Cowards, Comrades, and Killer Angels: The Soldier in Literature

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> Generals have since written accounts of these events (on the East Front), locating particular catastrophes, and summarizing in a sentence, or a few lines, the losses from sickness or freezing. But they never, to my knowledge, give sufficient expression to the wretchedness of soldiers abandoned to a fate one would wish to spare even the most miserable cur.
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> — Guy Sajer
> *The Forgotten Soldier*

Sajer's harsh indictment rings true. Generals, in recounting the big picture, often give short shrift to the horror of war at the soldier's level. Historians are equally culpable, recording only the objective events—dates, places, and orders of battle—not the confused, constricted view from the foxhole or tank hatch.

This is not to say that big-picture accounts are unimportant. Understanding war at the operational level is critical. But studying military history and the memoirs of senior generals is not enough. Leaders must also understand the human dimension of war at the lowest level. One valuable source of insight is often overlooked—the experiences of soldiers at war as recounted in fiction and personal accounts. As Colonel Henry Gole, US Army Ret., said in a recent article in *Military Review*, fictional accounts of battle helped one green soldier weather his first war: "My experience as a young infantry soldier in Korea convinced me that having read *The Red Badge of Courage*, *All Quiet*

on the Western Front, *From Here to Eternity*, and *The Naked and the Dead* prepared me better for war than any history I had read to that date."

Exactly what lessons are to be learned from these books? Even a brief review of the literature of war immediately uncovers two dominant themes: First, in combat all soldiers are afraid; second, this fear, coupled with shared hardships, drives soldiers into a close relationship with one another. A third theme, less obvious, more sinister, and more pervasive than expected, is that of a certain zest for war and destruction which, when carried to extremes, is best represented by a type of soldier Michael Shaara called the "killer angel."

I did not use any special method in selecting the fiction and soldier memoirs that will be used to illustrate these themes. Most are from recent wars, and generally represent both sides of the fighting. The authors of the fictional accounts cited had firsthand military experience with the exception of Stephen Crane, who wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* based largely on his reading of Tolstoy and about the battles and leaders of the Civil War. Many of the fictional works are largely autobiographical, some extremely so.

Cowards

Lieutenant Henry: They won't get us, because you're too brave. Nothing ever happens to the brave.
Catherine (his nurse): They die of course.
Henry: But only once.
Catherine: I don't know. Who said that?
Henry: The coward dies a thousand deaths, the brave but one?
Catherine: Of course, who said it?
Henry: I don't know.
Catherine: He was probably a coward. He knew a great deal about cowards but nothing about the brave. The brave dies perhaps two thousand deaths if he's intelligent. He simply doesn't mention them.

— Hemingway
A Farewell to Arms

Given similar combat settings, what separates the coward from the brave is neither the presence, nor even the intensity, of fear. Audie Murphy, our country's most decorated soldier in World War II, repeatedly faced combat

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with a gut full of fear: "It strikes first in the stomach, coming like the disembowling hand that is thrust into the carcass of a chicken. I feel now as though icy fingers have reached into my mid-parts and twisted the intestines into knots" (*To Hell and Back*).

What is the nature of this fear that "twists the intestines" with "icy fingers"? What, exactly, does the soldier fear? Obviously he fears death, but as in all dealings with emotions, it is far more complicated than that. For many soldiers facing their first combat, fear of death is overshadowed by a fear that they will not stand up to the rigors of battle—that they will not measure up to their comrades or to their responsibilities or, worse, that they will freeze or flee. This fear gnaws at Henry Fleming, the Union soldier in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. For days, as Fleming and his green New York regiment wait for their first battle at Chancellorsville, he agonizes over how he will react: "A little panic-fear grew in his mind" as "it had suddenly appeared to him that perhaps in a battle he might run."

The leader on the verge of his first battle is doubly plagued by fears and self-doubts. Not only must he overcome the normal fear of death, and not only must he measure up, but as the leader he must also take charge. In *And No Birds Sang*, Farley Mowat, a Canadian infantry platoon leader in World War II, after being selected to lead a 20-man assault party "was quivering with internal tremors, not so much at the prospect of what the enemy might do but at the thought of having to measure up to what would be required" of him. Lieutenant James McDonough (*Platoon Leader*) shares similar feelings before departing on his first combat patrol in Vietnam: "Even more awe-inspiring than the scenery was the realization that whatever took place in this part of the world, whatever these men did or whatever happened to them, was my responsibility. . . . I felt I was living a lie: I was trying desperately to learn what I was already supposed to know."

Not surprisingly, some soldiers can't bear up to the added pressure of leadership. Guy Sajer, an East Front infantryman in World War II, after proving his personal bravery any number of times during two years of fighting, chokes when put in charge of an antitank ambush team, unable to provide the leadership needed in the middle of a desperate and uneven battle between Russian tanks and German infantry: "I was there, fully conscious, aware of everything, but paralyzed by insurmountable panic. I shall never forgive myself for that instant, when reality touched the deepest recesses of my being. . . . Fear nailed me where I was" (*The Forgotten Soldier*).

