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The Legacy of Honor in War

“For the military, there is no value more conspicuous or important than honor”¹.

From the earliest accounts of warfare, honor has been central to the warrior ethos. But is honor today the same as it was thousands of years ago? From the *Iliad* to the Peloponnesian War, from the Romans to the Crusaders, and from the Victorians to the soldiers of World War I, honor has shaped warrior's conduct profoundly. While honor may mean different things to each culture, the core of honor has always been courage on the battlefield, but many facets of the idea, such as of virtue, religion, and how a soldier ought to defend his honor, have changed over time.

The *Iliad*

The oldest, and perhaps the greatest account of warfare is Homer's *Iliad*. It recounts in vivid detail the siege of Troy and the gore and glory of battle. It also gives a very candid glimpse of characters' thoughts and feelings, both on and off the battlefield, which has resonated with warriors through the ages since. A vital part of the psychology of warfare for the characters of the *Iliad* was honor. For them, honor was fundamental and personal. For example, when King Agamemnon is forced to give up Chryseis, a woman he had captured in the course of the war, he takes the captive Briseis from the hero Achilles as his own prize. In response, Achilles decides to leave the coalition against Troy. Agamemnon responds to Achilles's decision with the words, "Run away then, if your heart is demanding it; never for my sake I will entreat you to stay here-with me indeed there are others who will show honor to me."² Agamemnon feels that his honor has been doubly insulted. First, because he lost his own captive, he feels that it is not right for Achilles, who is not equal to his own rank, to have a captive as spoils of war if he himself has none. Secondly, Achilles' refusal to continue in the coalition against Troy, and thus as Agamemnon's subordinate, is an insult to the king personally. Agamemnon clearly feels that his own honor is connected to both his rank as king, and the esteem in which others hold him.

Achilles, too, bears wounded feelings after this encounter. After surrendering Briseis, he sits by the ocean, praying to his mother, the goddess Thetis:

Since you, mother, have given me birth, although to live briefly, honor at least should Olympian Zeus who thunders above be ready to grant me; but now not even a little he gives me, seeing that Atreus' son, wide-governing Lord Agamemnon, has dishonored me, since he has taken my prize and he keeps it.³

As the son of a goddess, Achilles feels that because he is to die young the gods in heaven should give him renown. In terms of his personal honor, Achilles feels affronted and summarily dishonored by Agamemnon because he took Achilles "prize," Briseis. Like the honor Achilles desires from the gods, he believes that Briseis was a reward for his toil and suffering, this time on the battle field. When his mother speaks to Jove on Achilles' behalf, she notes that her son is "is doomed to be quickest dying beyond all others; but now in fact Agamemnon, lord of the people, has dishonored him, since he has taken his prize."⁴ Thus, by taking Achilles' woman, Agamemnon has devalued all of Achilles' efforts and victories, insulting him and his honor as a soldier profoundly.

Although honor to the soldiers in the Iliad was of a very personal nature, its origins were more religious. When later offered rewards and accolades, Achilles replies, "I do not need honor like this; I think by the purpose of Zeus am I honored."⁵ By citing Zeus as the origin of his honor, Achilles implies a religious facet to the term. If honor is given by the gods, then one's conduct must be pleasing to them. That is not to say that one's conduct must necessarily be morally right by modern standards, because gods in the Greek pantheon were said to intervene on either side of conflicts where they deemed necessary or were invoked by loyal adherents. This suggests that Achilles gained honor because his mother, a goddess, persuaded Zeus to help him. In another instance, when the Trojan hero Hector exhorts the Trojans and Lycians to fight in a battle, he says "to me Zeus son of Kronos granted a mighty renown," thereby encouraging them

to follow his lead.⁶ Clearly, as a valiant hero it is Hector's courage that wins him honor from the gods and makes him worthy to follow into battle. For the warriors of the *Iliad*, life was inseparable from religion and thus their honor was granted directly from the gods.

Perhaps the most important part of honor to the warriors of the *Iliad* was courage in battle. When the Hector is encouraging his men to charge, he says, “remember your furious valor” so that they may “drive onward the single-hoofed horses... to win a renown yet greater.”⁷ Hector directly connects his troops' courage and tenacity in battle with the honor they stood to win. If, however, one was not brave enough in battle, dishonor also be gained. When none of the Greeks' accepted a challenge Hector leveled earlier in the story, Menelaus says to them, “Shame outrageous will this be, certainly, baleful and baneful... every man who is sitting here [is] spiritless, wholly dishonored.”⁸ By failing to rise to Hector's challenge, in Menelaus' eyes the men have forfeited all honor. For a warrior, the basis of honor in the *Iliad* is courage in battle, and if that virtue was found wanting, he would be branded with dishonor.

