IN DEFENCE
OF
WAR

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
manoeuvre around this by importing the ‘Anabaptist distinction’: namely that sword bearing is indeed authorized by God, but not for Christians. While importation in principle is acceptable—indeed, inevitable—this particular import is theologically incoherent and morally hypocritical. So it constitutes a third mistake.

Finally, since violence is all of a piece, since Jesus repudiated it, and since his followers are forbidden to use it even in defence of the innocent, just war thought is obviously sub-Christian. Therefore, our pacifists reason, there is no need to read its classic texts and engage with it at close quarters. Nor have they: their fourth mistake.

Nevertheless, as I have admitted, there is one point where the pacifist case presses hard on just war reasoning: namely on the requirement of proportion. This deserves further discussion, which I will give it in Chapters Four and Seven and in the Conclusion.

Immediately, however, I need to explicate one claim that I have made in this chapter, and I need to substantiate another. I need to explicate the claim that love and forgiveness can, and sometimes should, incorporate anger and retribution; and I need to substantiate the claim that the use of violence—and by extension, the waging of war—can, in fact, be qualified by love, and even by forgiveness of the enemy. This will be the task of the following chapter.

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Love in war

I. ‘Kind harshness’: forgiveness and the qualification of violence

The New Testament does not generate an absolute prohibition of violence, but it does generate an absolute injunction of love. Accordingly, just war doctrine’s claim to belong to a Christian ethic rests on its conception of the right use of violence as an expression of love for the neighbour. This makes obvious sense when the neighbour in view is the innocent victim of unjust aggression, on whose behalf the just warrior takes up arms. However, the innocent victim is not the only neighbour on site. Since love is an absolute injunction, applying always and everywhere, the just warrior is also bound to love the unjust aggressor. His love—as Jesus made plain—must extend itself to the enemy. But in what plausible sense can it do that?

According to the leading patriarch of Christian just war doctrine, St Augustine, the just warrior loves the unjust aggressor in so far as he witholds himself from vengeance, commits himself to benevolence, and so uses violence to punish him ‘with a sort of kind harshness’, doing him the service of constraining him from further wrongdoing and encouraging him to repent and embrace peace. What this amounts to is the qualification of the use of violence by forgiveness. Such a claim will seem strongly counter-intuitive to many Christians and non-Christians alike, for surely punishment and forgiveness are mutually exclusive alternatives? Surely one forgives instead of punishing? As I see it, that is not quite so; and in order to show

1. Augustine, Letter 138 (to Marcellinus), in Political Writings, 6.9.11, 14 (pp. 35, 36, 38).
V. Can love walk the battlefield?

In this chapter so far, I have sought to explain how Christian love might qualify coercion. But can it really? It might be possible in theory, but is it possible in practice? And even if it is possible in the case of certain limited kinds of coercion, what about physical violence? What about war? Surely soldiers in the heat of battle are driven by hatred and vengeance, not love? As the non-religious pacifist, Robert Holmes, puts it: 'One cannot help but wonder...whether it is humanly possible amidst the chaos of slaughter and gore that marks...combat to remain free of those things Augustine identifies as evil in war, the cruelty, enmity, and the like...'

I do not doubt that soldiers are sometimes motivated by vengeance and hatred. That, however, does not count against my thesis. What would count against it is evidence that it is psychologically necessary that war-fighting be motivated by malevolence; for then the shaping of violence by love would indeed be a mere academic fantasy. In support of my thesis, however, I can offer empirical evidence that malevolence does not necessarily motivate soldiers, even in the front line, and that various forms of love do.

Battlefield motivation varies enormously. Sometimes what prevails is a clinical professionalism. 'In the heat of battle,' writes the eminent military historian Richard Holmes, 'most soldiers regard their adversaries as ciphers: anonymous figures to be dealt with as expeditiously as possible...Most soldiers in contact killed to stay alive, and some went further, gaining professional satisfaction from outmanoeuvring or outshooting their adversaries, even if the consequence of this success was the death of another human being.' Such cool professionalism is evident in Ernst Jünger's classic memoir of the First World War. 'Throughout the war,' Jünger wrote, 'it was always my endeavour to view my opponent without animus, and to form an opinion of him as a man on the basis of the courage he showed. I would always try and seek him out in combat and kill him, and I expected nothing else from him. But never did I entertain mean thoughts of him. When prisoners fell into my hands, later on, I felt responsible for their safety, and would always do everything in my power for them.' Karl Marlantes, a veteran of jungle combat in Vietnam, concurs: 'Contrary to the popular conception, when one is in the fury of battle I don't think one is very often in an irrational frenzy...I was usually in a white heat of total rationality, completely devoid of passion, to get the job done with minimal casualties to my side and stay alive doing it.'