Some soldiers find on the eve of battle that they have even more to fear than death, mutilation, or failure to measure up to their responsibilities. Just before landing in Sicily, Mowat discovered one of his men standing at attention in the troopship head rotely practicing his manual of arms, ashen-faced and crying uncontrollably: "I had never seen anyone give way to fear

before, and I could not comprehend how Sully could collapse like that even *before* the guns began to fire. My God, I thought, if it can happen to him. . . . A jagged sliver of self-doubt slipped between my ribs." The possibility of "cracking up," "combat fatigue," "shell shock," or whatever is not a subject much dwelt upon in formal military education, but it is pervasive in the literature of war. Mowat's Private Sully boarded a landing craft with his platoon and went to the beaches of Sicily. After all the soldiers had supposedly debarked, Mowat looked back to see a "small khaki figure standing stiffly at attention in the gaping opening. Suddenly he began to move, *marching* up the ramp, rifle at the slope, free arm swinging level with his shoulders. Tiny Sully was coming off that sardine can as if on ceremonial parade . . . except that his eyes were screwed tight shut." Sully is killed a moment later by a mortar burst.

Thus soldiers have many fears in anticipation of battle, and this fear is too much for some. Crane's Henry Fleming, the Union soldier so afraid of cowardice, does indeed flee from his first battle, and the remainder of Crane's classic is devoted to portraying how Fleming eventually rejoins his unit, regains his confidence, and becomes one of his regiment's bravest soldiers. By the end of the story, Fleming has attained a serene, almost sublime, state: "He knew that he would no more quail before his guides wherever they should point. He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man." Here Crane's story rings false—the sane soldier never reconciles himself to his own death, try as he might.

The literature of war tells us that those soldiers who truly do reconcile themselves to death very promptly die. Mowat, a great chronicler of the progressively damaging effects of fear, tells of a stretcher-bearer who, after months of combat, strode naked toward the enemy lines singing "Home on the Range" at the top of his lungs. He had been possessed by the worm of fear "that never dies," the worm that gnaws inside all soldiers. Mowat's father, a World War I infantryman, writing to his son about similar events, told of two comrades who "committed suicide on the Line. They did not shoot themselves—they let the Germans do it because they had reached the end of the tether." Those unhinged soldiers, unlike Crane's Fleming, were truly resigned to death.

Had Crane carried his story on to Fleming's next battle, for the sake of honesty he would have had to portray a veteran soldier reentering the smoke of battle not serenely, but with reawakened fear, just as McDonough, back on patrol in Vietnam after recovering from a wound, is more afraid than before because he knows what he is in for: "I felt I was going to die, and I began to grieve—for myself, for my wife, for the little boy who would never really know his father. Sweat poured . . . from my every joint." McDonough quickly pulled himself together, however, thanks to another fear, that of not measuring up: "Somehow, I kept moving, I could not allow myself to appear cowardly in the eyes of those men." Audie Murphy, talking to a soldier freshly returned to the lines after

". . . A jagged sliver of self-doubt slipped between my ribs."

recovery from his wounds, hears a similar tale of renewed and stronger fears. As the returnee explained: "Lying there in the hospital, a man has too much time to think. And that's bad. He gets in the mood to live again."

Perhaps some soldiers are able to reconcile themselves to their own deaths, but one suspects that, like Siegfried Sassoon's pseudonymous George Sherston, their attempts to do so are self-deceptive. Sherston, a World War I British infantry officer on the Western Front, seems to persuade himself that he "had more or less made up his mind to die; the idea made things easier." Yet before his participation in a trench raid, "the fear of death and the horror of mutilation" took hold of his heart. Then, following the raid, he "felt a wild exultation. Behind . . . were the horror and the darkness. . . . It was splendid to be still alive" (*The Memoirs of George Sherston*). Not exactly the feelings of a soldier already resigned to the grave.

Thus, for the sane soldier who holds life dear, fear is an ever-present companion, and, not surprisingly, its effects can be progressively debilitating. Farley Mowat describes this dreadful process in detail. Mowat is initially brave to the point of recklessness, but after repeated exposures to death, such as the "undiluted terror" of a German rocket attack, he feels a growing sense of dread—when will his luck run out? This dread eventually overpowers him: "I was sickening with the most virulent and dreadful of all apprehensions . . . the fear of fear itself." Going on his umpteenth patrol, Mowat is "convinced that death or ghastly mutilation awaited me . . . . The certainty was absolute! The Worm that was growing in my gut had told me so." Finally, Mowat runs from a battle, only to be stopped in flight by a fellow platoon leader and given a stiff drink. Not long afterward, Mowat takes a "previously despised job at Brigade Headquarters," with the unstated implication (the book ends at this point) that he had reached his limit.