The Peloponnesian War

By the time of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta, the Greek concept of honor had become much deeper and more complex than it had been in the *Iliad*. A new feature of honor was that it no longer only applied to only individuals, but the city-states which made up the Hellenic world as well. For example, when Sthenelaidas, in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, accuses the Athenians of aggression, he then says, “Spartans, cast your votes for the honour of Sparta and for war!”⁹ Here, it is not the honor of an individual, but of the entire city and its autonomy that Sthenelaidas believes is at stake. Similarly, Pagondas says, “to the Syracusans and their allies the cry was that it would be a glorious thing ... for each man to

bring honour to his own country by winning the victory.”¹⁰ The Greek soldier clearly understood that he fought not only for his own honor, but for that of his city and people back home.

Greek honor also had a very strong moral component against aggression. When Pagondas tries to convince the Beotians to attack the Athenians, he says, “we make it a point of honour always to fight for the freedom of our country and never unjustly to enslave the country of others.”¹¹ Pagondas uses justice as a moral appeal based on a polity’s right to be free, and linking the honor of its warriors to defending that freedom. In this way, collective honor became a defense of freedom of the state. When Hermocrates addresses an assembly of Camarinaeans, he says that the honorable course is “to come to the side of the victims of aggressions ... and prevent your Athenian friends from doing wrong.”¹² In both views, aggression is unjust, and thus dishonorable, but the defense of freedom is closely tied to honor.

Another moral facet of Grecian honor was that of fulfilling obligations. When the Melians refused to capitulate to the Athenians, they placed their hope in their “alliance with the Spartans, who are bound, if for no other reason, than for honour’s sake ... to come to our help.”¹³ Their faith in the Spartans was based solely on the Spartans’ word, demonstrating that integrity was essential to honor. This can be traced to phrases today, such as the promise “On my honor.” In another instance, after the Spartans took the city of Plataea, they sent five judges to judge the city, which had been an ally of Athens. When the Plataeans defend themselves to the Spartan judges, they recount how Athens had aided them against Thebes when Sparta would not, and thus “it was no longer honourable for us to forsake them,” thereby justifying their relationship with Athens.¹⁴ Because they were indebted to the Athenians, the Plataeans could not in good conscience fight against them in the war. By including this in their defense, they clearly believed that the Spartans would respond favorably to their loyalty to their ally, even if it was Sparta’s

enemy. Thus, loyalty to comrades and allies, and integrity in fulfilling obligations to them became part of the moral facet of honor and was well understood throughout the Hellenic world.

The core of the concept of honor was still, of course, courage. When the Spartan commander Brasidas encourages his men before the battle of Amphipolis, he says, “Remember that what makes a good soldier is his readiness to fight, his sense of honour.”¹⁵ Lack of readiness to fight was not only dishonorable, it was intolerable. The Peloponnesian commanders warn their troops that no one had, “any excuse for playing the coward. Should anyone want to do so, he will be punished as he ought to be, but the brave shall be honoured with the rewards due to courage.”¹⁶ As in the *Iliad*, valor on the battle field was the most celebrated part of honor, and its want was the most disapproved of.

Selflessness was central to courage. In honor of the Athenian dead, Pericles said, “In the fighting, they thought it more honourable to stand their ground and suffer death than to give in and save their lives ... abiding with life and limb the brunt of battle.”¹⁷ The realities of battle were horrifying to the extreme, and to be able to stand and fight in the midst of death and chaos, no matter the personal cost, was the ultimate test of courage and the greatest honor. Recalling their own history fighting in the Persian war, the Plataeans say that they were “those who, instead of meeting the invasion by acting in the interests of their own safety, chose the path of daring, of danger, and of honour.”¹⁸ They well understood that greatest honor went to those who were selfless and courageous, putting themselves in harm’s way to do what is right. They believed this so deeply that it was the rhetoric they chose to defend their city and their very lives before the Spartan judges. Similarly, at the battle of Amphipolis when Brasidas encouraged his men, he says that the enemy had

no sense of shame about giving up a position under pressure. To run forwards and to run backwards are equally honourable in their eyes, and so their courage can

never really be tested, since, when every man is fighting on his own, there is always a good excuse for everyone saving his own skin.¹⁹ Once again, the dilemma of self-preservation or standing to fight is presented. In Brasidas' eyes, those who flee cannot have honor, because it is a fundamentally selfish act. The idea of selflessness bound together the honor of the state and the courage of the soldier by giving him something greater than himself to fight for.

