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“THE STRENGTH OF AN ARMY IS NOT IN ITS WEAPONS, ITS STRENGTH IS IN ITS PEOPLE”

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## THE IMPACT OF ASYMMETRIC WARFARE ON SOLDIERS

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### ABSTRACT

The term, Asymmetric warfare was first used in its current application around 1995 when the USA Department of Defense (DoD) expressed a growing recognition of the potential for asymmetric threats to the United States in a post-Cold War security environment. The DoD's basic point of departure was that, since the global distribution of power had become asymmetric (i.e., no one country could engage the USA in combat), it followed naturally that asymmetric strategies would be required to counter the threat posed to specifically the USA by weaker opponents that will engage in asymmetric war activities. Following the 9/11 attacks on the USA, the term asymmetric war became a catch-all description for any and all individual and collective attempts designed to circumvent or undermine a country's military strength through the exploitation of the targeted military's weaknesses by employing methods that differ significantly from the expected method of operations during armed conflict with the targeted military. The list of what comprises asymmetric warfare now includes all actions ranging from terrorism to the use of weapons of mass destruction, to information and cyber warfare, etc. These are deemed to comprise unconventional tactics, means and methods of launching attacks on the USA and/or its allies. Against this background, the role of Military Psychology is broadly discussed with specific attention to the psycho-social mass impact of such actions on a country's soldiers and its population.

**Note:** The views expressed in this paper are those of the presenter, unless otherwise indicated in the quoted sources.

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Lt. Col. (Rt.) Dr. Gouws, C. Psych., MMM, is a former South African Air Force officer and retired military psychologist. Dr. Gouws both researched and gained extensive firsthand experience of the resourcefulness required from soldiers and their commanders when faced by the insurmountable obstacles posed by the stress of being deployed in combat zones (complicated by the pressures from the international political arena, the reactions of the civilian population to the casualties of battle, as well as the strain placed on society in general) during long term sustained military operations. He consults and lectures on the psychological effects and impact of war, and also provided specialised trauma treatment to military, veterans, and first line responders (e.g., police, firefighters, etc.).

## INTRODUCTION

The world has always been at war, this at least for as long as human history had been around. There was always one group or another fighting another group, whether for access to resources, territory, jealousy, or just plain “for the hell of it”. Whether they fought with bare hands, sticks, rocks, crudely moulded knives, spears, or even today with chemical, biological, nuclear, and other weapons of mass destruction, leaders’ goal has always been to muster the support from their followers and convince them of the necessity to annihilate the identified opposition - simply described as “the enemy”.

The annihilation of the enemy through the means of war, has been labelled in a multitude of ways, ranging from conventional to unconventional to revolutionary warfare. Asymmetric warfare is not new, if anything, it is just a new title for the same old thing: how to wage war against a more powerful opposition with limited means, or the inverse: the means by which a more powerful opponent circumvents the tactics employed by a smaller opponent. Regardless of the terminology, war remains an ugly human endeavour that is perpetrated by the few in power on the many with no power, based on an authoritarian belief of own superiority that at best is warped and at its worst is brutally malevolent in its motives towards others who are depicted as inferior.

That said, there should be no misunderstanding that real enemies do exist and that they are very dangerous to each other and the world. These identified real enemies indeed also possess the malevolent qualities attributed to them. The malevolent qualities over time become more entrenched by the negative images created of the enemy, and the enemy’s actions taken in its own defence. Ironically, opposing enemy sides hold the same belief systems about each other and so, as the conflict between them escalates, each more and more closely fit the negative descriptions they had given each other in the first place. Whether these original descriptions had reflected actual reality or had involved a significant degree of distortion, is irrelevant to the conflict, this simply because of a belief by both sides that “the enemy is depicted as the enemy is”. The enemy is described, depicted, and characterised by the negative connotations derived from stereotypes of the enemy culture, in the choice of language conveying the stereotypes, and most importantly, scapegoating the enemy for all that went wrong, regardless of whose fault it may be.

It must always be remembered that the ultimate act of war is the killing of the enemy. No matter how indirect the method, how complex the chain of command, how intricate the team cooperation necessary to launch a particular weapon, how many of the enemy are killed at once, or what the casualties are, in the final analysis the act of killing is

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perpetrated by a single person on another. It is against this background that one must attempt to understand the complexity of the impact of asymmetric warfare on soldiers on all sides of the conflict.