Mowat is not unique. Audie Murphy undergoes a similar process as he fights across Western Europe with the 3d Infantry Division. Seeing his comrades killed or wounded until he is the last of the original group, he wonders when "his number will be up." Murphy, who earlier in the war described his disdain for a soldier who cracked, feels differently after months of combat: "Which of us knows when his own nerves may collapse?" Other soldiers come to this realization as well. Tank platoon leader Robert Crisp, in his excellent book *Brazen Chariots*, describes coming to the end of his rope during a grueling battle in North Africa in World War II. By the fourth day, a

spirit of adventure is replaced by "grimness and fear and a perpetual, mounting weariness of body and spirit." After more than 20 days of battle, Crisp's sustaining feeling that "it can't happen to me" is replaced by "a moment of realization that made me very afraid, I knew I had lost my immunity"—not surprising after having several tanks shot out from under him, and at one point losing his entire platoon to antitank fire. After being seriously wounded during his 29th day of battle, Crisp suffers through an air raid at his hospital: "We lay and waited, shivering, for the next noise. I found my mind murmuring: 'Please God, not on the ward. Please God, not on the ward.' And knew that, finally, my battered nerve was broken."

Sometimes a soldier cracks but is able to recover. McDonough describes a time in Vietnam when, during a badly organized night ambush, he is almost killed at point-blank range by his own men: "A few minutes earlier I had been an effective platoon leader doing his job. Now I could actually feel my chest throbbing against the dirt where I lay. . . . I could not think. My body began to tremble, then shiver, then shake uncontrollably." McDonough lay there all night, not stirring until first light, even though a nearby ant colony crawled over him and he was pelted with the monsoon rains. McDonough's lapse into terror over a botched nightime ambush was temporary. The momentary terror of heavy shellfire can be similarly transient. Guy Sajer describes the brief horror that overcame him after a direct hit on his bunker: "With a roar, the earth poured in and covered us. In that moment, so close to death, I was seized by a rush of terror so powerful that I felt my mind was cracking. Trapped by the weight of the earth, I began to howl like a madman."

While fear is the main catalyst in the soldier's gradual disintegration, other factors enter. Exhaustion, hunger, cold, darkness, scorching heat, and sickness also take their toll. These conditions heighten fear's effects, helping to break down the defenses erected against war's horrors. It is after all the ability to erect defenses against fear's devastating effects that distinguishes the brave from the coward. Leaders can do much to mitigate the damage inflicted by miserable conditions in the war zone. Crisp describes the recuperative effect of simply allowing his tankers time to wash, to cook a hot meal, and to enjoy that most critical of all British morale boosters, a "brew up" of hot tea. Sassoon's Sherston always marveled at the soldiers' ability to recover given an opportunity: "Twenty-four hours' rest and a shave had worked the usual miracle with the troops (psychological recovery was a problem which no one had time to recognize as existent)."

While easing physical discomfort and providing time for rest will help restore morale, these basic measures will not directly relieve the ever-present burden of fear. Soldiers must deal personally with fear, and they do so in a variety of ways. Some of their methods appear quite irrational from the perspective of peacetime, but they work nonetheless for the soldier in the

trenches. The most common defense against fear is the belief that "it can't happen to me." While this belief seems to defy reality, the literature of war tells us that it is a sustaining rationale held by soldiers under fire. Crisp, on the eve of battle in North Africa, had already experienced war in Greece, particularly the scourge of the *Luftwaffe*, but he nevertheless felt safe: "Not for one moment did I contemplate the possibility of anything unpleasant, and with that went an assumption that there was bound to be a violent encounter with the enemy, that it would end in our favour, and that if anything terrible were going to happen it would probably happen to other people and not to me." Frederick Downs, a platoon leader with the 4th Infantry Division in Vietnam, reviewed his company's morning strength report on the eve of his first day of combat, noting that the entries for "killed in action" and "wounded in action" were no longer abstractions: "Tomorrow I would be a candidate for both categories." Nevertheless, he "dismissed the thought of dying. A slight wound for my career maybe, but nothing worse" (*The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War*).

The feeling that it can't happen to me can sustain a soldier through a great deal of fighting. Downs still felt charmed after five months of hard fighting: "I had been wounded four times, winning three Purple Hearts. My men thought I was invulnerable; I did too." Downs apparently felt that way right up to the moment when he stepped on a land mine, losing his left arm and nearly his life. For most soldiers, however, the moment comes when the assumption of personal invulnerability wanes, to be replaced by a feeling that "sooner or later my number will come up." Audie Murphy, Robert Crisp, and Farley Mowat all went through this transition.

Once this occurs, the soldier must find a new defense against fear. He comes to feel that his supposed invulnerability is gone and that as his exposure is prolonged his number will inevitably come up. At that point, his main defense is to not think about the future or the horrors of the past. Paul Baumer, a World War I German infantryman in Erich Maria Remarque's famous novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, eloquently describes this defense mechanism while his company is on a break from the front line:

> Yesterday we were under fire, today we act the fool and go foraging through the countryside, tomorrow we go up to the trenches again. We forget nothing really, but so long as we have to stay here in the field, the frontline days, when they are past, sink down in us like a stone; they are too serious for us to be able to reflect on them at once. If we did that, we should be destroyed long ago. I soon found out this much—terror can be endured so long as a man simply ducks—but it kills if a man thinks about it.

The frontline soldier thus lives from day to day. This goes a long way toward explaining the wild behavior of soldiers when out of the line. In *Those*

Devils in Baggy Pants, Ross Carter, a paratrooper in the 82d Airborne in World War II, describes the reveling, boozing, and skirt-chasing during the rare reprieves from combat. Carter can "neither condone nor justify" his own and his comrades' conduct, but he "can understand why we acted as we did." This "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" attitude is difficult for noncombatants to understand, particularly if the revelry is at their expense, but it is the soldiers' way of drowning the past and tuning out the future.

