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978-1-107-02061-0 - The Psychology of the Athenian Hoplite: The Culture of Combat in Classical Athens

Jason Crowley

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

The Athenians, it was once dryly observed, were incapable of living a quiet life. Instead, they were driven by unchecked ambition and an innate, irresistible restlessness to strive and struggle, to exploit victory, decry defeat, and to thirst always for fresh horizons and new conquests.<sup>1</sup> This observation related by Thucydides, perhaps not without authorial intention, initially appears complimentary, yet the observer, a Corinthian delegate addressing representatives of Sparta and her allies on the eve of the Peloponnesian War, was not lauding Athenian élan, but instead encouraging its destruction.<sup>2</sup> Even so, and in spite of his tendentious and polemical intentions, his observation does not seem, especially to a modern audience, entirely without merit.

As her achievements testify, Classical Athens *was* something rather special. Many of her leading citizens, such as the playwrights Euripides, Sophocles and Aristophanes, the statesman Pericles and the philosophers Plato and Socrates, as a result of their on-going artistic, political and intellectual influence, remain household names. Despite their renown, however, Athens' greatest achievement was her system of governance, a truly radical direct democracy which allowed her to focus energies sufficient for architectural achievements so spectacular that, according to Thucydides, they made Athens look twice as powerful as she actually was.<sup>3</sup> Even without architectural augmentation, as Thucydides well knew, Athens was an immensely powerful *polis*.<sup>4</sup> During the Persian Wars, she served as a break-water against waves of Asian expansionism, leading first a voluntary Delian League and then an increasingly reluctant Athenian Empire,<sup>5</sup> a vast structure which survived against the combined might of the Peloponnesian and Boeotian Leagues, and only collapsed, after twenty-seven years of struggle, when those two superpowers combined with a third, Persia.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, it is perhaps because of that titanic struggle that little is heard of another field of Athenian excellence: the successful mobilisation and deployment of a magnificent hoplite phalanx. During the Peloponnesian

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War, the key weapon was the trireme, not the spear, and the war's decisive battles were fought at sea, not on land.<sup>7</sup> Pericles' policy, for 'naval' Athens to avoid decisive battle with 'hoplite' Sparta, is of course also to blame,<sup>8</sup> recently leading one influential modern scholar, Hanson, to conclude that Athenian hoplites were so qualitatively inferior to their Spartan and Theban counterparts that they spent most of the war hiding behind their fortifications,<sup>9</sup> from which they emerged to fight only two major land battles, one in 424 BC at Delium,<sup>10</sup> the other in 418 BC at Mantinea<sup>11</sup> – and both, tellingly, ended in their defeat.

Superficially, this view might not seem unreasonable, yet further consideration reveals the absurdity of Hanson's narrow definition of battle, which, applied elsewhere, would lead to the conclusion that, in 1982, Britain fought and won the Falklands Conflict, incurring in the process significant losses in personnel, aircraft and shipping, without the occurrence of any notable 'conflict' whatsoever.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, even cursory examination of the ancient evidence reveals that Athenian hoplites did not sit out the war, shamefully leaving the defence of Attica to her cavalry,<sup>13</sup> but instead, they marched or were shipped out whenever and wherever Athens sought tactical or strategic advantage.

During their coverage of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides and Xenophon offer narratives of well over twenty sharp engagements fought by Athenian troops,<sup>14</sup> such as Delium in central Greece,<sup>15</sup> Amphipolis in the north,<sup>16</sup> First Mantinea in the Peloponnese,<sup>17</sup> as well as a series of bloody engagements on Sicily<sup>18</sup> and a range of amphibious operations around the Greek world.<sup>19</sup> Nor was Athenian military activism confined to the period of the Peloponnesian War. Within Herodotus' *Histories*, notable actions include Marathon,<sup>20</sup> Plataea,<sup>21</sup> Mycale<sup>22</sup> and Sestos.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Thucydides' *Pentecontaetia* offers accounts of five more,<sup>24</sup> Xenophon's description of the Athenian civil war another two,<sup>25</sup> and his narrative of the Corinthian War no fewer than six.<sup>26</sup>

These are engagements, moreover, for which some narrative evidence survives. No doubt there were others which did not merit mention in the highly selective accounts offered by the ancient historians.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, from what chance has preserved, it is clear that the Athenian hoplite was not, despite his modest ancient, and sometimes derisive modern reputation,<sup>28</sup> a craven stay-at-home, nor was he some kind of chocolate soldier who would melt in the heat of battle.<sup>29</sup> Instead, the historical record unequivocally demonstrates that, man for man, the troops serving Athens were just as courageous as those deployed by Thebes<sup>30</sup> and every bit as

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tough as those produced by Sparta,<sup>31</sup> which was just as well, because they knew something Athenian hoplites did not: tactics.