Another facet of honor was self-control. Despite the Spartan's reputation for absolute ferocity, their king Archidamus says that the Spartans are "brave, because self-control is based upon a sense of honour, and honour is based on courage."²⁰ To Archidamus, these virtues were decisions, not qualities. Without control of self, a warrior could never face the horrors of battle with courage, and thus could not gain honor. In discussing whether or not to go to war with Athens, he counsels that the Spartans should "not be hurried, and in one short day's space come to a decision which will so profoundly affect ... the fates of cities and their national honour."²¹ Despite the strength of the Spartan's constant readiness for war, the decision was based upon how the war would affect the "national honor" of both their city, and others that would fight in the war. It was to protect this honor that Archidamus advised in favor of careful decision making.

The last facet of Grecian honor is perhaps the most obvious: glory. At the funeral for the Athenian dead, Pericles hailed their "good fortune - for men to end their lives with honour, as these have done, and for you [the people] honourably to lament them."²² As a statesman, Pericles granted public acclaim to the fallen, and praised those who did likewise. At the siege of Syracuse, the Athenian generals addressed their allies, saying that "we think that most of you are aware of the honour which we have won already and of the honour which remains to be won in the coming battle."²³ Here they are speaking of the acclaim and renown that their reputation as

warriors has won them. By referring to the battle ahead, they assert that the Athenians are as strong allies who will win more honors, and try and motivate their listeners to do the same.

The other side of glory is public shame. When a small group of cornered Spartans surrendered to their Athenian enemies, it sent shockwaves around the Hellenic world. The Spartans, known for their policy of never surrendering, were humiliated. Worse still the Spartans needed every man badly, and were thus compelled to negotiate for the hostages. Their emissaries in Athens told the Athenians that they wished to “try to come to an arrangement with you which will do you good and bring us, in our present plight, as much honour as can be expected in the circumstances.”²⁴ In light of their comrade’s surrender, Spartan honor was clearly in jeopardy. While honor could be won from fighting on the battlefield, it could be lost in a moment.

The Peloponnesian War demonstrated that honor had evolved from only personal to that of the state. Honor that had come from the gods now came from virtues such as loyalty, integrity, selflessness, and self-control. As with the *Iliad*, however, the essential part of honor was still courage on the battlefield.

Rome

Roman honor was based not just combat but contests of all kinds. The real test of character was how strongly one competed. Part of what made Rome such a force to be reckoned was that its people took this to heart. “The greatest source of power for the ancient Romans had been their willingness, singly and as a group, to compete strenuously,” says Carlin A. Barton, in her book *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones*.²⁵ When they did take to the battlefield, the Romans were a powerful fighting force indeed. Their values “were overwhelmingly those of a warrior culture. Soldiers of every status competed feverishly for the commendations, the

coronae, hastae, and armillae that recognized their courage and industry.”²⁶ Both warriors and civilians alike took part in contests to gain and test their honor.

Nothing equaled the Roman war machine in its day, in large part because of its soldiers’ collective mentality. On the battlefield, each man was part of the group, and that group took precedence over all else, even the life of the individual. Thus, a good Roman “above all ... willed himself to be expendable.”²⁷ The law of the Romans said that “soldiers must either vanquish or die, so that, according to Polybius, there might be no hope for survival in case of defeat.”²⁸ There was no room in the Roman warrior’s ethos for notions of retreat. Livy recalled a story seared into Roman memory of a group of soldiers at the Caudine Forks who were cornered surrendered to the enemy. At news of their surrender, all of Rome “went into deep mourning ... Such contempt did the Romans feel for the soldiers and their officers who had chosen to live that they wished to deny them admission to city and home.”²⁹ To surrender, or even to survive defeat was the ultimate capitulation and dishonor, a mortal sin in Rome.

