

A Good Death Mortality and Narrative in Army Leadership

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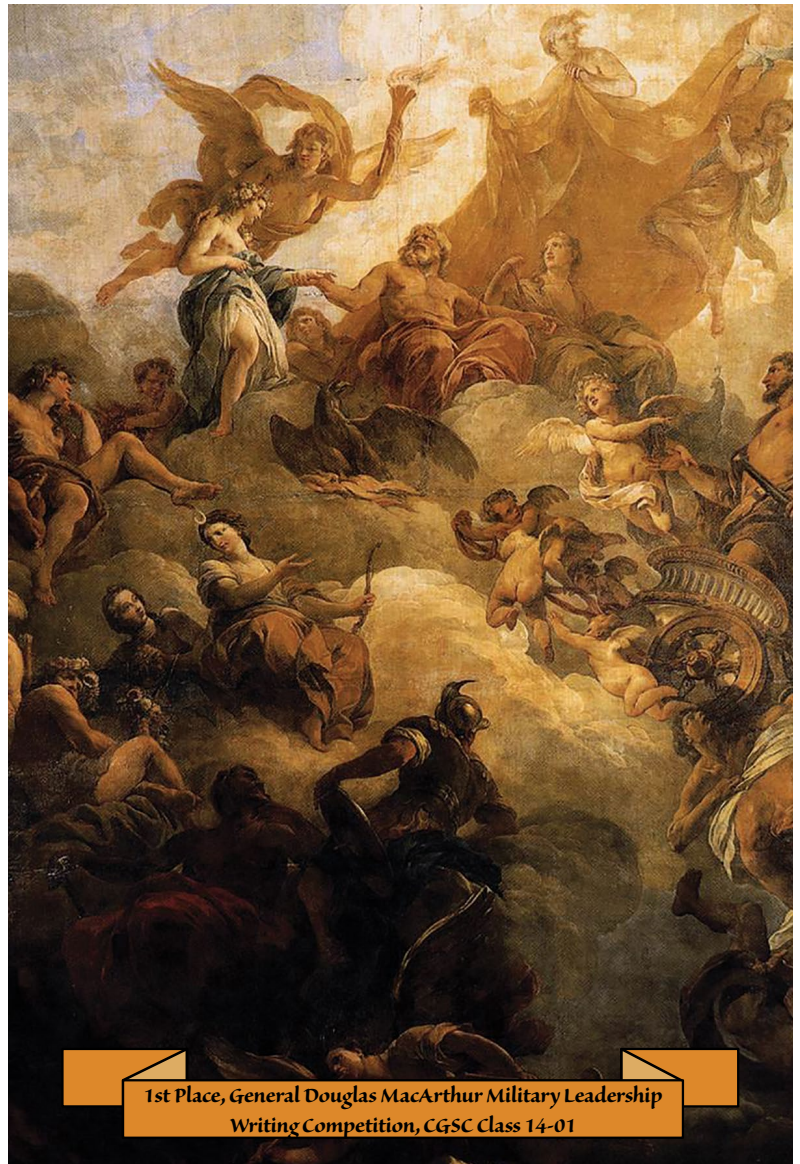
What does it matter when death comes, since it is inevitable? To the man who told Socrates, “The thirty tyrants have condemned you to death,” he replied, “And nature, them.”

—Michel de Montaigne

A soldier sees death more vividly than most. Mortality’s daily presentation in war has major implications for how leaders induce individuals and organizations to operate under the shadow of stark possibilities. To most leaders, this omnipresent threat of death may seem unremarkable—a benign fact—unless as soldiers we acknowledge just how important *immortality* is to each of us.

Philosopher Stephen Cave, in his book *Immortality*, identifies narratives that, in one form or another, all civilizations have used to sate human anxiety over death.¹ Countless soldiers have steeled

their minds against battle’s peril using four immortality narratives that Cave calls staying alive, resurrection, the soul, and legacy. Army leaders have used them to influence soldiers to carry out dangerous missions and to try to stay alive. However, leaders should use caution when employing these narratives as paths to build hardy, courageous formations. They are not one-size-fits-all and may produce undesired consequences. Leaders need to fully understand their shortcomings, and perhaps find a better approach, to manage the terror of combat in themselves and in others.



