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When a Soldier Kills

Experience of Homicide during Combat

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Military psychology systematically studies various aspects of the soldier's profession. It tries to understand behaviour, looks for ways to improve cognitive skills and creates concepts for building resilience and improving performance. However, there is an area that has been, unfortunately, been poorly systematically researched even though it is, in a way, the oldest and still the basic mission of infantrymen – killing the enemy. I would like to fill this gap by briefly considering this issue. Namely, the description and analysis of experiences that a soldier has when he finds himself in a situation that forces him to kill the enemy.

Contemporary society systematically blurs this basic purpose of the soldier's profession by using euphemisms of all sorts, so the media reports that 'the opponent' (not an enemy) was 'disposed of', or perhaps 'neutralized'. In practice, this means only one thing – a soldier did what he was trained for; he used his weapon and killed another man. I will not explain why we cannot call a spade a spade. This would require perhaps a separate study that would most likely end up dealing with issues of political correctness. Either way, so called labelling (using emotionally coloured terms to refer to certain phenomena) in this case points to the obvious moral dilemma that society has with military operations. On the one hand, society needs to do what soldiers do, but on the other hand, nobody wants to hear about this. For those that are struggling and in extreme cases even killing, such a situation will undoubtedly herald the risk of internal conflict. War is a field where the rules of peaceful society cannot apply. This society, however, often forms judgements. It is easy to maintain the moral and ethical rules of our culture if the situation is, so to speak, normal. But do we know how we will respond in moments of the extreme, of the unexpected? In this respect, valuable lessons can be learnt from the Stanford Prison Experiment of Phillip Zimbardo. He wrote. '*... ordinary, good individuals can be led at times to do bad things to others, even bad deeds that violate any sense of common decency or morality.*' (Zimbardo, 2007: 297) No one can be sure in advance how they will respond in a situation which is beyond their experience. Perhaps this is why psychological insight into aggressively

destructive behaviour disturbs people. Instead of convicting and thereby easily distancing oneself personally from the situation, an opportunity is opened up for understanding. It is not so far from this point to the point of identifying one's own hidden desires and fantasies. And this is usually what anyone connected to killing wants to avoid.

I began dealing with the topic of homicide in combat more than a decade ago. I have talked about it with fellow psychologists, but especially with soldiers and veterans who have had this experience. The first people who provided me with insight into this experience of individual killings were American veterans of the wars in Korea and Vietnam. In subsequent years, the original group of US veterans was enlarged with Czech veterans and, more recently, veterans of the Croatian War of Independence, who were willing to share their experiences with me.

Analysis of the interviews is not the only original source. The point here is not just to collect as many memories as possible but, what is even more significant, to understand and interpret them accordingly. From 2010–2015, I worked as a consultant at the Ministry of Defense which allowed me to either participate in or directly carry out some surveys dealing with the subject of manslaughter, the findings of which are valuable and will serve primarily to understand soldiers' mental adjustments prior to battle.

I study the phenomenon of homicide rather linearly in this work; as this event takes place. Killing does not just mean pulling the trigger. This crucial moment is preceded and succeeded by many other moments which I try to take into account.

In his book *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy admitted he was fascinated by war, but not the big maneuvers. Rather, he is *'more interested to know in what way and under the influence of what feelings one soldier kills another than to know how the armies were arranged at Austerlitz and Borodino.'*

The basic research tools I used were qualitative interviews, more specifically a structured questionnaire consisting of open questions. This type of interview was recognized as the best for minimizing the variation of issues and reducing the likelihood that the data obtained in the individual interviews would structurally be significantly different and therefore impossible to compare. The following lines are thus based on a number of interviews with soldiers, both on active duty and veterans. It is a sort of generalization and analysis of completely unique experiences which highlights those factors that are common, or even an integral part of military and recruit training.

The first kill is an extraordinary act, the finality and irreversibility of which break the fifth commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.' The emotional reactions surrounding it and following it could be divided into three basic categories – a lack of accompanying feeling, ranging from disgust to hatred and, finally, a feeling of unreality. The first category can be represented by the following statements:

...One surprised me, so I shot him and killed him. All this could take a few seconds. At that moment, you feel nothing. Nothing. Neither relief nor fear, nothing...

– Thomas, J.A. (Vietnam veteran, Tunnel Rat)

At that moment, you don't get it. You don't think about it. You're just trying to do what you have learned in boot camp. It was about not allowing any of them to reach us close enough to throw a grenade. That's what we did. I didn't think about it, can't even remember that I felt a thing.

