

# The Achilles effect and preventing armies from becoming mobs

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## Introduction

In his poem *The Iliad*, Homer pits the petulant Athenian demigod Achilles against his antithesis, the Trojan prince Hector. Homer's Hector was a skilled warrior, but he was also a paragon of nobility and reason. He was dispassionate, reflective and kind and he possessed a capacity to control his killing instinct.<sup>1</sup> Achilles, on the other hand, was brooding and temperamental. Incensed by Agamemnon's demeaning treatment of him, Achilles withdrew from Agamemnon's war with Troy and sulked.<sup>2</sup> His delicate sensitivities already heightened, Achilles was enraged when he learned of the death of his close friend Patroclus at the hands of Hector.<sup>3</sup> Overcome by grief, he returned to battle to avenge the death. All compassion left Achilles and he mercilessly killed every Trojan he could lay his hands on.<sup>4</sup> He eventually confronted Hector, slaying him in front of his parents and abusing the body to an extent that even the gods were sickened by the brutality.<sup>5</sup> Achilles was able to defeat Hector because his grief-induced madness inhibited reason, fear and morality. Through Achilles's victory over Hector, Homer expresses the tendency for passions such as fear, anger and hatred to consume humanity and reason in war.<sup>6</sup>

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- 1 Homer emphasises Hector's nature throughout the book. Book VI provides a good example. Homer describes Hector's visit to his wife and son, and Hector's concern for them. Homer describes Hector's meaningful meeting with the wives of the Trojan soldiers and an intimate meeting with his mother.
  - 2 Book I describes Achilles withdrawal from battle, demonstrating his pettiness and the tendency for emotions and passions to overcome Achilles's reason.
  - 3 Book XVIII describes Achilles's response to hearing of the death of Patroclus; weeping, tearing his hair out and throwing himself on the ground.
  - 4 Book XXI describes Achilles's killing spree and his lack of compassion.
  - 5 Book XXII describes the duel between Hector and Achilles, including Achilles's treatment of Hector's corpse.
  - 6 Other authors and film-makers such as Cormac McCarthy (*Blood Meridian*) and Francis Ford Coppola (*Apocalypse Now*) have explored this idea too.

This article examines the measures that have emerged in modern Western armies that seem to mollify the propensity for the passions that consumed Achilles to consume armies at war. These measures include: (1) a stoic ethos of respectfulness, abnegation, forbearance, punctiliousness and austerity; (2) rules and conventions governing professional relationships, including overt displays of courtesy, respect and deference; (3) mechanisms that inhibit officers and enlisted soldiers from becoming overly familiar with each other, and that inhibit officers from over-identification with their subordinates; (4) regulations governing standards of behaviour, comportment and uniformity of grooming and dress; (5) regulated daily routines and inspections; and (6) rituals and conventions for marking important occasions.<sup>7</sup> These measures are otherwise known as military regimentation.

In a progressive society, military regimentation is an anachronism. It implies things considered by some to be pejorative such as imposed discipline, unthinking obedience and conformity. It invokes images of stereotypical military practice such as marching, saluting and fastidious grooming. Regimentation is the antithesis of the contemporary zeitgeist and some people believe it is contrary to important battlefield traits like cunning, creativity and initiative. Many people outside the military regard regimental practices as quaint and curious. Soldiers find them grating and pointless. Why then do they persist in armies to this day, even in the armies of the most progressive societies?

Some argue that regimental traits are simply redundant relics of a bygone age. Others contend their persistence is a manifestation of the military mind's preference for tradition, order and control.<sup>8</sup> Yet these explanations are unlikely to be sufficient to explain the stubborn persistence of regimental traits across many different cultures throughout different eras.<sup>9</sup> This article proposes that war is more than just a struggle between two armed groups; it is also a struggle between restraint and abandon, conscientiousness and recklessness, order and disorder. It contends the first and most important battle for an army is a battle for self-control and abnegation. It proposes that the combination of organisational traits commonly known as military regimentation play an essential role in winning this battle. Regimentation is therefore not some quaint perversion of the military mind; it is a necessary vaccine against the tendency for war's violent nature to overcome the inhibitions of civilised soldiers,

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7 This article does not suggest the measures came about with deliberate and explicit intention to mollify the passions that affected Achilles rather than their emergence is a function of other inadvertent historical causes.

8 Norman F. Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 179-199. 'It is no accident that 'bull' is so closely linked to conservatism, for its very nature is to prevent change, to impose a pattern upon material and upon behaviour, and to preserve the status quo whether it is that of shining brass or social structure.'

9 Wooden figures found in the tomb of Mesehti of the 11th Dynasty are indicative. An image is available at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/museum-for-dialogue/item/en/70/model-of-nubian-soldiers> and Brian Campbell, *War and Society in Imperial Rome, 31 BC 284 AD*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 38.

causing them to succumb to primitive impulses and become mobs—referred to herein as the *Achilles effect*.

This article begins by reflecting on the origins of modern regimental practices, which have their roots in the religious enmity of the Thirty Years War. It explores the philosophical idea that the human condition consists of a tension between reason and passion and between restraint and abandon. It demonstrates how war tends to diminish these tensions in favour of passion and abandon. The article then looks to philosophy and literature to understand the nature of these tensions in war, particularly the harmful effect on armies when passion and abandon dominate. It proposes that military regimentation is an exaggeration of the features of modern civilisation that keep people civilised and it provides evidence of a plausible relationship between the relative degree of order and restraint in an army and its performance in war. The article concludes by exploring the potential mechanism by which regimentation works to vaccinate an army against the *Achilles effect*.