Those soldiers who insist on thinking about the future often see a grim picture of their own demise. Not unnaturally, some begin to think that a wound serious enough to keep them from further combat would be welcome. This hope for the "million-dollar wound," a pervasive theme in the literature of war, is another defense against fear—with luck a soldier will be only wounded, not horribly maimed or killed. The million-dollar wound was a favorite topic of conversation among the Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon members in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. The I & R Platoon, fighting the Japanese in World War II, envied those who got out with a lucky wound:

> Gallagher: The Army got the f-ggin percentages on their side, you can't even get a wound and get out where it's worth it.
> Stanley: I'd take a foot anytime. I'd sign the papers for it now.
> Martinez: Me too. Not so hard. Toglio, elbow shot up, he get out.
> Wilson: Goddam, ain't that somethin! Ah tell you, men, Ah don' even 'member what that chickenshit Toglio looks like any more, But Ah'll never forget he got out on a busted elbow.

Indeed, soldiers more seriously wounded than Toglio were content with their fate, knowing that they were not going back to the front. Audie Murphy tells of a soldier who had lost a leg: "He was as happy as a catbird in a cherry tree. Shipping out for home next week. Wisconsin. Figures he'll be out of the Army by the time fishing season opens." Other soldiers have felt the same. For the British in World War I, as Sassoon tells us, the goal was a "Blighty" wound, meaning one just serious enough to get one sent back to England ("Blighty") to recuperate.

If such a wound is desirable, then the next obvious line of reasoning is, "Why wait for the enemy to do it?" And the literature of war abounds with examples of self-inflicted wounds, a subject taboo in peacetime, but one that soldiers and leaders have to deal with in war. In Arnold Zweig's powerful novel *Education Before Verdun*, a story about German soldiers in World War I, the main character, Private Bertin, an otherwise brave soldier, contemplates such a wound: "Why prolong his life from one shell-burst to the next? Why not offer fate a hand and heave up his hindquarters for the benefit of a passing splinter. He had often half resolved to let his foot be crushed by the next truck

that came along: but had never quite made up his mind." Some, of course, do make up their minds. A comrade of Bertin's has a friend drive a rusty nail through his foot and then lets the wound fester. Armies establish punishments, including the death sentence, for self-inflicted incapacitations, but the fear of harsh punishment is not always enough to deter an already scared soldier.

In the final analysis, however, the solitary soldier, regardless of his individual defenses and rationalizations, does not stand a chance alone against the gnawing worm of fear. He must rely on a stronger defense against war's horrors: the strength and courage he can draw from his comrades. As J. Glenn Gray points out in *Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, the soldier who cannot avail himself of his comrades' support is the coward of the next battle.

Comrades

> At once a new warmth flows through me. These voices, these few quiet words, these footsteps in the trench behind me recall me at a bound from the terrible loneliness and fear of death by which I had been almost destroyed. They are more to me than life, these voices, they are more than motherliness and more than fear; they are the strongest, most comforting thing there is anywhere: they are the voices of my comrades.
>
> — Paul Baumer in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Remarque, a veteran of the Western Front trenches, paints an exceedingly grim picture of war in *All Quiet on the Western Front.* But there is one human quality among all of war's inhumanity that Remarque and his fellow chroniclers find worthy—the spirit of comradeship. Comradeship in war is as pervasive a theme as fear; not surprising, given that comradeship is directly related to soldiers' efforts to fend off fear. For many, as for Paul Baumer, comrades are a sustaining force. Paratrooper Ross Carter reflected that "my life wasn't any more important than theirs and my number would no doubt come up, sooner or later, just as theirs had. But somehow I felt that comradeship . . . had about it a value that in itself geared me to face whatever lay ahead as well as if not better than my hatred for the enemy and his philosophy."

In war, the soldier's world narrows to his immediate surroundings. His unit and his closest comrades define the limit of his horizon, and within that horizon the soldier draws security and comfort. Things beyond it dim and lose meaning, to include the war's larger goals and even loved ones and peacetime life. Guy Chapman, a British subaltern in World War I, described in *A Passionate Prodigality* how all-encompassing the soldier's life with his comrades can become: "Looking back at those firm ranks as they marched into billets, to the Fusiliers' march, I found that the body of men had become so much a part of me that its disintegration would tear away something I cared for more dearly than I could have believed. I was it; it was I."

While true that the soldier's unit can become the be-all of his existence, Chapman's implication that a soldier cannot shift his allegiance to another group is suspect. The bonds of comradeship develop for very personal reasons—specifically as a defense against war's fears and horrors. Thus, despite the strong bonds of comradeship that a soldier may develop in one unit, if he is transferred to another he will establish new bonds and rather quickly forget the old—he must if he is to survive. The perceptive Mowat describes this process when, for a period of time, he must leave his platoon to serve as battalion intelligence officer:

> I had been more firmly bound to them than many a man is to his own blood brothers, and yet, sadly, it was not a lasting tie. I would not have believed it possible, but I was to discover that after a brief separation they would become almost *irrelevant to my continuing existence* [emphasis added]. . . . I was slow to comprehend the truth; that comrades-in-arms unconsciously create from their particular selves an imponderable entity which goes its own way and has its own existence, regardless of the comings and goings of the individuals who are its constituent parts.

