here.' Even Michael Bernhardt (who refused to take part in the massacre) said of his comrades at My Lai: 'A lot of those people wouldn't think of
killing a man. I mean, a white man - a human so to speak.' After an horrific recital of rape and murder, Sergeant Scott Camil of 1st Marine Division explained that 'it wasn't like they were humans. We were conditioned to believe that this was for the good of the nation, the good of our country, and anything we did was okay. And when you shot someone you didn't think you were shooting at a human. They were a gook or a Commie and it was okay.' By classifying the Japanese or Vietnamese as inhuman, they all became fair game. Furthermore, such racism contained an element of fear, as the historian John W. Dower has pointed out in his exhaustive survey of racial attitudes in the Pacific theatre of war: Japan was the first non-white country to industrialize and become an imperial power, it was the first to claim a place among the Great Powers (at the Paris Peace Conference), the first to beat a western power at war (Russia in 1905), and the first to raise the idea of Asia for the Asians. These people needed to be put in their place.

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Sociologists Diane Archer and Rosemary Gartner, 1980 study of relationship between violence in war and crimes of violence in civilian life

War involves homicide legitimated by the highest auspices of the state. During many wars, the killing of enemy soldiers has been treated not merely as a regrettable and expedient measure but as praiseworthy and heroic...