



## Psychological resilience, a decisive asset for urban combat.

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**Beyond the physical oppression that can be experienced in the urban environment (stairwells, tunnels, underground passages), and the close proximity of mortal danger, Battalion Commander Frédéric Chamaud shows that the urban theater can be considered as a stress catalyst space, exposing all combat and support units to multiple sources of psychological injuries. More than anywhere else, it is therefore crucial to know how to identify risks, to prevent them and to ensure the support of specialised units as soon as possible.**

" We are now enveloped in a bubble of detonations, slamming, hissing, impacts. Impotent in front of the barbed wire, a porpoise looks dazedly at its perforated thigh, another has two severed fingers... Two other guys are drained of all energy by the violence surrounding them, they are like inert dummies. The group is out of action. My plan has stood the test of time for two and a half minutes" [1].

1) Although stress is a reality in all operations, operations in the city require even greater psychological resources from the combatants. The urban environment is indeed very threatening. Space is experienced in three dimensions from which opponents can open fire. There are countless firing positions and fire can be opened at very close range. While the engagement distance is usually less than 150 metres, it can even be reduced to physical contact during offensive or clean-up operations. Because of the presence of civilians, rules of engagement must in most cases include visual confirmation of the nature of the targets. These characteristics have long kept military leaders and their armies away from cities. Sun Tzu, like Soviet doctrine, envisaged city combat as a last resort, when all other alternatives had been exhausted.

Today, modern forces with technology seem unbeatable on open terrain. The technological equalizing power of the city is therefore sought in today's asymmetric conflicts by opponents without modern equipment [2]. 2) In order to win in these

conditions, it is obvious that the fundamentals of joint combat (shooting, maneuvering, taking the initiative) can make the difference; they must be mastered to a level of excellence that can only be achieved through preparation and training. This is well understood by most Western armies, which have at their disposal a large number of complementary training resources (covering the various tactical and operational aspects of urban warfare). However, this training cannot be limited to hardening tactical, technical and physical capabilities; it must also consider the psychological resilience of our soldiers through mental preparation and measures adapted to engagement in urban areas.

### Psychic risk in combat

Stress is a state of nervous and emotional tension caused by combat situations. Stress reactions in combat are normal and have been observed since antiquity. While stress has positive effects such as hyper vigilance, its negative effects led Charles Ardant du Picq to estimate in the 19th century that the soldier<sup>15</sup> "only capable of a certain amount of terror" [3]. It is the evolution and aggravation of the state of tension that can have a significant impact on a unit. For example, overwhelmed stress (sterile agitation, prostration, automaton reaction) can manifest itself in individual or collective "panic escape" reactions towards the rear and even towards the enemy as was observed during the First World War [4]. 4] More recent examples can be identified in Lieutenant Heluin's account of the fighting at Verbanja: "To cross the barbed wire, we had planned two gates, poor expeditionary equipment in the absence of specific equipment. They remained in the vehicles. So much the worse. We'll do without them. [...] I feel the need to open fire but my Famas stubbornly refuses to operate... At no time does it occur to me that I may have forgotten to cock my assault rifle" [5].

Beyond the immediate effects of stress, the longer-term effects are also important and can take the form of trauma. For everyone, a psychological trauma results from the confrontation with the reality of death for oneself or for a close "geographical" relative. For the soldier, this is different because he is not on an internal or external operation by chance, he has prepared himself. He is an actor in the situation. It is even possible to say that he feels satisfaction in being in the field. He is fully aware of what he may face and he takes responsibility for it. For this reason, when the situation escapes him and the consequences contradict the meaning of his commitment, then the "collateral" damage, the civil loss, the opening of fire on a civilian or on a child lead to an aggravation of stress resulting in psychological disorders.

In addition to the proximity of death, there is the emotion felt. The olfactory, tactile, visual, auditory or cenesthetic sensations act by leaving in the soldiers' memory the memory of situations of confrontation with death. These mnemonic traces are linked to the memory of an emotion felt, such as the colour of the eyes or even more so the smells.