Another motive, especially among soldiers entering battle for the first time, is to prove oneself by meeting an inner, almost spiritual challenge. Thus Private Bosch of 7 Platoon, C Company, 1 Prince of Wales's Royal Regiment, describes his first experience of combat in Iraq:

And then it happens, your first contact. You come face to face with the demon inside you. Fear and anxiety grips [sic] you and squeezes [sic] the very life out of you. This is life and death. This is where a man stands up and faces his destiny...This is what you were born for...You were born to be strong and courageous; to be a man. And with that the demon turns and runs. The fear and anxiety disappears [sic] and your senses sharpen into a knife's edge with which you take control of yourself and lunge forward...

Perhaps the predominant military motive is love for one's comrades, which is one of the forms of love that the Johannine literature in the New Testament endorses in Jesus' name: 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13). In her analysis of face-to-face killing in 20th-century warfare, Joanna Bourke observes the predominant extent to which soldiers are motivated to kill by love for their comrades and their families, rather than by vengefulness against the enemy. Quoting a 1949 study, she writes:

In a survey of 568 American infantrymen who had seen combat in Sicily and North Africa in 1944, men were asked what was the most important factor enabling them to continue fighting...[V]indictiveness...and self-preservation ('kill or be killed') were scarcely mentioned. Rather (after simply desiring to 'end the task'), combatants cited solidarity with the group and thoughts of home and loved ones as their main incentives.

42. Holmes, Dusty Warriors, p. 316.
One form of this sense of solidarity—this love—can take is a resolve to be worthy of one’s predecessors in an historic regiment with a gallant reputation. As Patrick Bishop writes of the men of 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, during their tour in Helmand Province in the summer of 2006: ‘They were fighting not just to hold their position but for the reputation of a regiment that was as dear to them as were their families.’ However, more frequently what mattered was less the esteem of long-dead ancestors than the trust of still-living comrades: ‘[T]he ideals that motivated every proper soldier… were nothing to do with queen or country, religion or political ideology. What sustained them was the determination not to let themselves down, and above all, not to let down their friends.’ Writing about his own experience in Helmand two years later, Lt Patrick Bury of 1st Battalion, the Royal Irish Regiment, puts flesh on this abstract point as he reflects on an exchange with his corporal:

‘Corporal McCord, I’m sorry for shouting at you in front of the…’

He interrupts and speaks hurriedly, passionately. ‘…I love you, boss. I’d do anything for you…I’d take a bullet for you.’ He looks at me. It is not often that a man tells another he loves him. Especially in front of other men. I think of… the effort I have made to… respect and protect the boys, to build this team. To earn their trust and respect. And we call it respect because it’s easy to say. It’s not soft and it’s not embarrassing. But Matt has called it by its true name, love. Simple, platonic love. This love that motivates men to do the most touching, brave, selfless things for their brothers. A love so deep it burns and tinges in you when it flickers, reminding you there are things greater than you, more important than you, things that last longer than you… And sometimes, out here, you get a glimpse and you understand. You understand why soldiers charge machine guns or hold out to the death while others escape. Love. For love melts fear like butter on a furnace; it transcends it.

