

Practice Makes Permanent - The Training of a Warrior

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To some the training of a warrior evokes the image of young Leonidas toughing out the trails of Agoge, to others the image of a R. Lee Ermy screaming obscenities at young recruits. Neither is the absolute truth, nor are they entirely fiction. The training of a warrior and even the status of soldiers has evolved through the years. However, the basic principles have always been the same. A warrior must be proficient in his battlefield tasks and must be willing to stand and deliver in the face of death. From some of civilization's oldest texts to modern Army basic training, the creation of a warrior has been a subject of great interest. Whether hoplite or paratrooper, men that have "seen the elephant" have won or lost, largely base on their training.

While most healthy people can be trained to wield a sword, or to shoot straight, training the mind seems to be the harder – and possibly most important task in training a soldier.(Caldwell, IV, 2009) The citizens of civilized nations are taught early on, and rightly so, that killing another human being is taboo. While this serves society greatly, it is also a detriment to the forging of a warrior. The natural instincts of "fight or flight" are never completely squashed, even in the most enlightened society. Even the meekest will kill is pressed. However, training a person to kill on order, without malice, is a different thing entirely. In fact doing so in the right context is what makes a warrior, instead of a raging killer. (Wong, 1999)

I have heard lectures concerning the American Civil War, that alleged that there were instances of rifles found on the battlefield, still in the hands of some brave soldier, packed to capacity with load after load – nary a shot having been fired. This shows that while the soldiers were trained to stand in the face of certain death and were technically proficient, they had trouble actually pulling the trigger. Obviously, this was the exception as the Civil War was horrifically bloody. Soldiers on both sides grew to hate each other for both ideological reasons as well as the obvious reason that the enemy were doing their best to deal out death. This was remarkably

tempered by legendary stories of compassion on the battlefield, showing that even in the hell of war; man has the capacity for kindness.

By World War II, the United States developed training centers that standardized the indoctrination to the rigors of combat. However, the issues remained concerning the average soldier, new to combat, had with actually killing another human being. This was of course mitigated by the “fight or flight” effect, hatred of the enemy and even race. While the Nazis were known to have committed atrocities both on the battlefield and off, propaganda helped in demonizing the enemy. The foreign attitudes, habits and even appearance of the Japanese made their humanity easier to ignore. Regardless of this type of racism throughout World War II, Korea and Vietnam, the US Army had still not found a universal way to train the mind of a soldier to squeeze the trigger on order, and against his moral and social sensibilities. Remarkably, the simple act of changing the shape of the targets used in training would have dramatic effect.

After the war in Vietnam, the US Army became introspective. A “never again” attitude permeated the organization and led to massive restructuring and realignment of resources - especially training. Among the myriad of changes that the Army would undergo, one minor change that would have a major impact is the abolition of round “bull’s-eye” type targets and the introduction of the “Plastic Ivan”. These targets are a three dimensional approximation of a Soviet soldier who is running toward the shooter. When combined with “pop-up” machinery, these Ivans conditioned the young trainee to shoot a man-shaped target with no compunction. This practice is still used today and has virtually eliminated the hesitation that many soldiers feel when the fatal moment comes.

Being able to pull the trigger is just one of many steps that the Army has taken to forge warriors. The use of realistic training, including feedback such as “simunitions” that simulate projectile impacts in gunfights as well as the use of lifelike wounds and blood when undergoing first aid training has made the training battlefield as close to the real battlefield as is safely possible. (“The New Training Philosophy”, 2000) Additionally, talking through the harsh realities of combat instills a “kill or be killed” mentality that is paramount to survival of life or death situations. The use of repetition, ad nauseum, in training has made battlefield tasks automatic. While soldiers perform drills, they begin to train not only their brains, but also their muscles to react without thought. This leaves little time for internal moral debate and creates a Combat Mindset.