War as a violent and destructive activity of organised groups must be understood in light of the group properties of the respective antagonists involved in conflict. While the conflict between antagonist groups had grown out of their negative interaction with each other, the onset and the course of the conflict cannot be adequately predicted from the characteristics of the individual members, nor from the groups' own internal properties. Hence, the saying: It is easier to start a war than to end it.<sup>2</sup>

Acts of war, in the final analysis, are based on the anecdotal and stereotypical perceptions created by words that create images that form the basis of what would later become the supposedly valid and legal reasons for engaging in acts of war. This is a very important and serious factor to always keep in mind as one listens to the news, reviews political rhetoric, and most importantly, interprets what supposedly intelligent and mature world leaders are saying about other countries and their peoples. Such "wars of words" can rapidly lead to "wars of swords" with now, more than ever before, the potential to destroy the very fabric of modern civilisation. Unfortunately, from a psychological perspective this all-important factor in warfare is often overlooked and seldom if ever addressed by military psychologists. Yet it is this very aspect that affects individual soldiers most in what mostly politicians and some military commentators refer to as "asymmetric warfare".

### **ASYMMETRIC WARFARE 101**

As soon as I attested in the permanent force as a pupil pilot in the South African Air Force, I was taught about the different types of war, and in particular the types of war in which South Africa was involved at the time. I learned about the differences between wars of insurgency and counterinsurgency, conventional and unconventional war, attritional warfare, manoeuvre warfare, and revolutionary warfare. There are as many types of war as books written about the subject and everyone who theorises about war has an opinion to offer, myself not excluded. If one were to define types of warfare, one could certainly come up with many more names than already mentioned above: civil war, guerrilla war, war of independence, religious wars, succession war, ethnic conflict war, people's war, limited

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2 Marquez G. G. (1967). *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reprint edition (February 21, 2006).  
Author's Comment: A character in this novel, the rebel leader Aureliano Buendia, after 32 attempts at seizing power violently, finally expresses this life lesson after agreeing to give peace a chance.

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war, proxy war, preemptive war, preventive war, defensive war, and of course total war and world war. And then there is psychological war, cyber war, hybrid war, nuclear war, chemical war, biological war, irregular war, and the multitude of other names that people come up with. In each instance I was left with more questions than answers as to me, warfare, regardless of its execution, entails one thing only: winning over the adversary by any means.

In this context Asymmetric Warfare is but another perspective of war operations, rather than a definition that addresses a complex world with complex security demands. Given and the degree to which identified types of war are intertwined, someone had to come up with a more generic label to subsume all of the various types of warfare. This is well explained in the following quote from an article by Colonel M. R. Sudhir, then the Commanding Officer of an Engineer Regiment in the Indian Armed Forces:

The definition of ‘*asymmetric warfare*’ is best borrowed from the US from where the term has originated. The 1999 *Joint Strategy Review* specifically defines “*asymmetry as something done to military forces to undermine their conventional military strength.*”

Asymmetric approaches are attempts to circumvent or undermine military strength while exploiting their weaknesses, using methods that differ significantly from the expected method of operations. Such approaches generally seek a major psychological impact, such as shock or confusion that affects an opponent’s initiative, freedom of action, or will. These approaches often employ innovative, non-traditional tactics, weapons, or technology, and can be applied at all levels of warfare — strategy, operations and tactics — across the spectrum of military operations.<sup>3</sup>

This quotation makes it abundantly clear that the major impact of asymmetrical warfare is psychological rather than military in nature, in that it applies methods and tactics designed to neutralise the opposing armed forces’ morale and ability to act. This in turn has a negative impact on the general population to the detriment of the government, its institutions, and obviously, its military’s capacity to resist the onslaught. This is an open-ended strategy regarding doctrinal courses of action, illustrated with chilling clarity by two retired military officers with extensive command experience:

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3 Sudhir M. R. (2008). *Asymmetric War: A Conceptual Understanding*. CLAWS Journal. Summer 2008, pp. 58-68.