## The Achilles effect

It is easy to take the relatively orderly and disciplined conduct of modern Western armies for granted; yet orderly and disciplined armies are a comparatively recent phenomenon. With some exceptions, medieval European armies were practically armed mobs.<sup>10</sup> It is revealing therefore that the origins of modern military regimentation coincide with the emergence of modern Western civilisation after the Thirty Years War.

Three of the main features of modern warfare emerged after the Thirty Years War: <sup>11</sup> the battle culture of forbearance, the use of drill to control and sustain troops, and the creation of the close-knit military community.<sup>12</sup> A number of social and technological factors at the time meant battle often resulted in two adversaries pouring volleys of musket fire into one another at very close range. Losses were staggering; nonetheless, one side usually broke ending the battle.<sup>13</sup> Precision of movement, standing fast in orderly formation and strict obedience were essential for success in battle.<sup>14</sup> Tactics and social arrangements therefore emphasised loyalty and forbearance; standing fast despite the enemy's fire, and stoic acceptance of casualties.<sup>15</sup>

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10 Lauro Martines, *Furies: War in Europe 1450-1700*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013)

11 Preston, Roland and Wise, *Men in Arms: A History of Warfare and its Interrelationships with Western Society*, 5th edition, (Forth Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1991), 116.

12 John A. Lynn, 'Forging the Western Army in Seventeenth Century France,' in MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray Ed., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 45.

13 *Ibid.*, 46.

14 *Ibid.*, 52.

15 Some might argue that this element of the Western way of warfare is changing into a culture of casualty avoidance.

These orderly and resolute practices stand in contrast to a generally more primitive and furious warrior ethos expressed throughout the Thirty Years War and earlier. Sparked by religious rebellion in central Europe, the Thirty Years War came to engulf virtually all the major European powers. Massive armed mobs that included large bodies of foreign mercenaries waged war across the continent. They survived on what they could forage and plunder, devastating and depopulating whole regions of central Europe.<sup>16</sup> It was a period of almost unequalled violence and savagery.<sup>17</sup>

The widespread violence and suffering of the period gave scholars like Thomas Hobbes an insight into the psychological forces that act on people when there is nothing to restrain their behaviour. Hobbes had seen people fight over resources made scarce by war and he had seen the atrocities committed by foreign mercenaries.<sup>18</sup> He came to realise that people in a natural unconstrained state become savage, selfish and indulgent, seeking to acquire power and resources and satisfy their needs at the expense of others.<sup>19</sup>

Hobbes argued that reason and fear of death are the two 'passions' allowing humans to escape their nature and make peace. Fear, he asserted, provides the motivation for peace, and reason illuminates the natural laws keeping people at peace.<sup>20</sup> Hobbes argued that to maintain a state of peace, people must forfeit certain rights in favour of a contract with each other called a commonwealth.<sup>21</sup> He proposed a sovereign should enforce the contract and maintain order, allowing people to escape a perpetual state of war against each other.<sup>22</sup> These are the ideas on which the modern state and modern civilisation are built.<sup>23</sup>

Other authors and philosophers have wrestled with the idea that without a leviathan, or some contra-influence, people tend to satisfy their immediate needs and acquire power and resources at the expense of others. In *The Birth of Tragedy*,<sup>24</sup> nineteenth

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16 Preston, *Men in Arms*, 96.

17 Martines, *Furies*, viii.

18 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, printed by Andrew Croke, at the Green Dragon in St. Paul's Churchyard, 1651., Part I, Chapter XII, Section 4, Paragraph 1. Hobbes was witness to the English Civil War, which was also fought with religious and revolutionary zeal similar to the Thirty Years War.

19 *Ibid.*, Part I, Chapter XII, Section 3.

20 *Ibid.*, Part I, Chapter XIII, Section 7.

21 *Ibid.*, Part II, Chapter XVII, Section 8.

22 *Ibid.*, Part II, Chapter XVII, Section 9.

23 Hannah Dawson, *Life Lesson from Hobbes*, Kindle Edition., (London: MacMillan, 2013), Introduction Paragraph 3. '...there are a whole host of activities –monetary transactions, renting a house, motorway driving, even having a party – which are at a basic level dependent on the coercive apparatus of the State and the mutual trust and respect that this creates. This is the *civilized and civilizing foundation* [emphasis added] without which the fantastically plural coordinations of society could not hope to get underway. It is on this foundation that I am free to make as much or as little of my life as I am able.

