

General Douglas MacArthur Military Leadership Writing Competition

Control and Fear: Enhancing Soldier Performance and Welfare

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Anybody who says they're not afraid of war is either a liar, or they're crazy.
Norman Schwarzkopf

Fear, an emotional response to threat and danger, is a reality of combat. In manageable doses, fear creates focus, clarity, and enhances physical capabilities by triggering the "fight-or-flight" response. However, excessive fear leads to anxiety, an emotional state typically occurring without external threat.ⁱ At extremes, fear leads to decreased performance through emotional exhaustion, apathy, resignation, and creates an increased likelihood of eventual Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).ⁱⁱ Given the inherently dangerous nature of combat, it is therefore critical for combat leaders to harness fear, managing and mitigating the effects of fear in their organizations. Not only is this in the best interests of the Soldier, but it also enhances unit performance and mission accomplishment. Empirical observation of human behavior in combatⁱⁱⁱ and numerous research experiments^{iv} have proven that the perception of control over one's environment greatly decreases fear regardless of the actual probabilities and consequences of physical harm. In other words, the belief that one has some control over a situation reduces fear, regardless of the actual danger. The ability to reduce fear through perceived control in combat operations represents a powerful tool for the combat leader, but does not necessarily override tactical and operational considerations.

This article discusses the effects of perceived control on fear, and the application of this relationship to combat leadership and operations. I will also use personal combat experience and observations to discuss this relationship and its potential combat applications.

The Effect of Control on Fear:

Bomber pilots in World War II, flying fixed courses through enemy flak, reported experiencing greater fear than fighter pilots despite experiencing a significantly lower casualty rate (23% versus 48%).^v A significant difference between bomber pilots and fighter pilots is the level of individual control. The fighter pilots had a greater level of control over their course and aircraft, than the bomber pilots. It is important to note that the bomber pilots were more fearful despite a significantly lower casualty rate, or were more fearful despite less actual danger. This example illustrates that actual danger is less important in creating fear than the individual's perception of control. The clear parallel in contemporary conflict is convoy personnel who drive a fixed route on roads targeted with improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Experiments corroborate and elaborate on this observation. In an experiment in which a psychologist administered a panic-provoking agent (5.5% carbon dioxide) to panic-prone patients, the psychologist told half of the patients that they could reduce the concentration of the agent by turning a dial when a light was illuminated. The experimenter did not provide this option to other half. The group with the dial reported both less fear and a shorter duration of fear, despite the dial being completely inoperative.^{vi} The inoperative dial is another instance of perceived control reducing fear, despite having no actual effect on the danger. Actual panic agent levels were the same for each group, the only difference was that the group with the dial *thought* they had some control. We can therefore conclude that, to some degree, the level of actual control is not as important as the *perception* of control.

A study of mountaineers further corroborates this conclusion. Like combat, mountaineering is extremely dangerous with some mountains having fatality rates approaching 50%.^{vii} However, mountaineers make extreme sacrifices to pursue this activity voluntarily, despite the danger, much like Soldiers in combat. We see in mountaineers a strong distinction

between uncontrollable risks and those risks that they can mitigate by skill or caution.

Mountaineers willingly accept those risks they feel they can control, while they disdain those they cannot. "When the risks depend solely on chance, not skill, the mountaineer enjoys them as little as anyone."^{viii}

From these and other studies, we can conclude that the perception of control significantly reduces fear. Reducing fear to manageable levels increases individual performance, reduces unhealthy anxiety, and reduces the likelihood of eventual PTSD.

Implications for Combat Leaders:

Appreciating that the perception of control diminishes fear, there are six key considerations for combat leaders. Holding all else equal, these considerations are: (1) an individual with more control, such as a leader, will tend to experience less fear than a subordinate with less control; (2) regardless of actual control, a leader must endeavor to exude control of a situation in both action and communication; (3) reasonable delegation of control to subordinate leaders will enhance control, and thereby reduce fear; (4) new Soldiers will experience relatively more fear than experienced Soldiers; (5) incoming leaders in particular must consider and mitigate the influence of control on fear; and, (6) organizations in offensive operations will experience less fear.

Leaders Experience Less Fear than Subordinates.

By virtue of their position and authority, leaders have more control over a given situation than their subordinates. Therefore, leaders must appreciate that they will experience less fear than their subordinates. Leaders must remember this consideration when judging the actions of their subordinates and consider the relationship between perceived control and fear for planning

and operations. While a leader faces additional stress due to their increased responsibility, in terms of fear, they will experience less. My personal observations over two deployments to combat as an Infantry company commander support this assertion. Despite a significant casualty rate (~20% wounded, ~6% killed) and approximately one enemy contact every two days, I rarely experienced significant levels of fear. Additionally, I noticed that this pattern held for my subordinates as well, leaders tended to experience less fear than a member of the squad. I do not attribute this to significantly greater levels of courage in leaders than the average, but rather to their increased control. In circumstances in which I did experience greater levels of fear, I typically had less control.

Leaders Must Exude Control in Both Actions and Communication.

If the perception of control reduces fear, then leaders must demonstrate control in both action and communication during dangerous situations, regardless of their actual level of control. This is intuitive although it is frequently violated, particularly by those with little combat experience, and therefore more likely to get overly excited. I know from personal experience that in an intense firefight there is nothing worse than getting the impression that a leader has lost control of himself, or the situation. Conversely, a calming, confident voice over the net seems to sooth the situation regardless of the fact that their communication tone has no material bearing on the gravity of the situation itself and is in fact, arbitrary.

Delegation to Subordinates.

If the perception of control reduces fear, then the greater the authority of the leader on the ground, the less fear experienced. The implication is to reduce the number of tactical constraints on subordinate leaders as much as possible, reduce fear by providing the ability, and authority, to control. I.e. avoid constraining authorities for close air support, in-direct fires, maneuver, etc.

