

# The Moral and Ethical Leadership Implications for Close Combat Soldiers in Subterranean Operations

by Anthony Randall

The moral and ethical leadership implications for close combat Soldiers in subterranean environments present complex problem sets in multi-domain warfare. Subterranean systems impact efficient implementation of Mission Command, effective application of doctrine, and ethical application of moral courage essential to the warrior's long term vitality spiritually, psychologically, and physiologically. Subterranean environments are a potential living hell for all who descend where "being fades away into nonentity."<sup>1</sup> Leaders must prepare, protect, and preserve close combat soldiers soul, psyche, and warrior code embodied by the Army Ethic.

## Subterranean Space Overview: Concepts and Doctrine

The U.S. Army's recent focus on developing, shaping, and implementing concepts and doctrine into multi-domain training and operational environments must include subterranean warfare. *ATP 3-21.51 Subterranean Operations*, identifies the brigade combat team (BCT) as the "Army's primary combined arms, close combat force." When necessary, they conduct "operations in subterranean environments...to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative."<sup>2</sup>

Three subterranean environments, "natural tunnels, urban subsurface systems, and underground facilities" disrupt and deny mission command, restrict tactics and techniques normally providing overmatch, and threaten the warrior's spiritual, psychological, and physiological being.<sup>3</sup> Whether used for "command and control, operations, production, storage, or protection," no subterranean system is the same and pose "tactical and physical risk."<sup>4</sup> Close combat units mitigate subterranean threats with five options: bypass, neutralize, control, defeat, or clear, with clear being the most inherently dangerous option.<sup>5</sup>

"Operations in a subterranean environment are physically and psychologically demanding. Specialized equipment such as ballistic shields, air quality monitors, and breathing apparatus must be either worn or hand carried in addition to an already robust combat load. Enclosed spaces, potential low or no light conditions, extremely limited maneuver options, and intermittent communications create immense psychological stress. Potential unique environmental or structural hazards such as air quality deteriorating to dangerous levels, injury from blast overpressure, or tunnel collapse serve to compound an already stressful environment."<sup>6</sup>—LTC Nathan Palisca<sup>7</sup>

Threat forces increase the tactical and physical risk endemic in subterranean operations by accelerating the psychological and physiological culminating point of close combat forces. Whether confronting a traditional threat such as North Korea, an irregular threat such as insurgents and guerilla's in Afghanistan, or a hybrid threat such as Hezbollah and the Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS), close combat leaders must assess the significant moral and ethical dilemmas of sending a close combat force into a subterranean system.<sup>8</sup> U.S. and Iraqi Forces encountered this complexity during the 2017 battle of Mosul, Iraq against ISIS.<sup>9</sup>

## Realized Mission Command in Subterranean Space

Doctrine developers and practitioners collectively realize the challenges of efficiently and effectively conducting subterranean operations. Since the emergence of ATP 3-21.51 in February 2018, LTC Rob Stanton and his CWMD Elimination Task Force and Sub-T SME, have solely focused on integrating concepts, doctrine, and training into real world application as a close combat force. He frames the problem set of realized mission command twofold, recognizing the “Sub-T environment becomes a ‘condition of the battlefield’ and simply a sub-set of a larger mission.”<sup>10</sup> Secondly, “what can a general purpose force realistically do...and do we really have the capability to send large numbers of GPF Soldiers underground?”<sup>11</sup>

The effectiveness of clearing a subterranean space will directly correspond to Soldiers’ cohesion and ability to trust one another with limited to no communications outside of their breaching element. Going underground removes many forms of overmatch leaving a peer to peer, close range, deadly fight. According to Stanton, “The only way to survive is to be a cohesive team before the breach ever takes place.”<sup>12</sup>

Leaders must recognize the “intimate brutality” and “primal aggression” killing range LTC (USA, Ret.) David Grossman identifies as the most damaging to a warrior’s mind, spirit, and body.<sup>13</sup> It is the hardest distance to kill another human being as the “average human being has a strong resistance to piercing the body of another of his own kind.”<sup>14</sup> It must be trained.

Despite a perceived or real intention of some Army leaders to limit or close the Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP), an intentional and renewed emphasis on hand to hand combat and knife fighting skills, to include training on the psychological impacts of killing an enemy combatant at close range is paramount to close combat unit training. The MACP and SOCP (Special Operations Combatives Program) should receive unanimous Army leadership support and emphasis in doctrine and training. Over 10,000 known military subterranean systems today.<sup>15</sup> Close combat forces must train and expect to fight in subsurface space.