– George, S.B. (Veteran of Korea, Gunner)

We walked along the creek in the belief that the Serbs were ahead. Suddenly I heard a noise behind me, turned around and saw about four Serbs who were a few feet away from me. I emptied my magazine into them. I did not feel anything, they were just wax figures.

– Damir, Ž. (A veteran of the Croatia, infantry)

The second group of experiences is illustrated by following statements:

He climbed out of the hole as a ghost.... I was terribly frightened From the shock, I kept kicking him and stabbing with a bayonet. It made me sick. Then I threw up.

– William, F.K. (Vietnam veteran, submachine gunners)

These three Vietnamese ... I threw a phosphorus grenade ... when I saw them sizzling, screaming and rolling on the ground, I had a sudden desire to go help them. Do something like – hey guys, I'm sorry, I did not ... bullshit ... I vomited.

– Stephen, M.L. (Vietnam veteran submachine gunners)

The third group of answers resemble the following:

It seemed to me like I wasn't myself. I received confirmation of the target on my headphones and the order to eliminate, but all I could think was that I was like a dream, as if it was all being done by someone else. I pulled the trigger, and he fell.

– Jiří, F. (A veteran of Afghanistan, sniper)

... The first kill... when you kill first ... it's weird. It's something you've never done before...

– Daniel, H.V. (Vietnam veteran paratrooper)

The interviewed veterans reported that, in the few minutes or hours following their first kill, negative feelings usually appeared, especially remorse, doubts whether what happened was good, and they felt the need to share this experience or, conversely, to isolate themselves from the environment. Psychosomatic responses in the form of nausea and vomiting occurred as well.

In war, however, killing rarely remains a single experience. The fact that the individual remains in a combat zone means that he will, of course, have to repeatedly kill. As was the case with the majority of respondents, experiences related to killing further developed in two directions. The soldiers would adapt to the deaths they brought about by gradually becoming more and more stolid and emotionally drained or, conversely, would begin to find a pleasure in killing. Again, let us mention some illustrative statements:

When I killed ten of them, I stopped counting. It was all the same.

– Mirko, Š. (A veteran of the Croatia, infantry)

You get used to it. That's it. I didn't deal with.

- Zoran, F. (veteran former Yugoslavia, infantry)

It was such a ride. Better than sex, or any dope on the street. It was something else. Such a height where you never dared to look from.

- Daniel, H.V. (Vietnam veteran submachine gunners)

I just felt the joy that there was another bastard less. I did what I had drilled. But for real. It was me. I was winning. This is something so great it makes me scared.

- Vaclav, B. (A veteran of Afghanistan, sniper)

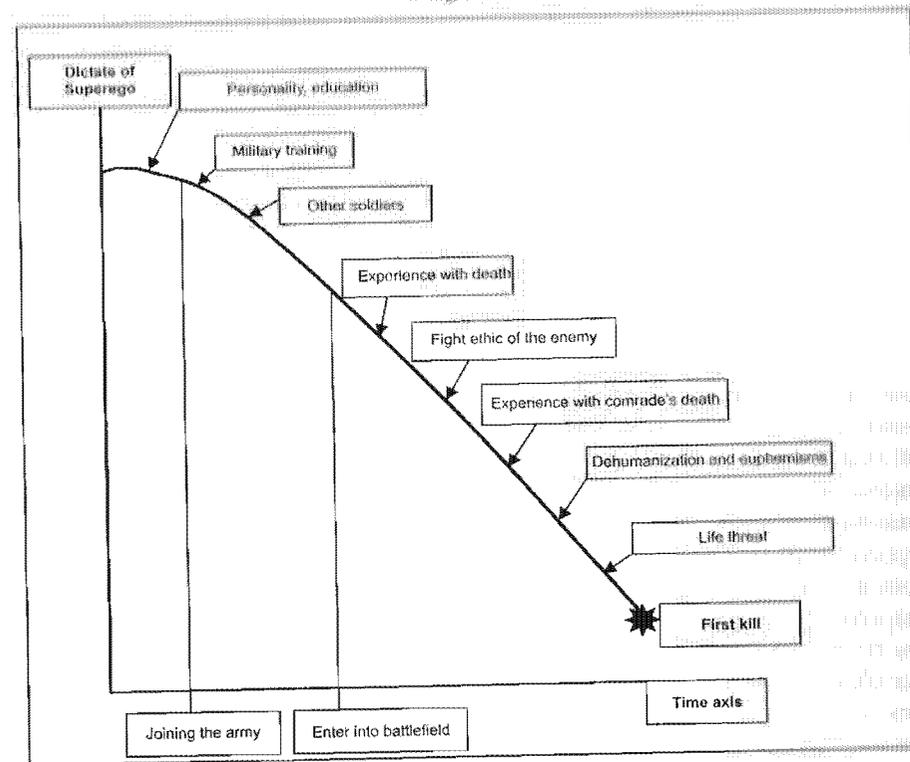
Man doesn't want to hear it, but you would like it. And when you get someone, you are satisfied. But not happy; not in this way. Happy - when you're young and you experience something like sex. Yes, it is similar. You're not excited, I mean sexually, but you like it. It's hard to describe.

