

FEAR AND THE SOLDIER

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INTRODUCTION

SOUDIERING has almost always been synonymous with deeds of valour and heroism and for an ordinary mortal fear is the last thing a soldier can be associated with. But history of war has ample examples where, fully equipped armies have lost battles because panic was created amongst them due to baseless fear. Incidents are also known where a very small band of soldiers have created havoc amongst a large group of enemy because of the tactics which created an element of surprise and an impression of superior force—the enemy capitulating out of sheer fear. Fear amongst combatants played a very vital role during various stages of Word War II, when the allied troops, after having suffered many initial reverses, had taken the supremacy of the German fighting forces for granted. Students of military history are only too familiar with the 'Order of the Day' issued by the allied commander in the Desert theatre of war where the allied troops were told that the Germans, and particularly Rommel, were no super humans. All this was done to dispel fear amongst the soldiers which was having a detrimental effect on their fighting capabilities.

PHYSIOLOGY OF FEAR

Fear can be defined as a psycho-physiological reaction occurring when an individual finds or believes himself in danger and with reference to a soldier it occurs primarily during defence or retreat. Infact, it can occur in any adverse situation where the individual is unable to respond and adjust himself in a manner required to control that situation. But it must be borne in mind that occurrence of fear is not a natural sequence of an adverse or a fearful situation only. It depends upon the exposure and reaction of an individual to a similar situation in the past; his physical and mental alertness, his maturity, his mental capabilities to judge a situation as potentially dangerous and incidences in his childhood that have instilled an inherent sense of fear in him for a particular situation—in case of which his only reponse will be to hide or flee from that situation instead of comprehending it and acting sensibly.

The manifestations of fear are induced by the action of the Sympathetic Nervous system. It includes a variety of conditions ranging from mild foreboding and apprehension to paralysing terror. Its chief symptoms are

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tachycardia (increased heart beats), trembling, a sinking feeling and in extreme cases loss of control of bowels and bladder. Many persons have auditory and visual hallucinations (hearing and seeing imaginary things) which they would otherwise correctly identify as coming from their own fantasies.

FEAR DURING WAR

Fear, of various types, has been confronting mankind since its inception. Initially, there were various unexplained natural phenomena which instilled a sense of fear in him but with the progress of science the secrets of nature were unfolded. Reason and logic made mankind capable of comprehending things which he otherwise thought supernatural and mysterious. But that is not the end of it. With the passage of time and progress of civilisation various other things have been causing fear in Man's life. They are the fear of disease, pain, social insecurities and death. Over and above all these, a soldier in battle has the additional fears of injuries, getting captured and subsequent tortures by the enemy and defeat. But his greatest fear amongst others is that will he be able to survive? For any one who has not been in battle, it is hard to believe that of all the emotions of a soldier during battle, the most dominant is the fear of self destruction. The unending scenes of mutilation and death of comrades, that a soldier sees during war, weak him emotionally and makes him unstable. Tolstoy writes in 'War And Peace'— "When a man sees an animal dying, a horror comes over him. What he is himself—his essence, visibly before his eyes, perishes—ceases to exist. But when the dying creature is a man dearly loved; then, besides the horror at the extinction of life, what is felt is rendering of the soul, a spiritual wound, which, like a physical wound, is sometimes mortal, sometimes healed, but always aches and shrinks from contact with the outer world, that sets it smarting."

Behind the facade of intense patriotism, devotion to duty, the singleness of purpose and the missionary zeal with which a soldier fights, a critical analysis will show that fatigue and fear from the main state of his physical and emotional being. General George S. Patton Jr says in 'War As I Knew It'—"No sane man is unafraid in battle". A soldier in battle vacillates between his sole purpose of killing or capturing the enemy and the fear of the same fate being meted out to him. The all powerful sense of self preservation tempts him to escape the situation but his fears of being considered a coward holds him back. S.L.A. Marshall has said—"Troops do not conquer their fear of death and wound." The fear of injuries to the self is aroused by the uncertain nature of the enemy. Uncertain, because the enemy cannot be expected where the soldier wants him nor act in the manner the soldier expects him to. This creates the fear of the unknown. This fact is borne out by the general observation that troops are more apprehensive and nervous just prior to going into battle than at the height of battle or during close combat—because at this moment he exactly knows what he has to deal with.

EFFECTS OF FEAR ON THE SOLDIER

Having discussed the factors which produce fears in combatants we now try to see its effects on the fighting capabilities of the soldier.

Paralysing terror, which is produced by extreme fear, can render a soldier completely inactive and this prevents him not only from fighting but from taking basic precautions for his personal safety. In such conditions he might refuse to advance against the enemy and instead of being an efficient member of the fighting team he will be a liability and a detriment to the morale of the unit as a whole. The sense of discipline, pride and upholding the traditions of the unit which have been drilled into the soldier since the time of his recruitment is all forgotten during this moment of intense fear. Milder forms of fear will produce a tendency to complacency and slackness which in turn will result in incomplete execution of the task assigned to the individual.

HOW TO PREVENT FEAR

Fear on the battle field has been a universal phenomenon since time immemorial. One of the greatest philosophies—Gita—could have never been given to the world had not Arjuna experienced a sense of fear at the start of Mahabharata. What Lord Krishna told Arjuna at that time is today known as indoctrination. And that is what is required for every soldier going into battle. A well indoctrinated soldier, who knows what he is fighting for and what he stands to lose in the event of defeat, will be less prone to fear and he can easily overcome it. He should be forewarned about the normal occurrence of fear which every one experiences initially while going into battle and he should be prepared to emotionally adjust himself and face it. For, the bravery of an individual does not lie in his not being afraid but in the fact that he can overcome his fears and perform normally inspite of it. The following incident—from Tolstoy's 'War And Peace'—precisely describes the emotions of a soldier going into battle. "In former days Rostov had fear while going into an engagement; now he had not the slightest feeling of fear. He had not lost his fears from growing used to being under fire (one can never get accustomed to danger) but from gaining controls of his feelings in face of danger. He had schooled himself when going into action to think of any thing except what one would have supposed to be more interesting than any thing else—the danger in store for him. Earnestly as he strove to do this, and bitterly as he reproached himself for cowardice, he could not at first succeed in this. But with years it had come of itself. He felt sorry to see the excited face of Illyin (who was going into battle for the first time)*, who talked a great deal nervously. He knew by experience the agonising state of anticipation of terror and death,—, and he knew that nothing but time could help him out of it."

Though, indoctrination and recognition of fear as a normal phenomenon do help but that is not the end of it. His overall discipline, esprit

*Inserted by the Author.

de-Corps, confidence in his leaders and his knowledge of situation of battle, go a long way in allaying his fears of battle. They help him in fighting his fears and protecting himself. Care should be taken to prevent a sense of idleness amongst troops because more they brood, the more apprehensive, they become. They should be encouraged, within the given circumstances to communicate their feelings with their comrades as this will help them in objectively analysing their own fears and tension and dispelling them.

SUMMARY

Many factors go in to create a sense of fear amongst soldiers in combat and these include causes from unpreparedness to loss of wits' at the time of fighting. In this article an attempt has been made to discuss the physiology of fear and the factors, operating during combat, which create a sense of fear amongst soldiers and ways and means to prevent it.

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