



Troops of the 2nd Canadian Division attacking on Vimy Ridge, 9 April 1917.

## THE WORM REVISITED: AN EXAMINATION OF FEAR AND COURAGE IN COMBAT

by Colonel Bernd Horn

*The scouts were brewing tea in a nearby cow byre. They watched me without expression as I briefed George Langstaff and two other men. They knew I had at least glimpsed the valley in daylight and so was the logical one to lead the patrol. What they did not know was that the mere prospect of descending into that ominously shrouded valley was paralyzing me. I was convinced that death or ghastly mutilation awaited me there. The certainty was absolute! The Worm that was growing in my gut told me so.<sup>1</sup>*

– Farley Mowat  
*And No Birds Sang*

**F**ear is a subject that is rarely discussed in the military. In many ways it is taboo to do so. After all, fear is often equated with weakness and contrary to having a soldierly disposition. Moreover, it is seen as particularly unmanly in an institution that is still largely dominated by males. To most serving personnel, if there was only one quality that could be assigned to them, most would choose to be described as brave or courageous. One need only consider how often the phrase, “what are ya, scared?” has effectively motivated someone to perform a task that they would rather not have done.

But fear is a normal emotion. The essence of the issue is not whether a person experiences fear, but rather how it is controlled and utilized to benefit the effectiveness of military

personnel in times of stress, danger and crisis. Conversely, the failure to recognize the reality of fear and its effects can have serious repercussions that manifest themselves at the most inopportune, if not catastrophic, moments. It is an unfortunate fact of military service – more accurately our military culture – that has led to the misguided perception that a soldier must never demonstrate or admit to fear.

Denial of fear has long been part of the military culture, which still maintains a great degree of bravado and machismo, particularly among young soldiers and junior officers. “Culture,” according to anthropologist Donna Winslow, “represents the behaviour patterns or style of an organization that members are automatically encouraged to follow.” She believes that “Culture shapes action by supplying some of the ultimate aims or values of an organization and actors modify their behaviour to achieve those ends.” She explains that culture “establishes a set of ideal standards and expectations that members are supposed to follow.”<sup>2</sup> Quite simply, the culture existing within an organization socializes those within the group, particularly newcomers, and shapes their attitudes and behaviour to correspond to the existing framework. In sum, it creates common expectations of what is and what is not acceptable behaviour.

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And so, military culture has a pervasive influence on how the issue of fear is handled within the institution, or more accurately, how it is ignored. It is generally seen as a distasteful subject that is better left alone. “An officer,” explained sociologist and former officer Anthony Kellet, “was expected to suppress fears and foreboding, and not to discuss them as [it was considered] lacking in martial spirit and boring to brother officers.”<sup>3</sup> Samuel Hynes, in his scholarly research on the subject, found that the education and training of the majority of officers inculcated a belief that “fear and its expression are especially abhorrent.” He suggested that “young officers had been trained to an impossible ideal of leadership and self-control; not only must they lead their men fearlessly; they must be fearless.”<sup>4</sup>

But it is not only officers who are weighed down by this burden imposed by military culture. “When bullets are whacking against tree trunks and solid shot are cracking skulls like eggshells, the consuming passion in the breast of the average man is to get out of the way.” So wrote a young participant of the battle of Antietam in 1862. He added: “Between the physical fear of going forward and the moral fear of turning back, there is a predicament of exceptional awkwardness from which a hidden hole in the ground would be a wonderfully welcome outlet.”<sup>5</sup> More recently, one investigative reporter discovered after a large number of interviews that: “It’s hard to confess fear to your buddy, let alone the platoon commander.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, the chaplain of the 101st Airborne Division prior to the War in Iraq in 2003, revealed: “Few come to him openly professing fear of combat. ... The one who did said he was terribly ashamed to admit it.”<sup>7</sup>

## WHAT CONSTITUTES FEAR?

In the simplest of terms, fear is an emotion, “a state characterized by physiological arousal, changes in facial expression, gestures, posture, and subjective feeling.”<sup>8</sup> When we experience an intense emotion, such as fear, a number of bodily changes occur – including rapid heartbeat and breathing, dryness of the throat and mouth, perspiration, trembling, a sinking feeling in the stomach. It can also have more embarrassing manifestations. “And urine poured down our legs,” confessed one veteran, “Our fear was so great that we lost all thought of controlling ourselves.”<sup>9</sup>

The bodily changes during emotional arousal are due to the activation of the parasympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system as it prepares the body for emergency action – the ‘fight or flight’ reflex. In short, it prepares the body for energy output. It does this by way of a number of bodily changes, which need not occur simultaneously. They include increases in blood pressure as well as heart and respiration rates. There is a dilation of the pupils, an increase in perspiration with a concomitant decrease in the secretion of saliva and mucous, increases in blood sugar levels to provide additional energy. Other symptoms include the ability for blood to clot more rapidly in the case of wounds, the diversion of blood from the stomach and intestines to the brain and skeletal muscles, and the erection of hairs on skin surfaces, causing goose pimples.<sup>10</sup>

These changes all have specific purposes. The parasympathetic system activates the body for emergency action by arousing a number of bodily systems and inhibiting others. For example, sugar is released into the bloodstream for quick energy. The heart beats faster to supply blood to the muscles. The respiration rate increases to supply needed oxygen. Digestion is temporarily inhibited. Pupils dilate to allow in more light. Perspiration increases to cool the agitated body. And the blood flow to the skin is restricted to reduce bleeding.<sup>11</sup> “The man who recognizes fear can often make it work in his favor,” suggested war reporter Mack Morriss, “because fear is energy. Like anger, fear shifts the body into high.”<sup>12</sup> Once the crisis is over, the parasympathetic system reverses emotional arousal and calms and relaxes the body.

Researchers have determined that there are two types of fear. The first is acute fear that is generally provoked by tangible stimuli or situations, such as a loud bang or a snake suddenly slithering into view.



