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WHY HALF OUR COMBAT SOLDIERS FAIL TO SHOOT

By BILL DAVIDSON

IMAGINE you're a combat infantryman in Korea, well trained and well dug in on a ridge line, awaiting an enemy attack. The artillery and mortar barrage begins. You see a number of the enemy making their way up the steep hill toward your unit. They mean to kill you. Ducking from rock to rock, moving steadily forward, they finally run across an open area and come plainly into view. They're perfect targets. You sight down your rifle barrel. Your finger tightens. But then—as the perspiration pours from you—nothing happens! *You just can't squeeze the trigger!*

Impossible? Unusual? Once the Army thought so, too. But now, after a long, hard look at itself, the Army is facing up to these sobering facts:

In any given action of World War II, only 12 to 25 per cent of all the combat soldiers who were armed and in a position to fire their weapons at the enemy were able to pull the trigger!

In Korea, the average has been raised by dint of intensive effort, but only to a maximum of about 50 per cent!

In other words, today, one out of every two American soldiers who come face to face with the enemy cannot be counted on to fight.

It's difficult for Americans to accept this disclosure, since it seems to be a reflection on the patriotism and bravery of their own sons and brothers. Actually, the courage of those of our infantrymen who *do* fight is unsurpassed anywhere in the world. Their bravery—plus the fact that our tanks and artillery give us unparalleled massed firepower—has more than made up, so far, for the failures of the riflemen in the lines who do not fight.

Official studies of why combat men freeze up reveal clearly that courage, as such, often is not involved. There was a much-decorated World War I company commander, for example, who always advanced under fire well ahead of his men, urging them on. Yet, he confessed to a fellow officer that throughout the entire war, he never was able to bring himself to pull the trigger of his weapon. He's now, incidentally, a general in the Marine Corps.

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In pursuing the question of why soldiers don't shoot, I spoke with dozens of scientists, Army historians, combat commanders and noncommissioned officers who had just returned from the Korean front. Nearly all told the same story. At Fort Dix, in particular, I had a revealing series of bull sessions with a group of noncom heroes assembled in an empty classroom. The participants were the cream of the U.S. Infantry.

"It was rough," said Master Sergeant Nicholas Smith, of Washington, D.C., a recent Distinguished Service Cross winner in Korea. "Sometimes you sent a squad to cover your flank and, instead of nine rifles firing, you only heard two or three."

"That's right," said Sergeant Thomas McGrath, of Haddon Heights, New Jersey (Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart). "Of the nine men in my squad in Korea, I never could count on more than four or five to fire, even when it meant saving their own lives."

"Time and time again," said Master Sergeant John S. Williams, of Flushing, New York (two Silver Stars, three Bronze Stars, five Purple Hearts), "I had to expose myself and crawl from foxhole to foxhole to get half of the platoon to fire. Sometimes I'd practically have to sight the rifle and pull the trigger for the guy."

And so it went, with one noncom after another recalling—occasionally with some bitterness—this strange behavior on the part of his men. But the theme also is repeated with distressing regularity in the reports of the combat historians who interview combat troops a day or two after battle.

One of the most clear-cut cases in Korea involved a platoon of the 38th Infantry Regiment; it had collapsed, allowing a serious enemy break-through. The platoon came back with virtually all of its ammunition unfired. When the fact was discovered, one of the sergeants tried to explain. He said:

"The Chinese mortar started firing on us, but we were unable to reply with flat trajectory weapons . . . The Chinese closed to within 30 or 40 feet of us, but we couldn't make effective reply to them because they had set up a machine gun on our right flank . . . We couldn't get our heads up . . . Except when the Chinese got on the sky line we could scarcely see a target . . . Our machine gun did no firing because of the Chinese moving against our right flank. Later, when we pulled back and the gun was set up in a new position, it wouldn't work . . . The BAR (Browning automatic rifle) had gone bad when we were in the initial position. It wasn't jammed, but it just got sluggish and wouldn't work . . . Sergeant ———, who was over near me, kept having trouble with his rifle. The extractor wouldn't work, though it didn't seem to be broke . . . I didn't walk away—I ran away."