(The Apotheosis of Hercules, oil on canvas, François Lemoyne (1688–1737), circa 1736)

To understand why immortality narratives are central to the profession of arms, it is essential to understand what Cave calls humanity's "mortality paradox," a psychological contradiction hardwired into every human:

Our awareness of ourselves, of the future, and of alternative possibilities enables us to adapt and make sophisticated plans. But it also gives us a perspective on ourselves that is at the same time terrifying and baffling. On the one hand, our powerful intellects come inexorably to the conclusion that we, like all other living things around us, must one day die. Yet on the other, the one thing that these minds cannot imagine is that very state of nonexistence; it is literally inconceivable. Death therefore presents itself as both inevitable and impossible.²

Immortality narratives try to reconcile this dilemma. Various philosophies have explored the mortality paradox for thousands of years. Sigmund Freud explored the cognitive inability to imagine one's own death and the resulting subconscious conviction of one's immortality.³ The inborn will to live sharpens as an individual becomes more aware of his or her own mortality. For the soldier, this meeting with

imminent death in battle can become a paralyzing confrontation. Australian war hero Peter Ryan describes the experience as leaving him "a shuddering mess of demoralised [sic] terror."⁴ As danger and the threat of death approach, the first issue emerging for the soldier is how to stay alive.

Survive

The drive for survival is the first and most basic narrative, and it has a single, simple tenet: do not die. Unfortunately, avoiding death is also the most problematic. In his study, Cave illustrates the history of man's obsessive search for a cure for dying through magic, alchemy, and even modern science.⁵ However, soldiers in battle have a comparatively simple dilemma—living forever first requires living until tomorrow. Army leaders often approach this narrative using two themes: that obedience leads to survival and that the medical system can save wounded or injured soldiers. When employed to satisfy the mortality paradox, these—like the fabled elixir of life—are false promises.

The first theme proposes that soldiers who are skilled enough in battle, and who listen to and obey their leaders, will come home alive. Hollywood portrays this idea in the film *Starship Troopers*, when a young lieutenant shouts to a group of soldiers:

"Remember your training, and you will make it out alive!"⁶ The lieutenant dies almost immediately after giving the advice. While darkly comical, the story highlights the fallacy.

The military invests significant effort in developing both realistic training and smart leaders. These may improve soldiers' odds of survival. Neither, however, can banish death's power in combat because neither can banish the role chance plays in survival. For example, a veteran of combat in Vietnam described being surrounded by metal flying through the air in the chaos of battle. He said the only reason anyone survived was dumb luck, the grace of God, or both.⁷ On the other hand, a remark by a noncommissioned officer in 2008 illustrates



(Photo by Christopher Menzie, Veterans Affairs)

Spc. Lyle Yantz and several other service members participating in Operation Proper Exit are greeted 6 December 2012 after arriving at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. Operation Proper Exit brought severely wounded service members back to the theater where they were injured to provide them with a first-hand progress update on the continuing mission and to help in their healing process.

the fallacy. He said only good soldiers die; the enemy cannot kill a bad soldier.⁸ There is a morbid principle here. After the first “good soldier” dies, his or her comrades quickly lose their sense of invincibility. Well-intentioned rhetoric tying skill or obedience to one’s chances of survival can lead to cynicism among those who witness its falsehood.

The second theme proposes that medical science can rebuild wounded, injured, or sick soldiers. It extols the quality of U.S. battlefield trauma care and the confidence that it can provide.

The U.S. military’s medical evacuation and treatment system is truly unparalleled. According to the U.S. Army Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, the medical evacuation survival rate in Afghanistan in 2012 was 92 percent.⁹ This achievement through the disciplined application of science and technology is phenomenal, but survival is not guaranteed for anyone. The statistic does not include those who died before evacuation or from injuries not related to combat. Moreover, of those evacuated, eight percent still died, under the care of the best combat medical care system in the world.

Soldiers need confidence in their training, leaders, and medical care system; however, these themes are inadequate to satisfy soldiers’ need to reconcile the mortality paradox. If leaders communicate these themes in absolute terms, they risk their credibility when chance takes its toll. Presenting combat as a controllable quantity—that the application of some technique, tactic, procedure, or technology can eliminate death in battle—denies the role of chance, which is part of warfare’s unchanging nature. A soldier’s acknowledgment that death is inevitable, regardless of skill, performance, and quality of care, leads to a search for immortality beyond this earth.