The Thebans won Delium and Leuctra with their characteristically deepened formation,<sup>32</sup> and the Spartans First Mantinea and Nemea with their trademark counter-phalanx.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, the Athenians were quintessentially amateur soldiers,<sup>34</sup> who, lacking their opponents' tactical ability, nevertheless repeatedly demonstrated an unwavering willingness to close with their enemies and engage them in ferocious and unflinching combat.<sup>35</sup> That, on many occasions, this was enough, or very nearly enough, to secure victory is remarkable.<sup>36</sup> Yet, if the Athenian hoplite's impressive capacity for combat is explanatory, it itself, in turn, requires explanation.

Surprisingly, despite the availability of high-quality monographs exploring the phenomenon of hoplite combat, no comprehensive explanation has as yet been offered.<sup>37</sup> A clear understanding of the sociology and the psychology of the Athenian phalanx, which enabled amateur Athenian troops to face the terrors of close-quarters battle, is, then, a pressing scholarly need, and one which this study aims to address.

In pursuance of this aim, and to exploit effectively the potential of the available evidence, which, for reasons of methodological relevance, must necessarily exclude except in amplification non-Athenian material such as Xenophon's *Anabasis*, this study will deploy an underutilised epistemological resource, namely the theories developed to explain the modern soldier's capacity for combat.<sup>38</sup> Naturally, the historical application of such theories is not without difficulty. Combat motivation, unsurprisingly, is a subject vigorously debated by military professionals and academics alike, and so any attempt to apply the findings of that debate has to take proper account of its intellectual evolution.

Accordingly, Chapter 1 of this volume will offer a survey of the major developments which have taken place in the field of combat motivation, from Ardant du Picq's pioneering *Battle Studies*, written in the late nineteenth century, all the way to Major Stephen Wesbrook's masterly work of scholarly synthesis, 'The Potential for Military Disintegration', written just over a century later. Then, once all ostensibly competing theories have been subjected to critical analysis, the best, with slight modification, will be adopted as the guiding epistemological framework for the remaining chapters of this monograph. Thereafter, Chapter 2 will explore the mobilisation and deployment of Athenian phalanx in order to determine the sociological and organisational environment in which the model set out in the preceding chapter will operate, as well as identifying the men to whom it will apply.

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Then, Chapters 3–6 will apply that model, one discrete element at a time, to the Athenian phalanx, and by so doing, finally reveal how and why, without tactical training and in the absence of any meaningful degree of external compulsion the amateur Athenian hoplite willingly and repeatedly embraced the terrifying ordeal of close combat.

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## CHAPTER I

*The architecture of aggression*

## I.1 INTRODUCTION

But saddest of all was the sight of my team, my friends. The scene was basically composed of two colors, green and red. Blood-drenched bandages attempted to stem the outpouring of life from the four who were scattered in the grass before me. . . Each of them looked at me with eyes that screamed, *Save us!* No words were spoken; they weren't necessary. There was I, the only guy who wasn't fucked up, and everybody was looking to me, pleading for help – *Save us!* I tried to display a positive and confident bearing, despite the tremendous odds against us and my own doubts. However, I was sure of one thing. I wasn't going to roll over and die. I would go down fighting, as melodramatic as it may sound. I would certainly do no less.<sup>1</sup>