In the most desperate situations, or situations felt as such, in which the soldier admits that he no longer has any chance of getting out of it, a favourable outcome can be accompanied by psychological disorders caused by the raw recollection of the confrontation with death. For the one who sees no other way out than death, his survival is not necessarily analysed by his mind as a memory. For example, during the Battle of Falluja in 2003, an American soldier recounts being isolated in a building under enemy fire. After several hours of fighting, the soldier, running out of ammunition, was resolved about his fate. He managed to escape, however, having been picked up by his comrades

during a local counter-offensive. This soldier was later subjected to serious psychological problems because he was convinced - wrongly - that he had been abandoned to certain death by the rest of his comrades.

Psychological injuries can render a soldier unfit for combat for life and weaken a country's combat potential in the long term. In order to prevent them, since their predictable rate is in the order of 20 to 30% of all wounded soldiers, it is essential to know them better, to learn how to detect them and to manage them. Especially in urban combat situations, which by their very nature represent a much higher level of risk than others.

### **Particularities of the urban theatre**

Beyond the physical oppression that can be experienced in the urban environment (stairwells, tunnels, underground passages), the reputation of the city as a place of combat where casualties are high is in itself a particular stress factor. Rightly so, the urban theatre, with its confined spaces, the channelling of the movements it imposes, its multiple angles of fire and also the strong assumption of combat at very close range or even hand-to-hand combat, accentuates the risks of being killed or seriously injured. This close proximity to mortal danger and the hypothesis of hand-to-hand combat imply a potential exacerbated confrontation with death. Indeed, to the high dose of unexpected combat, hand-to-hand combat adds an intimate dimension with its opponent. In this type of confrontation, each person looks each other in the eye, feels the other's breathing, knowing that one of them is going to die[6].

Moreover, in urban areas, stress is shared by all types of units, including support units, because combat implies a close engagement of contact forces and therefore exposure to risks far greater than that known in open terrain, as confirmed by the many cases of capture of American soldiers belonging to support units in Iraq between 2003 and 2011.

The way in which the soldier perceives his environment is certainly more important than the complex reality of his environment. The level of danger perceived, felt and imagined has a direct influence on the soldier's ability to remain calm and concentrate on his mission. Lieutenant Heluin, in his account of the Verbanja assault, describes a way to limit stress by keeping his men in action so that they do not have the opportunity to anticipate what might happen: "I look at my porpoises. I look at my porpoises. They are calm and quiet. Like them, I feel strangely serene. It's true that since I woke up three hours ago, I haven't had a minute to think about the danger" [7].

The configuration of the urban theater imposes that units operate in a three-dimensional battle space: above, at and below ground level. Most soldiers will not see each other and will feel all the more isolated due to the lack of knowledge of their comrades' position, which will be reinforced by a feeling of physical oppression resulting from the built environment. The effect of this sense of isolation is direct on the morale of the unit. Thus, it is fundamental, on the one hand, to cultivate, from peacetime onwards, even outside training, esprit de corps, a style of command based on subsidiarity, autonomy and initiative, and, on the other hand, to reassure the soldiers with a fair dose of information. Without this, units risk losing their fighting spirit.

Finally, urban warfare usually requires soldiers to be in close contact with the civilian population. The civilian population seems to be an aggravating factor in the occurrence of psychological injuries. Indeed, friendly or passive actors may turn out to be terrorists or spies or even be instrumentalized by the enemy (human shield, suicide bomber). Soldiers are then in particular situations that do not correspond to those for which they are committed and sometimes prepared.

### **Channelling and reducing the effects of stress**

In 1973, during the Yom Kippur War, the Israelis did not consider it useful to take into account the experience of the Allies during the Second World War. They were faced with "psychological" injury rates for more than 35% of the wounded, many of which were long-term. During the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the IDF had prepared the soldiers. Israeli psychological losses were in the order of 25% of the wounded, or 600 of the 2,400 recorded casualties.

Stress prevention is now a reality in most Western armies. Training programmes make it possible to inform, instruct, educate and train in psychological risks.

In France, commando training courses help to better apprehend the danger. Demanding collective physical activities bring cohesion to the units, and a sense of belonging to the group that protects against the illusion of being abandoned and promotes behaviours of mutual aid and solidarity [8].

8) The criterion of trust is also crucial and is constantly being maintained. If soldiers are confident that they are well supported, well equipped, well trained (technically and tactically) and commanded by leaders they trust, they will undoubtedly be more resilient in the face of stress.

