

A KILLING MIND:

Understanding the psychological effects of combat

By Dave Crozier

"We have made killing an automatic reflex: stimulus, response, stimulus, response. We can trick the body into killing. But if your mind is not ready to come along for the ride, we have tricked your body into doing something your mind is not ready to do. Who is the next victim? You are, just as sure as if you put the bullet into yourself."

— Lt. Col. (Ret.) Dave Grossman
Director, Killology Research Group

Throughout military history much has been written about combat – the tactics used, battles won, the nature of war and so on. Chinese general Sun Tsu, who lived thousands of years ago, wrote the quintessential book about combat, *The Art of War*. It is still regarded today as essential reading for combat historians, military professionals and strategists alike. What's missing from all these writings, however, is the psychological effects of combat – the emotional baggage that weighs heavily upon the minds of Soldiers

deployed into theater and those who have redeployed home: the psychological effects of killing another person in combat or seeing a battle buddy taken out by enemy fire or just the day-to-day stress of living in a high-risk combat environment.

So what are the psychological effects of combat?

In World War I it was called shell shock, and then came battle fatigue. Today it is described as post traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. The main ingredient – stress – is something Lt. Col. (Ret.) Dave Grossman, author of the books, *On Killing* and *On Combat*, said is actually a good thing.

"The stress of doing pushups makes your body stronger. The stress at boot camp makes you stronger. Stress is our best friend," said Grossman, a former U.S. Military Academy professor of psychology and Military Science, as well as an Army Ranger. "It is when stress is poorly digested, improperly processed, that it becomes a disorder."

Grossman said that everyone goes through life with a "backpack" full of stress: everyone has family stress, job stress and health stress.

"Combat stress is a totally different thing. Combat stress is like a great big 600-pound gorilla that comes out of nowhere and lands on top of your everyday stress," he said. "If you already have an enormous load of life stress, enormous load of family stress, job stress, or health stress, you could have a 'spider monkey' come out of nowhere and jump on your life stress and trip you up. The goal is to reduce the primary cause of combat stress and that is denial. Denial is the enemy."

Denial is what takes normal combat stress and manifests

itself into PTSD, Grossman said. If Soldiers learn to embrace the fact that the Army kills people, the Soldiers can lessen the stress that comes with killing.

"[Killing] is what we do in the military. We don't want to kill anyone," Grossman said. "We want [our enemies] to not commit terrorist acts. We want them to not commit criminal acts, to not murder their own citizens; but when we fire a weapon at somebody, the goal is to kill them, and we are not messing around."

In saying it is a Soldier's job to kill, Grossman notes that one can read a hundred military manuals and never see the word "kill" referenced in them. That, he said, is denial.

Taking some pages from history, Grossman makes some comparisons of Soldiers in combat today with those in past conflicts: World War I, World War II, Korea and Vietnam.



U.S. Air Force Photo by Staff Sgt. Suzanne M. Day

Firing your weapon at another human being can be stressful for any Soldier. How each Soldier handles that event can be the difference between being able to live with it or developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Through his research he found that the firing rates (actually firing the weapon) of Soldiers in combat prior to Vietnam were very low. During World War II between 15-20 percent of Soldiers ever fired their weapons at a person. By Vietnam that rate had gone up to 95 percent. This percentage still holds true today.

What changed? Training, he said.

“During World War II we had excellent Soldiers, excellent weapons; they just had crummy combat training. No bull’s-eye ever attacked a Soldier,” Grossman said. “Today’s Soldier is firing at pop-up targets, moving targets, and we are tricking the body to pull the trigger: stimulus response, stimulus response. It becomes second nature.”

In *On Combat*, Grossman who is also a Baptist minister, notes that even as far back as the “black powder” wars Soldiers who were highly trained and highly equipped shot ineffectively. And, in many cases, just like the 80 to 85 percent in World War II, became “conscientious objectors,” unable to kill their fellow man during the heat of battle – a moral dilemma that can be overcome with training and mental preparedness.