If not, it presents a failure to address a clear and present danger in subterranean space affecting Soldiers holistic well-being. Israeli Defense Force Major Ran Tinichigiu, a former subterranean unit company commander, concurs that their training in Krav Maga conditions soldiers to be confident with killing at close range while understanding the advantages of creating space to use personal weapons while wearing body armor, night vision goggles, and other equipment.<sup>16</sup> Choosing to clear a subterranean system should weigh heavy on the moral and ethical decision making process of leaders when planning and conducting the mission.

Creating shared understanding requires an “incredible amount of tactical patience”<sup>17</sup> as the accustomed IPB and real-time assets may be limited or deemed irrelevant literally leaving a commander and their force blind. Therefore, clear commander’s intent from the senior commander to the lead soldier in the breach must convey the “why” of going underground in order to achieve the decisive action required and buy-in of soldiers.

Subterranean environments may more acutely reduce Soldiers heartiness and grit causing them to culminate quicker due to the moral and ethical implications of their actions and subsequent psychological and physiological stress of subterranean environments. Stanton believes, “Soldiers will likely ‘culminate’ much faster in the three domains (mental, physical, emotional) and much more rapidly than we expect. We need to realize and be prepared for that.”<sup>18</sup> Soldiers’ moral courage and professional ethic internalized beforehand and steadfast determination increases their survivability during and after operations.

Regarding disciplined initiative, it is a double edged sword. Major Tinichigiu advises the enemy may have less information of who and what is breaching their defenses and may struggle comparatively with the sense or feeling of being trapped or buried alive. It is a “psychological game of hide and seek. You must keep moving and not become static.”<sup>19</sup>

Bypassing a subterranean space may elicit psychological duress on units. Israeli Defense Force Major Ido Puterkovski recalled during the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict with Hamas his unit established a secure battle position for 72 hours and implemented routine defensive procedures to include rest and recovery operations. During that time, an enemy combatant emerged from a subterranean space with an anti-tank weapon and engaged a tank inside their battle position. Psychologically this reduced their forces confidence in a secure area impacting rest and recovery plans and creating a hyper-vigilance of seeing each terrain feature as Sub-T entry or exit points.<sup>20</sup>

When Paragraph 1 regarding enemy and terrain may be incomplete or altogether missing, LTC Palisca encourages close combat soldiers to consider three aspects of subterranean warfare with regard to realized mission command. First, to the individual soldier, remember the enemy has to fight in the same environment. They are not superhuman. Second, leaders must ensure their units do not outrun their sensors, mirrors, robots, or moral and ethical rules of engagement. Third, leaders at every level must assume this mission set and train for proficiency now.<sup>21</sup>

### **Welcome to Hell: Theological and Psychological Impacts of Subterranean Space**

The highway to hell is glorified by rock ‘n’ rollers, condemned by firebrand preachers, and its very existence questioned by philosophers, theologians, and psychologists. To understand the implications of subterranean space as a living hell, it is necessary to consider the religious, philosophical, and psychological frameworks shaping our culture, warriors, and warrior codes.<sup>22</sup>

The darkness, isolation, and torment of hell opposes the immortal peace of heaven and pleasures of life and earthly relationships. Cultural and religious burial practices associate death and afterlife as subsurface. Greek mythology identifies the underworld of Hades as a place of torment. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe in some form of subsurface physical hell where torment and isolation from God prevails eternally, or for a period of time before annihilation, or redemption. Hinduism’s Yama judges the dead in multiple kinds of hell. Buddhist teachings associate death and hell with an underground concept of “diyu.”

The Judeo-Christian tradition portrays hell as a place of permanence, annihilation, or temporary torment for purification. Jesus warned, “Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28). Jesus taught that hell is a physical location prescribed for punishment “after judgment,” consumed with “fire and darkness,” and “never ending punishment.”<sup>23</sup> Origen believed hell held wicked souls for temporary purification in hopes of reunification with God, and Dante’s Inferno spirals the wicked down nine levels of torment.

Today progressive theologians, like Rob Bell, question hell as an actual physical location preferring to describe it as a “terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within our hearts.”<sup>24</sup> His perspective of experiencing a living hell within the depth of our soul is similar to psychologist, Carl Jung’s “shadow” identity of depravity and evil. Karl Marlantes writes, “The warrior must recognize the moments when circumstances mirror the ugly unwanted parts of his or her psyche. This is the only way to minimize the evil consequences of ignoring these parts. To do this requires recognizing and accepting one’s own despised parts, a form of heroism not taught in boot camp.”<sup>25</sup> Concepts of hell impact a warrior’s functionality in a subterranean space.

Understanding how close combat soldiers may respond in a subterranean environment includes psychosocial research in conjunction with theological and philosophical beliefs. Psychosocial research on humans interacting with subterranean spaces identified four major issues of concern: “isolation, perceived control, negative culture-based associations, and perceived security.”<sup>26</sup> Real time intelligence assets, protection from overmatching weaponry, and national defense strategies increase the propensity of these concerns in subterranean spaces.