The individualistic side to Roman honor was connected to the idea that one was “expendable.” Even when unnecessary, being prepared to face extreme danger “was acknowledged as the supreme manifestation of personal courage at Rome and that won the decorations for valor.”³⁰ In his book, *Imperatores Victi: Military Defeat and Aristocratic Competition in the Middle and Late Republic*, Nathan Rosenstein says,

the generals who deliberately placed themselves in danger, or who refused to surrender or even survive when all was lost, were admired more than the soldiers of the line, for theirs was the product of an individual decision, not something expected of them because they were part of a group.³¹

Part of the warrior ethos was *virtus*, the core of which, *vir*, Cicero summed up when he said, “Who, with the prospect of envy, death, and punishment staring him in the face, does not hesitate to defend the Republic, he truly can be reckoned a *vir*.”³² For a Roman, facing danger

was the test of courage, and thus of honor. Like the Greek ideal of selfless courage, the Roman ideal was “putting the dangerous and honorable before the salutary and expedient, ‘led by the splendor of honor without any thought for their own interest.’”³³ No Greek would have been able to fathom looking for an opportunity for unnecessary, extreme danger in the name of honor, but to the Romans, the virtues of a *vir* were everything.

The other side of honor was shame. “To have a sense of honor in ancient Rome was to have a sense of shame,” says Barton.³⁴ This was a more external quality, one in which other people’s opinions were of utmost importance. Thus, any insult would be keenly felt, and “the stories of Roman sensitivity to insult are legion.”³⁵ Shame was not, however, always considered a bad thing. Since shame was the opposite of honor, it was also the antidote to ego. It normalized a person in society by making them but one of the group instead of too outstanding. Even the triumph “shamed even as it honored.”³⁶

The shame of an individual was no great thing, but the shame of a city was something else entirely. If Rome was horrified at the result of the Caudine Forks, it was nothing compared to how they remembered the battle of Cannae. At this battle in the Punic Wars, Rome suffered the greatest defeat in Italian history, losing over 50,000 men in the course of a single day. Although the catastrophe was in large part due to the Roman commanders’ incompetence, Rome shunned the survivors of Cannae and sent them off to Sicily “in disgrace and inactivity.”³⁷ By daring to live when so many of their comrades had perished, the survivors were stripped of all honor. Livy’s Torquatus considered them irredeemable as soldiers and as men, and said to them: “Fifty thousand citizens and allies lay dead around you on that day. If so many *exempla virtutis* did not move you, nothing will ever move you; if such a disaster did not make you hold your lives cheaply, nothing will ever make you do so.”³⁸ Whether or not it was really the soldiers’

choice to die in such a way was beside the point. Despite the staggering number of dead, the Roman people blamed the survivors for coming back at all.

The shame the survivors felt was almost unbearable. Relegated to the quiet island of Sicily, there was no chance to redeem themselves on the battlefield, which only “compounded the disgrace” and “they pleaded for the chance to fight and die.”³⁹ They said,

It is neither an end to our disgrace nor a reward for our valor that we ask; only let us prove our spirit ... and exercise our courage ... We ask for hardship and danger that we might fulfill the office of soldiers and of men.”⁴⁰

Rome never forgot the losses, nor the disgrace of Cannae. Not only had they been thoroughly defeated, but the return of the unfortunate survivors shattered the city’s “vanquish or die” mentality, which to the people of Rome was unforgivable.

The Roman idea of honor was, like the Greeks’, both for the individual and for the state. Unlike with the Greeks, it came from upholding the ideal of victory or death, instead of virtues such as integrity or self-control. Roman honor was selfless in that a person’s life was supposed to be easily sacrificed for honor, but selfish in that they often sought out unnecessary opportunities to do so. Like their Greek predecessors, however, Romans found the core of their honor in courage on the battlefield, fighting and dying for their city. There too dwelt dishonor, should they fail and survive.

The Crusades

The rise of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire brought a new phase, and a new problem, into the understanding of honor. For the first time, the principles of Christianity were not only ostensibly held by the majority, but were used to rule nations. Christian doctrine, which emphasized love and forgiveness, needed to be adapted to governance, but one of the most indispensable tools of statecraft is war. In his book, *Honor: A History*, James Bowman states the problem succinctly: “In the early Middle Ages, Christianity was forced to come to terms with the

martial necessities of a chaotic and dangerous world.”⁴¹ The solution came in the form of a hero: the knight. The knight was, in theory, both a pious Christian and a warrior for God, “in spite of the pacifist tendency in Christian moral teaching.”⁴² Although the knight’s purpose revolved around Church, that did not mean he was without martial honor. Like the characters in the Iliad, a knight’s honor came from God. This meant that all earthly glory that a knight could attain must be subordinated to “a higher principle.”⁴³