Later, an eighteen-year-old private, earlier found sobbing uncontrollably after a Taliban attack, steels himself to go out on night patrol. Bury comments: ‘[M]ark has refused… to leave the platoon, and has forced himself to come out with us tonight, despite all his fear, his terror… I watch him nervously twitch and scan, but endure. It was pure courage, the very essence of it. The triumph of will over fear… Greater love hath no man.’ Sebastian Junger writes along the same lines of a US infantry unit in eastern Afghanistan in 2007–8, observing that the attraction of combat had more to do with protecting comrades than killing the enemy. In a nutshell, ‘Courage was love.’ To civilians this might seem a counter-intuitive, eccentric, even perverse interpretation. Nevertheless, it is confirmed by the commander of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, who, in a BBC documentary first broadcast in 2011, concluded his eye-of-commissioning address to the officer cadets: ‘I’m often asked, “Is there one Golden Rule for leadership?” As officers you are serving your soldiers. Some day may you have to lead men into battle. This is an extraordinary thing to do. You are their servants and you do that through leading them. That’s how it works. If you don’t understand that, you ain’t got it!’ That’s “serve to lead”. Go out and love your soldiers.

Self-sacrificial love for one’s friends is admirable, but he that would follow Jesus must extend love to his enemies, too. Is this possible in the heat of combat? Many will suppose not, assuming that soldiers typically hate their opponents. But this is not so. In his acclaimed history of the Spanish Civil War, Antony Beevor makes this remarkable report: ‘There was said to have been a sweet-natured youth among Moscardó’s [nationalist] defenders at Toledo [in 1936], who was called the Angel of the Alcázar because before firing his rifle he used to cry, “Kill without hate!”’ This is remarkable presumably because it is so unusual. What is unusual about it, however, is the pious, adolescent scrupulousness with which the absence of hatred is expressed, not the absence as such; for hatred of the enemy is not at all a constant motive of soldiers in the field, or even a usual one. Indeed, it seems that hatred is more common among civilians than combat troops. In his extraordinarily wise meditation on the psychology and spirituality of combat, informed by his own experience of military service in the Second World War, Glenn Gray writes: ‘A civilian far removed from the battle is nearly certain to be more bloodthirsty than the front-line soldier whose

44. Patrick Bishop, 3 Para (London: Harper Press, 2007), p. 188.
45. Bishop, 3 Para, p. 268.
47. Bury, Callsign Hades, pp. 231–2, 261–2. The italics are the author’s.
49. Junger, War, p. 239.
50. Major-General Marriott, Commandant, Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst at the end of Episode 3 of BBC 4’s documentary, ‘Sandhurst’, first broadcast on 3 October 2011.
hatred has to be responsible, meaning that he has to respond to it, to answer it with action. This view is substantiated by R.H. Tawney, the Anglican economic historian, who fought in the early stages of the battle of the Somme in July 1916 before he was severely wounded and invalided back to England. The following October he published an article in the press, where he reflected on the bewildering gulf in understanding that, he felt, had opened up between the men at the front and their families and friends back home. At one point he protests against the view of the soldier that has come to prevail in many civilian minds:

And this 'Tommy' is a creature at once ridiculous and disgusting. He is represented as... finding 'sport' in killing other men, as 'hunting Germans out of dug-outs as a terrier hunts rats', as overwhelming with kindness the captives of his bow and spear. The last detail is true to life, but the emphasis which you lay upon it is both unintelligent and insulting. Do you expect us to hurt them or starve them? Do you not see that we regard these men who have sat opposite us in mud—'square-headed bastards', as we called them—as the victims of the same catastrophe as ourselves, as our comrades in misery much more truly than you are? Do you think that we are like some of you in accumulating on the head of every wretched antagonist the indignation felt for the wickedness of a government, of a social system, or (if you will) of a nation?... Hatred of the enemy is not common, I think, among those who have encountered him. It is incompatible with the proper discharge of our duty. For to kill in hatred is murder; and soldiers, whatever their nationality, are not murderers, but executioners.53

Tawney’s experience was by no means unique. It was shared by Charles Barberon of the 121 Régiment d’artillerie: ‘It’s surprising, but the soldier who has suffered the enemy’s fire does not show the same hatred for the enemy as civilians.’54 Further confirmation, if it is needed, is available from the next world war. RAF pilot Michael Constable Maxwell reports in his diary an encounter he and some colleagues had with a local lawyer, who was friendly with his squadron. The lawyer was told of the Dornier [the German plane that Maxwell had just shot down]: ‘Oh how absolutely splendid of you, I do hope they were all killed!’ he remarked. Maxwell found this, he wrote, ‘the filthiest remark I have ever heard and I was staggered by its bloody sadism... it is this loathsome attitude which allows papers to print pictures of wounded Germans. They must be killed and I hope to kill many myself... but the act is the unpleasant duty of the executioner which must be done ruthless and merciless [sic]—but it can be done silently.55