The descent into unknown subterranean spaces to include temperature, narrowing, widening, descending, turning of tunnels, and confronting obstacles without situational awareness of what is happening above ground creates a natural sense of isolation, entrapment, and claustrophobia.<sup>27</sup> The darkness and fear of the unknown affects an individual's conception of time and duration underground. However, when close combat soldiers work as tight knit teams through training and experience, the subsurface space acts as a bonding relationship impacting mission accomplishment, survival, and returning to the surface.

Close combat soldiers entering unknown subterranean spaces must mitigate perceived and actual lack of control and security. Lack of reliable maps, self-correcting landmarks and terrain features minimize soldiers' abilities to navigate and adjust positions especially under the duress of enemy contact, evacuating wounded personnel, and escaping environmental threats like cave-ins or limited oxygen. Teaching warriors to 'control what they can control' and mindfulness fosters mental conditioning and emotional health under duress in uncontrollable conditions.

Enter the enemy force. Based upon psycho-social research of subterranean spaces, dehumanizing populations living underground is a natural human response.<sup>28</sup> The cultural and religious affiliations to death, demons, and the tormented, coupled with a hatred, fear, and disgust of an unknown number and location of enemy and how they are prepared to fight, can quickly lead to dehumanizing and demonizing the enemy.

Our Professional Ethic and Army Values encourage Soldiers to refrain from dehumanizing the enemy. Rules of Engagement aid Soldiers in discerning *jus in bello* principles such as proportional use of force, discrimination between combatants, and noncombatants, avoiding evil means, and using good faith of treating the enemy honorably as a combatant, with care as a prisoner, and with dignity when deceased. The Geneva Convention and UCMJ provide systems of justice for warriors who violate the ethic.

However, something deeper must compel warriors through a sense of character, identity, and honor than simply rules of war. Aristotelean virtue ethics and the works of Thomas Aquinas attempt to create a moral and ethical framework for the warrior to operate within since even "the most virtuous of soldiers, therefore, in the most just of wars, could, under Thomistic scrutiny also, still sense a certain disorientation in his attempt to do what was right on the battlefield."<sup>29</sup>

Our religious and philosophical perspectives of death, hell, and the enemy's humanity contribute to our perspective lenses as well as the psycho-social issues of isolation, and perceived control and security. Close Combat Leaders must ensure their personal and personnel's professional ethic, moral character, intent, action, and end state is rooted, founded, exercised, and tested in order to live with the hell of war ready to pierce through their soul.

### **Prepare, Protect, and Preserve: The Professional Army Ethic, Training, and Care**

Steeling the soul of the warrior is a holistic and ongoing process rather than a systematic task or program of instruction. It requires recruiting, teaching, and training Soldiers of character. Soldiers must know who they are individually as trusted professionals, who they are collectively as a professional ethic, and who benefits from their character, intent, and actions as leaders.

Our professional Army Ethic relies upon trusted professionals comprised of character, competence, and commitment who execute their mission effectively, efficiently, and ethically.<sup>30</sup> Our ethic is shaped by our culture and societal beliefs to include our spiritual and religious beliefs and practices, and philosophical and psychological development.<sup>31</sup>

Instilling the character of a professional warrior requires a professional ethic, a warrior's code, self-regulated and enforced from within out of a compelling love for one another and ones warrior class in war and peace. Major General Carl von Clausewitz wrote, "The soldier trade, if it is to mean anything at all, has to be

anchored to an unshakable code of honor. Otherwise, those of us who follow the drums become nothing more than a bunch of hired assassins walking around in gaudy clothes... a disgrace to God and mankind.”<sup>32</sup>

For the U.S. Army this includes ADRP-1 and the Army Framework for Character Development, the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), Rules of Engagement (ROE), and just war principles. These ethical rule sets create a framework for the compelling moral code of the warrior class shaping their moral and ethical reasoning and decision making process.

Immanuel Kant’s deontological moral reasoning and categorical imperatives continue to influence today’s professional armies. The first imperative of universal law shapes leaders’ use of just war theory and international law to determine if intentions, actions, and proposed end states fulfill jus in bello when choosing a subterranean mitigating course of action.

Subterranean operations are morally and ethically challenging especially when non-combatants such as human shields, enslaved labor, and trafficked people are involved. If jus ad bellum principles for going to war guide the jus in bello principles of war, subterranean warfare may shift 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare towards traditional total war principles. Such a dramatic shift conflicts with technology, social media, and public opinions conditioning of society to expect and demand risk averse surgical strikes and minimal casualties of combatants and non-combatants. Today, jus in bello seemingly dictates jus ad bellum contrary to the traditional deontological approach due to a hypersensitivity of battlefield violence via 24/7 real time access. The Clausewitz Trinity prevails. We must defeat our enemies with speed, surprise and violence of action, free the oppressed, and protect the innocent with the greatest scrutiny in history.