HMCS Ville de Québec Gets a Sub. Painting by Commander Thomas H. Beament.

This normally subsides quite quickly when the frightening stimuli is removed or avoided. The second type is chronic fear. This is generally more complex, and may or may not be tied to tangible sources of provocation. It is exemplified by an individual who persistently feels uneasy and anxious for unidentified reasons, such as the fear of being alone.<sup>13</sup>

Regardless of the type of fear, it need not be immediate or the result of personal experience. Fear is a learned reaction. "Men and animals," reported John T. Wood, "experience fear in the face of present, anticipated, or imagined danger or pain."<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Alan Gray, professor of psychology at the Institute of Psychiatry in London, agreed: "Fear ... is due to the anticipation of pain."<sup>15</sup>

Beyond all the theories, it is important to examine fear in the context of the military. "Fear is a normal, inevitable, useful reaction to danger," determined social anthropologist John Dollard in his seminal research on the subject. "It is a danger signal," he added, "produced in a man's body by his awareness of signs of danger in the world around him." He concluded: "It is not fear that matters, but what a man does when he is afraid. ...Controlled fear has the power to incite a man to useful action. Uncontrolled fear is destructive; it has the power to incite in a man a senseless panic which further endangers his life."<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, the objective of dealing with fear should be to manage fear. When the element of fear is too weak, individuals get reckless and expose themselves and others to unwarranted risk and peril. When it is too great, there is a lack of self-control. Fear can then become contagious and frequently leads to panic.

Research has provided some conclusive insights with respect to fear. First, it confirms that virtually everyone experiences it at one time or another. "Fear," maintains the scholar Elmar Dinter, "is the most significant common denominator for all soldiers."<sup>17</sup> Studies have also confirmed, in general terms, that fear in younger and unmarried soldiers is marginally less than in older, married ones, and that junior officers and non-commissioned officers show a little less fear than the other ranks.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, most people appear to be more susceptible to fear when they are alone.<sup>19</sup>

## WHAT CAUSES FEAR?

There are a number of stimuli, including the fear of the unknown and the unexpected. Retired combat veteran and military theorist Major-General Robert Scales, Jr. has suggested that "soldiers fear most the enemy they cannot see."<sup>20</sup> The medical officer assigned to the original 'L' Detachment of the British Special Air Service (SAS) in North Africa in 1941 wrote: "Why did we fear, and of what were we afraid? It was the

continual uneasy anticipation and mental torture of anxiety."<sup>21</sup> Also, anecdotal evidence indicates that fear increases in foggy conditions or when it is dark, or with the loss of orientation following an unexpected enemy attack from the rear.<sup>22</sup>

A second major cause of fear is a feeling of hopelessness. This is often due to a perceived or actual inability in the face of danger to influence the probable outcome of events. Simply put, it is caused by a feeling of being threatened without the power to do anything about it. "A soldier cowering alone in the bottom of his foxhole finds himself alone and isolated from his buddies," explained one veteran, "This feeling of isolation leads inevitably to vague imaginings and apprehensions – not only of dying, but of helpless inaction and the intense fear of being left to die alone."<sup>23</sup> "Fear," asserted Professor S.J. Rachman from the Institute of Psychiatry at the University of London, "seems to feed on a sense of uncontrollability: it arises and persists when the person finds himself in a threatening situation over which he feels he has little or no control." Research demonstrated that "...being in danger when one cannot fight back or take any other effective action, being idle or being insecure of the future, were the elements that tended to aggravate fear in combat."<sup>24</sup>

Noise is yet another common stressor and major cause for trepidation. "As we had feared, we heard the roar of war again," wrote one German veteran of the Eastern Front. "The noise," he stated, "... in itself was enough to send a wave of terror through the ... men trapped beside the water.... Every man grabbed his things and began to run.... Frantic men were abandoning everything on the bank and plunging into the water to try to swim to the opposite shore.... Madness seemed to be spreading like wildfire."<sup>25</sup> An airborne officer reported that in Tunisia, in 1942, he witnessed a group of American ammunition carriers shocked into inactivity "simply by the tremendous noise of real fighting. Instead of getting the ammunition forward to a machine gun these men were huddled together, hugging the ground, shaking – pitifully unaware that their route was protected by a hill."<sup>26</sup>

But it is not only the sound of munitions that creates a state of fear and panic. Even the dreaded Scottish Highlanders were overcome by the "appalling yells of the Canadians and Indians" at Fort Duquesne in 1758 and broke away in a wild and disorderly retreat. "Fear," said Major Grant of the Highlanders, "got the better of every other passion; and I trust I shall never again see such a panic among troops."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Hans-Heinrich Ludwig noted with trepidation the "wild choir of stormy Russian hurrahs." He acknowledged: "The tendency of Russians to trumpet their assaults with bloodcurdling screams unsettled many *Landsers* [German infanteers]."<sup>28</sup>

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Associated with noise, but adding an additional factor that generates fear, is immobility due to shelling or fire. Samuel Stouffer, in his classic study of the American soldier in the Second World War, reported that many veterans testified that the “severest fear-producing situation they encountered in combat was just such immobilization under artillery or mortar fire.”<sup>29</sup> American veteran Glenn Searle acknowledged: “No matter how gung-ho you are, after about fifteen minutes of artillery shells screaming in and exploding all around you, you start to quiver not unlike a bowl of gelatin and your teeth chatter.” He conceded: “We did a lot of screaming.”<sup>30</sup> The effect was the same in both combatant camps. “Those who weren’t struck dumb with fright howled like madmen,” wrote German veteran Guy Sajer.<sup>31</sup> “For soldiers on the receiving end,” explained American Major-General Scales, “firepower creates a sense of stress and alarm made all the more fearsome by its impersonal and anonymous nature.”<sup>32</sup>

Yet another cause of fear is deprivation. It is a statement of the obvious to declare that all soldiers need sleep, food and drink regardless of their level of physical fitness. Practical experience in the Second World War, and in conflicts since, have demonstrated that the physical and psychological factors that lowered morale and sapped men’s courage were fatigue, hunger and thirst.<sup>33</sup> However, very little conscious consideration has been given to a high tempo of operations or ensuring that all personnel, including headquarters staffs, commanders and soldiers, are given sufficient rest. Often forgotten in the army is the fact that the habits one forms in peacetime are those that are taken on operations and in war. The failure to ensure proper rest routines, coupled with the normally accepted practice of driving units and personnel relentlessly, is easily dismissed during short exercises and non-combat operations. Without question, testing individuals and units is important, and the stress induced does provide a glimpse of how personnel perform under duress. However, it also has a detrimental effect if leaders are not well informed about the importance of rest and proper nourishment to combat effectiveness.