“What we have to do is embrace this four-letter word ‘kill.’ It is a worthy and honorable thing to kill our nation’s enemies,” he said. “We don’t want to do it; we have been forced to do it, but it is a worthy and honorable thing. We need to embrace that dirty four-letter word. When you do that, you are able to live with what you have to do.”

Grossman said that killing is the easy part. Living with it depends on the degree to which the individual has embraced and accepted the reality of what he or she is doing ahead of time. The first time a Soldier kills in combat is a little rough for every Soldier. The more you do it, the easier it gets, and there is nothing wrong with that.

“For those who prepared themselves mentally, even the first time doesn’t have to be that hard, and there is nothing wrong with people who are not troubled by killing,” Grossman said. “There is nothing wrong with you if you are troubled by killing. A lot of people have to process it. I found that age and maturity are factors. The more you have mentally prepared yourself for the possibility to kill, the easier it is.”

Even with the successes of Operation Iraqi Freedom: the high firing rates, high kill rates and low casualty rates, many

Soldiers are having to process the whole spectrum of combat and are seeking help in doing that.

A recent study conducted by Army officials at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and the Army Medical Surveillance Activity of the Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventative Medicine found that, overall, 19 percent of Soldiers and Marines who served during the first year of Operation Iraqi Freedom reported a mental health concern. This, the study reported, is a higher percentage than those returning from Afghanistan or other combat zones.

The study also showed that 35 percent of Soldiers and Marines returning from Iraq used mental health services within a year after their return. These services included evaluations and preventative services. About 12 percent were diagnosed with mental health problems.

What Grossman said is happening is that mental health professionals are doing a better job in screening redeploying Soldiers and are more cognizant of the psychological effects of combat and the catalysts of PTSD.

“PTSD is not like cancer or being pregnant. It is like being overweight. Some people are 20-30 pounds overweight, and with some diet and exercise they are just fine. Some are 600 pounds overweight and it is going to kill them any day now,”

Grossman said. “Once upon a time we could only spot the guy who was 600 pounds PTSD. We didn’t know what to look for. And we could only spot them when they were dropping before our eyes. Now we are really, really good at spotting the guys who are 20 pounds PTSD.”

What is happening, he said, is that today’s Soldiers are dealing with the issues, seeking help and they have a better support system than in the past. Grossman used the difference between the ways Vietnam veterans were treated to the way today’s Soldiers are treated by society. Vietnam veterans were spat on and attacked as they returned home; today’s Soldiers are applauded in airports, lauded in parades and praised at home.

“In Vietnam, the nation mistook the warrior for the war, and they attacked the returning warrior,” Grossman said. “Today the situation is the opposite.”

Another part of that difference in support also comes from the NCOs who are better able to identify those Soldiers who are experiencing problems, Grossman said. NCOs fight, live, eat



Photo by Spc. Joseph Edmondson

Lt. Col. (Ret.) Dave Grossman spends a lot of time on the road educating the military and civilian police forces about the psychological effects of killing. His book *On Combat* is required reading at the FBI Academy and numerous other academies and colleges. He is regarded by many as the leading expert on combat stress.

and drink with these Soldiers every day and they know when a Soldier is “getting off whack” and should use their position to point the Soldier to someone who is better able to decide if there is a real problem.

“Let the professional decide if there is a problem and help get the Soldier’s feet back on the ground. But you are the one who needs to identify it first. A lot of young Soldiers will try to hide it,” Grossman said he likened an NCO to a football coach. “You are the coach. If you identify any of your players whose bell has been rung badly, you need to pull them out. Having them miss a couple of days or a couple of plays is no big deal. They are going to be there for a one-year rotation. You pull them out, give them an opportunity to get their heads straight and you’ve got them for the rest of the rotation.”