The first and most sacred duty of the knight was to God. The principle reason of the Crusades in the Holy Land was “to avenge Jesus Christ’s dishonour and to conquer Jerusalem, if God so permits.”⁴⁴ These words were spoken by French barons asking the doge of Venice for ships to make a crusade to Jerusalem in 1197 A.D., recorded by Geoffrey of Villehardouin in his account of the Fourth Crusade, *The Conquest of Constantinople*. He and his compatriots saw the occupation of Jerusalem as not only an affront to Christianity, but an “injury” to Christ himself.⁴⁵ Although Christianity preaches peace, war to recover Jerusalem was considered the honorable course. When the doge of Venice approved the French barons’ request, he did so with the stipulation that the material for war be used “to do service to God and Christendom, wherever that might take us.”⁴⁶ Their “service,” took them ultimately not to Jerusalem, but to Constantinople, which they conquered instead. Villehardouin says, “there was great rejoicing inside Constantinople and among the pilgrims in their camp on account of the honour and victory God had granted them.”⁴⁷ The Crusaders believed God honored them because of their service to Him in conquering Constantinople. Thus, honor was earned by service to God through conquest.

Loyalty was an important component of honor during the Crusades. Villehardouin recalls a knight by the name of Nicholas of Jenlain, who when his lord was badly wounded in a battle, “mounted his horse and protected his lord very well, so well that he was highly praised as

a result.”⁴⁸ As with the Greeks and the Romans, Nicholas of Jenlain earned acclaim and honor through loyalty and courage in battle. Just as Roman soldiers were expected to subordinate their own lives and put the group ahead of themselves, so too was loyalty, especially in adversity, valued. Conversely, when a large part of the army wanted to desert during the journey, those who discovered the plot resolved to ask them to stay, and “beg them for God’s sake to take pity on themselves and on us, to resist dishonouring themselves and not to impede the delivery of the land overseas.”⁴⁹ Deserting both one’s comrades and one’s mission for God is seen as cowardly and greatly dishonoring. On the strength of that argument the would-be deserters were dissuaded. Loyalty to the cause and to one’s comrades was an indispensable part of honor.

As with all forms of martial honor, the crusaders’ honor was earned on the battlefield. Villehardouin tells a glowing tale of a knight named Geoffrey of Villehardouin, who coincidentally has exactly the same name as he does. No mention of this anomaly is made, however, as Villehardouin continues to sing his own praises in third person. He says:

Geoffrey heard that the marquis was laying siege to Nauplia and set out to join him with as many men as he could muster. In great danger he rode across the country for six days until he arrived at the besieging army’s camp, where he was very warmly welcomed and shown great honour by the marquis himself and by the other people there. They were right to do so, for Geoffrey of Villehardouin was very worthy, very valiant, and an able knight.⁵⁰

Villehardouin stakes his claim to honor on the fact that he placed himself in “great danger” to come to the aid of his allies. This attributes to him both loyalty and courage, which would of course make him so worthy, valiant, and able. While this self-flattery seems at first glance to be ridiculous, it is significant that out of all the ways he could have chosen to record himself in history, these are the principles to which he appeals to make himself seem as grand as possible to the reader. This demonstrates how important courage was in the judgment of honor.

Conversely, cowardice brought dishonor. Villehardouin recounts a battle in which the Marquis Boniface of Montferrat was killed, and when his men saw him dying, “they began to lose heart and despair, and their sense of proper conduct started to falter... his men began to panic and to flee,” and thus they were defeated.⁵¹ Although a critique of “proper conduct” is much less harsh than what Romans might have said, the fact remains that cowardice was equated with dishonor, and in this case defeat.

The Crusaders unified the idea from the *Iliad* that honor comes from God with the later Greeks’ concept of virtue. For the Crusaders, the core virtues expected of the honorable knight were loyalty and duty to God. As with their predecessors, the fundamental origin of honor continued to derive from courage on the battlefield.

Victorian Europe

With the end of the medieval period and the coming of the Enlightenment, the idea of honor once again began to change. By the early 1700s, society had a new consciousness of honor. In his 1732 book, *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour and the Usefulness of Christianity in War*, Englishman Bernard Mandeville contemplates the meaning and uses of honor. In defining the word, he says it is a “Compliment we make to Those who act, have, or are what we approve of.”⁵² Honor was a good thing, and its conference an effective way to express approval of someone. A person of honor is defined by “Courage and Intrepidity [which] always were, and ever will be the grand Characteristick of a Man of Honour.”⁵³ The core of the idea of honor remained the same in that courage was still the best test of honor. Mandeville reaffirms that a man of honor is “brave in War, and dares to fight against the Enemies of his Country.”⁵⁴ As in the Peloponnesian War, both courage and service to the state are essential parts of honor.