(*The Storming of Ft Wagner*, lithograph, Kurz and Allison, circa 1890)

The 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was one of the first official black Union Army units formed during the U.S. Civil War. The regiment gained national and international attention when, on 18 July 1863, it spearheaded an assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, taking heavy casualties. The unit had among its ranks many former slaves. Its battlefield valor at Fort Wagner and elsewhere established a precedent and legacy for recruitment of additional black units to fight slavery and preserve the Union.

To Rise Again

The second and third immortality narratives—resurrection and the soul—are suitable for combination into a single discussion. Both are central doctrines for most religions, and each promises a continuation of life in some far future or other realm of existence.¹⁰ The religious context of these narratives allows opportunity for their use but also makes them perilous to organizational unity within diverse groups.

A certain leader introduced himself to a group of new subordinates—the critical first step in building rapport and establishing a positive command climate. He described himself as a husband, father, and “child of the one true king.” It was clear that the officer wanted to relate to the group by conveying his Christian faith; however, his manner of trying to relate was counterproductive. To the two Muslim and three atheist soldiers in the room, he had drawn a line in the sand: he was a child of the true god, and they were not. In effect, he had informed these soldiers that their personal immortality narratives were void. The resurrection and soul narratives’ inseparable relationship with religion makes them difficult to employ without opening rifts, or worse, within a diverse organization. Social psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton



(Photo by Staff Sgt. Justin Holley, 982nd Combat Camera Company)

Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Kahler, left, supervises and provides security as Pfc. Jonathan Ayers and Pfc. Adam Hamby emplace an M240 machine gun 23 October 2007 in the mountains of Afghanistan's Kunar Province. The soldiers are all from 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team. Kahler was killed 26 January 2008. Respected and admired for his skill, professionalism, and dedication to duty, he was universally mourned by those who knew him.

proposes that groups will “fight and die in order to affirm [their mode of immortality] or put down rivals who threaten their immortality system.”¹¹ This is not to say that religion and views of resurrection and the soul have no place in Army leadership, but they remain deeply personal, not universal, views. Leaders who attempt to use them must take care not to expect conformity within their units or to proselytize.

A dominant trend within the U.S. military is the increasing diversity of the force, including a religious diversity that mirrors America's changing religious landscape.¹² This is a trend that then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, now retired U.S. Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, said in 2010 “can't go fast enough.”¹³ Despite this narrative from strategic leaders to accept diversity, friction surrounds a significant population of military leaders who struggle to integrate soldiers and families whose beliefs lie beyond Judeo-Christian perspectives.¹⁴

Certain warrior societies—the Japanese samurai and Greek hoplites, for example—successfully employed a belief in the immortal soul to promote resolve in battle; however, these societies exhibited nearly perfect ethnic and religious homogeneity.¹⁵ In a diverse force such as the U.S. Army, using such narratives to bolster collectively hardy attitudes toward mortality is risky. Some in the formation may find courage, but leaders who emphasize unequivocal religious themes

will cause division among the increasing number of soldiers with diverse perspectives. Accepting then that everyone will die with no valid guarantees otherwise, and acknowledging the organizational problems generated by spiritual narratives in diverse forms, perhaps leaders could focus on the accomplishments and contributions that fallen comrades leave behind.

Remember Me Forever

The fourth narrative is legacy.

Of all the narratives of immortality, legacy lends itself most easily to the military context. In Homer's *Iliad*, the mythical warrior Achilles must choose to leave Ilium for “a long life” or stay and die to “gain unfading glory.”¹⁶

He chooses glory, and it is not surprising that his story endures. Achilles symbolizes a warrior's immortality through legacy, in the Western tradition. However, few warriors—sparing names such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar—gain enduring fame. Still, legacy offers a path to avoiding complete personal extinction, but it comes with a dark side.

The search for legacy through personal glory is a narcissistic one that runs counter to the selflessness needed for a unit-based ethos; therefore, modern armies seldom celebrate heroes as the Greeks did. Since the Napoleonic era, the common tool for constructing a legacy narrative has been nationalism. Soldiers may die, but their achievements live on in the security and prosperity of the nation-state.

