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How General Marshall's Study has Shaped Modern Military Training

And how today's soldier no longer fears the trigger

In World War II, General Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, conducted a study of infantry units and their firing ratios. His conclusion was that only 15 to 25 percent of infantrymen ever fired their weapons in combat. Perhaps the fear of killing someone else was greater than their fear of dying. Possibly a soldier's defined role at that time did not call for firing his weapon. Maybe there was not an opportunity to fire his weapon, or the soldier risked harming a fellow soldier should he fire. The conclusion was that the fear of killing another human being was greater than the fear of being killed. This is a powerful statement, and indicates the rifleman considered the consequences of his action prior to pulling the trigger.

To verify this, the army recreated well-documented battles, and discovered if all riflemen were fully engaged in the battle the battles would have been sharper, shorter, and more lethal. Also, it was found enemy soldiers must have had the same firing ratio as the American soldiers.

General Marshall's study also concluded that being ordered to fire by their officer significantly increased the rifleman's engagement rate. Ever since, the army has trained officers to order subordinates to fire on the enemy.

The army continued to explore strategies to increase rifleman engagement rates by making firing the weapon a reflex action before the rifleman could consider the consequences. Some of the strategies included using rifle ranges with human-shaped targets to condition soldiers to kill without thought, as well as the use of "killing teams" of soldiers with close supervision to improve numbers. Firing ratios increased during the Korean War to 55 percent, and were as high as 95 percent during the Vietnam War, according to an article in *Vietnam Magazine*.

The Video Game Era of Military Training

Today's military have the advantages of video games with live simulation of battle, which have conditioned soldiers to have more of that reflexive "killer instinct." Many articles have been published discussing how the U.S. military is using networked, multi-player video games for recruitment and retention, morale-boosting and even positive PR. Perhaps more importantly, they are also using these video games as virtual simulators for a more sophisticated level of training that is easily accessible to both troops and the general public. This evolved into training soldiers in "live fire" exercises using laser equipped guns to develop reflexive rather than reflective shooting.

The video game industry has also been called upon to help the military develop technology and software used in the battlefield. And medical professionals have also used virtual reality games to both diagnose and treat veterans struggling with PTSD or the psychological stresses of battle (source: *The Week*).

Final Thoughts

How remarkable that a study from World War II has helped to shape the training and sophistication of today's military. Today's soldiers have the benefit of technology to develop a basic skill set for using

weaponry as well as the shooter's instinct. The training has been effective and the rate of rifleman engagement hovers at 100%. While the army has prepared the soldier for battle, they have yet to prepare them for the consequences of battle once the soldier has time to think and consider the consequences of his action. The soldiers know they willingly ended another person's life, and must deal with the psychological scars that knowledge leaves behind. The scars can be deep since it leads the soldiers asking questions about their own self-identity. "Who am I? What kind of a person am I?" This is a new dimension of PTSD and one the army needs to deal with during training, as well as the soldier's transition to civilian life.