Paradoxically, there is a symbiotic relationship between fatigue and fear. The more fatigued people become, the more susceptible they become

to fear. The greater their fear, the greater is the drain on their energy. “Tired men fright (sic) more easily,” observed Colonel S.L.A. Marshall in his decades of battlefield studies, and he concluded that “frightened men swiftly tire.”<sup>34</sup> Extreme fatigue ultimately makes it impossible for some men to continue to function. “We learned,” asserted Corporal Dan Hartigan, “that the lack of sleep was the worst of all deprivations, far worse than hunger or thirst.”<sup>35</sup> One German veteran stated: “The exhaustion we had been dragging about with us for days increased the fear we could no longer control.” He explained that the “fear intensified our exhaustion, as it required constant vigilance.”<sup>36</sup>

Psychologist F.C. Bartlett concurs with this assessment. “In war,” he insisted, “there is perhaps no general condition ... more likely to produce a large crop of nervous and mental disorders than a state of prolonged and great fatigue.” This is the result of physiological arousal caused by the stress of existing in what is commonly understood as a continual ‘fight-or-flight’ condition, cumulative loss of sleep, a reduction in caloric intake, and the toll taken by the elements such as rain, cold, heat and dark of night.<sup>37</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, scholars have noted that the fear of killing is another high-profile stressor for soldiers. Western culture instils in individuals, from an early age, the value of life, and the abhorrence of killing others, and this is deeply rooted in the psyche of soldiers. A lack of “offensive spirit” was widely reported during the Second World War. One 1943 report noted that the “average Jack was quite amazingly lethargic.”<sup>38</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Cole lamented that “not one man in twenty-five voluntarily used his weapon” even though they were under attack.<sup>39</sup>



Three Rivers Regiment tanks during the Battle of Termoli, on the Adriatic coast of Italy, 6 October 1943. Painting by W.S. Scott.

12<sup>e</sup> Régiment blindé du Canada (Milice)

**“The objective ... should be to manage fear. When the element of fear is too weak, individuals get reckless and expose themselves to unwarranted risk and peril. When it is too great, there is a lack of self-control.”**

Another root cause of fear for soldiers is the threat of being killed or wounded. "I suddenly felt terribly afraid," confessed one German veteran, "It would probably be my turn soon. I would be killed, just like that ... as my panic rose, my hands began to tremble ... and I sank into total despair."<sup>40</sup>

However, the fear of failing one's comrades, or of being a coward, has historically been one of the preeminent fears of soldiers of all ages and all ranks. "I'm afraid of being afraid," wrote Captain J.E.H. Neville to his father during the First World War.<sup>41</sup> He was not alone. "Most men, if honestly answering 'What was your greatest fear?'" insisted Canadian paratrooper A. H. Carignan, "will tell you that it was the fear that one might not fulfill the expectations of his comrades under extreme duress."<sup>42</sup> Sergeant Andy Anderson agreed. "My personal concern," he confided to his diary, "is that I can measure up, and not let anyone down."<sup>43</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Mitchell confessed: "I had the usual new boy's dreadful fear of failing and I was much more frightened of that than any of the horror going on around me."<sup>44</sup>

The conflicts may change, but not the underlying fears. Recently, 22-year-old American Private Jeffrey Hren confided before engaging in combat in Iraq in 2003: "I don't want to let down my team, my squad, my company." His colleague, Private Gene Marr, concurred. "I tell myself, don't choke."<sup>45</sup>

## MANIFESTATIONS AND EFFECTS

Understanding what creates fear in soldiers on the battlefield is not enough. It is also important to understand the manifestations of fear. Professor Dollard determined that the most common symptoms of fear were pounding of heart and rapid pulse, tenseness of muscles, sinking feelings, dryness of mouth and throat, and

trembling and sweating.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Second World War aircrew studies showed that the symptoms of fear experienced during combat included palpitations, dryness of mouth, sweating, stomach discomfort, excessive urination, trembling, tension and irritability. The most persistent were tension, tremor and sleep disturbance.<sup>47</sup>

But it is not necessarily the symptoms that are of consequence. More importantly, it is the effect fear has on individuals and units that must be considered, and the consequences can be devastating. First, it affects performance. After decades of battlefield studies, S.L.A. Marshall determined that "in the measure that the man is shocked nervously, and that fear comes uppermost, he becomes physically weak." He added that the "body is drained of muscular power and of mental coordination."<sup>48</sup> Anecdotal accounts from Omaha Beach on 6 June 1944 demonstrated that some men "were so weak from fear that they found it physically impossible to carry much more than their own weight." Staff Sergeant Thomas Turner revealed: "We were all surprised to find that we had suddenly gone weak.... Under fire we learned that fear and fatigue are about the same in their effect on an advance."<sup>49</sup>

Also, the effect on performance is even more pervasive, and it frequently debilitates individuals. Dan Ray of the US 36th Infantry Division recalled preparing to ambush a group of German soldiers in the Colmar Pocket. "I was shaking so bad from fright," he declared, "I had to brace my knees against the sides of the hole so that I could be ready to function."<sup>50</sup>