While this attitude may strike us as cynical, it becomes perfectly understandable when we realize that comradeship first and foremost fulfills an individual need. This does not mean that comrades fail to sacrifice, fight, and even die for each other—they do. But the reasons a soldier seeks comradeship are inherently self-serving. This explains, to some extent, the soldier's ability to feel strongly for his fellow soldiers while not dwelling upon their deaths. Remarque's Baumer, noting the loss of many comrades after a bad stretch in the line, tells us: "It is a damnable business, but what has it to do with us now—we live. If it were possible for us to save them, then it would be seen how much we cared—we would have a shot at it though we went under ourselves. . . . But our comrades are dead, and we cannot help them, they have their rest and who knows what is waiting for us?" In other words, Baumer's dead comrades—or in the case of Mowat, his former platoon members—are irrelevant to the individual's continuing existence.

Comradeship, then, in its most basic form, is a defense mechanism that a soldier relies upon to quell fears, to diminish loneliness, and to endure hardships. Yet, as we have seen, comrades often fight and die for one another. This paradox is hard to explain, but it is the key to success in battle. Comradeship in its higher form is tied to the soldier's fear of not living up to his responsibilities: at the same time that the soldier draws strength from his comrades' presence, he knows he must reciprocate by being there for them. As J. Glenn Gray points out, soldiers fight not for ideals but for each other: "Numberless soldiers have died, more or less willingly, not for country or honor or religious faith or for any other abstract good, but because they

realized that by fleeing their post and rescuing themselves, they would expose their companions to greater danger. Such loyalty to the group is the essence of fighting morale."

The literature of war provides more than ample proof for Gray's thesis. Sajer and his comrades in the *Gross Deutschland* Division "no longer fought for Hitler, or for National Socialism, or for the Third Reich—or even for our fiancees or mothers or families. . . . We fought for reasons which are perhaps shameful, but are, in the end, stronger than doctrine. We fought for ourselves, so that we wouldn't die in holes filled with mud and snow." In subtler terms, Sassoon's George Sherston says the same: "The War was too big an event for one man to stand alone in. All I knew was that I'd lost my faith in it, and there was nothing left to believe in except 'the Battalion spirit.' The Battalion spirit meant losing oneself into comfortable companionship with the officers and NCOs around one; it meant winning the respect, or even the affection, of platoon and company."

Clearly the initial motivating ideals and reasons leading men to war often fall by the wayside in the trenches, where only the presence of one's comrades really counts. And thus it is comrades that soldiers fight and die for. Sassoon's words lead us into another important aspect of comradeship—the role of the leader. As Sassoon's Lieutenant Sherston points out, the junior leader needs to share the communion of his fellows—"winning the respect, or even the affection, of platoon and company"—as much as any other soldier. But the junior leader is not any other soldier; he is a leader. Thus, at the same time that he needs the security and support of his fellow soldiers, he must also lead them into battle and, often, to their deaths. Needless to say, soldiers are not naturally inclined to so follow. They must feel the same sense of comradeship toward their junior leader as they do among themselves before they will risk their lives for him.

Volumes have been written about leadership—principles, traits, tips, do's, don't's, examples, etc. While there are many useful tidbits in these volumes, for the junior leader at the front only two things really matter, and the literature of war is loud and clear on this: the leader must be tactically competent and must genuinely care for his men. Everything else is peripheral.

"We fought for reasons . . . stronger than doctrine. We fought for ourselves, so that we wouldn't die in holes filled with mud and snow."

Obviously a leader must be tactically proficient, because the soldier does not want to be killed thanks to his leader's incompetence. If the leader does not know his job, or if he is not able to quickly assimilate what he needs to know on the battlefield, then he will not gain his men's respect, he will not bond with his comrades, and his men will not risk their lives for him. As exemplified by Sassoon's Lieutenant Colonel Kinjack, the leader doesn't have to be a nice guy—he just has to know his stuff: "Personal charm was not his strong point, and he made no pretension to it. He was aggressive and blatant, but he knew his job, and for that we respected him and were grateful."

The second leadership requisite—genuine concern for the men—deserves even closer examination. Genuine concern means far more than just taking care of the troops. It is a deep, internalized, and completely authentic love of the soldier for what he is and what he does. In war, this love cannot be faked—the soldiers will know if their leader's concern is real or pretended. They will not readily follow a leader into battle who does not truly care for them, as proven by his presence and his deeds.