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*Tactics are employed against an asymmetric opponent in the course of combat, but there can be no set of tactics checklists for asymmetric warfare, since each application is unique. Tactics are whatever we do against an asymmetric opponent when we arrange forces to counter that opponent.*<sup>4</sup>

The first thought striking one upon reading the definition quoted by Col. Sidhur with the explanation of doctrine offered by these two experienced US military commanders is that the term, asymmetrical warfare, is entirely designed to serve just one purpose: doing whatever necessary to place smaller, less powerful militaries at a disadvantage by the overwhelming superiority of the American Military Machine, which because of its size and capabilities, is in itself asymmetrical. This opens the door for the American War Machine to engage in “counter-measures fitting the threat posed by asymmetric warfare” launched against it by setting in motion its own asymmetric warfare in any manner it chooses. This has a multitude of psychological implications for the soldiers deployed in asymmetric war operations. However, asymmetric warfare had been around for millennia:

There is nothing new in asymmetric warfare. In the battle of Agincourt in 1415, English infantry armed with longbows crushed shining French knights on horseback. Excluding the shared American and Soviet cold war concept of MAD - mutually assured destruction - all warfare has been asymmetric, says Phillip Wilkinson of King’s College, London.<sup>5</sup>

This is not the only such opinion on the concept of asymmetric warfare, which is of itself very important in the context of the role of political jargon designed to rationalise certain types of military action:

In the United States, the title asymmetric warfare was popular in the years following the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. While still used by some senior members of the US government, the uniformed U.S. military has mostly rejected the phrase as a doctrinal term. Arguing that warfare is, always has been, and always will be fundamentally asymmetric; they have opted to describe warfare using a construct of major combat operations, stability and support operations, and irregular warfare. Seeing these arenas as overlapping and inclusive of nearly all

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4 Ancker III C. J. & Burke M. D. (2003). *Doctrine for Asymmetric Warfare*. Military Review. July-August 2003, pp. 18-25.

5 Norton-Taylor R. (2001). *Asymmetric Warfare*. The Guardian, Wed 3 Oct 2001 09.51 BST. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/03/afghanistan.socialsciences>. Accessed: April 29, 2019.

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military operations, they see little utility in another construct. Advocates of asymmetric warfare have difficulty finding a concise purposeful definition. Yet the term continues to be used by senior government leaders.<sup>6</sup>

Therein lies the impact on the ordinary soldier involved in military operations around the world in theatres where they have little understanding of the fact that they themselves are being perceived as the enemy on the one hand by the local population, on whose behalf they are fighting “the enemy” emanating from that same local population, on the other hand. This is a losing battle for allied soldiers, as Plant’s conclusions show. These require careful attention and thorough analysis (bold emphasis mine):

Weak and failed governance will result in the growth of safe havens for powerful non-state elements; organized crime, traffickers in drugs as well as human slaves, terrorists and violent extremists. These are the fertile fields where we can expect asymmetric warfare to percolate. As non-state adversaries grow in these areas, enabled by modern technology, criminal financing and the constraints of the nation-state international system of order, we can expect them to use their power as best befits their objectives. This is the asymmetric warfare that will be the mainstay of contemporary and future battlefields. It is not just a slogan. **The people who have labeled this challenge to our current system of world order, and our understanding of conflict are talking about something that is larger than our current concept of warfare.** It is a battle against a 360 year-old system of international order. Attempts to solve this challenge only with military force will fail. Success will require whole of government solutions and unified international approaches. It will require a unique unity between governments and non-governmental organizations. **It will need to address the causes of conflict, more than the forces that fight them.**<sup>7</sup>

Plant’s conclusion that if conflict issues are not addressed at their core, they are likely to destroy much of our world before relative stability can be reestablished, is not a new insight, as already articulated a year before the Twin Towers attack of September 11, 2001:

This paper will show that asymmetric warfare is not new. **What is new is the fact**

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6 Plant Jr J. T. (2008). *Asymetrická Válka: Slogan Nebo Skutečnost? / Asymmetric Warfare: Slogan Or Reality? Obrana A Strategie / Defence & Strategy 1/2008* (pp. 5-16). See: [www.defenceandstrategy.eu](http://www.defenceandstrategy.eu) DOI: doi:10.3849/1802-7199.08.2008.01.005-015. Accessed: April 29, 2019.

7 Ibid.

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**that technology provides an adversary the ability to strike at the United States itself. We are no longer invulnerable to attack on our shores. A review of military theory will show that changing the character and conduct of warfare does not change its nature.** It will show how concern over asymmetric tactics has been addressed from the National Security Strategy through joint doctrine, and it will address how our national and military strategy is countering these tactics as they are identified. It will also indicate areas where greater emphasis needs to be placed and identify areas where risk or threats may exist that may not have been addressed.