Professor Dollard discovered that fear also led to overly cautious behaviour. Of those he questioned, 59 percent stated that there were occasions when they were too cautious and had their efficiency reduced by fear. But even more deleterious to performance is when fear leads to panic. With respect to the British experience in North America: "The men from what stories (sic) they had heard of the Indians in regard to their scalping and Mawhawking," wrote a British officer in his journal, "were so pannick (sic) struck that their officers had little or no command over them."<sup>51</sup>

Visual stimuli can have a similar effect. During a German counter-attack following the invasion of Sicily in 1943, *Wehrmacht* armour advanced towards the American lines. One historian described how their menacing long 88-millimetre cannons shone in the sun, at the same time as the enemy artillery opened up a barrage. "As if on cue, infantrymen of the 2nd Battalion of the 16th Regiment scrambled out of their holes and began rushing pell-mell to the rear," he wrote, "At first it was only a handful, then more and more joined in, until within minutes two-thirds of the Big Red One battalion had urgently departed."<sup>52</sup>



Flying stress. Aircrew from 417 Fighter Squadron after flying a mission with the Desert Air Force in Libya, 21 February 1943.

The timeless infectious nature of panic was confirmed by United States Marine Corps Lieutenant Philip Caputo in Vietnam. He witnessed a tough sergeant curse and kick a soldier who collapsed in tears unable to take any more combat. "None of us did a thing to stop Horne because we felt the same terror," he confessed, "And we knew that that kind of fear was a contagion and the marine a carrier ... beat him, kick him, beat that virus out of him before it spreads."<sup>53</sup> The belief that fear could be spread was widely held. Dollard found that 75 percent of the veterans he questioned expressed the view that "fear can be contagious [and] that it can be transmitted from one soldier to another."<sup>54</sup>

That fear affects performance – either through increasing fatigue, a change in bodily function or capability to perform, and at the extreme leads to panic – is well documented. However, it must also be recognized that there is a positive component to fear as well if it is managed properly. "We fought," maintained Guy Sager, "from simple fear which was our motivating power." Fear also sharpens an individual's senses and makes one more alert, mainly because of the release of adrenaline in the body. Panama veteran Sergeant First Class James Coroy, from the 101st Airborne (Air Assault) Division noted: "Fear is not that bad, because it heightens your senses."<sup>55</sup> In fact, a US Air Force study found 50 percent of the airmen reported that fear sometimes improved their efficiency.<sup>56</sup>

Direct performance aside, fear can also cause severe emotional stress and psychiatric breakdown. German scholar Stephen G. Fritz noted: "Fear was the real enemy of most *Landsers*: fear of death or of cowardice, fear of

the conflict within the spirit ... or, a simple fear of showing fear. Men felt haunted, hollowed on the inside by pockets of fear that would not go away, caught in the grip of something enormous about to overwhelm them."<sup>57</sup> German veteran Will Thomas recognized the mental strain that fear exacted. "The psychological load," he explained, "presses harder than the burden of the almost superhuman physical exertions."<sup>58</sup>

Professor Kellet's examination of Second World War experiences led him to believe that: "More than anything else, fear itself is the critical ingredient in psychiatric breakdown in combat... (It) causes a strain so great that it causes men to break down."<sup>59</sup> Stouffer's seminal work reported that 83 percent of those questioned asserted that they had the experience of seeing "a man's nerves 'crack up' at the front."<sup>60</sup> The importance of a fear management education program becomes evident, not only because of the effects of fear on individuals, but also because there is a cascading effect. Seventy percent of 1700 American veterans surveyed in Italy in 1944 said that they became nervous or depressed, or their morale suffered, at the sight of another man's psychiatric breakdown.<sup>61</sup>

Fear can also impact adversely upon decision-making. Research has shown "that during stressful combat-like training, every aspect of cognitive function assessed was severely degraded, compared to the subjects' own baseline, pre-stress performance." Moreover, the magnitude of the deficits was greater than those typically produced by alcohol intoxication or treatment with sedating drugs. The study team concluded that "on the battlefield, the severe

decrements we measured ... would significantly impair the ability of warfighters to perform their duties." Specifically, the team determined that extended periods of pressure and fear lead to over-reaction, an increase in wrong decisions and inconsistency.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Professor Dinter noted that fear and exhaustion will also reduce the willingness to make decisions at all.<sup>63</sup> Anecdotal evidence provided in war literature and interviews with veterans clearly endorses these findings.

What becomes worrisome is that fear has a cumulative effect. Dollard's research indicated that fear increases in proportion to the duration of the engagement and the number of frightening incidents endured by an individual.<sup>64</sup> Scottish historian Hew Strachan concluded that "the battle-hardened veteran was a mythical figure."



Canadian War Museum

Canadian sailors in a life raft after their ship was sunk in the Atlantic. Painting by Commander Thomas H. Beament.

He discovered that “sustained exposure to danger did not harden a soldier but eroded his limited resources.”<sup>65</sup> Another contemporary report concluded: “All soldiers have a breaking point beyond which their effective performance in combat diminishes.”<sup>66</sup> Quite simply, even the most psychologically strong person will eventually succumb. No one ever becomes accustomed to fear – it is just a matter of trying to control it.

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One study conducted during the Second World War by Lieutenant-Colonel J.W. Appel and Captain G. W. Beebe, observed: “Each moment of combat imposes a strain so great that men will break down in direct relation to the intensity and duration of their exposure ... the average point at which this occurred appears to have been in the region of 200-240 aggregate combat days.” The British estimated that a rifleman would last for about 400 combat days – the longer period being attributable to the fact that they tended to relieve troops in the line for a four-day rest after approximately twelve days.<sup>67</sup> However, after 200-240 days of combat, the average soldier became “so overly cautious and jittery that he was ineffective and demoralizing to the newer men.”<sup>68</sup>

### THE ANTIDOTE OF COURAGE

If fear is so prevalent, and its manifestations so overwhelming, why then do we have heroes? Is courage not an attribute that trumps fear? An examination of courage is revealing, but also problematic, because there is no universal definition or understanding of the term. Most would agree that it is a quality that all wish to have. “I do not believe,” extolled Field Marshal Slim, “that there is any man who would not rather be called brave than have any other virtue attributed to him.”<sup>69</sup> Courage is often seen in two lights – one as an act or action such as a single desperate act, such as the storming of a pillbox or falling on a grenade, the second, as Socrates offered, as a very noble quality. But what is it exactly?