Kant’s second imperative supports people to be seen as an end state rather than merely a means to an end. How close combat leaders interpret this imperative impacts the livelihood of their soldiers, non-combatants, and an enemy force when considering proportionality in the use of force, discrimination, avoidance of evil means, and good faith. Choosing to bypass, neutralize, or control a subterranean space may better fulfill this imperative than destroying or clearing it. Conversely, destroying or clearing a subterranean space in order to deny the enemy use of space to attack other friendly forces may also be a viable course of action.

Finally, the third imperative of making rules in a position of authority that one would also willingly be subjected to, prepares us to effectively protect our soldiers, non-combatants, and treat enemy soldiers justly during and after conflict. Leaders must consider the cost of subterranean operations regarding a units’ combat effectiveness and culmination points, and the potential post combat psychological trauma and moral injury resulting from subterranean spaces.

A professional ethic, moral and ethical reasoning, and morally courageous leadership enhance the preparation, protection, and preservation of close combat soldiers from the banality of evil and propensity of humanity to commit atrocities against humanity. Regarding subterranean spaces, there is no difference in proportionality, use of force, and right intent in suffocating a submarine crew at the bottom of the ocean by disabling their vessel with depth charges as there is closing off ventilation shafts or entrance/exit points of subterranean spaces. When both situations contain combatants, who by their own volition and intent, have chosen to fight from those defenses, which can also be considered offensive in nature, and must be bypassed, neutralized, controlled, defeated, or cleared. Additionally, we have integrated soft and hard call out techniques on objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq in order to mitigate risk to noncombatants even at the risk of our forces, losing initiative, or control of time and space.

### **Conclusion: Reclaiming the Warrior’s “Ticket”**

Warriors who look into the snarling, gazing, fearful, or saddened eyes of our enemy, kill them as combatants, care for them as wounded, and respect them as fellow warriors, meanwhile understanding their own fear of death and desire to live life another day, must have the spiritual, behavioral, and physical coping

mechanisms necessary to live well. “Warriors, above all, must fundamentally be spiritual people, that is, people who are on a different path to start with.”<sup>33</sup>

Steven Pressfield captures this image in, *Gates of Fire*, when after battle the Spartans reclaim their “tickets,” “wooden-twig bracelets,” that are snapped in half before battle. One part is placed in the basket held by the priest, the other attached to the body of the Spartan as their dog tag.<sup>34</sup> Reclaiming ones ticket and reattaching it is a purging and healing process of thanksgiving for surviving battle, mourning for those comrades who died, and living to fight another day. Critical characters in the scene include: the priest, the leader, and fellow warriors.

Addressing the moral pain of soldiers and preserving and caring for the wounded soul of the soldier is nothing new. Warrior codes, penances, ritual religious cleansings, and therapeutic psychology all attempt to address caring for the Soldiers soul after combat. Sigmund Freud mistakenly assumed soldiers returning from World War I would “joyfully return to his home, his wife, and his children, undelayed and undisturbed by any thought of the enemy he has slain” because “civilized man” had lost or discarded “ethical sensitiveness.”<sup>35</sup>

Many of the Enlightenment’s moral philosophies discarded a creator God’s objective truth, religion, and Aristolean and Thomistic virtues, in an effort to find moral good, without God, or an objective good. This led to the evolutionary social scientific pursuits of therapy while limiting the spiritual growth and healing required by the human soul. This pursuit is contrary to historical warrior codes across all cultures including our professional Army Ethic.

Preserving the force through the Army’s Human Performance Program is a holistic attempt to develop the 21<sup>st</sup> century American Soldier and care for the greatest asset of today’s military, people. Carl Jung wrote in reference to the psychological needs of humanity that, “It is indeed high time for the clergyman and psychotherapist to join forces to meet this great spiritual task.”<sup>36</sup> We must remember, “The nation that makes a great distinction between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools.” (Spartan king, quoted by Thucydides) Subterranean warfare highlights the continual need for professional Soldiers to prepare, protect, and preserve the warrior’s soul by internalizing a warrior code, utilizing moral and ethical decision making, and the exercising transformational leadership necessary to teach, train, refine, forge, and heal the warrior soul. May we trust that, “*God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and of a sound mind.*” (2 Timothy 1:7)

## End Notes

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- 32 Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
- 33 Marlantes, 64.
- 34 Steven Pressfield, *Gates of Fire* (New York: Bantam, 1998).
- 35 Verkamp, 49.
- 36 Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933). 265.