

COMBAT MOTIVATION

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FOR CENTURIES, commanders and military thinkers have reflected on the factors that contribute to motivation and morale during combat. In 401 BC, Xenophon alluded to the “force of the soul” to convince the Greeks to withstand the enemy during a campaign in Asia. At about the same time in China, Sun Tzu noted the importance of “moral law” in his teachings on the art of war. The Romans remarked on the importance of moral and motivational aspects in war and focused on them when they organized their legions. More recently, in the 19th century, Carl von Clausewitz categorically affirmed that “the effects of a victory cannot in any way be explained without taking moral impressions into consideration.”¹

The Second World War was the first conflict in which human behavior on the battlefield was scientifically analyzed. The studies of this time indicated that regardless of such variables as terrain, enemy fire, and logistics, units that achieved their objectives during battle essentially did it by having Soldiers who were well disposed toward combat.

Despite great advances in warfighting technology in the last few decades, the combat Soldier—the one who operates tanks and helicopters and weapon systems, who attacks from armored vehicles and defends his post—is still the essential element on the battlefield. Thus, motivation is and always will be crucial to leading Soldiers. In many situations, it will also be the key to achieving success in combat.

The Meaning of Motivation

Motivation can be defined as that which compels a person to act with determination, or that which gives rise to an inclination that manifests itself through a specific behavior. In certain circumstances or under certain stimuli, the individual assumes particular attitudes and acts on them.

In his book *Motivation and Emotion*, Edward J. Murray asserts that motivation has two essential components: impulse and motive. Impulse refers to the internal process that incites a person to act. Motive is that which generates the behavior and helps the person achieve his objective. The objective is the reward that satisfies the individual’s internal urges.²

Some sociologists argue that motivation necessarily includes a conscious desire to obtain something. In *Human Motivation*, M.D. Vernon agrees with that theory, declaring that a great part of human behavior is organized around being motivated and oriented toward a defined objective. Although individuals are not always conscious of the motives that propel them, they are always conscious of the objectives that they desire to achieve.³ Figure 1 lays out the elemental aspects of motivation.



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Motivation and Morale

Motivation for combat can be understood as “the impulse that compels the Soldier to face the enemy on the battlefield” or “the determination that induces Soldiers to fight, in spite of the adversities and the inherent dangers of war.”⁴

Motivation for combat and morale (or military morale) are intimately related concepts. They are not, however, identical. Morale refers to the psychological state or attitude of the individual or group before they undertake a task, whereas motivation describes those impulses that make an individual act. Historically, the consideration of human behavior in battle tends to concentrate on collective morale. It is legitimate, however, to suppose that the actions of the group have an individual predisposition as their basic determinant. According to this line of thought, one should first consider personal motivation before connecting it with the collective disposition toward action.

Intuitively, one may affirm that morale refers to the Soldier’s attitude or mental preparedness for action, while motivation refers to the impulses that lead to action. Hence, there exists a definite distinction between morale and motivation: motivation has a more dynamic, more immediate connotation in relation to the action undertaken. Morale and motivation for combat can also be defined, respectively, as the mental state of preparation and the impulse to fight.

Factors of Motivation

Motives to fight are influenced by cultural, ethnic, and religious considerations. In addition, they might vary (and normally do) from one person to another. From any given group of Soldiers it is possible to glean a wide variety of military, social, and individual values, beliefs, and feelings. These might include a sense of duty, a sense of accomplishment when a mission is completed, responsibility, spirit of sacrifice, love of glory, an adventurous spirit, leadership, esprit de corps, unit cohesion, training, self-confidence, discipline, logistical efficiency, confidence in systems of sub-institutions, predilection for recognition and rewards, notions regarding

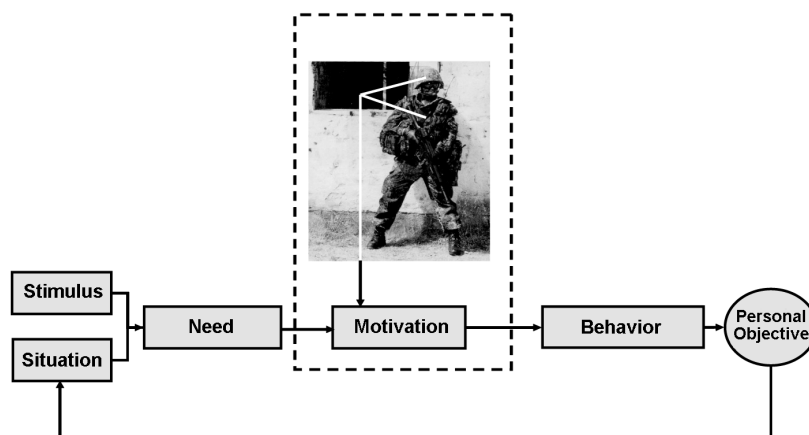


Figure 1. Elemental aspects of motivation.