Front-line servicemen do not necessarily hate the enemy. Sometimes they even feel a sense of solidarity or kinship with him. Thus Gerald Dennis, who fought on the Western Front, confessed that at Christmas 1916 he would:

not have minded fraternizing as had been done the previous two years for in a way, [sic] the opponents on each side of No Man’s Land were kindred spirit. We did not hate one another. We were both P.B.I. [poor bloody infantry], we should have liked to have stood up between our respective barbed wire, without danger and shaken hands with our counterparts [sic].56

Thus, too, Ernest Raymond, a British veteran of the Gallipoli campaign in 1915, recalled that the Turk ‘became popular with us, and everything suggested that our amiability toward him was reciprocated’.57

An absence of hatred for the enemy, even a certain sense of kinship with him, are not at all uncommon in the experience of front-line troops. But what about compassion? I put this question to a British veteran of the Falklands War in 1982. Chris Keeble, then a major in the Parachute Regiment, found himself in command of a battalion during the Battle of Goose Green after its colonel had been killed in action. The paratroops, he told me, were very ferocious as long as the battle continued, but once it was over he witnessed many instances of his men cradling wounded Argentine soldiers in their arms.58 Compassion for the enemy—after combat—was not foreign to that battlefield. And if Glenn Gray is to be believed, it is commonly found elsewhere.59

This is all true, but it is not the whole truth. It would surely strain credibility to pretend that pleasure in destruction, anger, and hatred are all-stran-

gers to the battlefield. Of course, they are not. ‘The least acknowledged aspect of war, today,’ writes Karl Marlantes, ‘is how exhilarating it is.’

This exhilaration, however, is not always malicious. It is not always the destruction that pleases, so much as the thrill, even the ecstasy, of danger. A month before he was killed at the very end of the First World War, the poet Wilfred Owen—yes, he of the pity-of-war fame—wrote to his mother:

I have been in action for some days. I can find no word to qualify my experiences except the word SHEER... It passed the limits of my Abhorrence... I lost all my earthly faculties, and fought like an angel... With this corporal who stuck to me and shadowed me like your prayers. I captured a German Machine Gun and scores of prisoners... I only shot one man with my revolver (at about 30 yards); the rest I took with a smile.

More recently, and less angelically, Patrick Hennessey has written of his first experience of battle in Afghanistan in May 2007: ‘But what I couldn’t say in an email because maybe at the time I didn’t know it or didn’t want to believe it in case it ran out or wasn’t true, was just how easy it all was, how natural it all felt and how much fun.’

And describing a later engagement, he says:

I want to sit with him [the major] in the ditch and try and explain, try and piece together what it is about the contact battle that ramps the heartbeat up so high and pumps adrenaline and euphoria through the veins in such a heady rapid mix. I want to sit with him... and wonder what compares; the winning and scoring punch, the first kiss, the triumphant knicker-peeking moment? Nowhere else sells bliss like this, surely? Not in freefall jumps or crisp blue waves not on dance floors in pubs or white lines—I want to discuss with him whether it’s sexually charged because it’s the ultimate affirmation of being alive.

A British veteran of the Iraq invasion in 2003, explaining his eagerness to go to Helmand, agrees: ‘There’s no better buzz than having a bullet flying past your face.’

Here, the exhilaration, the ecstasy of war seem akin to that of extreme sports—adolescent perhaps, but not exactly malicious.

On other occasions, however, the ecstasy that impels soldiers is that of rage, which is more morally complex, perhaps dubious. Sometimes what inspires it is the death of comrades. In the Battle for Normandy in 1944, according to Antony Beevor, a member of the US 30th Infantry Division noticed that ‘[r]eal hatred of the enemy came to soldiers... when a buddy was killed. “And this was often a total hatred; any German they encountered after that would be killed.”

Sixty-three years later, their counterparts in eastern Afghanistan reacted in the same way. After the death of a popular comrade, Sebastian Junger tells us, ‘Second Platoon fought like animals...’ And after a similar incident, one of its members commented, ‘I just wanted to kill everything that came up that wasn’t American.’