We hear about asymmetric warfare, asymmetric threats, asymmetric challenges and asymmetric approaches. These terms seem to be used interchangeably... **What becomes apparent is that the entire concept of joint operations is intended to pursue asymmetric operations that render an opponent powerless to defend himself.**<sup>8</sup>

As Daley correctly pointed out: war operations around the world continue unabated with only one objective: defeating the enemy, however “enemy” may be defined, and doing so by all means possible and probable. What he neglected to say was that many of these actions do not beat the enemy into submission, but instead serve to strengthen their resolve to resist and counter attack. In this truth one finds the core of what is being addressed in this paper, namely the complexities of asymmetrical warfare where deployed soldiers are faced with an ever-changing face of warfare and its strategies and techniques, but their political masters have no sense of the war’s realities or objectives to which they had committed their countries’ troops.

So, at this point, without beleaguering the validity or not of the terminology to describe types of war, categories of war, actions of war, reasons for war, or any other discussion on the topic of war, it would behoove us to instead address directly the horror of involving a country and its soldiers, and with that a population and its peoples, in actions that are designed with just one intent: using military force against others solely for the benefit of those seeking more power in whatever form. It does not matter whether the terminology includes or excludes asymmetric warfare, it matters that people’s lives are affected by decisions made, often in far away countries, by people who benefit directly from waging war while having no concern about the impact of those decisions on the world as a whole.

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8 Daley D. (2000). *Asymmetric Warfare: The Only Thing New is the Tactics*. USA/Class of 2000, Course 5605, Seminar N at the National Defense University National War College Washington, DC.

### THE COMPLEXITIES OF SOLDIERING IN ASYMMETRIC WARFARE

What follows in this section is a very gentle reminder of that in soldiering, consistent with the ethos of the warrior, all military forces purport to serve in the defence of their country and their people, this above all else. However, to do so ethically and morally in a technologically advanced world, means that there is an imperative for senior military leaders to question the political motives that form the basis for any decision to go to war outside the borders of one's own country. The reason is simple:

Most of what we learn, certainly in the field of politics, we learn by trial and error, which is to say, by going about our affairs in customary way until, by experience of error, we learn that the customary way is no longer workable and, accordingly, we revise it. It is a perfectly good way of learning as long as the error itself is not fatal or irreparably destructive. In matters of war and peace in the nuclear age, however, we cannot learn by experience, because even a single error could be fatal to the human race. We have got learn to prevent war without again experiencing it; and to change the traditional ways of statecraft without benefit of trial and error; and, in addition, we have got to be right not just in most, but in *all* of our judgements pertaining to all-out nuclear war.<sup>9</sup>

The day when one puts on a military uniform for the first time a total personal transformation happens. This transformation is reflective of a belief that one had chosen sides in *how* one wants to be making a difference in the world by serving one's country and its people *in a way* that few others, who did not choose the military as a career or vocation, would ever be capable of. Being a member of one's country's armed forces brings with it a sense of duty, dedication, and loyalty, all of which are the implied characteristics of a patriot. For many soldiers, after having served a great many years, much of the idealism with which they initially became members of the warrior cult simply evaporated after they were left with a sense of disillusion and a deeply felt awareness of betrayal by the very people who had send them to serve their country in a manner that instead furthered other agendas that in essence were unrelated to the defence of country.

The most poignant example to illustrate this point is the Vietnam War and its enduring impact on the American people and the war's veterans. Soldiers always pay the price for the political catastrophe that brought about any war. This is because, in having chosen sides when putting on the uniform, the soldier expressed the willingness to use ultimate

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9 Fulbright J. W. (1967). *Preface*. In: Frank, J.D. (1967). *Sanity and survival: psychological aspects of war and peace*. Random House. New York. p. vi.



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violence, killing, to protect someone else against intended, implied, perceived, or actual violence by another. In this protection of others, and most notably the nebulous concept of state and country, soldiers are willing to sacrifice their own lives. When this willingness to sacrifice everything, including one's life, for a country and a cause one believes in, the betrayal brought about by political lies, deceit, and corruption is incalculable. Once again, this was aptly illustrated in the Vietnam War, from which little was learned as the USA and some of its Allies decided to attack and occupy Afghanistan and Iraq. In particularly the latter case the political lies about weapons of mass destruction will continue to affect the lives of many millions of people around the world for decades to come. Most notably, it will continue to affect those soldiers who now know they had acted in support of inexcusable lies which, once exposed, brought no negative consequences to the political leaders and others who had perpetrated these lies, yet caused untold destruction and incalculable death to many.