One Man Who Used His Weapons

These pathetically flimsy excuses did not explain the one essential fact: an entire platoon had frozen; no one had fired. Yet, in the same action, under the same conditions, twenty-year-old Private Edsel Turner, of Kalamazoo, Michigan, assigned to another platoon of the same company, had managed to use *his* rifle and grenades so ef-

fectively that he personally accounted for 29 dead Reds. He held the battlefield, singlehanded, after the company and six tanks had withdrawn. For his astonishing bravery, he was recommended for Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest U.S. decoration.

The man who questioned the sergeant was Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall, who has been described by high Army sources as "undoubtedly knowing more about this subject than any other living man." He recently spent five months in the front lines in Korea analyzing Chinese tactics for the United Nations forces.

General Marshall is credited with being the first to discover the mass phenomenon of the nonfirer. His interest grew out of his experiences in World War II, when the Army sent him to the Pacific to develop an accurate system of combat reporting.

Soon after reaching Makin Island, the 3d Battalion of the 165th Infantry Regiment was caught in a nighttime Japanese ambush. The unit escaped disaster only because a soldier named Private Morris Schwartz, of New York City, took over a machine gun from its fallen crew and mowed down attacking Japanese throughout the night.

Getting at the True Story

The next day Marshall tried to find out just what had happened. He bumped headlong into conflicting stories. A lieutenant claimed that he had ordered Schwartz to take over the gun; Schwartz insisted the lieutenant was nowhere in the vicinity and that he had done it on his own. Finally, to get at the truth, Marshall lined up the entire battalion and asked each man to report everything he had seen and done during the night. Not only was Schwartz's story upheld, but Marshall almost immediately realized he had stumbled onto the secret of accurate combat reporting. Every man remembered *something*—a piece to be fitted into the jigsaw puzzle. Not only that, Marshall had the key to what has become the Army's officially adopted Group Method of reporting and analyzing battles: the average man cannot lie in the presence of comrades who would contradict him if he were telling an untruth; and haunted by the memory of the recent dead, he *will* not lie.

Marshall also learned—and ignored the fact at the time—that *of the more than 1,000 men in the reinforced battalion, only 37 had fired their weapons.* He just thought the outfit was green. But a few weeks later, on Chance Island in the Marshalls, he did a similar group investigation of a gallant action by the crack Reconnaissance Troop of the 7th Infantry Division. Of the 100 men in the fight, only 14 had done all the firing that routed the enemy. He began then to suspect he was on the trail of something big.

Marshall became absolutely certain later during a European tour of duty. In Normandy he found that no more than 25 per cent of our best airborne troops were firing their weapons. By the end of the war, he had 350 men working under him in the European Theater of Operations. They group-interrogated hundreds of outfits fresh out of battle and fixed the percentage of men who actually fired their rifles against the enemy at 12 to 25 per cent.

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1950 infantry training, Fort Bragg

After World War II, Marshall wrote Men Against Fire, in which he devoted a great deal of space to the problem of the nonfirer. The book became a text for a half-dozen foreign armies, and our own Army incorporated some of his recommendations into its training program. The problem continued to be discussed and analyzed. And when the Korean war broke out, Marshall was dispatched to the front to study combat operations firsthand. Again he found the number of nonfirers to be disconcerting. He listed incident after incident in his official reports. One of the most dramatic described the fight at Karhyon Pass, a 6,700-yard gantlet of death in which the Chinese trapped and destroyed half of the remnants of the 2d Infantry Division in its retreat from the high-water mark of its advance into North Korea.

Marshall wrote: "In the pass, the dead lay in the ditches and sprawled across the roadway. Most of the living—even those still unwounded—were in such a state of shock that they responded to nothing . . . Chinese fire beat like hail . . . where they stood or reclined. But they neither cried out nor sought better cover. . . .

