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**SundayReview** | OPINION

# How We Learned to Kill

By TIMOTHY KUDO FEB. 27, 2015

I.

The voice on the other end of the radio said: “There are two people digging by the side of the road. Can we shoot them?”

It was the middle of the night during my first week in Afghanistan in 2010, on the northern edge of American operations in Helmand Province, and they were directing the question to me. Were the men in their sights irrigating their farmland or planting a roadside bomb? The Marines reported seeing them digging and what appeared to be packages in their possession. Farmers in the valley work from sunrise to sundown, and seeing anyone out after dark was largely unheard-of.

My initial reaction was to ask the question to someone higher up the chain of command. I looked around our combat operations center for someone more senior and all I saw were young Marines looking back at me to see what I would do.

I wanted confirmation from a higher authority to do the abhorrent, something I’d spent my entire life believing was evil. With no higher power around, I realized it was my role as an officer to provide that validation to the Marine on the other end who would pull the trigger.

“Take the shot,” I responded. It was dialogue from the movies that I’d grown up with, but I spoke the words without irony. I summarily ordered the killing of two men. I wanted the Marine on the other end to give me a reason to change my decision, but the only sound I heard was the radio affirmative for an understood order: “Roger, out.” Shots rang out across the narrow river. A part of me wanted the rounds to miss their target, but they struck flesh and the men fell dead.

When I originally became an infantry officer, increasing my Marines’ ability to kill was my mission, and it was my primary focus as I led them to Iraq and Afghanistan. Now, as a young lieutenant, I had faith in my Marines; I trusted them

and looked up to them. But in the back of my mind, I always wondered whether they would follow my orders in the moment of truth. As the echoes of gunfire reverberated and faded, I received my answer. Yes, they would follow me. I also received affirmation to a more sinister question: Yes, I could kill.

II.

*The primary factors that affect an individual's ability to kill are the demands of authority, group absolution, the predisposition of the killer, the distance from the victim and the target attractiveness of the victim.*

So began the essay I wrote during my Marine Corps infantry officer training in 2008. The assignment said, "Discuss the factors that affect an individual's ability to kill." I focused on lessons I had learned reading Lt. Col. Dave Grossman's book "On Killing," which deconstructs the psychology of taking human life. It explains how, throughout the past century, military social systems and training evolved to make humans less reluctant to take a life. But while Mr. Grossman's work was descriptive, my training was prescriptive.

Before I was given the authority to order a kill, I trained to do it by hand. I practiced the techniques of killing for more than a year before taking command of a platoon. I became the master of my rifle, thrust my bayonet through human-shaped dummies, and only then learned the more advanced methods of modern warfare: how to maneuver a platoon of 40 Marines and call for artillery barrages and aerial bombardments. But mastering the tactics of killing would have been useless if I wasn't willing to kill.

In war, of course, there are many ways to kill. I did so by giving orders. I never fired my weapon in combat, but I ordered countless others to fire theirs. It was a disorienting sort of power to have: I would speak a few words, and a few seconds, minutes or hours later people would die. Of course, our snipers became the celebrities of our deployment because they were the best killers. They would perch in their hide, watching the villagers through high-powered optics that allowed them to see faces from hundreds of yards away. They would watch and wait until the moment when they could identify an enemy among the civilians. The fighters would fall before the echo of the shot reached their dead bodies. They would truly never know what hit them.

Before killing the first time there's a reluctance that tempers the desire to know whether you are capable of doing it. It is not unlike teenagers longing to lose their virginity but also wanting to wait for the right time to do it. But once killing loses its mystique, it no longer becomes a tool of last resort.

In Marine officer training we were taught to be decisive. Even a bad decision, I was told, is better than no decision at all. But the combination of imperfect judgment, the confidence of authority and absolute decisiveness does not produce measured outcomes.

For a while after I ordered the Marine to take that first shot, everything we did seemed acceptable. It revealed that killing could be banal. Each day would bring a new threat that needed to be eliminated. Bombs would drop, Marines would fire and artillery would blanket hills with explosions. I had a rough estimate of how many people we killed, but I stopped counting after a while.

III.

I spent every day of my seven-month deployment in Afghanistan trying to figure out how to kill the Taliban commander in my area. He lived and operated to our north and every day would send his soldiers down to plant bombs, terrorize the villages and wrestle with us for control of the area. Our mission was to secure the villages and provide economic and political development, but that was slow work with intangible results. Killing the Taliban commander would be an objective measure of success.

I never killed him. Instead, each day we would kill his soldiers or his soldiers would kill our Marines. The longer I lived among the Afghans, the more I realized that neither the Taliban nor we were fighting for the reasons I expected. Despite the rhetoric I internalized from the newspapers back home about why we were in Afghanistan, I ended up fighting for different reasons once I got on the ground — a mix of loyalty to my Marines, habit and the urge to survive.