24 It is important to note this book received significant criticism after it was published and Nietzsche himself would later criticise it.'

century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche suggested the human condition consists of a struggle between reason and passion and between restraint and abandon.<sup>25</sup> He referred to the traits associated with reason—such as order, restraint and morality—as Apollonian after the Greek god Apollo, whose ascribed characteristics most closely resemble the rational ideal.<sup>26</sup> He referred to the traits aligned with emotion, passion and indulgence as Dionysian after the Greek god Dionysus, whose ascribed characteristics most closely resemble the uninhibited and passionate ideal.<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche believed Greek tragedy's portrayal of the struggle between Apollonian and Dionysian elements gave classical audiences a distilled example of the human condition.<sup>28</sup> He concluded, it is not healthy to allow Apollo or Dionysus to dominate: 'without the other to hold it in check, each drive would tend to the extreme'.<sup>29</sup>

Author Sir William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* is a modern allegory of the Apollonian–Dionysian struggle.<sup>30</sup> Golding's marooned schoolboys gradually reject the restraints of civilisation in favour of an indulgent, violent and primitive existence. They kill the thoughtful and sensitive Simon and the rational and intellectual Piggy, signifying savagery's consumption of kindness and reason in the absence of a leviathan. Golding's use of children in the story implies that a primitive and violent nature is innate whereas civilisation and peace are artificial and learned. Laws, rules, policemen, schools and other social conventions of civilisation are necessary to keep the darker side of human nature at bay.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which derived from his experiences working on a steamboat in the Belgian Congo at the peak of the colonial rubber trade<sup>31</sup>, echoes Golding's inferences.<sup>32</sup> European societies of the period had strict moral codes and were preoccupied with rules, order and structure. Conrad used the Congo as a metaphorical antithesis of restraint in European society. His principal idea was that while the features of civilisation suppress savage tendencies civilisation cannot rid people of these tendencies entirely. Inside everyone lurks a heart of darkness that inexorably rises to the surface in the right circumstances.

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25 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Douglas Smith (trans), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xviii.

26 *Ibid.*, xvi.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*, xvii.

29 *ibid.*, xix.

30 William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1954).

31 While the Belgian exploitation of the native Congolese was in the context of the colonial rubber trade, author Joseph Conrad uses ivory trade as the context for the *Heart of Darkness*.

32 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 2nd edition, D.R.C.A Goonetilleke (trans), (Toronto: Broadview Press, 1999). Originally published in serial form in *Blackwood's Magazine* 1899, 17.

Conrad's and Golding's works of fiction are consistent with material cases such as the extraordinary descent into savagery of the crew of the Dutch East India Company ship *Batavia*, when it ran aground off the Australian coast in 1627.<sup>33</sup> Other cases are also illustrative, such as the behaviour of escaped convicts in Tasmania and their resort to cannibalism<sup>34</sup> and the wanton behaviour of the HMS *Bounty* mutineers<sup>35</sup>. Each story serves as a reminder of the dark psychological forces civilisation suppresses and the power of situational forces to affect human behaviour.

According to social psychologist Philip Zimbardo, there is a large body of evidence supporting the idea that situational factors triumph over individual power in the right circumstances.<sup>36</sup> Zimbardo was the director of the infamous Stanford Prison experiment in which he and his research team randomly selected volunteer college students to act as guards and prisoners in a fake prison. Some of the participants played their roles zealously, despite being aware the whole thing was faked. Some guards subjected prisoners to abuse and many of the prisoners submitted to the abuse. Zimbardo, who was playing the role of prison superintendent, allowed the abuse to go on for an unreasonable amount of time before shutting down the experiment on the sixth day.<sup>37</sup> He found that the 'pervasive yet subtle power of a host of situational variables can dominate an individual's will to resist'.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, the pre-eminent military theorist Carl von Clausewitz observed that war is 'composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason'.<sup>39</sup> War's element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason mirrors the Apollonian ideal in Nietzsche's dialectic; whereas the play of probability and chance and the element

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33 Mike Dash, *Batavia's Graveyard: The True Story of the Mad Heretic who led History's Bloodiest Mutiny*, Kindle edition., (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002). Dash describes how the crew and passengers of the *Batavia* descended into savagery and waged war on one another across a few tiny sand islands off the Australian coast.

34 Alison Alexander, *Tasmanian Convicts: How Felons Built a Free Society*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010), 195. Alexander describes how a small group of escaped convicts preyed on one another and fed on each other's flesh to survive.

35 Caroline Alexander, *The Bounty, London: (Harper Collins), 2003*. Alexander describes how savage circumstances led to a number of the *Bounty's* crew to mutiny.

36 Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*, Kindle edition., Random House ebooks, Preface, Paragraph 6.

37 *Ibid.*, Chapter 1, Section 2, Paragraph 5. Zimbardo wrote, 'One thesis [of mine] is that most of us know ourselves only from our limited experiences in familiar situations that involve rules, laws, policies, and pressures that constrain us. We go to school, to work, on vacation, to parties; we pay the bills and the taxes, day in and year out. But what happens when we are exposed to totally new and unfamiliar settings where our habits don't suffice? You start a new job, go on your first computer-matched date, join a fraternity, get arrested, enlist in the military, join a cult, or volunteer for an experiment. The old you might not work as expected when the ground rules change.'

38 *Ibid.*, Preface, Paragraph 14.

39 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 89.

of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity mirror the Dionysian ideal. Importantly, Clausewitz's dialectic differs to Nietzsche's in one crucial way; it includes the admixture of violence.

Clausewitz's point is that the admixture of violence profoundly changes behaviour. Violence tends to exaggerate passions causing excessive fear and hatred. Therefore, if Hobbes et al. are correct—that given the right circumstances it is only possible to cover up inner savagery for so long—then the implication of Clausewitz's theory of war is that war is not just the right situation for savagery to break out, it is the ideal situation. If not tempered by some contra-influence, the admixture of violence breaks down civilisation and causes armies to become mobs.