'I would certainly do no less.' A short, terse sentence, almost cryptic, yet it is redolent, indeed replete with psychological and sociological meaning, its very grammar bursting with implied choice. Indeed choice, or rather choices, had already paved the way for Frank Miller, the hitherto unnamed actor in this introductory passage. He chose a war-torn Vietnam as his world, describing his arrival there as his 'birth' and his forced leave-taking, after six consecutive years of fighting, as his 'death'.<sup>2</sup> He chose to join the Special Forces. He chose to lead a small team of Montagnard mercenaries on dangerous reconnaissance patrols.<sup>3</sup> He chose to embrace a role which transformed him from a nobody into a man of status, with his own brotherhood, a close-knit and deadly family, RT Vermont,<sup>4</sup> bound by ties of affection and mutual dependency.<sup>5</sup> Finally, in January 1970, when one member of his patrol stepped on a landmine deep in NVA territory, he chose to deny his individuality, with its selfish cries for self-preservation, and instead to remain, at all times, both physically and psychologically, a fully integrated member of a small, hurt and isolated team of men facing a very uncertain future.<sup>6</sup>

As Miller later recalled, when the mine exploded, 'our world collapsed'.<sup>7</sup> Out of the dust and debris staggered Prep, one of RT Vermont's four

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Montagnards,<sup>8</sup> with his uniform shredded, and his lower jaw removed by the blast which had seriously injured not only him, but four other team-members.<sup>9</sup> Worse still, the explosion had compromised their position, leaving the only unwounded men, Miller and another Montagnard, Hyuk, to face the inevitable, and probably irresistible, NVA assault. Obviously, Miller's best hope of salvation lay in slipping quietly away with Hyuk, yet the thought apparently never crossed his mind, nor did any of the wounded consider that they might be abandoned. Instead, Miller and Hyuk braced themselves for the onslaught, and when it came, they ferociously defended their helpless comrades, twice beating off determined assaults. Their luck, however, did not last, and as they repulsed the third assault, Hyuk was shot squarely in the neck and died shortly thereafter, leaving Miller the only unwounded man in a decimated team, facing a tactically hopeless situation.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Miller did not give in to the demands of self-preservation: eschewing flight, he advanced, and after ambushing the enemy's leading element, set about reconnoitring a large crater which might offer the tattered remnants of RT Vermont some protection from assault.<sup>11</sup> However, as he inspected the position, a rifle round smashed through his unsuspecting body, leaving him vomiting blood and understandably panicking. 'In the blink of an eye', he explained, 'I got emotionally upset. . . My mind exploded with a million colliding thoughts. I just sat there. I didn't know what to do. I was going to die.'<sup>12</sup> Yet, even though he was fighting for calm, he dressed his wounds, and, after narrowly avoiding the *coup de grace*, and despite the approach of physical and mental collapse, he hauled his comrades back to the crater. There, he assigned two of the wounded, who had recovered sufficiently to use their weapons, arcs of fire, and together they defended their precarious redoubt against repeated and determined assault.<sup>13</sup>

However, in spite of Miller's efforts, including another successful spoiling attack, both he and his two riflemen were hit again, and as daylight faded, the defence of the crater faltered and then, finally, failed altogether. Now, certainly, the end had come, but, although the will to live was clamouring at him, Miller would not abandon his comrades. Having made his last choice, he choked back his emotions and prepared to share his team's unwelcome fate. As he expected, it was not long before shadowy figures appeared at the rim of the crater, yet, to Miller's profound relief, they turned out to be not NVA, but Montagnards: just as all hope had evaporated, RT Vermont had been saved.<sup>14</sup>

For his courage that long and painful day, Miller was awarded the Medal of Honour.<sup>15</sup> When considering his actions, however, it is clear that the key

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## 1.2 Thesis

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to understanding his conduct, and indeed the conduct of soldiers in general, lies not in his abundant personal courage, but in the ties that bound him to his comrades, which, despite the overwhelming odds he faced, and without the slightest shadow of external compulsion, kept him fighting and prevented his flight. Plainly, Miller never once considered himself an individual. Instead, at all times, he remained a fully integrated member of RT Vermont. This suggests that the starting point for any attempt to model the will to combat, which is the primary aim of this chapter, must be the small group and, in particular, the sociological and psychological environment that group creates.<sup>16</sup>

## 1.2 THESIS

RT Vermont was, for Miller, a primary group, a psychological and sociological concept defined in 1908 by Charles Cooley as follows:

By primary groups I mean those characterized by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation . . . The result of intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole . . . Perhaps the simplest way of describing this wholeness is by saying that it is a 'we'; it involves the sort of sympathy and mutual identification for which 'we' is the natural expression. One lives in the feeling of the whole and finds the chief aims of his will in that feeling.<sup>17</sup>