Fierce anger in response to the violent killing of a comrade seems to me quite natural, not merely in the sense of “predictable”, but also in the sense of “appropriate”. Anger at the deliberate destruction of anything valuable is appropriate. Not to resent its loss is to fail in love for it. If it was valuable, then its violent destruction deserves resentment. Still, it deserves only proportionate and discriminate resentment. It deserves anger that is not sinful.

This raises the important psychological question: Is it actually possible to control anger under battlefield conditions? It seems so. Describing a unit’s reaction to the death of a popular colleague in Afghanistan, Sergeant Dan Jarvie of the Parachute Regiment observed: ‘There wasn’t a feeling that they [the dead man’s section] were going to go out and do anything for revenge. That’s not what we were there for. We weren’t going to hand out any punishment to anyone who wasn’t Taliban. But we had a resolution... we will go out there and fight harder, fight more aggressively...’

What appears to anger combat soldiers most, however, is not the death of a comrade, but enemy conduct that breaks the rules, be they formal or informal: treachery, gratuitous sacrilege, wanton cruelty. So Michael Burleigh comments on the behaviour of troops in the Second World War: ‘Anything that seemed sneaky... were [sic] liable to elicit a vicious response.’

During the battle for Sicily in 1943, American troops of the
45th Division responded to cases of treacherous surrender by German troops by adopting a policy of taking no prisoners. In South-East Asia, ‘[a] they pursued the Japanese, the Australians encountered countless examples of sadism: the body of a native boy, his head incinerated with a flamethrower and a bayonet protruding from his anus; a woman whose left breast had been cut off before she died; the body of a militiaman tied to a tree with a bayonet left rammed into his stomach. By the time the Australians found evidence of cannibalism, they had come to regard the enemy as something other than human.” Similarly, US Marine Eugene Sledge told of ‘an incident where he happened upon Marine dead, one of whom had been decapitated and had his hands cut off at the wrist—his head was posed on his chest—while his penis had been cut off and stuffed in his mouth. Another man had been “butchered” into neat pieces... “From that moment on I never felt the least pity or compassion for [the Japanese] no matter what the circumstances.”

Again, it seems to me that deep anger is the only morally fitting response to such appalling, sadistic cruelty; and that fitting anger here may require the intensity of a certain kind of hatred. Confronted with such atrocity, soldiers have cogent reason not to extend to those responsible any benefit of doubt; and if such conduct is typical of the enemy, or unless and until they can find a way of discriminating between the guilty and the innocent among them, they have sufficient reason to withhold doubt’s benefit from anyone wearing the enemy’s uniform in the relevant arena. Such fitting hatred and mercilessness need not last forever, however: ‘During the assault on Longstop Hill in Tunisia in April 1943 a captured German drew a concealed pistol and shot several of his Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders captors. The latter were “roused to a state of berserk fury—We just had a hate—at the Germans, the hill, everything.” For a few days they accepted no surrenders, but by the time they had stormed the hill, losing a third of their own men in the action, they had taken three hundred prisoners.” Nor need hatred be universal and indiscriminate. An American infantryman, Sidney Stewart, leapt into a bomb crater and found himself face to face with a Japanese soldier who had done the same thing: “I knew I couldn’t take him prisoner. We didn’t have time... He said something in

Japanese... I knew it was surrender... He didn’t cringe or sneer, nor did he show any hatred. Why, I don’t hate this guy. I can’t hate him... This man was like a friend.” Nonetheless, when ordered to move out, Stewart ignored the prayer board the Japanese was tugging from his pocket and shot him dead. He did this, however, neither out of hatred nor without necessity.

Writing of his experience in Helmand Province in 2008, Patrick Bury tells a very revealing tale about what happened when a Taliban blew himself up while laying a roadside bomb:

I was glad he was dead. It was funny. He had tried to blow us up, and the stupid fucker had blown himself up. That was gratifying, warming, pleasant. But later I see photos of his body and I feel sick. Somewhere within me, under the hardening crust, compassion still pervades my thoughts. What about his mother, his family? What a waste of a life.