In order for an action to become automatic, a person must “own” that action. Sometimes a significant or traumatic emotional event etches the mind with a required reaction to a given stimuli, thus making it relatively permanent. While this is possible, it is not guaranteed or always a pleasant experience. So, they train repetitiously in order to own a skill or action, and once one have done it a certain number of times, he no longer has to think about what he is doing. An apt illustration is learning to ride a bicycle. I specifically remember learning all of those seemingly complex maneuvers, and it took a lot of time before I became comfortable with riding, especially after the training wheels were removed. However, I still ride today and do so without so much as a thought. Sports skills are another example. Imagine when you first learned to throw a football or baseball. Probably not such a great image in your mind’s eye – nor is it for me. However, today I throw the ball with my son as I carry on conversations with my wife. I own that skill.

As good as it is to practice to make permanent, we must remember that only *perfect* practice makes perfect. An example that I learned from my father, who was a Police Training

Officer, was that of an officer who had been killed in the line of duty in a gunfight. They found him behind good cover, but he had not reloaded fast enough and the assailant was able to close on him and kill the officer as he tried to reload his revolver. The officer had been trained to catch his expended brass when reloading and line it up neatly on the bench at the range for accountability. This was reflected in the neat row of empty .38 special brass on the windowsill adjacent to the dead officer's body. Similarly, the long lines of soldiers of the Napoleonic era, facing each other shoulder to shoulder, were seen as quintessential in training and discipline. However, the simple tactics of the Native Americans during the French and Indian War led to much of the so-called ungentlemanly conduct of the Colonials during the American Revolution. While the British soldiers were trained to a much higher standard, the habit of American irregulars to use terrain and camouflage to their advantage cost the British dearly.

The study of training flaws has evolved over time, but perhaps Bruce Lee illustrated one of the most lucid philosophies concerning correcting those flaws. Bruce Lee had trained for years in traditional Kung Fu, but found that it was too ridged a system for actual combat. He was scorned by many of his peers for experimenting with other styles and techniques, but Lee would not be dissuaded. His idea was that the 'fancy mess' of traditional martial arts was a training flaw and that fighters should simplify their technique. His concepts were distilled in his version of Kung Fu, called Jeet Kune Do – "The Way of the Intercepting Fist". (Lee, 1975, ch. 1) Lee was a student of philosophy as much as he was a philosophical pioneer. Many of his training precepts were based on Taoist and Buddhist philosophy and concepts that were staples of his upbringing. Lee simply restated these in the context of combat. Training the mind is as important as training the body, according to Lee. The Noble 8-Fold path that he describes has three mental steps

toward enlightenment before actions are even mentioned. This can be equated to building a Combat Mindset in order to facilitate training for combat.

This mindset is far from a new way of looking at things. It is apparent that the ancients had their professionals who knew how to train soldiers, and there are even ancient texts written to guide generals of antiquity that are still staples of military education today. Sun Tzu's *Art of War* has offered sage advice to warriors for 2500 years. Sun Tzu admonishes the reader to prepare well and makes it abundantly clear that war is as much a mental exercise as a physical one. (Tzu, 1910) Today the *Art of War* is required reading at most military leadership schools and has become a staple in business training as well.

Modern contingency operations like nation building and seemingly mundane jobs like community policing are also embracing the theory of Combat Mindset. The international police advisors stationed in the war torn former Yugoslavia have embraced the idea through training models provided by the U.S. Institute of Peace. It seems that being polite and professional must always be backed with a plan and willingness to meter out deadly force. (Cook, 2002)

As the training of soldiers has evolved through the centuries and we have learned from our mistakes as well as the mistakes of our predecessors, the training of a warrior has likewise evolved. We have relearned many hard won lessons that have been readily accessible if we only took the time to read a bit of history. Modern trainers are more prone to look to those successful models for inspiration as well as research failures for their root causes. This has led men like Dr. Ignatius Piazza to develop entire training regimes around the Combat Mindset. Dr Piazza writes "The Combat Mindset is the ability to block everything else out and focus on the one thing that's going to get you through that gunfight." (Piazza, 1996-2008, p. 1) The US Military has developed many techniques to defeat those inhibitions that we find so admirable in civilized

society. From the use of massive repetition so that a technique is owned and de-humanizing the enemy mentally, to the simple act of changing the shape of the targets that soldiers shoot at, the art of training a warrior has evolved into a science.

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