This group then, limited in size by the number of people an individual can intimately interact with,<sup>18</sup> must be small, yet in civilian life a person might be a member of several groups, such as his or her family, work colleagues or friends,<sup>19</sup> and it is difficult to see which of these, if any, would be primary in any real sense.<sup>20</sup> However, if, in the civilian environment, Cooley's theory is somewhat problematic, its applicability to the military, especially in times of war, is immediately obvious.<sup>21</sup> A soldier's rifle section or squad has its basis in the most intimate interaction and cooperation, of men who eat, sleep, live, fight, kill and die together, and as such it is a group that is manifestly primary, in that the soldier unambiguously depends on it, for physical and psychological support, to defend him, and to keep him sane, in an environment incessantly seeking his destruction.<sup>22</sup>

Understandably, such an environment enhances the natural desire for affiliation,<sup>23</sup> which reduces anxiety and stimulates a sense of well-being,<sup>24</sup> under the influence of which soldiers often experience an irrepressible longing for the close physical proximity of other human beings.<sup>25</sup> As Marshall observed, frightened soldiers during World War II derived such immense psychological support from the nearness of their comrades that the

merest human touch could 'turn a mouse into a lion'.<sup>26</sup> Of course, Marshall's scholarly credibility, once unimpeachable, has now reached something of a nadir,<sup>27</sup> yet it is beyond question that modern soldiers demonstrate an irrational tendency to 'bunch' under fire.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the dynamic relationship between affiliative desire and threat, which generates this behaviour, has been proven experimentally by the psychologist Stanley Schachter. His study demonstrated, firstly, that threat produces anxiety, and anxiety in turn produces a desire to affiliate, and secondly that, as the relationship between all three is causal, when the threat is intensified, so too is the affiliative desire.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to remember, however, that the modern soldier's primary group is not spontaneous: he is assigned to it, and so threat causes not just affiliation, but also an increase in cohesion<sup>30</sup> and, when casualties are sustained and replaced, the rapid assimilation of new members.<sup>31</sup> Pragmatism, naturally, drives these processes. In combat, the soldier's goal and those of his comrades within the primary group are fundamentally congruent. All members wish to survive,<sup>32</sup> and since they are both functionally and structurally interdependent,<sup>33</sup> the only sensible cognitive response is to work together.<sup>34</sup>

This co-dependency is obvious even in bivouac, where one or more members of the group must guard the rest while they sleep or eat, but it reaches its apogee only in combat.<sup>35</sup> In modern Western armies, when under effective enemy fire, small infantry units, such as the rifle sections of the British Army, subdivide into two squads or fire-teams, and while one is moving, the other covers its movement with fire, with each alternating in the fire and then the manoeuvre role until the leading fire-team can assault and fight through the objective. Any man who gets to his feet and rushes forward does so having placed his life in the hands of those of his comrades covering his movement, and alternately, they in his, when they move and he fires.<sup>36</sup> In such circumstances, the interdependence of primary group members is unmistakable, yet, even beyond this explicitly structural co-dependency, the soldier can expect his comrades to come to his aid when he is in danger, to minister to him when he is wounded, and, if the worst happens, to form his burial party when he dies.<sup>37</sup>

The supportive role of the primary group, moreover, goes beyond the merely physical. Its members are psychologically interdependent, especially as, orphaned by enlistment and deployment, they are denied their former affective environment<sup>38</sup> and so rely on each other for such basic social and psychological staples as friendship, affection and acceptance.<sup>39</sup> Affiliation, therefore, in satisfying those needs, provides the soldier with an immense



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psychological boost: his comrades surround him, accept him, reassure him, sustain him, and so help him withstand stresses and strains which would break an unaffiliated individual.<sup>40</sup> Finally, the deep feelings of devotion and comradeship engendered by the group reinforce cohesion,<sup>41</sup> which acts to reduce anxiety,<sup>42</sup> and to increase endurance,<sup>43</sup> morale<sup>44</sup> and, critically, resistance to psychiatric breakdown.<sup>45</sup>

The support offered by the primary group, then, can mean the difference between life and death. During the Korean War, British and Turkish prisoners, who maintained their group structures even though the social ties that comprised them were deliberately attacked by their captors,<sup>46</sup> survived surprisingly well.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, American prisoners, whose group structures and social ties had atrophied even before capture,<sup>48</sup> and did not withstand attack, died like flies.<sup>49</sup> The primary group, therefore, provides the soldier with his social and psychological environment<sup>50</sup> and it clearly maximises his prospects of mental and physical survival.<sup>51</sup> As such, it is ideally placed to influence its members' conduct.<sup>52</sup>