Francis Ford Coppola's film, *Apocalypse Now*, is an allegory of this breakdown of the Dionysian/Apollonian tension in war. Set during the Vietnam War, the film follows Captain Benjamin Willard as the crew of a United States Navy patrol boat escorts him up a river to find and kill Colonel Walter Kurtz. Kurtz has gone insane and become the leader of a rogue group of Montagnard tribesmen deep in the jungle across the Cambodian border. The river in the film serves as a metaphor for Dionysian attraction in war and Willard and the crew of the patrol boat represent war's effect on humanity. As Willard journeys further up the river, and away from the headquarters in Saigon (a vestige of civilisation), disorder and passion displace order and reason. The river grows darker and narrower and the crew members of Willard's boat become increasingly irrational and indulgent, turning to drugs and discarding their uniforms. They become like the primitive Montagnard warriors they eventually come to. Willard finally meets Kurtz at a place beyond the reach of civilisation. The disembodied heads of Kurtz' enemies sit atop spikes and other bodies hang by the neck. Kurtz represents the ideal warrior who pursues an ideal form of warfare, which is uninhibited by reason and restraint. Eventually, Willard brutally assassinates Kurtz by clubbing him with a machete thereby fulfilling his journey into savagery.

Group Captain Sara Mackmin's study of the causes of acts of personal violence by soldiers that contravene the laws of armed conflict supports Coppola's allegory. She finds, 'a soldier is at most risk of using force illegally when he is only thinking about personal gain, when his cognitive abilities are impaired, when he is in an unfamiliar situation and is guided by limited knowledge or strong group dynamics and when he thinks he can get away with it'.<sup>40</sup> In other words, soldiers succumb to the *Achilles effect* when they are fearful, their passions are aroused and civilising influences are at their weakest.

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40 Sara Mackmin, 'Why Do Professional Soldiers Commit Acts of Personal Violence that Contravene the Law of Armed Conflict?', *Defence Studies* 7:1, 6589, DOI: 10.1080/14702430601135610

A mechanism that has a strong civilising power over group dynamics, that inhibits a soldier's sense of getting away with something wrong and provides a sense of familiarity and civilisation in unfamiliar and uncivilised moments, is therefore likely to inhibit the *Achilles effect*. Reinforcing or exaggerating the principal features of civilisation such as restraint, abnegation, order, hierarchy, routine and morality might therefore serve to curtail man's consumption by fury, abandon and indifference under the strain of war. Although not necessarily by design, military regimentation happens to be just such an exaggeration.

## **The relationship between military regimentation and military effectiveness**

The winter of 1778–1779 was the lowest point for the Patriots in their war for independence. The Continental Army suffered a defeat at Germantown in October 1778 before General George Washington led the weary and demoralised army to Valley Forge to camp for the winter. Conditions in the camp were squalid. Soldiers lived in crowded and damp quarters. They were inadequately clothed and fed.<sup>41</sup> Before the end of the winter, disease, malnutrition and exposure would take the lives of many of Washington's 12,000 soldiers.<sup>42</sup> Many more deserted. Washington despaired as he watched his already defeated and ill-disciplined Army disintegrate.<sup>43</sup> He assigned the task of repairing the Continental Army to Baron Friedrich von Steuben, a former member of the Prussian General Staff.<sup>44</sup>

Von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge in February and was immediately discouraged by the sight of the dishevelled mob he found there. He was appalled by the general indifference to field sanitation, military bearing and conduct; and set about fixing it.<sup>45</sup> His strict methods developed in the citizen soldiers a sense of abnegation and acquiescence to collective standards necessary for modern warfare.<sup>46</sup> The undisciplined rabble emerged from Valley Forge a modern regimented and disciplined army. On 19 June 1778, the British abandoned Philadelphia and marched back to New York City. Washington's army pursued them to Monmouth where they fought a draw. The result demonstrated the Patriots had attained the British Army's measure.<sup>47</sup>

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41 Rowland L. Young, 'What is to Become of the Army this Winter', *American Bar Association Journal* 64, (January 1978): 67.

42 *Ibid.*, 68.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*, 71.

45 Erick Trickey, 'The Prussian Nobleman who helped save the American Revolution', in < <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/baron-von-steuben-180963048/>>

46 *Ibid.*

47 Rowland, 'What is to Become of the Army', p.70.



The experience of the United States Army's II Corps in North Africa in 1943 also illustrates the positive effect of restoring order and regimentation on demoralised and defeated soldiers. Lieutenant General George S. Patton took command of II Corps from Lloyd Fredendall in the wake of its defeat at Kasserine. Patton observed, 'I cannot see what Fredendall did to justify his existence. Have never seen so little order or discipline ... No salutes. Any sort of clothes and general hell'.<sup>48</sup>

Patton's first step was to restore order. He regulated daily routines, he ordered his soldiers to be clean shaven, to wear their helmets at all times, fasten their chin straps, roll down their sleeves, wear neck ties and leggings, and salute their officers.<sup>49</sup> These measures were immediately unpopular, but as one officer observed, 'However, begrudgingly, I must admit that the troops did look more professional and maybe this was part of the aura that I had detected on my return'.<sup>50</sup> Patton's deputy, Major General Omar Bradley, observed, 'Each time a soldier knotted his necktie, threaded his leggings, and buckled on his heavy steel helmet, he was forcibly reminded ... that the pre-Kasserine days had ended, and that a tough new era had begun'.<sup>51</sup> In the space of an eight day offensive, which began just ten days after Patton took command, II Corps regained the ground lost at Kasserine and went on to an important victory at El Guettar.<sup>52</sup>

Like Patton, Field Marshal Sir William Slim famously turned the defeated and demoralised 14th Army into a victorious army by first restoring order. At its lowest point, the 14th Army was losing more men to disease than to enemy action, largely because of carelessness and lethargy born of squalor, fear and indiscipline. Before its turnaround and eventual success, the 14th Army routinely succumbed to inferior numbers of Japanese in battle.<sup>53</sup> Slim credited the turnaround in his army to the restoration of stereotypical military order and discipline.