a war’s legitimacy, hope of victory, hatred of the enemy and, lastly (on many occasions), a need for self-preservation.

What we can gather from this long list is that individual motivations for combat can be diverse and wide-ranging; in fact, they constitute a very blurry universe of ideas. These motivations can include several powerful factors that are highly abstract in nature. In this context, the studies of the Canadian Anthony Kellet and the German General Dirk Oetting surpass others, offering a solid base from which to study combat motivation.

According to Kellet, the primary combat motivators are small-unit cohesion; esprit de corps; strong leadership; belief in, and notion of, values; rewards and recognition; efficient and fair management of human resources (sub-institution policies); and discipline.⁵ Kellet recognizes other motivating factors, such as training and the degree of individual integration into the military culture, but acknowledges that those factors stimulate the Soldier at other times and not only during moments of combat.

Oetting’s aim is to identify the most important combat motivators based on academic research.⁶ To that end, he has compiled a list of the factors most often mentioned by significant thinkers in the field. Using this methodology, Oetting has identified such “essential motivation factors” as group cohesion (in pursuit of the objective to be achieved), small-group leadership, legitimacy, and efficiency of force.

Differences between the motivating factors noted by Kellet and those highlighted by Oetting result from the two authors using different criteria to devise their lists. Kellet opted for a wider focus;



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Oetting restricted his study to the motivating factors he deemed to be most important. However, the absence of discipline from Oetting's essential factors is worthy of attention.

Discipline has always been considered an important element in the proper performance of armies on the battlefield. This notion reached its peak during the days of absolute monarchies, when linear tactics were employed. During that era, the need to concentrate force and coordinate fire made it essential to keep forces in formation. This required rigid discipline based on strict order and severe punishments. The lethality of the battlefield also provided a powerful stimulus for Soldiers to maintain good order and discipline: doing so would lead to victory, thereby increasing the Soldiers' probability of surviving.

During the 19th century, formal discipline began to lose its importance in battle. The development of new weapons (such as the automatic rifle and the machine-gun) necessitated greater troop dispersion and the use of terrain. With the abandonment of close formations, Soldiers could escape the close vigilance of their superiors, and draconian discipline declined.

During World War II, the cohesion of troops and their confidence in their commanders, not the threat of punishment, were decisive factors when inspiring troops to advance. Combat in small units, the maneuver of scout units, and troop dispersion on the battlefield gave Soldiers the liberty to think and act on their own, thus increasing the importance of self-discipline and a sense of mutual responsibility.

Modern democratic societies gave rise to the

concept of the citizen-soldier who acts in harmony with his civic convictions and who is compelled by his conscience, or by something the Germans called *innere Fuhning* (leadership and civic education). Integrating these new citizen-soldiers into combat formations introduced doubts about the effectiveness of formal discipline on the battlefield.

It is also worth offering some comments regarding hatred of the enemy as a motivating element. In the past, this motivation was important in many conflicts. During the cold war, for example, Soviet Bloc soldiers were indoctrinated to hate

their Western enemies and all they symbolized. One can even say that hatred is still a significant motivation today, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. In the Middle East, guerrilla units and terrorists feed off of hatred of Israel and the West in order to keep fighting.

For many armies, though, hate is not a relevant motivational factor. The cordial character of the Brazilian soldier, for instance, does not incorporate hatred well, nor do the armed forces stimulate it, since it makes the establishment of peace difficult after war ends. Accounts of Brazilians who participated on the Italian front during World War II indicate they respected the Germans and greatly admired their combat qualities. German prisoners were treated by their captors with consideration, so much so that the Brazilian Expeditionary Force headquarters had to intervene many times to keep prisoners from receiving cigars or words of encouragement just before they were to be interrogated.