"The division commander, Major General Laurence B. Keiser, walked among them, moving from group to group, barking questions, trying to startle them back to consciousness. One thing made his heart leap up. A sergeant from the 9th Infantry Regiment had taken an 81-mm. mortar from a ¾-ton truck, set it up in the middle of the bullet-spattered roadway, and was now, single-handed, firing the piece on line of sight against the Chinese positions atop the south exit to the pass. *It was the only fire that Keiser saw being delivered by an American.*"

General Marshall—sometimes conducting his group interrogations under enemy fire—discovered this strange, side-by-side combination of heroes and nonfirers existed both in Army and Marine Corps units, and in green and seasoned outfits alike. But in his official report for the Operations Research Office (a hush-hush group of high-level scientists who analyze battle procedures for the Army), he had some encouraging findings. He wrote: "In the average infantry company in Korea, between 12 and 20 per cent of the men not only participate actively in the firing but exercise varying degrees of initiative . . . In addition . . . between 25 and 35 per cent of the men . . . take some part in the fire action with varying degrees of consistency . . . It is believed that this showing is a substantial improvement over the participation averages among World War II troops."

That still leaves an average of about 50 per cent of our combat men who do *not* fire or participate at all in a fire-fight. Why? A lot of good guesses can be made. But right now no one can say we know for sure. We are trying to find out. The Operations Research Office has teams of its best scientists in Korea to follow up Marshall's work on a more exact mathematical basis. But, meanwhile, the important consideration is to improve the situation, and the Army already has made some progress. Common-sense suggestions offered by

General Marshall and other soldiers (including enlisted men) have helped.

Failures Traced Back to Childhood

Psychiatrists point out that a man's failure to fire his weapon in battle may be traceable to inhibitions placed upon him in infancy. Every child is born with aggressive tendencies. But his impulses to commit violence are soon suppressed in the family. His parents disapprove, often with threats of punishment, if—for example—he should crown brother Billy with a baseball bat. As the child grows older, the inhibitions are further strengthened by cultural taboos (a gentleman keeps his temper), religious sanctions (Thou Shalt Not Kill), plus fears of legal reprisal.

All his life, the boy's mind works unconsciously to suppress any desire to kill. Then, abruptly, he is put into a soldier suit and told to shoot fellow human beings. One man in two loses the resulting struggle to break down the lifelong inhibition.

I went to the University of Michigan to talk to two outstanding military psychiatrists: Dr. Raymond W. Waggoner is head of the university's department of psychiatry and an adviser on psychiatric problems of the draft to Director of Selective Service Major General Lewis B. Hershey; Dr. M. M. Frohlich is a psychiatrist who, as a lieutenant colonel during World War II, handled thousands of combat-fatigue casualties at the 298th General Hospital. They cited case after case of soldiers developing actual paralysis on the battlefield the first time they were required to fire.

Dr. Frohlich suggests there are at least three ways (preferably to be used in combination) of removing these inhibitions temporarily so that soldiers will shoot. The most efficient method is to prompt them to lose their individual identities by promoting a mob psychology. People in a mob override their inhibitions and act as they would never dare act as individuals. A second approach is to make the man feel that because he's in a uniform and because he's an integral part of a group of men he likes and respects, somehow it is all right to join them in setting aside one's life-long inhibitions against killing. The third tack is to provide the man with a fatherlike leader who, he can believe, is supremely strong, wise and just; so that he will accept his leader's orders to set aside temporarily the taboos against killing.

From practical experience, Marshall and other Army experts made these assumptions years ago. Marshall began a long, emphatic campaign for the Army to look for its "natural leaders," as opposed to leaders selected according to the accepted standards of the civilian world. He insisted that "cause and national pride are not important; pride in company is the major factor in getting a man to participate in battle." He also discovered that a man gets terribly lonely in his foxhole.

The isolated man, says Marshall, will develop a sense of having been deserted by his fellows, and he will reason to himself that if he does not shoot and expose his position, the enemy will not fire back. Marshall recommended the revolutionary principle that noncoms and junior officers do not fire their own weapons, but instead crawl from foxhole to foxhole to keep the mob or group psychology going. Colonel John G. Hill, assistant chief of the Army's Organization and Training Division, told me that orders have gone out that, where possible, at least two men should occupy a single foxhole on outpost duty, instead of one, to militate against the so-called "loneliness of the battlefield." Also, the Army now is experimenting with two BAR men in every squad, instead of one, to double the number of rallying points for the men, since rifle fire builds up around automatic-weapons fire.