At some stage in all wars armies have let their discipline sag, but they have never won victory until they made it taut again; nor will they. We found it a great mistake to belittle the importance of smartness in turn-out, alertness of carriage, cleanliness of person, saluting, or precision of movement, and to dismiss them as naive, unintelligent parade-ground stuff. I do not believe that troops can have unshakable battle discipline without showing those outward

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48 Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers 1940-1945*, (Boston: Da Capo Press, Inc. 1974).

49 D.A. Lande, *I was with Patton: First-Person Accounts of WWII in George S. Patton's Command*, (St. Paul: MBI Publishing Company, 2002), 47.

50 Ibid.

51 Alex Axelrod, *Patton's Drive: The Making of America's Greatest General*, (Guilford: The Lyons Press, 2009), 75.

52 Jeromie Balwin, <<http://warfarehistorynetwork.com/daily/wwii/lloyd-fredendall-the-general-who-failed-at-the-kasserine-pass/>>

53 William Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945*, (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), Book I.

and formal signs ... It was our experience in a tough school that the best fighting units, in the long run, were not necessarily those with the most advertised reputations, but those who, when they came out of battle at once resumed a more formal discipline and appearance.<sup>54</sup>

The experience of prisoners of war provides a slightly different, but no less illustrative, example of the effect an absence of stereotypical military order can have on armies at war. In *This Kind of War: The Classic Military History of the Korean War*, historian T.R. Fehrenbach describes the experience of American prisoners in a Chinese POW camp, which became known as Death Valley. Breaking with convention, the Chinese did not separate officers and soldiers in the camp, nor did they allow the prisoners to maintain their own command structures and disciplinary systems. The Chinese advised the prisoners they were all equals.<sup>55</sup> The equality had an immediate appeal to many men;<sup>56</sup> but, without discipline or structure, Death Valley became a Hobbesian world in which some men no longer wanted to live and others, who were determined to live, took food from the sick and dying.<sup>57</sup> Fehrenbach observed:

The disciplines that hold men together in the face of fear, hunger, and danger are not natural. Stresses equal to, and beyond, the stress of fear and panic must be overlaid on men. Some of these stresses are called civilisation ... The controls of civilisation make men, often against their will, become their brother's keeper. When the controls are taken away, it is but a step to becoming their brother's killers. The veneer of civilized decency is much thinner than most Americans, even after seeing Auschwitz and Belsen, think.<sup>58</sup>

Contrast the experience of the prisoners in Death Valley with that of the prisoners in Stalag 11B under British Sergeant Major J.C. Lord. Wounded and taken prisoner at Arnhem, Lord arrived at the camp with several hundred fellow prisoners from the 1st Airborne Division. He found the prisoners in the camp had succumbed to lethargy born of hunger, boredom and squalor. Even the bodies of the dead were unceremoniously taken to their graves in an old cart. Lord set about making things right.<sup>59</sup>

For the next six months Lord was in effective control of the camp, which at times held up to 17,000 prisoners of mixed nationality. He restored order by instituting garrison-style regimental routine and protocols; and with the loyal support of his non-commissioned officers, he maintained it. He kept a formal guard, which

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54 Ibid., 542-543.

55 T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: The Classic Military History of the Korean War*, Kindle edition., Chapter 27, Section 2, Paragraphs 9-12.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., Chapter 27, Section 2, Paragraph 3842.

58 Ibid., Chapter 27, Section 2, Paragraph 18, 2021.

59 In <[http://www.napoleon-series.org/cgi-bin/forum/archive2006\\_config.pl?md=read;id=67470](http://www.napoleon-series.org/cgi-bin/forum/archive2006_config.pl?md=read;id=67470)>

mounted daily, and oversaw daily inspections. He made every fit soldier participate in physical training and expected high standards of dress and bearing.<sup>60</sup> These measures were very unpopular when introduced, but helped restore the prisoners' self-respect and military bearing. Officers and soldiers arriving at the camp were amazed by the standard of turnout and attitude of the prisoners. Lord had restored the Apollonian-Dionysus balance by exaggerating the features of civilisation and probably saved the health and lives of many as a result.<sup>61</sup>

There is also a potential correlation between the absence of regimental order and atrocities. Author Jim Frederick describes the insipid attempts of various young officers and non-commissioned officers to maintain order in One Platoon at the peak of the Iraq War.<sup>62</sup> Many members of the platoon regularly took drugs and consumed alcohol. They were often insubordinate, with little consequence for their behaviour. Their appearance reflected their apathetic attitude—unshaven, dishevelled, incorrectly dressed and often choosing not to wear their protective equipment.