The enemy fighters were often young men raised alongside poppy fields in small farms set up like latticework along the river. They must have been too young and too isolated to understand anything outside of their section of the valley, never mind something global like the 9/11 attacks. These villagers fought us because that's what they always did when foreigners came to their village. Perhaps they just

wanted to be left alone.

The more I thought about the enemy, the harder it was to view them as evil or subhuman. But killing requires a motivation, so the concept of self-defense becomes the defining principle of target attractiveness. If someone is shooting at me, I have a right to fire back. But this is a legal justification, not a moral one. The comic Louis C.K. brilliantly pointed out this absurdity: “Maybe if you pick up a gun and go to another country and you get shot, it’s not that weird. Maybe if you get shot by the dude you were just shooting at, it’s a tiny bit your fault.”

My worst fear before deploying was what, in training, we called “good shoot, bad result.” But there is no way in the chaos and uncertainty of war to make the right decision all the time. On one occasion, the Taliban had been shooting at us and we thought two men approaching in the distance were armed and intended to kill us. We warned them off, but it did no good. They continued to approach, and so my Marines fired. What possible reason could two men have to approach a squad of armed Marines in a firefight? When it was over and the two men lay dead we saw that they were unarmed, just two men trying to go home, who never made it.

On most occasions, when ordnance would destroy the enemy or a sniper would kill a Taliban fighter, we would engage in the professional congratulations of a job well done like businessmen after a successful client meeting. Nothing of the sort happened after killing a civilian. And in this absence of group absolution, I saw for the first time how critical it actually was for my soul and my sanity.

Nobody ever talked about the accidental killing. There was paperwork, a brief investigation and silence. You can’t tell someone who has killed an innocent person that he did the right thing even if he followed all the proper procedures before shooting.

When I returned home this group absolution was supposed to take the form of a welcoming society, unlike the one Vietnam veterans returned to. But the only affirmation of my actions came through the ubiquitous “Thank you for your service.” Beyond that, nobody wanted to, or wants to, talk about what occurred overseas.

IV.

The first Marine to be grievously injured on our deployment was shot in the neck during a firefight exactly nine years and nine days after the Sept. 11 attacks. He was a 19-year-old from Mississippi on his first tour after enlisting straight out of high school. Under enemy fire, the Navy corpsman and Marines in his squad gave him medical care as the evacuation helicopter raced to get him to the field hospital in the critical "golden hour."

When he was transported onto the helicopter 40 minutes later, the squad reported that he seemed in good spirits. He would make it to the hospital, receive emergency surgery and then be transported through Germany back to America for a long recovery at Bethesda. Except that didn't happen. Ten minutes later the call came through the radio that he had died.

Until that moment, our deployment in Afghanistan had been exhilarating because we felt invulnerable. This invulnerability in an environment of death was the most powerful sensation I'd ever experienced. I felt favored and possessed with the power to do anything. Instantly, those feelings were replaced by uncertainty and impotency. The initial report that we lost our first Marine stunned everyone who heard it, but soon after came another call about men planting a bomb on a nearby road.

Seeing the enemy so quickly after our Marine was killed was the perfect opportunity for revenge. I watched the missile strike the men's car on the gritty gray-and-white footage of a surveillance drone's camera and then watched one of them run away on fire and collapse. This was accompanied by the exultation of everyone around me. High-fives. Cheers. Fist pumps. If we couldn't bring our Marine back to life, at least we could take a life. The power returned to us a little bit. It was an illogical equation but in the moment it rang true.

V.

I could look you in the eye and tell you I'm sure that the two men we killed right after our Marine died were planting a bomb. I remember watching the drone surveillance video as they dug and appeared to drop an explosive device by the side of the road. At the same time, doubt creeps in. The emotions surrounding loss and revenge can distort reality. Maybe it's too convenient to believe that after losing our first Marine we just happened to find a couple of members of the Taliban planting

a bomb. The fog of war doesn't just limit what you can know; it creates doubt about everything you're certain that you know.

The madness of war is that while this system is in place to kill people, it may actually be necessary for the greater good. We live in a dangerous world where killing and torture exist and where the persecution of the weak by the powerful is closer to the norm than the civil society where we get our Starbucks. Ensuring our own safety and the defense of a peaceful world may require training boys and girls to kill, creating technology that allows us to destroy anyone on the planet instantly, dehumanizing large segments of the global population and then claiming there is a moral sanctity in killing. To fathom this system and accept its use for the greater good is to understand that we still live in a state of nature.

If this era of war ever ends, and we emerge from the slumber of automated killing to the daylight of moral questioning, we will face a reckoning. If we are honest with ourselves, the answers won't be simple. I don't blame Presidents George W. Bush or Barack Obama for these wars. Our elected leaders, after all, are just following orders, no different from the Marine who asks if he can kill a man digging by the side of the road.

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