Soldiers, different from civilians and especially politicians, very publicly have to take responsibility for their actions while in uniform, including having made the choice to have served without questioning their orders and performing their duties to the best of their ability. The reason why many soldiers succumb to PTSD and many kill themselves is found in a very simple fact: either they were right or they were wrong when they followed the orders that came down from above to kill an enemy. If they were wrong, living with the guilt of having killed unfairly and unjustly, becomes too much to bear for some. This happens because soldiers know that what distinguishes them from marauding murderous gangs is simply the fact that by the wearing of their uniform they have been provided legitimacy to take military actions on behalf of the government they serve. This is not a grey area, it falls squarely into the thin black and white lines at the ends of the grey continuum. They believe the politicians sorted out the shades grey and that in their deployment all action is simply black and white. This is why they follow orders coming down from the political masters when acting in defence of their country. It is therefore a relatively simple matter to go to war when one's country is attacked by another country. Regardless of the political messages to the contrary in the aftermath of 9/11, no one can argue to this day that the USA had been attacked by another country, and therefore that the invasion of Afghanistan was legitimate. However, soldiers trusted the messages from their political masters and went into an avoidable war. Author, Historian and Independent Journalist Gwynne Dyer expressed it as follows in January 2019:

“The Taliban have committed, to our satisfaction, to do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals,” said Zalmay Khalilzad, the US official in charge of Afghanistan peace

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talks, on Tuesday. So why didn't the United States have this discussion with the Taliban seventeen years ago, in October 2001?

The American representative has just spent six days negotiating with the Taliban in Qatar, and he has their promise that they will never let terrorist groups like al-Qaeda or Islamic State use Afghanistan as a base. The Taliban are Islamists and nationalists (despite the incompatibility of these two principles), but they were never international terrorists.<sup>10</sup>

If Dyer is correct, the implication is that allied soldiers deployed to Afghanistan are technically invaders, at least in the eyes of some Afghans. In the self-defence of a country it would be expected that some members of the general population would join its soldiers in the country's defence. But what if the soldiers had surrendered because the government capitulated, as was the case in World War II Europe? Are the partisans/resistance fighters legitimate in carrying forward the struggle? Does this bring about brother fighting brother, like happened in the American Civil War? It is this type of dilemma that brought about the a change from conventional and unconventional warfare, particularly as it pertains to what would be legitimate targets for the invading force to eliminate. But what about the government that capitulated? What happens when a new government supportive of the invasion force is placed in power? This is the situation in both Afghanistan and Iraq today. While those who are natives of an invaded country may choose who they accept and who they fight as it pertains to their own people, it is a different ball game for the soldiers on the other side of the equation: the "invaders" are everyone's enemy.

For the ordinary fighting soldier being part of a perceived invasion force is a monumental dilemma. Regardless of the orders that came down from above, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the individual soldier rightly must and should ask whether engaging in a particular war was a legitimate action, and therefore whether it would be legitimate to expand military actions to beyond the opposing military forces to include the civilian population? Or, if the decision to invade the country was based on lies (invariably Iraq comes to mind), how legitimate is it to continue military operations directed not just at the opposing military, but also the local civilian population, especially since they may believe that they are merely defending their country?

This dilemma is so huge that it is no wonder large numbers of American and allied soldiers involved in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq returned home suffering from serious

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10 Dyer G. (2019) *Afghanistan: Seventeen Years Too Late*. Published on January 29, 2019. See: <http://gwynnedyer.com/2019/afghanistan-seventeen-years-too-late/>. Accessed : April 29, 2019.

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psychiatric problems, with many later committing suicide. The political and even mental health professional thinking is that PTSD and related combat and deployment stressors are responsible for the clinical problems with which some soldiers present. However, the results of a research project in the Marine Corps sponsored by the Training and Education Command and the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, not widely acknowledged, showed the opposite as to what was causing rises and falls in suicide, PTSD, and other socially negative outcomes for U.S. service members:

The results we reported suggest that the issue is not so much medical as social, cultural, and personal. Typical explanations of stress from a medical perspective suggest broken biology (defective genes or an IED blast) or compromised psychology (a psychological disposition or traumatic event). But this study found instead crises of **meaning**: “How can I be a good Marine and be a good parent?” or “How can I be a good Marine if I have let another Marine die?” This is a single study, and we didn’t talk to every Marine. But we think this central insight has broad explanatory power for some problems Marines and other service members face.