The platoon members developed a mutated moral code with an inward protective logic, born of an unhealthy and largely unwarranted sense of victimhood and self-pity. They grew to believe everyone, and everything, was against them and to hate all Iraqis, their superiors, their headquarters, the other companies and even the other platoons in their company. According to Frederick, 'Foremost among their rationalisations was their conviction that no one else had experienced what they had, and no one else could possibly understand it'.<sup>63</sup> The platoon member's moral code grew out of a sense that they were more important than anyone, and anything, else—even, more important than morality, their country and the purpose for which they were fighting.

The phenomenon that took hold of One Platoon is described in Jonathon Shay's study of the Vietnam War's psychological effect on soldiers titled, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. Shay observed that soldiers in small isolated groups 'sometimes lose responsiveness to the claims of any bonds, ideals or loyalties outside a tiny circle of immediate comrades [in war]. An us-against-them mentality severs all other attachments or commitments'.<sup>64</sup>

As the *Achilles effect* took hold of the One Platoon, the soldiers grew increasingly aggressive. They began to routinely beat suspected insurgents and eventually came

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60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Jim Frederick, *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death*, Kindle edition., (London: Macmillan), 2010.

63 Frederick, *Black Hearts*, Chapter 14, Paragraph 11.

64 Jonathon Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, (New York: Scribner, 1994), 23.

to consider all Iraqis as suspects. Some soldiers would get drunk and go out looking for any Iraqi to beat up.<sup>65</sup> Eventually, the platoon's enmity, self-pity and anger led to the rape and murder of a teenage girl, and the murder of her family. The platoon's carelessness and apathy also led to the unnecessary capture and death of three of its members at the hands of insurgents.

In this and the other short case studies presented above, the absence of military regimentation or its restoration was not the only factor at play. For example, there were undoubtedly bad characters within One Platoon;<sup>66</sup> but that is not sufficient to explain the behaviour of the platoon. Many of the thousands of American platoons that deployed to Iraq during the war contained bad characters, but not every bad character engaged in rape and murder. While it is unlikely regimentation would have turned the bad characters in One Platoon into good people, it might have at least served to limit their potential to do bad things. Better still, it might have prevented them from succumbing to the dark passions such as apathy, enmity, and fear that contributed to their descent into a mob.

Regimentation has its limits. It is a poor proxy for a strong sense of right and wrong, for example. There have been many regimented and well-disciplined units that have done unspeakably cruel and barbaric things. Reserve Police Battalion 101, for example, was a relatively orderly and disciplined unit made up of ordinary German men, yet it was responsible for the murder of thousands of Polish Jews and other minorities during the Second World War. Historian Christopher Browning observes that people invoke many reasons to explain why soldiers commit atrocities.<sup>67</sup> Examples include: 'wartime brutalisation, racism, segmentation and routinisation of the task, special selection of the perpetrators, careerism, obedience to orders, deference to authority, ideological indoctrination, and conformity'.<sup>68</sup> In the case of Reserve Police Battalion 101, 'these factors [were] applicable in varying degrees, but none without qualification'.<sup>69</sup>

Browning distinguishes between atrocities caused by the *Achilles effect*, which he associates with a breakdown in self-control,<sup>70</sup> and sanctioned atrocities committed by disciplined troops that lack 'the immediacy of battlefield frenzy and fully [express]

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65 Ibid., Chapter 14, Paragraph 13.

66 The soldier responsible for the rape and murder of Abeer Qassim Hamza entered the United States Army via a waiver for drug and alcohol use and was in the process of discharging from the Army for anti-social behaviour prior to anyone knowing about his role in the rape and murder of Hamza and her family.

67 Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Kindle edition., (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017), Chapter 18, Paragraph 1.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid., Chapter 18, Paragraphs 2-4.

government policy'.<sup>71</sup> The My Lai massacre is an instance of the former; whereas, reprisal executions of civilians in response to partisan attacks are examples of the latter.<sup>72</sup> Browning calls these latter types of atrocities—'atrocities by policy.' He notes that unlike atrocities caused by the *Achilles effect*, atrocities by policy are not 'spontaneous explosions or cruel revenge of brutalised men'.<sup>73</sup> Because atrocities by policy derive from a calculating and rational mindset, features of regimentation like order, deference and conformity are likely to enable rather than inhibit them. Therefore, while regimentation might be an effective prophylaxis for the *Achilles effect*, in the hands of the wrong people a regimented and disciplined army can become an efficient instrument of murder. Regimentation cannot do duty for ethics.

Regimentation is also not a substitute for things like unit cohesion, belief in the cause, individual determination, battle discipline, success and good leadership, among a myriad of other factors that affect the performance of armies and units. Regimentation is not a cure-all. Field Marshal Sir William Slim succeeded not just because of his emphasis on restoring order in the 14th Army. He also paid particular attention to organisational matters such as administrative processes, malaria prophylaxis, and the supply and preparation of fresh food. Patton emphasised training and was probably a superior tactician to Fredendall. Training was particularly important in reversing the fortunes of the Continental Army. Slim, Patton and Washington were all good leaders, in one way or another. Yet restoring a degree of regimentation was a tool that each of them employed to prevent the disintegration of their forces. Perhaps, this feature of their leadership suggests the task of keeping the *Achilles effect* at bay is more difficult in the absence of regimentation. It hints at a causal relationship between military regimentation and military effectiveness, and it suggests that bringing about an appropriate level of regimentation in an army, or in a unit, might be a feature of good leadership.