My compassion lasts less than twenty-four hours. As we debate whether to return his body to a mosque before sundown, like the soft, moral, Geneva-bound men we are, the Taliban prepare to ambush us at the mosque. Luckily, we don’t have the manpower. The family can collect him later. Then we find out about the ambush. Rage.

F*ck them, the dirty despicable bastards. Is nothing sacred? Ambush your enemy as he returns your dead? Honour? You bastards. YOU FUCKING BASTARDS. I WILL KILL EVERY LAST ONE OF THEM.

...I am struggling with this war... Struggling with our enemy. An enemy that says it is strictly Islamic yet runs harems and makes and takes drugs, an enemy that uses handicapped kids as mules for suicide bombs, that executes children for going to school. I start to hate them. Hate them for what they are doing to me. Hate them and their terrifying suicide bombs that separate us from the locals. Hate them for eroding me.

Do they hate us in the same way?

Yes.

And I hate the locals for not standing up to them. For harbouring them, sheltering them. For not returning our smiles. For not being human. For hating us. For watching us walk over IEDs [improvised explosive devices].

Not all of them... Not all of them.

In the first place what this reveals is the emotional maelstrom within Bury: on the one hand, a sense of satisfaction that an enemy had got his come-uppance, sharpened by righteous indignation against the Taliban’s

72. Ibid., p 365.
73. Ibid., p 379.
74. Ibid., p 357.
75. Bury, Callings Hades, pp. 218–19. The italics and the block capitals are all Bury's.
outrageous unscrupulousness, and on the other hand the constraining voice of compassion (‘What about his mother, his family? What a waste of a life. . . . Do they hate us in the same way? Yes. . . . Not all of them. . . . Not all of them’). In the second place it displays the struggle that Bury undergoes to retain his compassion, which he articulates elsewhere: ‘Faced with the poor chances of our own survival, with death permeating everything, with the cheapness of life and the Afghan disregard for it, our morality, our compassion, diminishes within us. We try to keep our empathy. Our humanity. But it is getting harder.’ Finally, Bury’s experience implies that the enraged hatred of the enemy, powerful though it may be, need not get its own way, need not take over, because in his case it did not. The voice of compassion was able to speak, to push back.

It seems to me that anger, even with the intensity of rage and hatred, can sometimes be a morally fitting motive on the battlefield. Despicable deeds deserve no less of a reaction. For sure, even morally justified rage and hatred are dangerous emotions, not easily governed; but the empirical evidence is that they can be governed. If it is love of justice that grounds and inspires them, then perhaps that same love is well placed to restrain them.

It has to be admitted, however, that rage is not always inspired by care for goods and love for justice. Sometimes, it is fuelled by the sheer joy—the ecstasy—of destruction. Ernst Jünger bears witness from the First World War:

As we advanced, we were in the grip of a berserk rage. The overwhelming desire to kill lent wings to my stride. Rage squeezed bitter tears from my eyes. The immense desire to destroy that overhung the battlefield precipitated a red mist in our brains. We called out sobbing and stammering fragments of sentences to one another, and an impartial observer might have concluded that we were all ecstatically happy. . . . The fighter, who sees a bloody mist in front of his eyes as he attacks, doesn’t want prisoners; he wants to kill.  

Looking back at his experience in Vietnam, Karl Marlantes recognizes the same phenomenon: ‘This was blood lust. I was moving from white heat to red heat. The assigned objective, winning the hill, was ensured. I was no longer thinking how to accomplish my objective with the lowest loss of life to my side. I just wanted to keep killing gooks.’ Marlantes is acutely aware of ‘the danger of opening up to the rapture of violent transcendence’, of ‘falling in love with the power and thrill of destruction and death dealing. . . . There is a deep savage joy in destruction. . . . I loved this power. I love it still. And it scares the hell out of me.’ Nevertheless, he is quite adamant that it is ‘simply not true’ ‘that all is fair in love and war, that having rules in war is total nonsense’. Appealing to incidents of German and British generosity towards the enemy during the North African campaign in the Second World War, Marlantes comments, ‘They remembered their common humanity and controlled the beast that lies within us all.’

