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Courage as a Virtue in the History of Military Pilots

Virtues that are important to societies and that can come to the foreground in our everyday lives and define us – such as courage, honour, and loyalty – have been of outstanding importance both in the past and in the present, where they are considered fundamental and essential virtues for the practice of the military profession. Nowadays, although honour and loyalty can be influenced, courage is based on the personality of the individual, a quality that can be learned and developed. It is an indispensable element of the military career, as our greatest historical role models also achieved military successes thanks to this virtue.

Keywords: virtue, courage, pilot, helicopter, instinct, ability

1. Introduction

Courage – in a more general sense – is the initiative required for someone to start and carry out an action. In the absence of courage, our ability to act decreases, and in some cases, it can increase to complete incapacity. Military courage is a special and unique virtue because it involves high risk, since the chance that the individual will die or be seriously injured is significantly higher. A dangerous situation causes fear and if this prevails, we speak of cowardice, but the lack of cowardice is not the same as courage. On the other hand, a person who is unaware of the danger of a situation is reckless, so it is between courage, cowardice and recklessness. We can also talk about the definition of natural courage, which is a response to a seriously dangerous situation, both instinctive and conscious, to deal with the danger. However, if we consider that this ability can be developed (artificial courage), then its central elements are learning, obedience and discipline. The acquisition of all virtues is based on some sort of learning. Before learning, various dangerous situations arouse fear in a person, by getting to know them and reacting to them, the fear disappears, and one can learn when to be afraid and when not to be afraid. Patriotism is a positive emotion directed towards the homeland with moral value, which not only justifies, but also motivates the performance of certain actions. In the case of courage related to this virtue, although the brave person may react to the situation with serious fear, the protection of moral goals encourages him to perform brave actions [2], [3], [4].

The battles and wars of human history, expressed in the time interval of our existence, were mostly characterised by land clashes, air force and air battles are a mere fraction of this period. Thus, the concept of courage was also linked to the character of such heroes, determined and unshakable people. Determination and willingness to act were rewarded

with orders or decorations in almost all armed forces without exception, but it is important to note that the spiritual mentality of the individual was never developed due to the desire to accumulate medals. An extremely good illustrative example of this is one of the heroes of World War II who received the Medal of Honor, although he never held a gun in his hand. Desmond Thomas Doss (7 February 1919 – 23 March 2006) although he received a military deferment when the United States entered World War II, he still chose to join the army. He later said, "I felt it was an honor to serve my country as my conscience dictated" [1]. Despite his strong religious beliefs, he wanted to be a conscientious co-operator rather than a conscientious objector, so he requested a transfer to the front. Doss served in the 307th Infantry Regiment of the 77th Infantry Division, where he was subjected to much ridicule and abuse for his refusal to bear arms. Despite this, during the fierce fighting in Okinawa that began on 29 April 1945, he rescued an estimated 75 people on the first day from heavy machine gun and artillery fire. But he also performed many other acts of heroism during the war that earned him the distinction of being one of the few people to receive a medal from the White House (Figure 1) [1], [6].

In my opinion, this is the ultimate manifestation of natural, instinctive courage. Faith was a bulwark for him that helped him overcome his mental barriers to the extent that he was able to put his survival instinct aside in order to protect the safety of others. If we consider that despite the continuous emotional attacks from his platoon mates and commanders, he persevered with his ideals, he can be called an even more heroic and courageous person.



Figure 1.
Desmond Thomas Doss, the unarmed soldier, shaking hands with President Harry S. Truman [1]

The courage that emerged with the advent of the air force is a quality that is made quite special by the ability to make responsible decisions, quickly assess the situation and manage stress. Pilots are most often faced with situations where they have to make quick and accurate decisions, so they carry a great deal of responsibility on their shoulders. While a civilian pilot is responsible for the lives of his passengers, a military pilot is responsible for the lives of himself and his comrades, as well as for the plane, so that they return safely from a mission or task. Military pilots also have to deal with the unknown. In certain situations, when operations have to be carried out in unsecured areas at extreme speeds, close to the ground or with hair-raising manoeuvres, it also means that they have to be brave in expanding and pushing their own limits. One of the foundations of their faith is their calmness. In order to make the right decision, they have to remain calm and clear-sighted. These skills could have been learned and developed through various training courses, but they could also have been due to their inner strength and individual, unique attitude.

2. From the early flights to World War II

The experimenters and pilots who carried out the first flights were among the bravest, as they truly faced the unknown. Without them, the world of aviation would not be where it is today. When aviation technology was developing, engineers and developers did not have prior experience, studies or pilots with thousands of hours of flight time; they could only rely on their own ideas. This made it difficult in many cases to find candidates who were willing to face even death for the sake of the development of science. The first combat use of aircraft took place in the Italo-Turkish War in 1911. These missions showed that aircraft could be suitable for combat use, so the tactical development of aircraft increased dramatically thereafter.

In World War I, the air also became a battlefield. Between 1914 and 1918, aviation developed rapidly, and by the end of the war, the air force emerged as a separate branch of the armed forces. At first, airplanes only performed reconnaissance tasks, but they soon realised that ground troops were defenceless from above, and taking advantage of this, the crews of the planes began to use bombs and hand grenades against them. The first air battle took place on 4 October 1914. A French pilot shot down a German plane with his handgun, after which the development of airborne weapons gained new momentum. The weapons were first mounted on the wings, but their designs were not optimal and effective enough. Later, they were mounted above the engine, so they could achieve more effective fire control. The development of air combat was made possible and effective by the intermittently controlled machine gun designed by the Dutch designer Fokker, which allowed the machine gun mounted on the engine cowling to work well even with a rotating propeller and to allow proper aiming. During World War I, aviation progressed by leaps and bounds. Engine power increased from 60–80 hp to 280–300 hp, flight speed from 80 km/h to 220 km/h, maximum altitude from 2000 m to 4000–7000 m, range from 40 km to 200–800 km, and bomb load from zero to 700–1000 kg [11], [12].



