

BOOK REVIEW

On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace¹

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It is clear that Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Grossman's intended audience for this work does not include attorneys practicing veterans law. Instead, LTC Grossman writes in the paternal fashion expected of a senior officer rallying his troops. He guides the reader through what might occur in a moment of combat with an enemy force and how one might prepare for the potential aftermath of that experience. While the author's colloquial and repetitive writing style presents some challenges, the book provides valuable insight into the broad spectrum of normal human responses to combat. As a result, it is likely to prove useful for any attorney serving veterans and their families.

The author thoughtfully describes the personal histories of many combat veterans, conveying the realities of fear, heightened awareness, and bodily reactions that can and do occur in battle. Most people will never know what it actually *feels* like to look down the barrel of a gun and pull the trigger with the intent to kill another person or to know that another person intends to kill you in a similar manner. From this perspective, a book written in the style and language of American warriors, often in their own words, is particularly helpful to anyone who wants to develop a more thorough understanding of the realities of combat and the extreme stresses inherent in the combat environment.

¹ DAVE GROSSMAN WITH LOREN W. CHRISTENSEN, ON COMBAT: THE PSYCHOLOGY AND PHYSIOLOGY OF DEADLY CONFLICT IN WAR AND IN PEACE (3d ed. 2008).

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To afford the reader a more complete perspective on combat, LTC Grossman includes the experiences of civilian law enforcement officers who were involved in deadly force encounters. Loren Christensen, the book's co-author, served as a military police officer in Vietnam and is a retired career police officer.³ Additionally, many contributing members of the book's Board of Advisors come from the law enforcement community.⁴ By including civilian combat experiences from the law enforcement perspective, this book achieves greater depth than others, as there can be a tendency to view military combat in light of the historical or political context in which the conflict arose. For example, there are certain hardships and expectations that may differ between service members who fought in World War II versus those who fought in Vietnam or those who currently fight in Iraq. The personal stories regarding the experiences of law enforcement officers, however, have a timeless quality and paint a broader picture of the experience of human combat.

At times, the author's writing style, with his use of hyperbole or awkward analogies, is distracting to the reader. For example, he postulates that if humanity were to go a single generation without warriors, characterized as new paladins replacing the knights of old "who are willing to go out every day and confront evil, then within the span of that generation we should surely be both damned and doomed."⁵ He also analogizes the unconscious mind of a combatant, to a "puppy inside," stating that the midbrain adapts by bypassing logical thought processes and establishing certain survival reflexes. To continue this analogy, he identifies potential symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as actions of that "puppy."⁶ He extends the analogy

³ GROSSMAN WITH CHRISTENSEN, *supra* note 1, at 403.

⁴ *Id.* at 376-91.

⁵ *Id.* at xxii.

⁶ *Id.* at 43, 281-82 (stating that "[d]uring [State Trooper Speer's] gunfight, his heart rate skyrocketed and a neural network was established when the puppy 'blew a hole through the screen door.' That neural network was still in place when a week later the unexpected sound of the starter's pistol at a swim meet caused the trooper's puppy to burst through that hole in the screen door, jump into his lap, pee, gnaw at his throat, and cry out, 'Gunfight! Gunfight! Where's the gunfight? Where? Where? Where?'").

even further when he describes gaining conscious control of a conditioned response to a stimulus with breathing exercises and debriefing as putting a “leash” on the “puppy.”⁷

It is notable that the author’s online *curriculum vitae* includes more than thirty pages listing numerous presentations, guest lectures, and training engagements in which he participated,⁸ suggesting that this descriptive style may be better suited to capturing an audience’s attention in an oral presentation rather than clearly and concisely conveying a scholarly stance through the written word. However, the reader who wades through the author’s occasionally gratuitous prose is ultimately rewarded with penetrating and insightful truths.

For example, the author provides a particularly informative chart illustrating the effects of hormonal or fear-induced increases in heart rate and the attendant changes in the body’s stress response, also known as the “fight or flight” impulse.⁹ The chart lists the performance capabilities that are possible at distinct stages of accelerated heartbeats and notes that optimal survival and performance level for combat occurs between 115 and 145 beats per minute.¹⁰ Various reactions of the nervous system are also described in detail, to include the physiological and chemical changes resulting from the secretion of hormones such as adrenaline, epinephrine, and norepinephrine that affect dilation and constriction of the bronchial tubes, vascular system, and muscles of the body when confronted with the immediacy of combat.¹¹ Perceptual distortions such as auditory exclusion, intensified sounds, tunnel vision, slow-motion time, memory loss, and temporary paralysis are explored.¹² While much of the evidence is

⁷ *Id.* at 286, 303.

⁸ Lt. Col. Dave Grossman’s Curriculum Vitae, http://www.killology.com/print/print_vitae.htm (last visited Sept. 29, 2009).

⁹ GROSSMAN WITH CHRISTENSEN, *supra* note 1, at 31.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 30-31.

¹¹ *Id.* at 14, 16-18.