The *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* defines courage as “the ability to disregard fear; bravery (i.e. able or ready to face and endure danger, pain, adversity, etc...).”<sup>70</sup> Similarly, the *American Standard Dictionary* states courage is: “The quality of mind which meets danger or opposition with intrepidity, calmness and firmness; the quality of being fearless; bravery.” It further states that “the brave man combines confidence with firm resolution in the face of danger. To be courageous is more than being brave, adding the element of morale. The courageous man steadily encounters perils to which he may be keenly sensitive, at the call of duty.” The British *Chambers Dictionary* explains courage as “the quality that enables men to meet danger without giving way to fear; bravery (courage, heroism; to brave – to meet boldly, to defy, to face, spirit). And finally, the Israeli *Ben Shushan* dictionary depicts courage as “strength, power, might.”<sup>71</sup> In all cases, the underlying theme is a human trait or quality.

This theme has been further developed by scholars, researchers and veterans. Stouffer noted there was an internal struggle between an individual’s impulses toward personal safety and comfort and the social compulsions which drove them into danger and discomfort. “Sometimes a guy would say, ‘How do I keep going?’ You have to fight with yourself. You didn’t want to be a quitter....’ In the case of the combat soldier, this internal fight was one of the factors which sometimes lay at the root of neuropsychiatric breakdowns involving gross disorganization of behaviour.”<sup>72</sup> Anecdotal accounts reinforce this view. “I will not be a coward, so I pray a lot to God,” confessed Walter Happich, “I know against what opponent I must fight.” Horstmar Seitz, another German soldier commented: “We must often conquer ourselves.”<sup>73</sup>

Dollard’s studies revealed that: “Courage is not fearlessness; it is being able to do the job even when afraid.”<sup>74</sup> Professor Rachman formulated that “true courage” was a quality of “those people who are willing and able to approach a fearful situation despite the presence of subjective fear and psychophysiological disturbances.”<sup>75</sup> S.L.A. Marshall considered courage more than an innate quality. Courage and cowardice to him are alternative free choices that come to every man. These views accord well with that of Lord Moran in his classic work, *The Anatomy of Courage*. Moran theorized that courage was “a moral quality” and “not a chance gift of nature.” He asserted: “It is the cold choice between two alternatives, it is the fixed resolve not to quit, an act of renunciation which must be made not once but many times by the power of will.” He essentially concluded that “courage is willpower.”<sup>76</sup>

### CONTROLLING FEAR

And so, it would appear that courage is a foil for fear, but fear need not be shrouded in uncertainty. In fact, all officers, NCOs and soldiers can take measures to help manage fear. However, to contend with fear, one must be able to recognize it before it becomes so strong that nothing can be done to surmount it. One must recognize the symptoms, understand where to expect danger, and comprehend the conditions under which fear builds up. Although impossible to eradicate completely, fear can be controlled to maximize individual and unit performance.

The first strategy for controlling fear is to explain that it is a normal occurrence and to encourage discussion of it. The existence of fear must not be repressed by individuals, nor should those who articulate their fear be ridiculed. Research has indicated that eight out of ten combat veterans felt that it is better to

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admit fear and discuss it openly before battle. The belief that “the man who knows he will be afraid and tries to get ready for it makes a better soldier,” was shared by 58 percent of those surveyed.<sup>77</sup> “If it [fear] is allowed to back up in a man, unspoken and unaired in any way,” explained war correspondent Mack Morriss, “it can form a clot and create an obstacle to normal action.”<sup>78</sup>

The key factor identified by combat veterans was not the fact that someone had fear, but rather, “the effort to overcome the withdrawal tendencies engendered by intense fear.”<sup>79</sup> Stouffer determined that when a person regards fear reactions as a normal response to a dangerous situation, one is less likely to be disturbed, once the danger has subsided, by self-reproaches of cowardice, unmanliness, or other accusations that lower self-esteem. Moreover, in the face of danger, a source of conflict is eliminated if one accepts the notion that he need not fear the loss of status and esteem in the eyes of his fellows if he trembles, gasps, and exhibits other marked fear symptoms while carrying out his job.<sup>80</sup>

The failure to acknowledge fear has tangible and substantive costs. For example, paratroopers are generally recognized as having some of the highest casualty rates and the most difficult situations to cope with in combat. Yet, as a group they have an attitude that does not permit free expressions of anxiety and fear. “In an atmosphere where everyone is tough, rough and ready for the worst,” explained Stouffer, “anxiety cannot be verbalized or [be] socially accepted.” But, as a result, he discovered that neurotic reactions among paratroopers “are apt to take the form of conversion symptoms involving the lower extremities – weakness or paralysis of one or both legs.” Similarly, British officers who suffered from the same type of self-imposed intolerance tended to suffer from paralysis of limbs, and in extreme cases, suicides.<sup>81</sup>

Another vital method for controlling fear is training and education.<sup>82</sup> Flavius Renatus asserted in 378 AD that “the courage of the soldier is heightened by the knowledge of his profession.” Knowledge is the key as it provides confidence – not only in self, but in one’s comrades, equipment and tactics. This is achieved through realistic training, as well as a complete understanding of the realm of conflict. This reduces the fear of the unexpected and the unknown.