Anger, hatred, rage, the sheer pleasure of destruction: these are all powerful emotions on the battlefield, but they can be governed. The last one can be refused; the first three can be rendered discriminate and disproportionate. Whether or not they will be governed depends crucially upon the military discipline instilled by training, and especially upon the quality of leadership in the field. This last point is underscored by Patrick Bury’s testimony:

Most soldiers do not want to kill per se. Almost all of us have an inherent belief that killing is wrong. However, the situations we find ourselves in often mean we are forced to consider the use of lethal force. Our training helps us differentiate between threat and appropriate use of force, but also, by its very nature, makes it easier for us to kill . . .

Killing, whatever its form, can be morally corrosive. Mid-intensity counterinsurgency, with its myriad of complex situations, an enemy who won’t play fair and the constant, enduring feeling of being under threat, compound such corrosiveness. A good tactical leader must recognise this and constantly maintain the morality of those he commands.

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76. Bury’s view of the Taliban is not just an expression of partisan prejudice. Michael Semple, an Irish expert on Afghanistan and deputy to the European Union’s special representative to Afghanistan in 2004–7, has written: ‘In terms of the insurgents’ operating methods, most sections of the insurgency have developed ruthlessness as an in-house style, even more so now than pre-2001. In fact the insurgents have developed a reputation for using extreme and arbitrary violence . . . In the post-2001 insurgency, the Taliban have been even more dependent on tactics that any definition constitute acts of terrorism, including targeted assassinations of civilian figures and bomb attacks on civilian targets or on military targets without due precautions to prevent civilian casualties’ (Reconciliation in Afghanistan [Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009], pp. 36–7, 46).


78. Jünger, Storm of Steel, pp. 332, 339.

79. Marlantes, What is it Like to Go to War, p. 103.

80. Ibid., pp. 61, 53, 67, 160.

81. Ibid., p. 228.

82. It must be admitted that the fighting in North Africa during the Second World War was unusually civilized.

83. Marlantes, What is it Like to Go to War, p. 232.
... At the beginning of the tour, it was relatively easy to maintain a sense of morality amongst the platoon. But when the threat to our lives increased, as the Taliban began fighting increasingly dirty, as the civilians became indifferent and as we were either nearly killed or took casualties, this became increasingly difficult. Soldiers who did not want to kill for no reason began to become unconcerned.

There is a balance to be struck between morality and operational effectiveness, between softness and harshness. It is a fine line to walk, but one which must be walked nonetheless. My platoon sergeant would always strive to keep the soldiers sharp, aggressive and ready to fight their way out of any situation...

However, as a junior officer I felt the need to morally temper what the platoon sergeant had said to the men. His could not be the final word on the subject... In the morphing, grey conflict we found ourselves in I pointed out that the civilians, even if they were untrustworthy and indifferent, were still our best form of force protection. They told us where the IEDs were. If we lost them, we lost everything... We had to treat captured Taliban correctly. Otherwise we might as well not bother coming out here.

I think, in hindsight, this unacknowledged agreement I had with my platoon sergeant worked well. He kept the platoon sharp and ready, 'loaded' as it were, and I just made sure the gun didn't go off at the wrong place at the wrong people... The platoon was so well drilled it barely needed me for my tactical acumen. But they did need me for that morality.

Sometimes I felt my own morality begin to slip, that hardness creeping in. Sometimes I thought that I was soft, that my platoon sergeant was right and I should shut up and get on with it. Sometimes I'm sure the platoon felt like that! I was unsure. And at these times my memory would flit back to Sandhurst, to the basics, and I would find renewed vigour that what I was saying was indeed right. My moral compass, for all its wavering, was still pointing North. And that was the most important lesson I was taught in Sandhurst, and that I learnt in Afghanistan.

VI. Conclusion

The testimony that I have adduced is first-hand and comes from frontline soldiers in six wars, spanning almost a century from 1914 to 2012.

84. Lt Paddy Bury, 'Pointing North', unpublished paper, May 2009. Bury instances the demoralization that poor leadership allows to develop in Culligan Hades, pp. 117, 233: 'I can't trust some of that platoon to make the right decisions. Some of them are fully aware that down here they are indeed deities of their own little universes... Much of it is down to leadership... It feels like the platoon commander lost the respect of his platoon months ago. It was the little things that added up, the little things he didn't do.'