They were not, however, all there was to it, as Mandeville warns that courage “is this Part of the Character only.”⁵⁵ For Mandeville, the label of honor “signifies likewise a Principle of Courage, Virtue, and Fidelity.”⁵⁶ As in the ancient cultures, loyalty and righteous conduct were considered important facets of honor. It is clear that in the words “Courage, Virtue, and Fidelity,” that the core of the concept of honor was much the same as the Greek’s concept. The opposite of honor, shame, and its ability to motivate are acknowledged as well, in that “the Fear of Shame may act as powerfully upon bad Men, as it can upon good.”⁵⁷ Thus far, the idea of honor was much the same as it had been in ages past.

The difference came with the Victorian concept of “the ‘Christian gentleman’-a man of honor yet one who owed allegiance to a universal and ethical and not just a local and honorable standard.”⁵⁸ Like the knight, the Christian gentleman owed much of his honor to religion and virtue. Because Europe’s religious wars were winding down, however, “honor was no longer at odds with a Christian and democratic society’s other value systems.”⁵⁹ Honor became associated with the upper class, and thus it became “the way to virtue and social distinction.”⁶⁰ As with many societies, the position of those at the top is jealously defended, and it was perhaps this defense which gave rise to one of the Victorian era’s most distinctive features: the duel.

Mandeville says that a man of honor must “be ready to engage in private Quarrels, tho’ the Laws of God and his Country forbid it. He must bear no Affront without resenting it, nor refuse a challenge, if it be sent to him in a proper Manner by a Man of Honour.”⁶¹ As the Romans were sensitive to insult in their contest culture, so too was a person of honor expected to defend it if insulted. While the duel had originated as a judicial process to decide which of two contesting parties’ grievances was just, it was replaced by the duel for honor in the late fourteenth century.⁶² Victorian Europe took the concept of insult to honor much further than

even the Romans did. In his article “The Code of Honor in *fin-de-siècle* Austria: Arthur Schnitzler’s Rejection of the ‘Duellzwang,’” A. Clive Roberts says that “the concept of honor was most dangerous in that it was something of which another person could deprive one through insult. Only through combat (a duel) could this sense of honor ... be restored.”⁶³ In Victorian Europe, there was much of such combat.

The Prussian army was especially infamous for duels between its officers from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. This was in part because an institution called the “Ehrengericht” was created by the Prussian cabinet in 1843 “to determine under which circumstances military honor had been sufficiently offended to warrant the fighting of a duel.”⁶⁴ This legalized and institutionalized the practice of dueling in the Prussian army and in civilian society. It made defense of one’s honor of paramount importance, pairing the idea of honor with mortal combat off the battlefield. Although encouraging one’s soldiers to kill each other over insults and slights seems counter-productive, it was thought that in periods of extended peacetime, “the duel satisfied the need for an outlet of physical aggression and also provided a means of toning up the soldiers’ courage and weapons skills. In essence the duel represented a peacetime alternative to war.”⁶⁵ Rowdy soldiers have always been a threat to the peace, and in extreme circumstances to the survival of the state. Duels kept soldiers occupied and personally motivated to keep their martial skills sharp. Although duels had the potential to fragment “army cohesion,” this was not the case in Prussia. Duels were part of the army’s code of honor which was itself cohesive in that it promoted an *esprit de corps*, and pride among the men of the army.⁶⁶ Despite the fact soldiers were killing each other, duels actually helped the army stay unified.

The type of honor defended in a duel was highly personal, not that of group or the state. As such, under this system, it was taken to an extreme. As the main character in Arthur Schnitzler's *Lieutenant Gustl* discovers, if it is impossible to exact satisfaction for an insult in the form a duel, then the insulted soldier is expected to commit suicide rather than endure an insult to his honor.⁶⁷ This led some in Prussian society, such as Schnitzler, to question what had now become the institution of honor and its usefulness in the military and in society. For a peacetime army, virtue that had to be won in combat became more of a blight than a boon.

Although the Victorian idea of honor had many of the same characteristics as honor had in the past (virtue, religion, and courage), it was, in practice, very different. Dueling made the practice of honor highly personalized and extreme. Like the Romans, Victorians were sensitive to insult and sought honor in life-and-death situations of their own making. This type of personal honor was soon to end, however, with the coming of the war to end all wars.