¹² *Id.* at 51-122.

anecdotal in nature, the author also synthesizes scientific research into these phenomena conducted by Drs. David Klinger and Alexis Artwohl.¹³

Of particular import to attorneys involved in the field of veterans law is the author's discussion of PTSD. He explores the negative impact that the adjudication of compensation claims filed with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) may have in perpetuating the impact of a traumatic, combat-related event. In quoting Dr. Jacques J. Gouws, the author notes that "in order for a person to feel normal while still suffering the sequels of trauma, s/he must be able to view the symptoms as a normal reaction to an external threat, rather than an illness."¹⁴ This conclusion directly contradicts the framework of VA's compensation system, which limits benefits to service-connected illnesses and injuries.¹⁵ In some cases, access to treatment and other rehabilitative services is directly linked to the establishment of service connection, which requires the existence of a current disability.¹⁶ Therefore, VA's current disability compensation system provides a negative incentive for a veteran to view his or her own stress reactions as "normal" and may limit a veteran's overall ability to "make peace with the memory" of combat, as the author suggests.¹⁷

This stance was recently reiterated in an April 2009 article, *The Post-Traumatic Stress Trap*, which concludes that VA's current disability compensation system discourages recovery.¹⁸ Like LTC Grossman, the article's author suggests that the best way to support our veterans is to recognize the horror of war. However, he cautions

¹³ ALEXIS ARTWOHL & LOREN CHRISTENSEN, DEADLY FORCE ENCOUNTERS: WHAT COPS NEED TO KNOW TO MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY PREPARE FOR AND SURVIVE A GUNFIGHT (1997); DAVID KLINGER, INTO THE KILL ZONE: A COP'S EYE VIEW OF DEADLY FORCE (2004).

¹⁴ GROSSMAN WITH CHRISTENSEN, *supra* note 1, at 294.

¹⁵ 38 U.S.C. §§ 1110, 1131 (2006); 38 C.F.R. § 3.303 (2008).

¹⁶ *See, e.g.*, U. S. DEP'T OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, FEDERAL BENEFITS FOR VETERANS AND DEPENDENTS, at 2-3 (2009) (describing priority groups for VA health care based, in part, upon a veteran's combined rating for service-connected disabilities).

¹⁷ GROSSMAN WITH CHRISTENSEN, *supra* note 1, at 284.

¹⁸ David Dobbs, *The Post-Traumatic Stress Trap*, SCI. AM., Apr. 2009, at 64, 68.

that “to impose on a distressed soldier the notion that his memories are inescapable, that he lacks the strength to incorporate his past into his future, is to highlight our moral sensitivity at the soldier’s expense.”¹⁹

In addition, LTC Grossman explains how the public’s superficial awareness of PTSD can increase the possibility that the disorder will occur when service members, their families, and others become convinced that a combatant returning from war will invariably suffer from PTSD, creating the proverbial self-fulfilling prophecy.²⁰ Continued attention to these issues may signal the beginning of a movement that ultimately shifts the way clinicians diagnose or treat PTSD, as well as the way VA reviews and adjudicates compensation claims.

Also insightful is the author’s explanation of how a returning combatant may be viewed differently based upon his or her service branch and the circumstances of his or her service. For example, he opines that a fighter pilot may be lauded and respected as an “ace” based on the number of “kills” indicated by the pilot’s destruction of enemy aircraft. However, a pilot kills at a distance and is specifically targeting a machine, as opposed to another human, even though one logically knows that the aircraft contains one or more people who may die when that machine is destroyed. Nonetheless, for the soldier or civilian sharpshooter who pulls a trigger with another human being as the target, unless this individual receives a particularly high honor or award for valor, the soldier or civilian sharpshooter with many “kills” may be viewed as somehow deviant or maladjusted if he or she takes pride in carrying out his or her training as a marksman and fulfilling the lawful orders of superior officers.²¹ In combating this effect, LTC Grossman suggests that individuals working with veterans assume

¹⁹ *Id.* at 69.

²⁰ GROSSMAN WITH CHRISTENSEN, *supra* note 1, at 296-97 (citing Dave Grossman, *Hope on the Battlefield*, GREATER GOOD MAG., Summer 2007, at 24, 27).

²¹ *Id.* at 312-13.

nothing and treat everyone with respect and compassion regardless of the circumstances of their service—certainly a standard of care which VA aims to provide.

While *On Combat* describes appropriate ways for civilians to interact with veterans after their combat experience is complete, it also includes a number of suggestions for the warriors themselves regarding ways to prepare for what may come prior to entering a battle. He refers to this process as stress inoculation. Specifically, he states that in military and law enforcement training scenarios, we now have the knowledge and technology to create “pre-battle veterans” or individuals that have the survival skills of an experienced warrior without having suffered the tragedies of real combat.²² By exposing various hidden aspects of combat, LTC Grossman effectively forearms service members and law enforcement officers by equipping them with knowledge of the physical and mental responses that they may undergo should they encounter a life-threatening combat situation. He also assures them that if they experience a traumatic event, they can recover from it and emerge stronger from the experience.²³

In conclusion, the guidance provided in this book is extremely valuable to the attorney or judge who is responsible for hearing a veteran’s personal account of combat actions in service, many of which describe experiences or particular stress responses that are utterly foreign to the casual civilian observer. This book also provides immeasurable benefit to the warrior, both before and after the fight, as well as critical information that can assist attorneys in better serving our nation’s veterans upon their return from the battlefield.

²² *Id.* at 134.

²³ *Id.* at 297.