When we asked, Marines in the study told us in great detail what stress and distress are for them, and how they deal (or don’t) with it. At one end of the scale are Marines equipped to do resilience work — actively getting themselves back to a good state after distress. They can, for example, forgive themselves for battlefield errors. At the other end are ones who do not know how to (or choose not to) forgive themselves for real or imagined failures, standing in judgment of themselves. And in the middle are those Marines who are making it, but nagged by doubts about their worth or standing. As these Marines told it, stress is variable and contextual, and what is debilitating for one Marine isn’t noteworthy for another.

According to them, there’s nothing inherently traumatizing about seeing or inflicting death; instead, these — like all human action — present an interpretive choice: “I did what I had to do,” vs. “I’m a murderer.” Which meaning is made depends on the Marine and their context.

All of this hinges on a fundamental question about the role of our biology: Is it an important resource for making meaning, or is it a mechanism that causes us to make certain meanings? The answer dictates what legitimately constitutes data, and methods of data collection and analysis in research. Typically we see researchers who work from a medical perspective, even when claiming not to reduce humans to their biology, writing as if biology causes certain social meanings. Only with this

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assumption does it make sense to ignore whole persons in favor of parts of their biology or psychology.

On what scientific basis, we ask, are quantifiable bio-phenomena substituted for what a Marine says in explaining his or her stress? How are urinary free-cortisol levels more relevant for explaining and understanding PTSD than a Marine's explanation that he's accountable for another's death, and so doesn't deserve to live? That those with PTSD might have altered catecholamine and cortisol levels is not in question, but rather why researchers accord this primary focus or decisive weight in explaining what otherwise appear to be issues of personal meaning.<sup>11</sup>

Soldiers, contrary to some popular beliefs, are actually thinking and feeling human beings with the capacity to judge right and wrong. The monumental dilemma of being part of an "invasion force" supporting one group of defending soldiers against another group of their countrymen, poses an even greater challenge in finding true meaning in the military operations taking place. To illustrate, using an example from World War II: after France surrendered to Germany, the Vichy government acted in support of the Nazi occupiers, only to find at the end of the war that these actions came back to bite them in the behind. The lesson: if ever there is a guarantee to find oneself in a Catch-22, then go ahead and openly choose sides in any war. The problem is however, one is faced by countless shades of grey with only a thin line of black and white at the very edges, and what may be legitimate actions today may have either negative or positive effects for the future, once a peace treaty had been reached, and depending of course, on who comes to power.

Herein also lies the biggest philosophical problem soldiers face with their assigned orders of protecting others: what is the origin of the threat, and indeed who started the process by which good neighbours were transformed into archenemies? Of course, no one argues that there are those in the world who act in the most malevolent ways imaginable and hence those actions need to be stopped. That at least seems like a relatively simple black-and-white decision. Or is it? The problem lies with the definition of "malevolent" because what may be considered malevolent in one culture may well be benevolent in another. Very often the difference between the two is one of religious interpretation with value statements defining what is socially appropriate and not appropriate, such as the differentiation between male and female roles, prescriptions on what males and females should be

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11 Tortorello, Jr. F. J. & Marcellino W. M. (2013). *Military resilience, suicide, and posttraumatic stress: What's behind it all?* In: Best Defense by Ricks T. E. March 21, 2013, 3:48 PM. See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/21/military-resilience-suicide-and-post-traumatic-stress-whats-behind-it-all/> Accessed: April 29, 2019.

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wearing, dictates on what is respectful and disrespectful or honourable and dishonourable, acceptable behavioural sets and appropriate punishment for disregarding them, etc., etc.

In a world that has been transformed into a global village by technological advances, cultural differences in general and religious beliefs in particular are at the core of conflicts facing the world. Given the rapid change and access to technology, modern amenities, and especially information resources that were unthinkable even a decade or two ago, everyone is potentially exposed to all these features of modern life. The United States has long seen itself as the global cop responsible for security around the world and as such has established military bases in numerous countries from which it operates. However, American involvement around the world, including the role played by American allies, reflect a cultural approach with Western values that is not acceptable, respectful, or transferable to many of the countries where the United States and its allies are now militarily involved. The impact of this on soldiers on both sides of any particular conflict is again incalculable.