Essential Factors of Motivation

As Oetting suggests, some motivational factors are more important than others, and so it is very useful to identify them. With this goal in mind, a research project was conducted using Brazilian World War II veterans. The research indicated the importance of having a sense of duty, believing in the legitimacy of the cause, being confident about the effectiveness of the force and its leadership, and building unit cohesion. Above all, the aspects most mentioned were sense of duty, capable leadership, and small-unit cohesion.

When it comes to actual combat, the Soldier must also believe in the legitimacy of the war, in the possibility of victory, and in the importance of his own role in battle.

The motivating factor behind doing one's duty can be explained by psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs.⁷ The satisfaction of fulfilling a relevant obligation in the midst of a difficult situation and being lauded for the excellence one achieves when overcoming any obstacle to success is tied closely to the search for personal fulfillment.⁸ In war, notable performance means completing combat-related tasks in spite of inherent difficulties. To overcome difficulty, one must have a sense of duty.

Sense of duty is mentioned only briefly in the literature on combat motivation; however, it appears frequently in accounts of wars and battles. It seems that some authors confuse duty with discipline, while others subsume duty into the other military ideals and values considered to be the real motivators. The degree to which duty is established in the military cultures of many countries (Brazil's included) validates the consideration of sense of duty as a specific factor for motivation. Unquestionably, sense of duty constitutes an important moral and psychological support for many Soldiers on the battlefield.

The legitimacy of a particular war is established and reaffirmed by society, not the military. Different social actors interpret the history, causes, and objectives of a conflict within the context of law, reason, and justice. Later, these ideas are translated for public opinion into justifications for the validity of the war. As an integral member of society, the Soldier must believe in the legitimacy of a war to motivate himself to fight.

The effectiveness of force depends upon the Soldier's belief in his unit's ability to advance to its objectives without suffering an inordinate number of casualties. Here, "force" can be defined as an operational unit that brings together combat, combat support, logistics, and the capabilities of sister services (e.g., close air and naval support). In other words, a Soldier's belief in his unit's chance of success is related to the confidence he has in the effectiveness of his unit's weapon systems, logistics, operational doctrine, working strategies, and command and control elements. The latter is especially important. Firm and decisive leadership during critical moments has the power to elevate

the morale of troops, galvanize their energies, and increase the will to fight from within.

Cohesion is determined by the intensity and quality of relationships in small groups, particularly at the platoon and company levels. Oetting attributes great value to this motivating factor. He directly relates mission success to how closely small units establish their own objectives and align them with the intent of their higher echelons.

We can now see the essential factors of motivation coalescing. At this point, the need for confidence comes to mind. Toward the end of the 19th century, Charles Jean Jacques Joseph Ardant du Picq referred to "personal, firm, consistent confidence that does not disappear in the moment of action" as one of the necessary elements of an efficient army.⁹ Oetting, for his part, considered confidence as a true motivating factor, although he has a slightly different definition of it than the other writers.

Confidence is the outcome of the various motivating factors forged together into a holistic system of motivation. It is a catalyst for motivating factors and the amalgamator that will make them more effective. Commanders should have confidence in their troops, and vice versa. Soldiers should have confidence in their comrades, their weapons, and their unit's efficiency. When it comes to actual combat, the Soldier must also believe in the legitimacy of the war, in the possibility of victory, and in the importance of his own role in battle.

If he is imbued with a sense of duty, believes in the legitimacy of his nation's cause, and trusts in the efficiency of his forces (to include his comrades and his leader), the Soldier will be highly motivated to fight. **MR**

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Krieg*, vol. 1, book 3, (Schleswig, Germany: S.L. Leik, 1963).
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3. M.D. Vernon, *Motivação Humana* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Editora Vozes, 1973), 189.
4. Reuvan Gal, "The Motivation for Serving in the Israeli Defense Forces: In the Mirror of Time," *Strategic Assessment* 2, no. 3 (December 1999): 2.
5. Anthony Kellet, *Motivação para o Combate: o comportamento do soldado na luta* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: BIBLEX, 1987).
6. Dirk W. Oetting, *Motivation und Gehechtswert: von Verhalten des Soldaten im Kriege* (Frankfurt, Germany: Report Verlag, 1988).
7. Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Needs," *Psychological Review* 50 (1943), 370-396.
8. Vernon, 211.
9. Ardant du Picq, *Estudios sobre o Combate* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: BIBLEX, 2000), 99.