The authors quoted throughout do not dwell on the characteristics of leadership—that is not their main theme—but the need for leaders to care about their soldiers comes out very clearly. Sassoon's newly arrived Lieutenant Sherston emulates fellow platoon leader Durley who "took the men's discomforts very much to heart. Simple and unassertive . . . Durley was an inspiration toward selfless patience." Other examples abound. Sajer's company commander, Captain Wesreidau, "often helped us to endure the worst. . . . He stood beside us during countless gray watches, and came to our bunkers to talk with us, and make us forget the howling storm outside." The veteran soldier in Sajer's platoon, "who had a good sense of men," said of Wesreidau that "he looks intelligent and wise." Lieutenant Guy Chapman's battalion executive officer, Major Ardaugh, was from the same mold: "Very small, very thin, a frail ghost of a man he joined us; but a month of his company convinced everyone of the soundness of his heart. He was always to be found in the front line at night, sitting on a firestep smoking his pipe or wandering around the bays. "

There is a key phrase in this description of Major Ardaugh: "the soundness of his heart." The leader who truly cares for his soldiers is with them because of heartfelt concern, not because it is his "duty," or because he wants to appear brave and soldierly for his own sake. He is there because he wants to be. This concern cannot be trumped-up or invented, it must come from inner feelings like those of James McDonough on the verge of leading one of his squads in a bloody counterattack: "I felt proud to be with them and glad to share their company. Their qualities of moral and physical courage, of unselfish dedication to each other amid the difficult jobs they were called upon to do, marked them in my mind as among the noblest of human beings." Lieutenant Chapman's tribute to his men is in a similar vein: "By your courage

in tribulation, by your cheerfulness before the dirty devices of this world, you have won the love of those who have watched you. All we remember is your living face, and that we loved you for being of our clay and our spirit." Lieutenant Sherston's tribute to his soldiers is cut from identical cloth:

> I was rewarded by an intense memory of men whose courage had shown me the power of the human spirit—that spirit which could withstand the utmost assault. Such men had inspired me to be at my best when things were very bad, and they outweighed all failures. Against the background of the War and its brutal stupidity those men had stood glorified by the thing which sought to destroy them.

There is a corollary to the rule of caring about one's soldiers. It is contained in these simple yet significant words of Guy Chapman in describing certain of his brigade's staff officers: "They were of that superb type, the best kind of regimental officers, devoid of personal ambition." The corollary, quite simply, is that the officer who *truly* cares for his men has little time or inclination for personal ambition. The junior leader who is more concerned about his career than his own men will not be willingly followed in battle, for such a leader does not have the soldiers' best interests at heart.

Thus the leader, through tactical competence and genuine concern for his soldiers, will earn their trust and comradeship. Soldiers and leaders alike need their comrades' support to endure war's fears and horrors. Comradeship sustains the soldier long after the glorious ideals for which he initially went to war are lost in grim reality. Paradoxically, comradeship becomes so important, so much the be-all of the soldier's existence, that he will die for his comrades at the same time that he counts on them for his own survival.

Killer Angels

> Once Chamberlain had a speech memorized from Shakespeare and gave it proudly, [his father] listening but not looking, and Chamberlain remembered it still: "What a piece of work is man . . . in action how like an angel." And the old man, grinning, had scratched his head and then said stiffly, "Well, boy, if he's an angel, he's sure a murderin' angel." And Chamberlain had gone to school to make an oration on the subject: Man, the Killer Angel.
>
> — Michael Shaara
> *The Killer Angels*

We turn now to the third theme in the literature of war, one more pervasive than a supposedly peace-loving mankind might wish to admit: In war many soldiers become efficient killers who take to their work rather handily.

Michael Shaara's excellent, fictionalized account of the Civil War battle of Gettysburg is arguably the book most widely read by serving soldiers and most often quoted by them. *The Killer Angels* abounds with lessons in

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Colonel Joshua Chamberlain gives the order at Little Round Top for a desperate charge in this painting "Bayonet! Forward . . ." by Dale Gallon. The original painting was a gift to the US Army War College from the resident class of 1987.

leadership and generalship, and it is for this reason, along with its readability, that the book is so popular. Most military readers, however, do not catch the book's main theme—the theme for which it is titled—that some men in battle, as personified by Colonel Chamberlain of the 20th Maine, are quite adept at the calling of war. Following the 20th Maine's critical victory on Little Round Top, Shaara describes killer-angel Chamberlain's feelings before the smoke had even cleared: "He felt an appalling thrill. They would fight again, and when [the enemy] came he would be behind another stone wall waiting for them, and he would stay there until he died or until it ended, and he was looking forward to it with an incredible eagerness. . . . He shook his head, amazed at himself."

One might dismiss this as merely clever wordsmithing—surely no soldier eagerly seeks his next battle. But in examining the career of Colonel (later Brigadier General) Joshua Chamberlain, one must conclude that Shaara has hit the nail on the head. A reading of John J. Pullen's excellent *The 20th Maine: A Volunteer Regiment in the Civil War*, in essence the story of Chamberlain as well, shows what a truly remarkable warrior he was. He had numerous horses shot out from under him, was severely wounded several times, and won the Medal of Honor. In short, he was always in the thick of it.

His brigade was chosen as the honor guard to receive the surrender of Lee's army at Appomattox, and he stood beside the President of the United States at the Union Grand Review at the end of the war. That event is the capstone in Pullen's summation of Chamberlain's soldierly career: "It was an honor for which the Maine general had been an extremely unlikely candidate three years before as a theologian and a college professor. But there is no telling what sort of man will do well in battle. The war had been Chamberlain's dish; he had swallowed it whole and savored it to the full."