Canadian Forces Photo Unit PL 11314



A member of a Canadian bomber crew after a mission. *Back from Essen*, drawing by Paul Goranson.

For example, realistic training, such as battle simulation, intense tempo, stress, physical exertion and fatigue, can create reasonable expectations of how long a unit can maintain combat effectiveness. It is also valuable to the extent it inculcates in soldiers the realization that they can survive on the battlefield. Major John Masters, a Second World War Chindit commander, explained that it is “easy to be brave when a little experience has taught you that there is nothing to be afraid of.”<sup>83</sup>

Dollard explained that “fear is useful to the soldier when it drives him to learn better in training and to act sensibly in battle.”<sup>84</sup> Stouffer believed that fear aroused in training could serve a useful purpose. He argued that it “can motivate men to learn those habits which will reduce danger in battle.” He explained that “training benefits by accustoming – taking away the unknown unfamiliar element.” He concluded that “a certain amount of adaptation to the extremely loud noises and other stimuli probably takes place with repeated exposures so that when the stimuli are encountered in battle they elicit less fear.”<sup>85</sup>

As such, it is critical to add the element of ambiguity and the unknown in all training activities. In addition, training should be conducted at night, in poor light and in unknown surroundings. Moreover, it should include situations where things go wrong. This will help inoculate individuals to the fear of the unknown and accustom them to dealing with adversity. Demanding adventure training in remote regions is invaluable, as it varies from the routine and incorporates real, unexpected events that must be dealt with on the spot.

The beneficial effect of realistic training is undisputed. Research has shown that “the general level of anxiety in combat would tend to be reduced insofar as the men derived from training a high degree of self-confidence about their ability to take care of themselves. ... Troops who expressed a high degree of self-confidence before combat were more likely to perform with relatively little fear during battle.”<sup>86</sup> It has also been determined that confidence is perhaps the greatest source of emotional strength that a

**“Discipline strengthens the mind so that it becomes impervious to the corroding influence of fear.”**

soldier can draw upon. Numerous studies have shown that well-led and cohesive units tend to have fewer stress casualties than units lower in these qualities.<sup>87</sup> Confidence, in turn, can be instilled through training, education and fitness. It can also be heightened through sound leadership, team cohesion and dependable equipment. The value of training is also derived from its ability to create an element of habit and routine, such as the development of instinctive reactions. Drill, for instance, is utilized to teach the instinctive reaction of a body of troops to commands. “What is learnt in training,” insisted Commando commander Lord Lovat, “is done instinctively in action – almost without thinking down to the last man.”<sup>88</sup> Further, the adherence to simple daily routines, such as the ritual of shaving, provides a sense of normalcy, of reassurance to individuals. This is vital in maintaining an equilibrium that helps combatants to perform consistently. Major John Masters suggested that in regard to meals deep in the Burmese jungles: “It was not the food that refreshed and renewed us as much as the occasion.”<sup>89</sup> Lord Lovat further summed it up when he declared that “habit is ten times nature.”<sup>90</sup>

In the same manner, discipline and response to leadership are crucial variables shaping attitudes among combat veterans. The role of discipline is one of providing a psychological defence that helps the soldier to control fear and to ignore danger through habitual, near-instinctive performance. “It is a function of discipline,” extolled Field Marshal Montgomery, “to fortify the mind so that it becomes reconciled to unpleasant sights and accepts them as normal everyday occurrences. ... Discipline strengthens the mind so that it becomes impervious to the corroding influence of fear. ... It instills the habit of self control.”<sup>91</sup>

Humour is another important motivational element and it acts to release tension. Second World War veteran Howard Ruppel of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment observed: “When circumstances become unbearable, the experienced soldier with some sense of humor and the ability to laugh at one’s self has a better chance to retain his sanity than the serious minded fellow.”<sup>92</sup> For some, religion and faith have provided a foil for fear. Max Kocour of the 90th Infantry Division revealed that faith among combat men was usually a general belief in God and was not centred around any particular religion or denomination. “We developed faith,” he offered, “regardless of religions, which had been created by man, we felt we were on the right side of faith, under the protection/care of a truly fine Supreme Being.” Others maintained that prayers actually helped them through some of the worst of circumstances.<sup>93</sup>

Still others have relied upon more artificial tools for controlling their angst. Alcohol and drugs have been a time-honoured way of dealing with pain, fear and stress – their use often more widespread than has been generally acknowledged. British regiments fought at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 with barrels of whisky in the centre of their Squares. “Had it not been for the rum ration,” testified one British medical officer to the 1922 Shell Shock Committee, “I do not think we should have won the war.”<sup>94</sup> Prior to the Dieppe Raid, the commandos were given a breakfast served with rum which at least one veteran of the raid credited with allowing them to keep the contents of their stomach despite the devastation, carnage and death they faced that morning.<sup>95</sup> The Japanese and Russians regularly plied their soldiers with alcohol prior to their fanatical human wave charges. The American and Russian experiences in Vietnam and Afghanistan respectively are laden with accounts of substance abuse as a means of coping. Although drugs and alcohol have frequently been used to help manage combat anxiety, their success is usually of only marginal value. They only alleviate anxiety temporarily, but more importantly, they reduce the ability to act in a rational and coordinated manner, and there are often long-term consequences associated with their use.

A more effective tool for fear management, and one with less harmful side effects, is the timely and accurate passage of information. In the chaos of battle, information is empowerment. Quite simply, knowledge dissipates the unknown and dampens groundless rumours and fears. “If a soldier knows what is happening and what is expected of him,” explained a veteran British officer, “he is far less frightened than the soldier who is just walking towards unknown dangers.”<sup>96</sup>



Infantry near Nijmegen, Holland. Painting by Alex Colville.