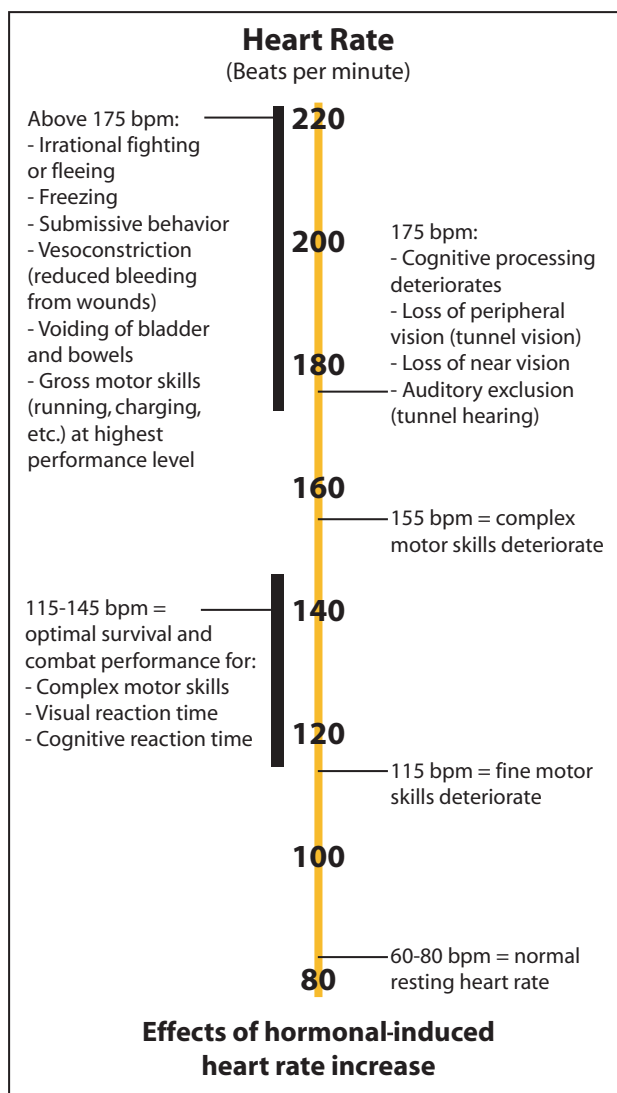
Run them in the dirt, he said, and you’ve lost them, and they will never come back.

Another example of support an NCO can give to their Soldiers is by leading by example and creating a “no macho man” environment.

“If there is something wrong, deal with it. Support the guy that goes to get help. Don’t censure them. Lead by example,” Grossman said. “NCOs, if you have something remotely wrong with you, go deal with it. Go talk to the man, talk to the chaplain, the counselor, and get your head straight. And when you see one of your Soldiers with a problem you can say ‘Hey, I once had a little hitch in my get-along and I was losing my balance. I went and got help; you go get some help.’”

The other environmental support aspect of dealing with the effects of combat is to ensure there is “no pity party” either, he said. If you create an expectation that you will be destroyed by combat, you will.

“Don’t focus on the negative. Don’t obsess over the negative, but don’t allow the macho man either. We are not saying warriors don’t cry. Every warrior society has wept at funerals, but the goal is to not weep at the memory of battle, to de-link the memory [from everyday life],” he said. “Can you understand how the firefighter can go to a funeral and weep at the loss of a friend in a fire and then go out the next day and enjoy putting out a fire? Can you understand a warrior going to



Grossman uses this chart to illustrate how hormonal-induced heart rate increases affect a Soldier’s physical and mental readiness. By the time the heart rate reaches 175 bpm, a Soldier’s performance is severely degraded. He suggests using breathing to combat the increased heart rate.

a memorial service for a friend killed in battle and then go out the next day and enjoy kicking in doors and hunting down bad guys? If you weep at the memory of battle, you are like a fireman weeping at the memory of a fire. You won’t be there for us next time.”

It is this memory that needs to be understood, dealt with and separated from the trauma of the event, Grossman said. If a Soldier tries to forget it altogether, he will drive himself literally insane.

In World War I the military experienced more than 400,000 deaths. In World War II the military experienced more than 500,000 psychological casualties. These were physically fit, healthy individuals who had to be pulled out of the front lines because their minds went, he said. They were trained and equipped, yet the military lost them because their minds went. If it could happen to them, it can happen to today’s Soldiers, as well.