- George, S.B. (a veteran of Korea, gunner)

Soldiers are not usually psychopaths for whom killing is without a moral dimension. On the contrary, they are people who have grown up in an environment, whether it is the United States, Croatia or the Czech Republic, in which homicide is one of the largest taboos. A healthy person somehow manages to cope by surpassing this imperative, or even by adapting to it. Whether we think of stupor or even affection, both reactions are abnormal in their own way and we need to seek their roots to understand them. The first step is to understand the evolution of a soldier's mind, which will take place from his entry into the army until after the first killing. Thanks to the testimonies of the respondents and various theoretical postulates, we have created a diagram of the dynamic process through which a soldier passes from the moment of his entry into the army to the first kill. The experiences accompanying the killing then reflect how deeply this process influenced the personality of a soldier. There is no doubt that an important role is played by the dynamic development of moral principles and attitudes, or, to use a psychoanalytical vocabulary, the Superego. If any of us picture ourselves in the moment of taking another person's life, we are immediately hit by strong feelings of opposition to the horrors stemming just from the conflict with our value systems. This part of a soldier's personality will be greatly influenced during his military career, especially during wartime deployment. Thus, already at the moment of firing at the enemy, a soldier's pre-war system of values is significantly altered. With a little exaggeration, we can say that an individual who is characterized as healthy during psychological testing in the recruitment procedure will more or less be a different person a few months after completing military training and after his first experience on the battlefield. Diagram 1 shows this process in a schematic, simplified form.

If we look at the system of values and moral principles of a person who enters the military, considering their age, the major determinants could be the influence of family and their immediate surroundings, especially school. If the person's environment as well as their personality are healthy, we can assume that their system of values will more or less coincide with the moral

Diagram 1



principles of a certain population, that is to say the civilization based on Judeo-Christian ethics in which killing another person is forbidden. By entering the armed forces, however, new influences begin to take effect that primarily or secondarily reduce the pressure of conscience. Military training, which aims to educate the novice, secondarily affects him although it does not primarily attack his ethical principles. The very fact that a person is trained to shoot at another person and that the success of their intervention is recognized leaves the individual with two options: either adapt at this stage and begin to relativize and rationalize the basic commandment 'Thou shalt not kill', or leave the army. Every army may tactfully keep quiet about the fact that their mission is to destroy and therefore usually kill the enemy, but its soldiers must be explicitly trained for this purpose. The original mindset 'Killing is wrong' is replaced by a new one - 'killing is justified by survival, helping others and completing a task. All that is done, is done to protect, preserve and promote the values for which you were sent to war.' This shift in perception of what is right and wrong, permissible and forbidden will become more pronounced as training progresses and as a soldier becomes aware of his dependence on others and vice versa. He or she grows inevitably more prone to accepting the values of their colleagues. The soldier will never be the same person he or she was before joining their combat unit. If the process was carried out successfully, by the end of their training, the soldier will have built a different system of values, he will have

changed his identity, perception of reality, of self and his relationship towards others as well as having changed himself. One's survival comes first now, but it is relevant only insofar as it is useful to others. Soldiers feel powerful and important when they have had many experiences; they then feel proud to belong to the unit in which they serve. The world is divided into 'us' and 'those against us' which may not refer to only the official opponents but also the pacifist public. The only things that are valuable are those that are helpful in mastering a task and for the unit with which a soldier identifies. The external reality starts to be drawn out in black and white and becomes ever clearer and more concrete. The enemy is not human any more. He is a target at best, and at worst, he is something inhuman, demonic or mystical; something that must be destroyed.