The passage of information is predicated upon effective communications, which are equally vital to staving off the effects of fear. It is critical to keep personnel informed as much as possible about virtually everything. It is not only the content of the message that is important but also the process itself. Regular communications with troops assure them they are not alone, that they are still part of a team. Initially during the Second World War, the Allies believed that German and Japanese night attacks were amateurish and disorganized because of the excessive amount of yelling that was used. However, they later discovered that this was deliberate – not only a means of control, but also as fear management.

Yet another powerful tool for controlling fear is strong group cohesion. As already noted, the greatest fear felt by most combat soldiers is the fear of letting down their comrades. This is a powerful impetus not to allow fear to create panic. Paratrooper John Agnew explained: “Pride in Regiment and Division and being able to depend on each other makes individuals courageous regardless of fear, don’t let your comrades down.”<sup>97</sup> S.L.A. Marshall asserted: “I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapons is the near presence or the presumed presence of a comrade.”<sup>98</sup>

This sense of obligation, coupled with a sense of responsibility for ensuring the well-being of others, also generates a feeling of responsibility for upholding the reputation of the unit. This sense of responsibility also helps alleviate fear. Creating demanding expectations of combat behaviour in members and then linking soldiers’ self-esteem to the reputation of the unit and the welfare

**“The essence of the issue is not whether one experiences fear, but rather how one deals with it.”**

of their fellow soldiers is a powerful motivating force. Many believe that a man behaves as a hero or a coward based upon the expectations of others of how he is to behave. “The overwhelming majority of men,” reported Dollard, “felt that they ‘fought better after observing other men behaving calmly in a dangerous situation.’”<sup>99</sup> Marshall insisted that “no matter how lowly his rank, any man who controls himself automatically contributes to the control of others.” He added, “Fear is contagious but courage is not less so.”<sup>100</sup> Studies of submarine crews demonstrated that they suffered extremely low rates of psychiatric breakdown. This was attributed to a number of factors – all were volunteers who were required to meet rigid educational and physical standards for entry, the training required was very thorough, morale and confidence were high and a successful rotation scheme was used. Of a grand total of 126,160 patrols carried out by these crews, there were only 62 cases of psychiatric difficulty, an infinitesimally-small percentage.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, in John Flanagan’s seventeen volume report on performance of US combat air crews during the Second World War, he noted: “The primary motivating force which more than anything else kept these men flying and fighting was that they were members of a group in which flying and fighting was the only accepted way of behaving.”<sup>102</sup> Similar studies mirror these results for the British and Dominion aircrew experiences.

In consonance, studies of German forces during the war reinforced that the key to their success, despite the worsening situation, was the strength of the primary group. Clearly, when the primary group developed a high degree of cohesion, morale was high and resistance became more effective.

But leadership is also a critical element. Dollard noted that 89 percent of those surveyed emphasized the importance of getting frequent instructions from leaders when they were in a tight spot.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, evidence clearly indicates that leaderless groups normally become inactive.<sup>104</sup> Not surprisingly, Samuel Stouffer found that “cool and aggressive leadership was especially important” in pressing troops forward in dangerous and fearful situations, such as storming across a beach raked by fire.<sup>105</sup>

This finding is based on the fact that “role modeling” has an extremely important influence on a person’s reaction to threatening situations. With regard to the evocation of courageous behaviour, American



Canadian infantrymen running for cover during the fight for the Hitler Line in Italy, 22 May 1944.

enlisted men who served during the Second World War told interviewers that 'top down' combat leadership was very important.<sup>106</sup> Most research has reinforced the intuitive deduction that "men like to follow an experienced man.... [He] knows how to accomplish objectives with a minimum of risk. He sets an example of coolness and efficiency which impels similar behaviour in others." In this regard, the presence of strong thoughtful leadership creates "a force which helps resist fear."<sup>107</sup> A wounded veteran from North Africa put it in perspective. He explained: "Everybody wants somebody to look up to when he's scared."<sup>108</sup> "A brave captain," affirmed Sir Philip Sidney, "is as a root, out of which, as branches, the courage of his soldiers doth spring."<sup>109</sup>

But this only results if there is implicit trust in the leadership. Soldiers must believe that leaders mean what they say. Body language, tone and eye contact all betray insincerity. Actions must match words. In the end, it comes down to setting the example. A leader must never ask, or expect, troops to do that which he or she is unwilling to do. Stouffer's study showed that what the officers did, rather than what they said, was important. "I personally recall," wrote Sergeant Andy Anderson, "when in the advance in Germany, our platoon was 'on point' and we suddenly came under small arms fire from our front and my men all took to the ditches. I was peering about, under some cover to get a fix on the enemy. In a matter of minutes, I felt a poke in my back from a walking stick and it was the brigadier with a smile. His comment was simply, 'not to hold up the entire Division,' so 'press on', which is what we did. The point is, that you have no idea what confidence is carried to the troops when you have great leadership."<sup>110</sup>

Another tool for managing fear is simple activity. John Dollard found that veteran soldiers quickly learn that meaningful activity permits less time to dwell upon trepidation. "When fear is strong, keep your mind on the job at hand."<sup>111</sup> Major-General T.S. Hart, former Director of Medical Services in Britain, agreed. "There is no doubt,"

**"Like anger,  
fear shifts the body  
into high."**

he asserted, "that inactivity at a time of tension breeds fear and that the best antidote ... is purposeful action."<sup>112</sup> Robert Crisp, a tank troop commander in North Africa in 1941, acknowledged that "when the race is begun or the innings started, the fullness of the moment overwhelms the fear of anticipation. It is so in battle. When mind and body are fully occupied, it is surprising how unfrightened you can be."<sup>113</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

In the end, there need not be a stigma surrounding fear. The essence of the issue is not whether one experiences fear, but rather how one deals with fear. It can be controlled and utilized to benefit the effectiveness of individuals and units in times of danger. Conversely, the failure to recognize the reality of fear and its effects can have serious repercussions that manifest themselves at the most disadvantageous moments.