The Great War

“Opinions will always differ as to whether the Great War could or should have been prevented. But one conclusion is undeniable: the ideals of chivalry worked with open accord in favour of war.”⁶⁸ - Mark Girouard

For many people, the death of honor came with World War I. The horrors of trench warfare, poison gas, and casualties in the millions made the Great War a reality worse than anyone could previously have imagined. In many ways the beginning of the war was much like other European wars had been, based in part on the honor of countries being offended. No one could have anticipated the horrific consequences of the application of twentieth century technology to a nineteenth century conflict. The lack of rules regulating the new and deadly technologies and styles of warfare was one of the most shocking things to the people of the day. Bowman says that “Victorian honor culture ... gave us the idea ... of fair play as it applied to warfare. Unfortunately, the idea of ‘fighting fair’ also helped inflame passions among

belligerents.”⁶⁹ A country that did not fight fair did not have honor by the Victorian definition. The war had become, however, not just a contest between states, but a struggle for survival. No one could afford to fight fair.

It was at this time that some of the most powerful critiques of honor began to appear. In his wartime writings, Schnitzler criticized “the false notion of honor, at the same time demonstrating the parallel between the duel and war.”⁷⁰ He fundamentally rejected the notion that the honor of an individual or a country can be offended by another. Honor, he believed, “can be lost only through one’s actions.”⁷¹ Schnitzler’s version of honor is the property of the individual, not society, which was the antithesis of the Victorian age’s honor. By the war’s end, the tide of opinion on the idea of honor had ebbed to an all-time low. Honor was blamed for causing the war, which “created a wave of revulsion against honor in Europe and America,” the effects of which are still felt today.⁷²

Despite its overall effect on honor, one of the most famous aspects of World War I was the air battles. The famous “Knights of the Air,” as the pilots were known, were said to have flown and fought with chivalry and honor that is remembered even today. This, in part, was due to the traditions of the pilots themselves. German pilot Baron von Richthofen, popularly known as the Red Baron, was perhaps the most famous flying ace of the war. In his journal he recorded an air battle against Britain’s top ace, Major Lanoe George Hawker, saying that “the gallant fellow was full of pluck, and when we had got down to about 3,000 feet he merrily waved at me as if to say, Well, how do you do?”⁷³ The gallantry and strange friendliness recorded in Richthofen’s account was part of the emerging legend of the Knights of the Air, who were a world apart from the horror of the war below.

In this world, honor was not something reserved for one side or the other. Britain lost its best pilot the day Richthofen shot down Major Hawker, whose plane crashed behind German lines. In a mark of deepest respect for Hawker, he was “given a burial with full military honors by Richthofen’s flying mates.”⁷⁴ Although he did not attend the funeral, “Richthofen personally dropped a note from the air behind the English lines addressed to Hawker’s comrades of the Royal Flying Corps,” to notify them of Hawker’s death and “expressing the widespread admiration of German air-men for him as an exceptionally brave airman and a chivalrous foe.”⁷⁵ The English too, observed this practice, by dropping wreaths over the German lines with the inscription ““To the memory of Captain Boelcke, our brave and chivalrous foe,”” one of Germany’s top pilots who had died in combat.⁷⁶ Perhaps the reason these extraordinary traditions are remembered is the contrast in which they stood to battle on the ground, where life was cheap and men died horrible deaths every minute. To value and honor the life of an enemy bestowed honor upon both sides, because to value life was a way to retain one’s humanity in the most deadly war the world had ever seen.

The reality for the pilots, however, was just as dangerous as it was for soldiers on the ground. Casualties were so high that for the British “the life of the average pilot in the fall of 1916 was three weeks.”⁷⁷ Quentin Reynolds, in his book *They Fought for the Sky*, writes that “There was no more ghastly death than to be caught in a flaming machine of wires, wood and fabric at ten thousand feet, and each side respected the other because each faced the same destruction.”⁷⁸ The respect the pilots gave each other underlines their understanding of exactly how dangerous their job was. Fighting in the air required a mentality in which

You either accepted the spurious but comforting belief that you were invulnerable, or the alternative—that it was merely a matter of time before your turn came. If you accepted the latter, you were passing a death sentence on

yourself, for such an attitude slowed your reflexes in combat and clouded your judgement.⁷⁹ Thus, in many ways the chivalric attitude pilots had towards each other, and the seemingly arrogant regard in which they held themselves, were two sides to the same coin. Each was a facet of the pilots' attempts to come to terms with how close to their own mortality they were. In this sense, honor came from a close proximity to death and an intimate awareness of that fact.