However, the inoculating effect of regimentation might not be sufficient to mollify the *Achilles effect* in every instance. In the same way a supremely fit athlete, who is doing all the things a good athlete should do, is still vulnerable to viruses, a well regimented army—with healthy levels of esprit, leadership, cohesion and the like—is still vulnerable to the corrosive passions induced by war. The example of Wellington's Army at the siege of Badajoz in Spain is illustrative, where after the capture of the town the army ran amok for three days until control was reasserted.<sup>74</sup>

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71 Ibid., Chapter 18, Paragraph 5.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 The siege of Badajoz took place during the Peninsula Campaign in 1812. Wellington's army lost 4,800 soldiers killed or wounded when it stormed the city walls. Incensed by their suffering and losses, the troops sacked the city, raping and murdering the inhabitants. They got drunk and refused the orders of their officers. It took three days to bring the army back under control.

But what of the examples of apparently effective armies and units that shun the rudiments of regimentation? Examples such as the Israeli Army, Western special forces, and some insurgent organisations suggest regimentation is not necessary for wartime effectiveness in all cases. Regimentation's mollifying influence might not be universally necessary to keep the *Achilles effect* at bay. It might be, for example, that extraordinary leadership or extreme levels of ethical indoctrination are sufficient. Or, perhaps relying on extraordinarily high levels of leadership, ethics and other factors is itself a vulnerability. It is perhaps indicative that the special forces of Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom have all in recent years come under scrutiny for behaviour in Afghanistan that, on face value, might suggest they had, to at least some degree, succumbed to the *Achilles effect*.

Compare Slim's experience in Burma to that of the highly publicised 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional) better known as Merrill's Marauders. The unit is famous for its long-range penetration in 1944 to seize the important airfield at Myitkyina in Burma. Its combat record was impressive by any measure; but its participation in the campaign lasted just five months.<sup>75</sup> By August 1944, the 5307th had disintegrated.

The disintegration of the Marauders was the result of several factors. The unit was made up of volunteers from the South West Pacific and Trinidad, in the West Indies. According to American historian Frank McLynn, many of the recruits were 'psychopaths pure and simple'.<sup>76</sup> The 33rd Infantry Regiment in Trinidad, for example, was known as the 'pits of the army' and was a dumping ground for many of the United States Army's troubled souls.<sup>77</sup> As a provisional unit, the Marauders had no unit insignia or history from which to derive identity. The soldiers signed on as volunteers on short-term contracts.<sup>78</sup> They also faced a difficult enemy, endured weeks of almost constant fighting, and suffered unnecessarily from the perception that their commanders broke important promises.<sup>79</sup> These factors notwithstanding, the primary cause of the disintegration of the Marauders was disease; and failure to maintain order within the 5307th was the most important contributing factor.

Like other special forces, the Marauders were freed of the normal administrative and disciplinary measures endured by regular forces. The Marauders did not emphasise the features of regimentation that Slim believed to be so critical to battlefield success. During the three months of training in India, serious disciplinary indiscretions

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75 John B. Gaither, *Galahad Redux: An Assessment of the Disintegration of Merrill's Marauders*, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1975., p.iii.

76 Frank McLynn, *The Burma Campaign: Disaster into Triumph 1942-1954*, Kindle edition., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), Chapter 14, Paragraph 1.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., Chapter 14.

were an almost daily occurrence.<sup>80</sup> Ten per cent of the Marauders went absent without leave.<sup>81</sup> Many Marauders made a sport of shooting at farm animals and even shot at the feet of locals to make them dance.

On the train to Ledo they fired out of the window at any passing ‘wogs’ that took their fancy. Arrogant, sociopathic, full of blithe self-confidence, the Marauders were a gung-ho outfit...<sup>82</sup>

This indiscipline translated into a failure to maintain malaria prophylaxis and basic levels of field hygiene, which significantly abetted the prevalence and effect of disease. Without the intervention of someone like Slim to restore Apollonian dominance over Dionysus across the organisation, the Marauders succumbed to a fate born of their own self-pity and indiscipline, illustrating how the absence of regimentation makes a leader’s task of keeping the *Achilles effect* at bay all the more difficult.<sup>83</sup>

## **Virtue, habit and the relationship between good order and military efficiency**

Recent studies hint at the connection between outward order and inner self-discipline. An experiment found that people in a messy room tend to score lower in self-control than people in a tidy room, for example.<sup>84</sup> The case of controversial British journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley is illustrative of this phenomenon. He was considered by some to possess super human qualities.<sup>85</sup> Others regard him as a brutal colonialist and ruthless exploiter. But, according to psychologist Roy Baumeister and author John Tierney, in recent years a more intriguing story has emerged; one which helps to understand the relationship between outward order and inner self-discipline.<sup>86</sup>

Stanley led his third expedition into Africa in 1871, at the age of forty-six. When his party came across an uncharted jungle, Stanley split it into two. One group was to stay behind and await supplies while Stanley led the other into the jungle. Without Stanley’s leadership the stay-behind party disintegrated. It kidnapped young African women and kept them as sex slaves. Its members beat, stabbed, shot and flogged natives for relatively minor indiscretions. They had thieves shot and decapitated

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80 Ibid., Chapter 14, Paragraph 1.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 James H. Stone, *Crisis Fleeting: Original Reports on Military Medicine in India and Burma in the Second World War*, Office of the Surgeon General, The Department of the Army, Washington DC, 1969., 396.