The lack of preparation of the Russian troops and numerous command errors, especially in the first two Chechen wars, have amplified the psychological losses. One study shows that 72% of the Russian soldiers enlisted in 1995 reportedly suffered psychological symptoms.

In the context of combat preparation, several projects and studies are under way to improve the realism of training situations and to measure their effects on the performance of combatants. Thus, the CERBERE programme and the new Combat Firing Simulator (STC APC) will enable French units to train under extremely realistic conditions. For example, the effects of large-calibre weapons will be represented by smoke, flashes of light and thud, including inside the CENZUB buildings [9]. 9) Soldiers will have combat rescue kits at their disposal that interact with their simulation equipment. Odour simulators will also be used. The U.S. Army has conducted an in-depth study in the field of realism of combat situations in training (simulation of corpses or wounded with odours and use of dead animals) and the psychological effect obtained. Its findings show that the exposure of troops to such situations should be carried out sparingly and without overkill (showing the bare minimum to limit surprise). It should also be borne in mind that overly realistic training can re-emerge traumatic memories for many seasoned soldiers.

At the forefront of the immaterial fields protecting the French soldier, the combat ethic

instilled from initial training and maintained throughout his career represents an undeniable protection against the risk of psychological injury. Ethical principles enable leaders to find ways to give meaning to the actions of their troops, to explain why a mission which, a priori, makes no sense to soldiers must be carried out. Combat ethics principles will be all the more effective when the command has developed rules of engagement that are simple to understand and apply.

At the heart of operations, satisfying the soldier's physiological needs (sleep, food, hydration) also limits psychological risks. The battles in Grozny show us that a certain degree of psychological wear and tear on units must be considered. Intervening more quickly in urban areas, this wear and tear requires units to be disengaged to regenerate [10]. [10] These replacements must be carried out with discernment, without undermining the cohesion and mutual knowledge of the units, which is a guarantee of their immediate effectiveness.

Finally, it is essential that as many combatants as possible know how to identify the physical and psychological signs of psychological injury. Good coordination with the specialist psychological support units deployed in the field reduces the risk of aggravation. The Army's psychological intervention and support unit (CISPAT) has been effectively fulfilling this role for many years. CISPAT is present with the units deployed in the field and can thus intervene without delay to preserve the mental health of soldiers. The teams of this cell carried out work that was noticed during Operation Sangaris in the Central African Republic, particularly in Bangui.

**In short**, the urban theater can be considered as a stress catalyst, exposing all combat and support units to multiple sources of psychological injuries. More than elsewhere, it is therefore crucial to know how to identify risks, to prevent them and to ensure the support of specialized units as soon as possible.

Tomorrow, infovalorisation, the keystone of the SCORPION programme, will enable the French Army to speed up its efforts to combat psychological injuries. The SCORPION programme will enable the French Army to speed up the pace of combat thanks to the real-time broadcasting of all available information on both the enemy and friends. Beyond the limits posed by the necessary security of information, it seems essential to consider measuring the psychological effects induced by this potential omniscience of each soldier.

[1] Testimony of Lieutenant Heluin in Colonel Michel Goya, " Sous le feu-Lamort comme hypothèse de travail", Tallandier, 2014.

[2] Colonel Pierre Santoni, Battalion Commander Frédéric Chamaud, "The ultimate battlefield, fight and win in the city", Pierre de Taillac, 2016.

[3] Colonel Charles Ardant du Picq, "Études sur le combat", Économica, 2004.

[4] «Sixteen lessons about trauma», Louis Crocq, Odile Jacob, 2012.

[5] «Under Fire - Death as a Working Hypothesis", Colonel Michel Goya, Tallandier, 2014.



[6 ] "Falluja!" David Bellavia, Movie planet, 2009.

[7 ] «Under Fire - Death as a Working Hypothesis" , Colonel Michel Goya, Tallandier 2014.

[8 ] «Psychic war trauma", Louis Crocq.

[9] Urban Training Centre

[10 ] Lester W. Grau, "Changing Russian Urban Tactics: The Aftermath of the Battle for Grozny"

Battalion Commander Frédéric CHAMAUD spent most of his career in the marine infantry. He was an instructor at the Training Centre for Actions in Urban Areas - 94th IR, then <sup>program</sup> officer at the Army's technical section, in charge of CERBERE and the "operational preparation-simulation" component of the SCORPION program. He is passionate about joint combat and urban areas.

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