“We are no better than they were, but we can be better equipped, better trained and more mentally prepared for combat by embracing the word ‘kill’ and being better able to live with it afterwards,” Grossman said.

Trying to prevent the extreme stress fear response of combat through training is something Grossman calls, “stress inoculation.”

“Firefighters have to face fire to practice putting it out. The military uses force-on-force drills with plastic bullets with marking capsules,” Grossman said. “Firefighters can’t use flickering lights to train, and we have to use real guns in our training.”

Grossman said another way to reduce combat stress is to ensure the Soldiers are not only mentally ready, but physically ready as well. The great destroyer is stress; the predisposing factor is denial; and the other predisposing factor is physical un-readiness. If a Soldier is severely malnourished or sleep deprived, the stress of combat will be increased,” he said. “Most of our Soldiers are not malnourished, but they do play video games, watch DVDs all night long and start the next day sleep deprived. It is up to the NCOs to put a boot in their tails and make them get the needed rest so they will be mentally and physically ready when the moment of truth comes.”

"Having the puppy come for a visit is not PTSD; you are not losing your mind. PTSD is when you try and not think about the event. That will drive you crazy."

The act of combat and firing of weapons causes hormonal induced, increased heart rates (fear), unlike the increase caused by physical exercise. Grossman explains this by saying when an athlete does wind sprints, the heart rates rises, the face becomes flush and blood runs to your brain and other parts of the body. When the heart rate is increased because of fear, blood runs away from your brain, and your face goes pale. Your body is shutting down the blood flow to the outer shell of your body, and you start to lose body and muscle control. By the time your heart rate reaches 175 beats per minute, he says, "there's nobody home." (See illustration, Page 26)

To counter this effect, Soldiers should use breathing to calm themselves, much like snipers do before they shoot, they take a breath to relax themselves. This same technique can be used if a Soldier is re-experiencing a traumatic memory – something Grossman calls a visit from the puppy – and the memory is causing a feeling of fear and helplessness.

"So the puppy comes for a visit, you think you are losing your mind. You are not losing your mind. It is just the adrenaline dump coming when you don't want it to," Grossman said. "When this happens use your breathing and get it under control. Having the puppy come for a visit is not PTSD; you are not losing your mind. PTSD is when you try and not think about the event. That will drive you crazy."

In combat you can't help but be confronted with life and death experiences, but you can help yourself by making peace with the memory, walk through the memory and talk about the event with others that have been there with the Soldier, Grossman said. Walk yourself through the hot wash, do the after

action review, go through the debrief. When you do, don't let the puppy come along for the ride.

"[German philosopher Frederick] Nietzsche said, 'what does not kill me only makes me stronger.' The Bible in Romans, Chapter 5 says, 'we glory in tribulation, tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope; and hope maketh not ashamed.' The idea of growing from a negative experience is not a new idea. Author Ernest Hemingway said, 'The world breaks everyone and afterward, some are strong at the broken places.' Combat will destroy enough. It is madness to allow it to destroy the people afterwards."

"The NCO Corps has their roots in the earth. The manuals refused to use that dirty four-letter word, 'kill.' But there has always been one person who used it and that's the Soldier," Grossman said. "In 230 years of history the Soldier's job has been to close [with] and kill the enemy. That's what you do. As for the NCOs it is their job to prepare their warriors' mind, body, soul, and spirit to kill the enemy, to inoculate them and make them righteous warriors."



Photo by Spc. Mike Pryor

Training is the key to being able to embrace the notion of having to kill someone in combat, Grossman said. Above, Spc. Ronald Turner, from the 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, provides security for fellow Soldiers searching for insurgents and weapons in Mianashin, Afghanistan.

Editor's note: For more information on the psychology of killing and it's effects on combat, go to Grossman's Web site at <http://www.killology.com/>. For information on the Army's network of support services for redeploying Soldiers visit <http://www.armyonesource.com/>.