This brings about another complexity to soldiering in asymmetric warfare: soldiers on all sides are human too. Clearly forgotten in statements designating groups of people as enemies, and especially in war operations around the world, is that most, if not all soldiers are the children of loving parents, are husbands/wives and fathers/mothers of loving spouses and children, are members of their community, and are all experiencing the same human desires, emotions, needs, and hopes for the future as everyone else on the planet. Soldiers experience this reality more intensely as time passes and they continuously ponder their combat experiences:

So ask the twenty-one-year-old veteran at the gas station how he felt about killing someone. His probable angry answer, if he's honest: "Not a fucking thing." Ask him when he's sixty and if he's not too drunk to answer, it might come out very differently, but only by luck of circumstance—who was there to help him with the feelings during those four long decades after he came home from war... We cannot expect normal eighteen-year-olds to kill someone and contain it in a healthy way.<sup>12</sup>

War is one of the most dehumanising human endeavours on earth, the only reason its horror is not talked about as much as the senseless killings on the streets of cities by gang members, is because societies choose to not accept the fact that soldiering in its most basic form equates to the indiscriminate killing of other human beings in whatever way

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12     Marlantes K. (2011). *What it is like to go to war*. Grove Press, New York. p. 47.

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possible for reasons that for the most part are ill-defined, ill-conceived, and more likely than not based on stereotypes, misinformation, and yes, malevolence.

Soldiers are ordered to do the killing at the behest of those who do not give the killing a second thought because they bask in the benefits derived from their political careers, the enhancement of their personal wealth, and the advancement of their standing in society. I shudder to think about the psychological effects in the coming 40 years during which the millions of soldiers who had served in the USA and Allied forces since the invasion of both Afghanistan and Iraq (and also other parts of the world) will continue to have to deal with their actions as a result of the lies and the deception that caused this gross destruction of countries and peoples. Indeed, the consequences of these actions are not only affecting the soldiers who participated in these operations with their fancy and lofty sounding names, they are affecting the whole world through the displacement of millions of people and will do so for many generations to come.

Thousands upon thousands of refugees who are fortunate enough to get away from the fighting are flooding Europe, while millions waste away in refugee camps or live in utmost squalor in their home countries. This emotionally also effects Allied soldiers who see themselves as having been instrumental in bringing about this carnage. And yes, soldiers expect that they are to be blamed for this, as much as that they expect to be targeted by the resistance forces unleashed against them in those countries where they are supposedly bringing stability.

There is an assumption by governments and especially by wily politicians, that soldiers don't think, but are pawns that are expected to be loyal, and most important, they must follow all orders. The truth is that politicians can only order soldiers to engage in combat operations if soldiers are willing to obey those orders. However, obedience of orders for soldiers do not come directly from politicians, so soldiers do not face the direct dilemma of disobedience. Instead they get their orders from their commanders, who in turn had received those orders from the general staff. So there is a cutout and soldiers, with no direct input as to the reasons for their orders, do what they are trained to do. What happens later is not the soldiers' concern, until it happens, but then, they have just followed orders.

Blind obedience, clearly described as an ineffective defence in the trials at Nuremberg at the end of World War II, is no longer an option in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Thus, it is incumbent upon every level of command and military leadership and even more so upon those who have the greater insights, such as military psychologists working within units, in headquarters, and even at the strategic level, to speak up and respectfully indicate the

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moral and ethical dilemmas that are being created by the use of stereotypic words, disrespectful judgement, and the quest for a political legacy at the cost of many innocent lives, including those of our own soldiers and their families.

Put another way: the generals have to question the motives of the political masters and be willing to challenge orders that are not in the interest of the country's defence. After all, regardless of the reasons for engaging in war, regardless of the validity of the actions taken, regardless of the legality of the execution of military orders, in the end soldiers on all sides pay the price for the failures of politicians to, by other means than military action, address the conflicts that do exist between peoples, countries, nations, and ideological blocs. This begs the question: is there another way to look at the complexities of soldiering in what is called asymmetric warfare? The answer to this question is once again based on knowledge: knowledge of self, as much as knowledge of the beliefs held by both sides to the conflict, and then challenging the less than factual rhetoric, while also respecting the right of each side to have opposing viewpoints, beliefs, and cultural imperatives. This role fits the role of Military Psychology like a glove, but only if we are willing to put on this glove.

### **CONCLUSION**

Military psychologists, in order to counter the negative impact of asymmetric war operations on own forces, has to engage in advising senior military decision-makers on the dangers of engaging in military actions based on stereotyping through the use of language, especially when there is no clear understanding of the history that preceded the conflict situation.