Even accepting that Chamberlain did indeed have a killer-angel complex, one might be tempted to write him off as an aberration, unrepresentative of any characteristics commonly seen in soldiers. The literature of war, however, suggests that Chamberlain's behavior is more common than one might like to believe. Furthermore, the killer angel is no psychopathic killer in uniform, though the literature suggests that there are a few of those around too, like Norman Mailer's Sergeant Croft as portrayed in *The Naked and the Dead*. The killer angel more often is like Chamberlain—rational, intelligent, and sensitive, and fully able to return successfully to the peacetime life, albeit often much affected by his wartime experiences. As J. Glenn Gray points out in *The Warriors* (a book all serving soldiers would do well to read), the soldier-killer may be lurking in all of us:

> Most men would never admit that they enjoy killing, and there are a great many who do not. On the other hand, thousands of youths who never suspected the presence of such an impulse in themselves have learned in military life the mad excitement of destroying. . . . Generals often name it "the will to close with the enemy." This innocent-sounding phrase conceals the very substance of the delight in destruction slumbering in most of us.

No doubt to the despair of well-meaning pacifists and humanists, man does possess a vast capacity for destruction and violence. Most of the accounts cited describe soldiers who are particularly adept at war and who draw a qualified pleasure from their accomplishments. To understand these seemingly sinister killer angels, we must first understand the environment of war in which they operate. At the front the number one rule is kill or be killed. Further, the soldier's right to kill is legally established by his government, leaving only his ingrained aversion to killing to be overcome. Thus a stage is set bearing little resemblance to peacetime. Frederick Downs describes how he and his platoon "slide into the barbarism" of war: "Why did we want to kill dinks? After all, we have been mostly law-abiding citizens back in the world and we were taught that to take another man's life was wrong. Somehow the perspective got twisted in war. . . . It turned out that most of us like to kill men. Some guys would shoot at a dink much as they would at a target."

The soldier is there to kill, and if he does not, he will be killed in turn. This basic rule allows soldiers not only to rationalize the taking of life, but also to take satisfaction in destroying the enemy. James McDonough, for example, expressed a perverse pleasure in seeing slain enemy: "Looking at enemy dead is an eerie sensation. I had done it often, but the emotions it evoked in me were disturbing. Could it be—repugnant thought that it was—pleasure that one feels at the sight of an opponent's body?" As McDonough goes on to explain, emotions in war run strong and deep, and the driving rule affecting the flow of emotion is that of kill or be killed: "Emotions flow with an intensity unimaginable to the nonparticipant: fear, hate, passion, desperation. And then—triumph! The enemy falls, lies there lifeless, his gaping corpse a mockery to the valiant fight he made. Your own emotions withdraw, replaced by a flow of relief and exhilaration, because he is dead and not you."

The environment of war causes not only strong emotions, but also painfully conflicting ones. As we have seen, the successful leader must genuinely care for his men. At the same time, however, he must somehow steel himself against the inevitable deaths that will occur among them. No easy task. At one point, as he led his company into battle yet again, Audie Murphy presented what appears, on the surface, to be a very callous attitude: "Right now I am concerned with the individual only as a fighting unit. If his feet freeze, I will turn him over to the medics. If his nerves crack, I will send him to the rear. If he is hit, I will see that his wound is treated. Otherwise, I look upon him as a unit whom I must get to the front and in battle position on schedule." We know, of course, from other parts of Murphy's memoirs, that he cared very much about his soldiers, but the leader must somehow reconcile himself to the fact that some will not survive. The leader who cannot do this will himself crack. Such is the environment of war for the leader.

There is the further consideration that, for some younger soldiers, the environment of war is the only one they have known outside of home and classroom. Thus, with no peacetime adult life of consequence to relate to, war becomes their entire existence. Guy Sajer, who joined the German army at 16, explained: "And then there was the war, and I married it because there was nothing else when I reached the age of falling in love." Likewise, Remarque's Paul Baumer, who went to war at 18, cannot envision life after the war, and is pessimistic about his ability to function in peacetime. All he and his young comrades know is war: "We had as yet taken no root. The war swept us away. For the others, the older men, it is but an interruption. They are able to think beyond it. We, however, have been gripped by it and do not know what the end may be." Such is the life of war for the innocent youth.

The wartime environment is one in which the killer angel will not only thrive, but also prove to be a valuable asset to his comrades and his country. In every war, on every side, such soldiers emerge, and the literature

of war is rife with examples. In Hemingway's novel *Across the River and Into the Trees* we have a classic study of one such killer angel, Colonel Richard Cantwell, a life-long professional soldier who has fought in both world wars, has received numerous wounds, admits to killing 122 enemy (he has counted), and yet can never reconcile his ability to both love and hate war.