Therefore, it is important to ensure that the necessary steps are taken to lessen the impact of anxieties and fears. Discuss their causes and their impacts to ensure that the perceptions and expectations of leaders and subordinates alike are realistic. Imbue confidence in individuals, teams and equipment, and develop strategies to allow all to feel a sense of control over their destiny, regardless of the activity or the operation. Develop contingency planning and undertake additional training and education so that individuals are better able to cope with the unknown or unexpected.

Finally, remember that the emotion of fear also has positive physiological consequences upon the body, namely, heightened awareness and strength. A proper understanding of fear, its causes and manifestations, and how to control and counter fears can actually provide an edge that may make the difference between success and failure – between life and death.



## NOTES

- Farley Mowat, prior to becoming an internationally acclaimed author, was an infantry officer engaged in some of the bloodiest and most intense battles of the Italian Campaign in the Second World War. His "Worm" was the cumulative stress of anticipated and experienced combat. It was, in his words, "The Worm That Never Died." From Farley Mowat, *And No Birds Sang* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), p. 220.
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- John T. Wood, *What Are You Afraid Of?* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1976), p. 22.
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18. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
19. Rachman, p. 84.
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21. Malcolm James, *Born of the Desert. With the SAS in North Africa* (London: Greenhill Books, 2001), p. 125.
22. Dinter, pp. 18 & 98; and Wood, pp. 28-29.
23. Scales, p. 58.
24. Rachman, pp. 50-52.
25. Guy Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier* (New York: Brassey's, 1990), p. 257.
26. Don Wharton, "Bringing the War to the Training Camps," *The Reader's Digest*, Vol. 42, No. 254, June 1943, p. 37.
27. Charles Hamilton, ed., *Braddock's Defeat. The Journal of Captain Robert Cholmley's Batman; The Journal of a British Officer; and Halkett's Orderly Book* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), p. 50. See also Francis Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 333.
28. Fritz, p. 151.
29. Samuel A. Stouffer, *The American Soldier. Combat and its Aftermath, Volume II* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 83; and Rachman, p. 82.
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31. Sajer, p. 192.
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38. Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing* (London: Granta Books, 1999), pp. 73-74.
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40. Sajer, p. 245.
41. Richard Holmes, *Acts of War. The Behaviour of Men in Battle* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), p. 141.
42. Private A.H. Carignan – Interviews, letters and recollections compiled by Gary Boegal for the 1 Canadian Parachute Battalion Association.
43. R.F. Anderson, "From the Rhine to the Baltic," 1 Canadian Parachute Battalion Association Archives, File 11-2, Anderson, R.F.
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45. Zoroya, p. A1.
46. Dollard, p. 2.
47. Rachman, p. 52.
48. Marshall, *The Soldier's Load*, p. 41.
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50. McManus, p. 251.
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53. Philip Caputo, *Rumour of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), pp. 273-274.
54. Dollard, p. 28; and Rachman, p. 76.
55. Zoroya, p. A1. See also text and endnote, p. 17.
56. Rachman, p. 60.
57. Fritz, p. 134.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
59. Kellett, p. 268.
60. Stouffer, pp. 124-125, p. 134, pp. 208-209. See also Rachman, p. 61, pp. 76-78.
61. Stouffer, p. 209.
62. H.R. Lieberman, G.P. Bathalon, C.M. Falco, J.H. Georgelis, C.A. Morgan III, P. Niro and W.J. Tharion, "The Fog of War: Documenting Cognitive Decrements Associated with the Stress of Combat," *Proceedings of the 23rd Army Science Conference*, December 2002, abstract.
63. Dinter, p. 82.
64. Dollard, p. 22.
65. Quoted in Brigadier-General Denis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker, *Rhineland. The Battle to End the War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2000), p. 351.
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67. Holmes, p. 215. See also Rachman, pp. 11, 22.
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71. Definitions quoted from Ben Shalit, *The Psychology of Conflict and Combat* (New York: Praeger, 1988), p. 97.
72. Stouffer, p. 84.
73. Fritz, p. 135.
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77. Dollard, pp. 2-3 and p. 24. They also felt that thinking the enemy is just as frightened is also helpful in controlling fear.
78. McManus, p. 251.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
81. Stouffer, p. 206.
82. Training is defined as "a predictable response to a predictable situation," as opposed to education which is "the reasoned response to an unpredictable situation – critical thinking in the face of the unknown." Professor Ronald Haycock, former Dean of Arts, Royal Military College (RMC), "Clio and Mars in Canada: The Need for Military Education," presentation to the Canadian Club, Kingston, Ontario, 11 November 1999.
83. John Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay* (London: Cassell, 2003), p. 271.
84. Dollard, pp. 2-3. See also Stouffer, p. 195.
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86. Rachman, pp. 63-64.
87. J.G. Hunt and J.D. Blair, *Leadership on the Future Battlefield* (New York: Brassey's, 1986), p. 215.
88. Fowler, p. 55.
89. Masters, p. 198.
90. Quoted in Will Fowler, *The Commandos at Dieppe: Rehearsal for D-Day* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 55.
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94. Holmes, p. 249.
95. Fowler, p. 138.
96. Mitchell, p. 41.
97. Captain T.M. Chacho, "Why Did They Fight? American Airborne Units in World War II," *Defense Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Autumn 2001, p. 80.
98. Miller, p. 214.
99. Dollard, p. 28 and Rachman, p. 76.
100. Miller, p. 209.
101. Rachman, pp. 23, 237.
102. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
103. Dollard, p. 44.
104. Dinter, p. 92.
105. Stouffer, p. 68.
106. Kellett, p. 299.
107. Dollard, p. 44.
108. Stouffer, p. 124.
109. Grossman, p. 85.
110. Letter, Sergeant Andy Anderson to author, 10 January 2003.
111. Dollard, p. 3.
112. Kellett, p. 281. Dollard's study found that 71 percent felt fear most acutely just before going into action, from not knowing what to expect.
113. Kellett, p. 282.