84 Ibid., Chapter 7, Paragraph 30.

85 Roy.F. Baumeister and John Tierney, *Willpower: Rediscovering our Greatest Strength*, Kindle edition., (New York: Penguin, 2011), Chapter 7, Paragraph 6.

86 Ibid., Chapter 7, Paragraph 7-8.

and displayed the disembodied heads outside their fort to deter others. One of the stay-behind party paid to have an eleven-year-old girl killed and fed to cannibals while he sketched the ritual.<sup>87</sup> Stanley reflected on the behaviour of the men in the rear party:

At home these men had no cause to show their natural savagery...they were suddenly transplanted to Africa & its miseries. They were deprived of butcher's meat & bread & wine, books, newspapers, the society & influence of their friends. Fever seized them, wrecked minds and bodies. Good nature was banished by anxiety. Pleasantness was eliminated by toil. Cheerfulness yielded to internal anguish ... until they became but shadows, morally & physically of what they had been in English society.<sup>88</sup>

Meanwhile, Stanley's party managed to keep its discipline. For several months, he explored the forest, enduring the worst of the African jungle. His group suffered from disease, including malaria, dysentery, festering sores and ulcers. Its members were unceasingly hungry, and many died of starvation. Natives attacked them with poison arrows and spears sometimes maiming, killing and eating them. Only a third of those who entered the jungle with Stanley came out alive. Nonetheless, despite the extreme hardship, the party remained cohesive. Stanley's willpower and forbearance were essential factors.<sup>89</sup>

The key to Stanley's success was making things like abstinence, fastidiousness and sufferance habits in easier times and thus inoculating himself against his moments of greatest weakness and temptation. It is easy, for example, to agree to diet when one is satiated. It is far more difficult to abstain from eating when one is hungry. But Stanley also knew that his self-control, like a muscle, would atrophy without exercise. During the expedition, he always tried to keep a neat appearance. He 'set great store by the clarity of his handwriting, by the condition of his journals and books, and by the organisation of his boxes'.<sup>90</sup> He also made a point of shaving every morning.<sup>91</sup> Despite the austerity and difficulty of his circumstances, Stanley's punctiliousness helped him ward off apathy and the decline of his own will.<sup>92</sup> And so it is with the seemingly petty and pedantic rudiments that characterise military regimentation. Each element on its own, such as shaving, saluting or polishing a shoe, seems petty and pointless; but, when taken as a whole, all the activities, customs and conventions of military regimentation make sense. Collectively, they

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87 Ibid., Chapter 7, Paragraph 2.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., Chapter 7, Paragraph 4.

90 Ibid., Chapter 7, Paragraph 29.

91 Ibid., Chapter 7, Paragraph 28.

92 Ibid., Chapter 7, Paragraph 29.



work to make things like abstinence, fastidiousness and sufferance habits in easier times to inoculate armies in moments of greatest weakness and temptation. When the *Achilles effect* is strongest, the habits formed by military regimentation ward off apathy and the decline of will.

## Conclusion

At the end of Oliver Stone's Vietnam War film *Platoon*, the main protagonist, Private Chris Taylor reflects, 'I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy; we fought ourselves. And the enemy was in us'.<sup>93</sup> War is more than a struggle between two armed groups; it is also a struggle between restraint and abandon; conscientiousness and recklessness, order and disorder. Succumbing to the *Achilles effect* makes victory difficult because mobs perform poorly in war. Victory over oneself might therefore be an essential precursor to victory over one's enemies. This idea explains why militaries tend to exaggerate the principal features of civilisation and therefore why regimentation in one form or another is a consistent feature of armies.

The veneer of civilisation is fragile. War easily fractures that veneer; therefore it needs special reinforcement in an army. Regimentation is that special reinforcement. While individual elements of regimental practice such as saluting and shaving seem to make little sense on their own, they are among a body of civilising mechanisms that reinforce respectfulness, abnegation, forbearance, punctiliousness and austerity, among other things. They control relationships and ward off apathy and the decline of will. Like the instruments of civilisation, regimentation compels soldiers to form a habit of virtuous and disciplined behaviour thereby acting as a prophylaxis against the *Achilles effect*. It amounts to a continual process of exercising, reinforcing and automating outward virtues, which keep the corrosive effects of war at bay. And while regimentation is not a cure-all, its absence probably makes a leader's task of keeping the *Achilles effect* at bay markedly more difficult.

In the contemporary anti-vaccination debate, 'anti-vaxers', who have not experienced the horrific effects of a disease that has been kept at bay for decades by an inoculation program, are quick to undervalue the benefits of the vaccine. They give unreasonable emphasis to the relatively minor consequences of a vaccine's side effects. Unless they have experienced the severe consequences of a disease, they readily dismiss the vaccine's importance. And so, it might be with military regimentation.

People with little experience of war's corrosive effect on armies may tend to dismiss the importance of the inoculating effect of regimentation and, based on superficial and stereotyped notions, overemphasise regimentation's perceived creativity and

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93 Oliver Stone was himself a Vietnam War veteran.

initiative-sapping qualities. The challenge for post-modern armies is to win the regimentation 'antivax' debate in a seemingly Dionysian age in which the effect of not taking the vaccine is poorly understood; the contemporary zeitgeist is contrary to things like forbearance, restraint and order; and emotion seems to trump reason so often.