One of the most famous acts of heroism, and subsequent embodiments of honor, in the war was performed by Corporal Alvin York, who received the Medal of Honor. He grew up in the mountains of Tennessee in a very religious household, and initially opposed being sent to fight in Europe because he believed that God called him to be a pacifist. Together with his company captain, he found a passage in the Bible that said, “If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight,” to which York said “All right; I’m satisfied,” and went to war.⁸⁰ Before he could fight, York had to see for himself both the justice and the “righteousness” of the war.⁸¹ York’s personal honor and his decision to go to war hinged upon sense of right and wrong, and of duty to God. Like the Crusaders and the Victorians, the basis of York’s actions and thought, and thus his honor, was his religion.

While in Europe, Corporal York captured by himself 132 German prisoners in the forest of Argonne after single-handedly fighting “a battalion of German machine gunners until he made them come down that hill to him with their hands in the air.”⁸² It was for this action that he was awarded the Medal of Honor, and is still one of the most renowned war heroes in the United States today. When he commended York, Major-General C.P. Summerall said:

I desire to express to you my pleasure and commendation for the courage, skill, and gallantry which you displayed on that occasion. It is an honor to command such soldiers as you. Your conduct reflects great credit not only upon the American army, but on the American people. Your deeds will be recorded in the history of this great war and they will live as an inspiration not only to your comrades but to the generations that will come after us⁸³

Here Summerall demonstrates that the idea of honor during World War I was actually much the same as it had been throughout history. Central to honor was still “courage,” on the battlefield.

The honor that York had won applied not only to himself, but to the army and his country. Honor was still something held both collectively and individually, and the honor of one reflected on the honor of the other.

Although the reputation of honor suffered greatly because of the war, its survival was due in large part to the feats of such soldier’s whose heroism kept it alive. The Knights of the Air retained a sense of honor through gallantry and honoring even one’s enemies, as well as through the raw nerve it took to fight air battles. York’s contribution to honor came from both his dedication to religious ideals and his courage on the battlefield. Although damaged and battered by the war, the central themes of honor survived.

Today

In the nearly one hundred years after the Great War, honor has suffered through a second world war, the Cold War and its many proxy conflicts, and more recently the War on Terror.

Today, honor has many qualities ascribed to it. A person of honor is “‘honest and true,’ someone who is above all else consistent ... He or she is committed to a code that admits no exceptions.”⁸⁴

For soldiers and civilians alike, the idea of honor has become inexorably linked to the ideas of truth and justice, and the idea that these ideals ought never to be surrendered. Barton says, “what is ‘honorable’ in our Euro-American culture is also ‘just,’ and there is a perfect consonance between justice and the just and honorable person.”⁸⁵ Part of that duty to truth and justice means that honor is now a very individual idea, in which “‘character and honor depend upon a man’s own life and conduct; not upon what another may say of him. Armed with truth and backed up by common sense, he is well nigh invulnerable.”⁸⁶ Gone are the days when dueling to defend

one's honor is an acceptable means to solve a conflict. The honor of today has stronger connections with virtue than ego.

Honor continues to be recognized as both an individual and a collective quality. Personal honor is now solely a product of one's actions. This entails the idea of "dignity: a dispassionate demeanor, faultless self-possession, and a private reserve of security that ensures [people's] autonomy even while allowing their faithful and voluntary submission to the laws of their code."⁸⁷ It is each person's responsibility to uphold their own ideals and honor in the way that is best to them. In organizations, especially the military, individual honor still reflects on the group, and vice versa. Listed first under its "Core Values," the United States Marine Corps says of honor that "Marines are held to the highest standards, ethically and morally. Respect for others is essential. Marines are expected to act responsibly in a manner befitting the title they've earned."⁸⁸ Today, the honor of the soldier, citizen, and country all depend on their actions in defense of moral values.

The legacy of honor in warfare still revolves around courage in the face of adversity. Like the ancient Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Victorians, and soldiers of the Great War, the greatest military honor is given for great deeds on the battlefield. Honor includes the ideas of loyalty and self-sacrifice because it places the needs of the group before the needs of one's self. From the Christian moral tradition there is an emphasis on truth and justice associated with honor and the dedication to uphold those ideals. Today, honor is the intersection of courage and moral conduct to which soldiers and civilians alike still aspire.

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