Military psychology should, as a standard procedure, engage in a historic overview and language analysis of statements made by all parties during political spats prior to entering into operational and deployment planning for military operations. Senior military leadership cannot only be managers of physical violence, they have to also manage verbal and emotionally based violent behaviours from political leaders! The best war is the one that never happened because of a well-chosen diplomatic discourse over violent outcomes.

No matter how we theorise, no matter what labels we apply, war can only be described as one group of humans creating killing fields for other humans. As many theorists and experts there are on war, so many explanations, labels, and models are designed to provide some form of structure to a human endeavour that serves no other purpose but the creation of illusions about what is nothing more than legitimised murder. This runs counter to the warrior's dictum: it can only be ethical to engage in this violent form of human

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behaviour when it is to directly oppose the violence that was perpetrated first by another country.

There is no way to undo the damage inflicted once war has started. There is not a single war fought in the history of humankind where in the aftermath thereof it was not deemed shortsighted, stupid, and self-serving. The antidote to short-sighted engagement in war operations starts with a simple phrase: respect and empathy for the humanity of others. Most of all, it entails respect and empathy for the soldiers being tasked with the performance of the most horrible of tasks of self-sacrifice. Time and history are the equalisers of all people and their endeavours, whether age and or being voted out of office, sooner or later, we are all put back into a place of nothingness from where we can ponder our life experiences. Few have said it as well as the late German Generalleutnant Günther Rall, Chief of the West German Air Force during the Cold War, and one of the few outstanding German fighter aces who had survived the Second World War:

Nothing is further from my mind than to join into the praise for the last Knights of the Air which you hear so often when people talk about World War II fighter pilots. The sober truth [...] is that we fought each other for life and death, although we wanted nothing but to live, and that these fights became the more relentless the longer this terrible war lasted. [...] War is not the continuation of politics with other means, but an infamy; it is the utter failure of political action.<sup>13</sup>

This is a powerful statement that wraps up all of what can be said about war: soldiers pay the price for the failures of politicians, the young are killed for the mistakes of the adults. Military psychology fails miserably in its goals if all it does is to create better soldiers but not better leaders, and above all, fails to foster in these leaders the courage needed to speak out against lies, deception, and political expediency. There will be no senseless war when the generals refuse to send their troops to do the bidding of thoughtless, mindless, and devious political masters.

The antidote to all the suffering of soldiers, the disruption of civilian populations specifically and humanity in general, lies in the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy by discerning lies, deception, and deceit from the true facts.

Until we do this we will fail to live up to our human potential as brothers and sisters in humanity, to act together to stop the scourge of this horrible endeavour: perpetual war. If

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13 Rall G. (2006) My Logbook. Reminiscences 1938-2006. NeunundzwanzigSechs Verlag. Moosberg, Germany.



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we do not do this now, then the growing backlash that we see around the world as these conflicts continue, will engulf us all, it will destroy our beautiful world, and it will render all our research, our work for the benefit of humankind, and our great and strong military minds and might useless and obsolete.

May we all, and Military Psychology in particular, become the human energy that serves to restrict war operations to the absolute minimum even as we, as military psychologists, assist in the creation of strong and resilient warriors who can and will protect all of our world from the wicked, violent few.

#### **FOOTNOTE**

This author expresses his appreciation and gratitude to the many individuals, whether they were colleagues, peers, superiors, professors and teachers, students, or friends, who across a lifetime of service in military and civilian life have expressed their opinions, brought their criticisms to bear, and often through their vocal interaction in long discussions encouraged the author to express on paper the multitude of insights gained through stringent scientific research combined with his personal experience in various parts of the world regarding war, peace, and conflict resolution. Without these inputs spanning more than four decades living in South Africa and more than two decades living in Canada, this work would not have been possible.

Any factual misunderstandings or misinterpretations, where such may be identified, are solely those of the author, who would gladly review them for correction in a future publication. The same would apply to this author's interpretations of quotations from the work of those "giants on whose shoulders we stand"<sup>14</sup> from a variety of disciplines who studied and wrote about the elusive solutions to the complexities of preventing war and maintaining peaceful coexistence in a troubled world.

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14 Edge inscription on the 1997-2015 British £2.00 coin, attributed to Sir Isaac Newton. For more information See: <http://www.royalmint.com/discover/uk-coins/coin-design-and-specifications/two-pound-coin/1997-technological-achievement>. Retrieved: January 27, 2017.