A nationalistic theme is problematic for two reasons: the relationships between the force and the host-nation population, and the relationships among members of the force whose cultures differ. This is because a nationalistic theme tends to be based on an ethnocentric defense mechanism (a superior attitude about one's culture).

Enhanced cultural themes such as nationalistic messages, combined with the high mortality risk of combat, will generate increased tension between soldiers and populations of other nationalities, cultures, and religions—if they apply at all within a diverse force. Nationalistic messages require a significant amount of uniformity within the force.

Terror management theory's "worldview defense" hypothesis proposes that reminders of mortality inspire a need to validate faith in one's cultural worldview.¹⁷ Multiple studies confirm that "in response to reminders of mortality, people become more favorable toward those who support their worldview and more unfavorable toward those who violate it."¹⁸ As warfare moves toward an increased reliance on multinational coalitions, and combat operations require increased cultural competence to negotiate complex environments, nationalistic messages as a buffer against the fear of death seem increasingly less applicable.

Some forms of legacy do have merit: contributions to collective efforts, a mission that has some enduring worth, and a personal legacy such as having children. However, these are difficult to share universally across an organization. Leaders should consider the consequences of nationalistic narratives in addressing the mortality paradox. Inspiring nationalistic pride among soldiers may generate an aggressive but xenophobic force.

A Fifth Narrative

The four immortality narratives presented exhibit flaws that should cause Army leaders to question their validity. The ideas that obedience, skill, or medical science can guarantee survival are false promises; resurrection and the soul are acceptable individual narratives but can fissure organizational trust and cohesion in diverse organizations; and nationalistic narratives that satisfy a need for legacy can promote dangerous intolerance toward others inside or outside the organization. Still, the mortality paradox needs reconciliation. Ethicist and author James Toner describes the soldier's duties this way: "In addition to killing and preparing to kill, the soldier has two other principal duties. Some soldiers die; when they are not dying, they must be preparing to die."¹⁹

Cave proposes a fifth narrative that soldiers can apply to face their own mortality, *wisdom*, but Army leaders can think of it as *professionalism*. Through professionalism, soldiers can prepare to die by acknowledging their mortality without reservation and cultivating values that enable wellness.²⁰

World War II infantryman and writer James Jones posits, "every combat soldier ... must make a compact with himself or with Fate that he is lost."²¹ Through this

conscious decision to face mortality, he can "function as he ought to function, under fire" because "he knows and accepts beforehand that he's dead."²² After accepting this fate, a soldier must cultivate values-based habits, or virtues, to reinforce the decision to expel the fear of death. The first virtue is to seek empathy, or relatedness to and respect for others. The second is to dwell in the present and clear the mind of unstructured plans and "plots, worries, and idle speculations."²³ The third is to exhibit gratitude and joy in interactions with others.²⁴

According to Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1, *The Army Profession*, an Army professional is "bonded with comrades in a shared identity and culture of sacrifice and service to the Nation. An Army professional is one who acts as a steward of the Army Profession while adhering to the highest standards of the Army's ethic."²⁵ These characteristics parallel the virtues of the fifth narrative.

Leaders seeking to inculcate a true servant spirit must endeavor to build bonds beyond simple unit comradeship. Professional American soldiers are bound not only to their fellow soldiers but also to the citizenry they serve and the broader humanity whose dignity and lives they preserve. Instilling empathy in every soldier is among a leader's most vital tasks to ensure a professional force. A true servant spirit, with the deepest knowledge of U.S. Army values, is humble and grateful. Gratefulness is a quintessential characteristic of a selfless actor. To steward the profession is a daily, moment-by-moment activity. As stewards, soldiers are future-oriented but present-focused. A steward—a professional—asks continually, am I preserving this profession with what I do now? Stewardship inspires thoughtful and structured goal setting and emphasizes present duties over future worries.