Again, from personal experience, it is always comforting to know in the back of your mind that you can call on "the big guns," or take other significant measures, if the situation on the ground becomes untenable.

New Soldiers Will Experience Relatively More Fear.

Apart from simple prior combat experience, newly assigned Soldiers will experience more fear than Soldiers who have served in the unit long enough to learn unit standard operating procedures, personalities, culture, etc. A new Soldier will have relatively less control of a given situation than an established Soldier. A new Soldier does not know unit nuances and thereby how to best exert control of the tactical situation as appropriate. Leaders must appreciate this premise in their integration of newly assigned Soldiers; endeavor to create understanding and familiarity.

Incoming Leaders Must Consider and Mitigate the Influence of Control on Fear.

When a new leader assumes control of a unit in combat, the leader must appreciate and understand the relationship between control and fear. A new leader will have different expectations, modus operandi, etc. These changes will reduce subordinates' perception of control to varying degrees, depending on the new leader's actions. When possible, the new leader should avoid reducing subordinate authority and ease into new modus operandi, this will enhance subordinate perception of control and thereby reduce the potential for fear.

Organizations in Offensive Operations Will Experience Less Fear.

In addition to individual control, as discussed above, it is also meaningful to consider the control/fear relationship in organizational control of the battlefield and resultant Soldier fear. In other words, in the minds of the Soldiers, who controls the battlefield, friendly or enemy forces? Are we attacking or defending? What demonstrates organizational control of the

battlefield? We can deduce that proactive, offensive operations producing results demonstrate greater control of the battlefield. This deduction does not promote ill-conceived, baseless offensive operations for the sake of demonstrating control; this simply says that holding all else equal, an offensive mindset and operational mix will result in the perception of more organizational control of the battlefield and subsequently, less fear. Of course, we must appreciate that reducing fear is not the purpose of combat operations; this discussion simply provides additional considerations for combat leaders to incorporate when appropriate.

We can best examine the importance of an offensive mindset and its effect on the control/fear relationship in a contemporary operational setting. Consider a frequently IED targeted road. Some convoys take the approach of "blowing through" IED strikes. I.e. upon an IED strike, the convoy speeds through the engagement area and continues mission. Disregarding the numerous tactical disadvantages of this approach, consider the mindset of the convoy personnel. They play "Russian roulette" with IEDs every day, doing little to control the environment or affect the probability of future IED strikes. During the surge my company inherited one of the most heavily IED targeted stretches of road in Iraq. We targeted this threat as proactively as possible. This consisted of counter-IED Small Kill Team ambushes and aggressively targeting IED cells. Additionally, if we suffered an IED strike we would do as much as possible to track down the culprits, starting as soon as possible (within mission constraints). Occasionally this required returning to exploit the site of the strike after mission completion. The process would sometimes involve multiple days of "police work," but for approximately 50% of IED strikes, we eventually arrested or killed those responsible. During our deployment, the number of IED strikes on this road decreased 93%. Not only did we actually decrease the threat, but also cognitively, we were exerting control over the environment.

I have no doubt that this control reduced fear and assisted us in functioning effectively despite the real and significant threat from IED attack.

From the IED example, we can theorize that proactive, offensive operations producing results create a sense of organizational control of the battlefield. This control of the battlefield will result in less experienced fear for friendly forces, and most likely increased levels of fear in enemy combatants. Therefore, holding all else equal, proactive offensive operations and an offensive mindset are preferable to defensive operations and a defensive mindset in terms of increasing perceived organizational control and decreasing fear.

Conclusion:

Through scientific experiments and empirical observations of human behavior, we know that perceived control reduces fear. Reducing fear improves performance and is best for the individual. By the nature of our mission, combat units routinely confront dangerous conditions and consequently experience some level of fear. Through appreciating and applying the mitigating effects of control with respect to fear, combat leaders can significantly reduce fear, improve performance, and improve Soldier welfare.

The control/fear relationship indicates six key considerations for combat leaders. Holding all else equal, these considerations are: (1) an individual with more control, such as a leader, will tend to experience less fear than a subordinate with less control; (2) regardless of actual control, a leader must endeavor to exude control of a situation in both action and communication; (3) reasonable delegation of control to subordinate leaders will enhance control, and thereby reduce fear; (4) new Soldiers will experience relatively more fear than experienced

Soldiers; (5) incoming leaders in particular must consider and mitigate the influence of control on fear; and, (6) organizations in offensive operations will experience less fear.

Importantly the control/fear relationship does not necessarily override tactical and operational considerations; rather, the relationship represents another tool for the combat leader to employ as appropriate. Additionally, a perceived lack of control is not the only source of fear; other factors are also important, such as previous combat experience, individual psychological resilience, and other factors.

ⁱ Ohman, A. (2000). Fear and anxiety: Evolutionary, cognitive, and clinical perspectives. In M. Lewis & J. M. Haviland-Jones (Eds.). *Handbook of emotions*. (pp.573-593). New York: The Guilford Press.

ⁱⁱ Prince, H. (1988). Individual Stress and Adjustment. In *Leadership in Organizations*. (101-126). New York: Avery Publishing Group, Inc.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, (pp. 122).

^{iv} Loewenstein, G. (1999). Because It Is There: The Challenge of Mountaineering...for Utility Theory. In *KYKLOS* Vol 52. (pp. 315-344). Fase.

^v *Leadership in Organizations*. (pp.101).

^{vi} Because It Is There: The Challenge of Mountaineering...for Utility Theory. (pp. 330).

^{vii} Ibid. (pp. 318).

^{viii} Ibid. (pp. 330).