This brings us to the topic of dehumanization. In studying this issue, however, we encounter some professional difficulties. The more we know about the possible causes and consequences of dehumanization, the more difficult it is to maintain a professional distance. So instead of dehumanization being explained and studied, it is more often judged. This way of reasoning, however, is that of philosophers, but not of psychologists because it prevents us from understanding this process. If we look at dehumanization from an etiological point of view, then we begin to perceive it as the (mal) adaptive process which enables soldiers to do what they are trained for. If you recall, we established that the primary task of a soldier is to survive and face challenges even at the cost of and with the right of killing the enemy. But how can this be done if the enemy is perceived as somebody with whom you can identify? Robert J. Lifton claims: '*...it is probably impossible to kill another human being without numbing oneself toward that victim*' (Lifton, 1986: 428). If we contemplate on this postulate more deeply, we come to the surprising conclusion that dehumanization is probably always present when one person kills another. I can confirm that all the veterans that I have spoken with and who have killed, have dehumanized their enemies to a greater or lesser extent either by perceiving them as something inanimate (wax figures, just another character, a target, etc.) or as something vile; something less valuable than a man (gook, runts, worms, etc.). With that said, dehumanization appears as a prerequisite to slaughter. If a soldier has to fulfill his tasks and thus kill enemies, he must dehumanize. He does not have much of a choice. On one hand, a man may die; but the alternative option may lead to the soldier feeling huge guilt which can further cause great remorse and still further develop into mental dissolution. And here we find ourselves faced with a dilemma. From a clinical point of view, dehumanization is a pathological process stemming from the splitting of the object and therefore regression to the paranoid-schizoid position as it was described by Melanie Klein. Dehumanization allows one to kill without guilt. On the other hand, however, this is just a soldier's job which he/she does not always choose freely. Soldiers that dehumanize protect themselves from extreme feelings of guilt which would, after killing the enemy, probably appear in every healthy person. Therefore, we should instinctively understand dehumanization as an adaptive process that allows soldiers to be who they are and do what their

society (that sent them into war in the first place) expects of them. Then, we can hardly judge this process. Moreover, the price which a soldier pays for dehumanization is terrible. By numbing his empathy and ability to identify with others, he becomes emotionally flat and burned out. Among other things, this is one of the most common symptoms seen in war veterans.

The dehumanization of the enemy, however, does not put an end to the changes in perception of the soldier's external reality. A soldier's previously rational worldview (if it ever was rational), is replaced by a mythical black and white vision in terms of 'us versus them'. Under these circumstances, logically, internal conflicts disappear or are greatly weakened. What occurs here is a shift from destructive and aggressive intentions in order to alleviate internal tensions which arise from the conflict between the Superego and the Id's instinctive demands. Keeping inner conflicts under control is a very demanding process, yet their removal leads to relief. If we externalize 'our shadow contents,' to use C.G. Jung's terminology, we place them, or respectively project them onto the putative or actual enemy and are then relieved in any case. This process rids us of internal doubt and allows us to accept ourselves without having to displace any part of ourselves in our unconscious. This is exacerbated by a kind of projection of the Superego onto an external authority. The pressure of one's conscience is henceforth associated in particular with the obligation to obey. If a soldier has the possibility to 'legally' and with an authority's blessing destroy the enemy (who personifies his shadow), this can bring out the worst in him. Not only does he do so without guilt at that moment, but this can even lead to a brief sense of relief that can verge on pleasure. This may be one of the explanations of the blissful feeling that accompanies repeated killing. Also, the diffusion of a soldier's Ego into the group is usually perceived as pleasant. This is also part of the regression. The limited adult Ego regresses somewhere into its distant past where there was no 'I', but only 'we'; that is to say into the early developmental stages of the pre-Oedipal period. It is then that the possibility to express these deep, atavistic impulses becomes one of the sources of the attractiveness of war.

After completing their training, the individual arrives on the battlefield. According to the testimonies of our respondents, we can detect other factors that affect one's value system. Diagram 1 represents the process as the respondents recalled it. However, one should keep in mind that this is a simplistic view that does not deal with individual differences. Some will not be exposed to all the influences listed in Diagram 1, while others will maybe add other influences which our respondents did not specify, or perhaps the curve of the Superego's pressure drop may differ in terms of smoothness and depth.

In the period immediately after deployment to a combat zone, the individual is exposed to the sight of dead people, foreign soldiers, civilians, etc. Their colleagues, or perhaps comrades fall under the influence of senior soldiers, veterans of previous battles, whose moral values have already been altered. They then begin to relativize the activities that would have otherwise conflicted with their previous (household) moral principles. The soldier will

be directly or indirectly confronted with the ethics of fighting the enemy, which affects his or her view of the situation and the development of potential dehumanizing attitudes. Finally, his or her life could be threatened. Under such strong pressure, it is not likely that they would maintain the same attitude towards killing as they had had before joining the army. Should this nevertheless happen, it would significantly decrease their chances of survival.