Death is nothing fearful to one who lives a meaningful life, and few lead more meaningful lives than professional soldiers. The four immortality narratives are opiates for the masses, but when applied in combat leadership they leave something wanting. Army leaders must break free of them and inspire more meaningful and lasting mechanisms to foster courage, resolve, and resilience in confronting the harshest realities of battle. The professionalism narrative provides a path to embracing death as part of a life committed to a worthy task. Leaders seek to build character that echoes the Roman poet Ovid: "When death comes, let it find me at work."²⁶ ■

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Notes

Epigraph. Michel de Montaigne, "To Philosophize is to Learn How to Die," in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, ed. and trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 64.

1. Stephen Cave, *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How It Drives Civilization* (New York: Crown, 2012), 4-6.

2. *Ibid.*, 16.

3. *Ibid.*, 16-21; Sigmund Freud, *Reflections on War and Death*, trans. A. A. Brill and Alfred B. Kuttner (New York, NY: Moffit, Yard, and Company, 1918), excerpt reprinted online by SigmaOmni Press, accessed 5 August 2015, http://www.sophia-project.org/uploads/1/3/9/5/13955288/freud_waranddeath.pdf; See also Jessie Bering, *The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny and the Meaning of Life* (Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey, 2010).

4. Peter Ryan, "Behind Enemy Lines with Marcus Aurelius," *Quadrant* (April 2010), 128.

5. Cave, *Immortality*, 29-82.

6. *Starship Troopers*, directed by Paul Verhoeven (TriStar Pictures, 1997), based on a novel by Robert A. Heinlein, *Starship Troopers* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1959).

7. Master Sgt. Lloyd Haseleu, U.S. Army, retired, reported from a discussion with the author, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, June 1997. Originator served as an Army Special Forces staff sergeant in Vietnam.

8. Patrick Jarchow, discussion with author, Kandahar, Afghanistan, September 2008. Originator served on active duty as a U.S. Army first sergeant at the time of discussion.

9. U.S. Army Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, "Army Statement on MEDEVAC [Medical Evacuation] Issue," news archive at the homepage of the U.S. Army, 20 January 2012, accessed 8 August 2015, http://www.army.mil/article/72250/Army_statement_on_MEDEVAC_issue/.

10. Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh, UK: Cannongate, 2005) discusses the relationship of religion and reconciliation of the mortality paradox.

11. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Future of Immortality and Other Essays for a Nuclear Age* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), quoted in Cave, *Immortality*, 13.

12. Department of Defense, *2011 Demographics Profile of the Military Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense [Military Community and Family Policy], November 2012), accessed 8 August 2015, http://www.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2011_Demographics_Report.pdf; and Department of Defense, "Pay Grade and Religion of Active Duty Personnel by Service," (Washington, DC: Defense Manpower Data Center, 2009), accessed 5 August 2015, <http://www.google.com/>

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13. Karen Parrish, "Mullen: U.S. Military Needs More Diversity," Department of Defense News online, 18 October 2010, accessed 8 August 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=61315>.

14. Charlotte E. Hunter and Lyman A. Smith, "Religious Diversity in the U.S. Military: Human Potential Supporting Cultural Acuity and Mission Accomplishment" (Patrick Air Force Base, Florida: Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, 2009) accessed 5 August 2015, https://www.deomi.org/EOEEOResources/documents/Religious_Diversity_in_the_US_Military-Hunter_and_Smith.pdf.

15. Ted M. Preston, "The Stoic Samurai," *Asian Philosophy* 13(1), 39-52; M.R. Wright, *Introducing Greek Philosophy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 107-133.

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17. Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, "Tales from the Crypt: On the Role of Death in Life," *Zygon* 33(1), 20.

18. Linda Simon, et al., "Terror Management and Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory: Evidence That Terror Management Occurs in the Experiential System," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72(5), 1123. See also Jeff Greenberg, et al., "Evidence for Terror Management II: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Threaten or Bolster the Cultural Worldview," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58, 308-318; Abram Rosenblatt, et al., "Evidence for Terror Management Theory I: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Violate or Uphold Cultural Values," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, 681-690.

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20. Cave, *Immortality*, 268-273.

21. James Jones, *The James Jones Reader: Outstanding Selections from His War Writings*, eds. by James R. Giles and J. Michael Lennon (New York, NY: Birch Lane, 1991), 262.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Cave, *Immortality*, 279.

24. *Ibid.*, 276-283.

25. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1, *The Army Profession* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013), 1-1.

26. Ovid, quoted in Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 62.