Lieutenant Guy Chapman's company commander, who later becomes battalion commander, is a classic example of a man "awakened" by war: "Sane, cool, and monosyllabic, he would when the occasion demanded take enormous risks and, with an uncanny sensibility, carry them off. He was one of those rare individuals who seem to require the stimulus of danger to raise them to the highest pitch." Chapman, after long months of watching his commander excel at his business, comes to believe that Colonel Smith truly "enjoyed the war, even in its most terrifying aspects. The worse the trial to be faced, the more perfect the balance of his nervous system and the greater the increase of his physical and moral power." As Chapman further considered men's actions and emotions in war, he came to realize that there is a bit of the killer angel in many soldiers, even in those who hate war:

> There grew a compelling fascination. I do not think I exaggerate: for in that fascination lies War's power. Once you have lain in her arms you can admit no other mistress. You may loathe, you may execrate, but you cannot deny her. . . . Every writer of imagination who has set down in honesty his experience has confessed it. Even those who hate her most are prisoners to her spell.

The susceptibility to war's fascination is a matter of human nature, not a matter of rank or background. Some of the private soldiers who rotated into Audie Murphy's and Ross Carter's platoons adapted quickly to their role as killer soldiers. A fellow soldier of Carter's, a "calm, quiet, good-natured" soldier fond of reading Homer, "turned out to be one of the fiercest, craftiest fighters. . . . It surprised us but shouldn't have. It is hard to predict the fighting cock in the chick and the true soldier before he has been in battle." Audie Murphy tells of similar arrivals to his platoon. One replacement, named Flack, "came into the lines with eagerness. A pale boy who looks as though he scarcely had strength to lift a rifle, he has volunteered regularly for patrols. He works with a quiet thoroughness." Likewise, Valero, a tough kid from the streets of Chicago, "is a born fighter. . . . He asks no quarter, gives no quarter; and his face lights up with savage joy when his gun is spitting. But with the men he is as friendly as a shaggy dog."

Obviously the backgrounds of killer angels can vary considerably, yet within each are dormant emotions that war brings to the surface. The more introspective killer angels realize, as does Arnold Zweig's Lieutenant Kroysing, that their zest for war fulfills some sort of personal need, and is not based on patriotic zeal: "More than any man Eberhard Kroysing had needed the war

to realize himself, to express his being and to test his reach, as he himself put it." This need of Kroysing's does not go away. Even after he is seriously wounded as an engineer in the line, he plans to continue the war as a fighter pilot, although his wounds are grave enough to warrant a return to civilian life. He describes his plans to the chaplain while in the hospital, explaining that, in making this decision, "he was not talking of his duty . . . he was talking of his own satisfaction. The priest knew quite well what a heathen he was—a faithful disciple in the religion of slaughter."

Despite the overwhelming evidence in the literature of war, it is difficult to believe, at least in a peacetime setting, that such lust for war is possible. Only by considering the killer angel in the context of his environment does one begin to understand that such soldiers not only exist but thrive. Taken to extremes, the killer angel and his comrades, operating in the violent ambience of war, work up a communal rage against the enemy that temporarily drives away fear and incites them to heights of destruction. Gray describes this phenomenon: "Men who have lived in the zone of combat long enough to be veterans are sometimes possessed by a fury that makes them capable of anything. Blinded by rage to destroy and supremely careless of consequences, they storm against the enemy until they are either victorious, dead, or utterly exhausted." The important factor here is living in the zone of combat "long enough to be veterans." Such soldiers may literally assimilate the environment of war.

Conclusion

> If I were in charge of training combat officers, I would start by establishing a class called "The Dark Side of Command." It would be about the basic features of combat: killing the enemy and taking ground. This is a side of command that is rarely discussed within the military. It's hard to talk about because it invokes subjects that are taboo in our society—subjects like death, fear, ego, destruction, and mental illness.
>
> — Frederick Downs
> "Death and the Dark Side of Command"

There is much need for the sort of training described by Downs, as unpleasant as the subject matter may be, for the junior leader in combat will most assuredly have to deal with "subjects like death, fear, ego, destruction, and mental illness." In his article, Downs accuses the military of glossing over these subjects. There is much truth in this accusation. The Army has made only sporadic efforts to address these complex and profoundly sensitive issues. A slight flurry of activity in the early 1980s, for instance, resulted in the publication of field manuals covering the effects of "stress" (a euphemism for fear) on soldiers in combat (FM 26-2) and the effects of exhaustion and

the consequent need for proper planning in continuous operations (FM 22-9). But these were flashes in the pan, not wholly satisfying, and certainly not comprehensive. Even today's hype about the warrior spirit rings hollow because it glorifies positive leadership traits and largely ignores how the combat leader is to deal with fear, death, self-inflicted wounds, fratricide, and combat fatigue—skills as much a part of the "warrior spirit" as tactical proficiency, stamina, and fostering unit cohesion. It's a package deal.

Until such time as Downs' class on "The Dark Side of Command" is instituted, both the soldier and the leader can learn much about these taboo subjects from the literature of war. As a generation of soldiers, myself included, approaches 20 years service without hearing a shot fired in anger, the lessons gleaned from the literature of war may be the best we have to go on, as was the case for a young Henry Gole off to his first war in Korea. Far from recoiling at the horrors to be found in war's literature, the professional soldier will see his capacity for introspection grow—a capacity he will surely need if he is to reconcile human reactions to war with his mandate to achieve victory.

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