Obviously, for the group to survive, it must avoid disharmony and diversification of effort, and so it provides norms and values together with set modes of conduct for all its members.<sup>53</sup> Mutual supervision detects deviant conduct,<sup>54</sup> and leads to psychologically elegant enforcement procedures, based, as in all good behavioural conditioning techniques, on a system of rewards and punishments.<sup>55</sup> Under this system, both the norms and their enforcement act dyadically, with compliance earning the group's approval, and deviance meriting disapproval; that is to say selflessness, the reciprocal provision of mutual support and the defence of the group win collective approbation, whereas selfishness, failure to provide mutual support and failure to defend the group merit condemnation.<sup>56</sup> In addition, when the primary group accepts the demand to fight,<sup>57</sup> it adopts an additional set of situationally specific values and associated modes of conduct, stressing, for instance, the worthiness of combat, the contemptibility of combat avoidance, the need to overcome fear and the condemnation of cowardice.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, a man's status within and his membership of the group is contingent upon his observed conduct.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, acting in congruence with group norms not only maintains or enhances the soldier's status, but also ensures continued access to physical and psychological support.<sup>60</sup> Conversely, deviance reduces the deviant's status and leads to reduced access to support, social and physical sanction, and, in some cases, exclusion.<sup>61</sup> It is understandable then that soldiers often demonstrate an immense, even obsessive, degree of concern about their status, and consider its prospective loss more terrifying than death or wounds.<sup>62</sup>

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Naturally, such conditioning eventually results in the internalisation of group norms and their associated modes of conduct,<sup>63</sup> and thus the control of an individual's behaviour, even when unobserved, through his feelings of pride and guilt.<sup>64</sup> This induces men to fight<sup>65</sup> even when they could be assigned elsewhere<sup>66</sup> or while suffering from unhealed or newly received wounds,<sup>67</sup> since they feel whole and at peace only when fully integrated with their group.<sup>68</sup>

The primary group, therefore, is more than the sum of its parts. The ties which bind its members together and the norms that condition their conduct produce an otherwise unattainable and unparalleled level of cohesion, and cohesion, in military terms, is a powerful force-multiplier.<sup>69</sup> This, certainly, has been understood for some time. In the nineteenth century, du Picq's famous metaphor expressed how four brave but unaffiliated individuals would not dare attack a lion, while four less brave but affiliated men would attack resolutely.<sup>70</sup> By the twentieth century, this elegant metaphor had become Marshall's down-to-earth doctrine of tactical and moral strength,<sup>71</sup> which explains how the military potency of a group is largely determined by its degree of interpersonal affiliation.<sup>72</sup> Both concepts, of course, express one essential axiom: that the lonely and the unaffiliated, bereft of support, and hearing only the incessant voice of self-preservation, are militarily impotent,<sup>73</sup> whereas the affiliated possess the strength of their group in aggregate<sup>74</sup> and, since they suffer less from fear and anxiety, fight harder and last longer, often leaving the struggle only through death, wounds, or the destruction of their primary group.<sup>75</sup>

The primary group, however, is not a panacea. There is an inherent tension between the goal it sets for itself, to survive, and that set for it, to fight.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, if this tension erupts into conflict, its resolution is likely to be violent, as the primary group, which must externalise its members' aggression for the sake of internal harmony,<sup>77</sup> will defend itself when threatened.<sup>78</sup> Thus, while military authority seeks to direct this defensive response against the enemy, the group may perceive that authority itself to be the greater threat, since it is responsible for sending the group to war, for placing its members in harm's way, and for employing its whole coercive apparatus to ensure they keep fighting and dying.<sup>79</sup> The effects of such a cognitive response are not hard to imagine, nor is imagination necessary. As the progressive collapse of American forces in Vietnam demonstrates,<sup>80</sup> when tension grows between the primary group's potentially mutually exclusive goals, so too does the incidence of collective mutiny and the murder of authority figures.<sup>81</sup>

Clearly then, in isolation, the primary group cannot explain the will to combat. It is, undoubtedly, a force-multiplier, a generator of lethal synergy