The most dramatic innovation has been talking-it-up—the yelling in combat which has accompanied many of our most heroic actions in Korea. This new idea is direct application of the mob-psychology technique. Marshall had noted in World War II that our troops did not sing or shout

among themselves, as they had done in World War I. They were so ingrained with the thought of maintaining complete silence that they continually worried about such things as their dog tags jangling together. "Let 'em holler," Marshall advocated. "In most cases, the enemy knows where they are anyway, so the noise doesn't matter. The yelling is vitally important to keep reminding the man that he is part of a group, not just a poor lone individual, and it can stir up chain reactions that will convert lambs into lions on the battlefield."

This theory, too, has been put into practice in Korea. Today we have a talking, jabbering Army. The relationship between the shouting and the number of men firing their weapons became apparent early. There have been many reports of men making heroic charges against the enemy while shouting incongruities like college cheers—or obscenities in Chinese.

There is still another field in which General Marshall is "functioning as a scout in a scientific area where there isn't even a trail"—as Dr. Ellis Johnson, director of the Operations Research Office, put it. Marshall has discovered that fear can cause such fatigue that a soldier literally becomes too tired to fight or fire his rifle. Not only that, but he found that the fear-caused fatigue is measurable in terms of the load a man can carry.

Soldiers Carried Too Much Weight

On the Han River in Korea, for instance, the crack L Company of the famed 27th "Wolfhound" Regiment went into an attack under a new company commander, who ordered them to wear their parkas as protection against the cold. The order brought their total load to 45 pounds, or eight pounds more than they usually carried into battle.

It was midday. The company was fresh, battle-tested and in top physical condition. But they advanced only 1,600 yards up a ridge before they dropped from exhaustion. As the official report records it, they "were falling asleep even as the enemy fire came in on them."

Today, the Operations Research Office is measuring fear-caused fatigue in terms of the metabolic effects in the blood, urine and so on. But meantime Marshall has estimated that because of the fear-fatigue factor, a soldier cannot go into combat and reasonably be expected to fire unless his total load is no more than 40 pounds (the soldier's load used to be 60 pounds and upward). An Army survey unit under Colonel Henry Kelly confirms this figure and has redesigned the uniform, the canteen, the ammunition and the first-aid kit, in order to bring the total combat weight below Marshall's 40-pound limit. Marshall has set a total load of 48 pounds for a soldier in training, which means that he estimates the fear-fatigue factor to be the equivalent of eight extra pounds.

All in all we are making progress in solving the problem of why soldiers don't shoot. But several questions still remain. Is it significant that in our era we must submerge the dignity of the individual? Must we employ techniques that run counter to everything in our society, our religion, our 4,000-year-old system of morality? General Marshall had this to say:

"In Russia, where life is cheap and violent death frequent, the Red soldiers have been reared with far fewer inhibitions against killing. This is confirmed by British Lieutenant Sir General Giffard Martel, the only high-ranking Allied officer permitted to observe the Red Army closely in World War II. He wrote: 'Their one secret weapon is the willingness of their troops to die in active participation on the battlefield. It exceeds anything we have seen with other troops in modern times.'

"Now, I don't believe this means they get 100 per cent of their men to fire. I don't believe such perfection is possible in *any* army. In fact, I feel that if we get our own number of firers up to 75 per cent, that's the best we possibly can expect. But, since all battle is a combination of small fights, we cannot—for our own survival—allow the enemy to start out with *any* advantage in the number of small arms being fired. We have gone as far as we can go in the perfecting of weapons. Our only chance to move forward is to remold the

human material."

Aware that the nature of this "remolding"—emphasis on mob-psychology techniques—carries disturbing implications, I wondered if there might be some justification on spiritual grounds. I spoke with several clergymen. They were all agreed. One said: "In a life-and-death struggle, it sometimes is necessary to lift the curtain of morality and civilization from men's souls to expose the brute beneath. But when the crisis is over, if the curtain is old and solidly designed and substantially built, it will easily drop back into place again—to mask the brute forever."

Brig. General S. L. A. Marshall, a 52-year-old Texan, is reputed to know more about why GIs don't shoot in combat than anyone else—and he has done a great deal to solve the problem. A veteran of both the World Wars, he was, at 18, the youngest company commander in the A.E.F. After 1918, Marshall joined the staff of the El Paso Herald and became city editor. Since 1927, except for extended duty in World War II, he has been editorial writer and military critic of The Detroit News. The Army often recalls him for special duty

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