It is only after developments described above that the soldier's first kill comes. Now, depending on degree of the soldier's exposure to the aforementioned influences, this could mark a turning point in their mode of reaction. As demonstrated in the structured interviews, the relativization of ethical principles is never quite complete, so respondents described feelings of alienation, physical reactions or feelings of guilt.

This is, however, not the end of the process. The soldier will remain in a war situation and his or her activities will become more closely associated with fighting and killing. No additional influences will appear, but the aforementioned influences will become more pronounced. It is possible to detect reactions that were not a product of the environment in virtually all the respondents, but it also seems that the aforementioned influences awakened certain reactions that they could fully express. This explanation, among others, may help to clarify the appearance of very pleasant and blissful feelings accompanying the act of killing. The most important causes of such feelings can be the presence of elements of the hunt, feelings of power, the opportunity to get rid of stress and vent anger. The feelings themselves have thus often been likened to those experienced during coitus or upon experiencing the effects of drugs. These aspects clearly demonstrate the important role of the unconsciousness in an experienced situation.

Apparently, there is no single explanation for blissful experiences accompanying killing. The story of every soldier or veteran was unique to his personality. Nevertheless, we can suggest some explanations that may clarify these emotional reactions. As we know, every living organism is guided by two basic motives – to survive as a species and as an individual. Sexual instinct is used to achieve the first, while the instinct of self-preservation is used to ensure the second. One, albeit not the sole motive behind people's sexual drives, is the vision of blissful experiences of orgasm. It seems like nature endowed us with this ability to encourage this desired behaviour; it being desirable because it aims to keep the human race as a biological species alive. Based on the data provided up to this point, we have every right to wonder whether, perhaps, there is a chance that the expression of the instinct of self-preservation in the form of aggressive and destructive actions aimed at one's hostile surroundings is accompanied by qualitatively the same experiences as during orgasm (which is itself a part of the expression of one's sexual instinct). Man is also apparently the only creature on the planet who is aware of his mortality; the finality of his existence. This may propel him into a kind of chronic state of existential anxiety from which, by his nature, he must find an escape. Usually, we ensure our immortality through our

libido, either directly by begetting children through which we live on, or indirectly, by taking advantage of the creative aspect of our sexual instinct. Then we try to create anything that will outlive us. Our anxiety, however, can even cut through self-preservation. If this occurs, we join something that is naturally eternal or unlimited – religion, ideology, political parties or, of course, a military unit. I have already referred to the diffusion of a soldier's Ego into the unit in which he serves. This process helps him to perceive himself as being much stronger and invulnerable. On the other hand, any threat to the unit or its symbol, for example a flag, is extremely hazardous. Killing the enemy in this situation is a confirmation of one's own strength and causes relief due to the fact that the threat had passed. As a soldier diffuses his ego into the wider society, he no longer has to fight only for himself, but for the whole group with which he identifies. In such situations, there is no need for him to even dread his own death so much because self-preservation is related to the unit and not himself. He can die, but if his unit survives, he becomes immortal. It is here that we can find an explanation for numerous heroic deeds, as well as unnecessary killings and atrocities which, at a certain moment, seem like something that needs to be done for the unit, the army and the state with which the soldier identifies. This process can also explain the unprecedented brutality of religious conflicts or series of terrorist acts.

The regressive Ego's diffusion into society with which the soldier identifies leads to relief from internal conflicts. The destruction of anything that threatens this company would not only be welcomed but often sought after because it could not only eliminate the threat to society, but also confirm one's uniqueness and finally elicit positive feedback from the members of this society. Internal conflicts and the dread of a lonely, suffering Ego all make the return to adulthood unusually difficult, or even impossible for a number of veterans. The price that these people pay for their ability to kill is high. Anyone who has undergone such an experience will never be the same. Once formed, the adult Ego cannot be completely dissolved into the outside world because, if it were, we would witness a soldier falling into psychosis. After the soldier is excluded from the army, he is like a child without a mother. The ability of the soldier's Ego to rebuild itself, or perhaps the failure to do so, is a measure of and can serve to characterize their post-traumatic symptoms. Moral principles, once they are created, cannot be completely destroyed. During a war, they can be treated, relativized, or even temporarily lost. But upon the return of the appeals of conscience, the internalized rules of peaceful society also reappear. This may result in a particularly strong increase of feelings of guilt leading to pathological developments towards PTSD. Studying the processes related to killing an enemy is therefore necessary to continue the systematic analysis of this phenomenon. We should not shut our eyes to these issues simply because of political correctness.

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