Figure 2.

József Kiss Ittebei, one of the most successful Hungarian ace pilots, nicknamed the "knight of the air" [9]

Over time, a class of flying aces emerged, they were the pilots who won the most air battles. According to popular belief, the purity and chivalrous nature of air combat contrasted with the battles fought in the trenches, which mostly disregarded honour (Figure 2) [9].

In reality, however, it is more nuanced than that, as the air battles were also cruel, merciless and, leaving aside chivalry, they did everything they could to win. Most of the "aces" hunted down lone scouts or novice pilots. It can be said that the pilots of World War I were brave, even if some of them only hunted novice pilots. More than once, they were forced to carry out several missions a day, even if their planes were damaged. Their courage is proven by the fact that they most often went into the unknown, working with dangerous and undeveloped technology in an even more dangerous environment waiting to be discovered. They could never be sure whether they would return after the fight.

The years after World War I were not favourable for either the pilot or the aircraft production. The market had no takers, it was choked, the previous production volume became redundant. In the first year after the war, the production volume in the USA fell to 328 units, many companies in Europe went bankrupt. The victorious powers introduced a flight ban throughout Hungary. Only a fraction of the pilots remained in military service and an even smaller part of them remained in aviation. One of the greatest achievements was the flight around the world in 1924. Among the flying heroes was the first female pilot, who flew across the Atlantic Ocean in 1932 in 15 hours. During this period, a high degree of courage in flight was also necessary, since now it was not the fighting that caused difficulties in many cases, but the poor instrumentation. The pilots "flew with their bottoms", instinctively keeping the plane balanced, and although a rudimentary artificial horizon was already on board, many did not yet trust it, and as a result, many fatal accidents occurred.

In World War II, the air force had already played a decisive role, and the skies were once again the domain of the brave. They carried out their operations with more modern weapons, more sophisticated flying techniques and flight procedures, but air defence had also developed a lot over the years. Airplanes were also introduced to new tasks, landing operations appeared, where pilots were put under extra pressure to be responsible for more people and needed even more courage, mainly due to the modernised air defence, as they most often flew behind enemy lines and carried out their tasks.

It can be seen that the work of war pilots required a lot of extra qualities, courage, perseverance, tolerance for monotony, a high degree of concentration and an outstanding sense of responsibility. In addition, up to now, instinct was the determining factor, not the checklists of the given types. There was no time to consider, the experience, daring and intuition of the individual were the only guiding factors [5].

3. From the Cold War to the regime change

The post-war period was largely dominated by Soviet ideology, reflecting the broader geopolitical environment and influence of the time. Soldiers were expected to embody and profess virtues aligned with the communist ideology, such as discipline, loyalty, and commitment to the state and party. This gave rise to the concept of "communist autonomy", which highlighted a disciplined and ideologically driven approach to military service. This emphasised not only obedience, but a deeper ideological acceptance of the principles of socialism. Its aim was to foster a sense of collective consciousness in soldiers, relegating the individual to the background.

Collective, team thinking has always been important to pilots, since (similarly to many other branches of arms) the effectiveness of the missions was largely determined by how much the reconnaissance, fighter and bomber teams could trust each other during the offensive. Although Eastern technology lagged behind its Western counterparts, the new direction to follow tended towards learning the development of aircraft. More precise and accurate radars, weapons and instruments appeared one after another, so the pilots also had to constantly adapt. The Hungarian aircraft fleet was experiencing its golden age at that time. In the rotary-wing line, for example, from the 1980s onwards, there were 40 Mi-24D and Mi-24V attack helicopters and nearly 70 Mi-8 transport helicopters. We can witness a fleet of similar size today thanks to the Zrínyi 2026 defence and military development programme [7], [8], [10].

It is important to note that many pilots – who graduated in the Soviet Union during this period – are still active today and are serving with the best of their knowledge. The sense of responsibility, commitment and passion they have for their careers are so outstanding that advanced technology alone would not be enough without them. This seems to be reflected in the training of the new generation. The knowledge base, selfless helpfulness and the highest level of courage that these pilots show are difficult to teach and transfer to today's youth, and this is partly due to their upbringing, training, and the ideas and perceptions of that time. Pilot courage and camaraderie were able to take root so deeply that time could not erode them. There were no mobile phones, no social media, only mutual respect and learning from each other. Only in this way could they develop such a level of courage, heroism and self-confidence that helped them through everything. They trusted each other and their plane. Although the technological development of the time was advancing rapidly, there were still no life-saving devices that could be considered 100% certain. While during the great wars, although life-saving devices were present, the most common outcome was death (courage here meant heroic death), the appearance of more advanced devices in the period close to the regime change perhaps put them in a new light. The pilots were trying to save the plane and the crew until the penultimate moment (they were not driven by further destruction of the enemy or glory) and for this reason it may have required even more determination to hold out until the final moment, before the situation became unmanageable.

4. Moral issues of our day

After the change of regime, a strong stagnation was noticeable in the domestic pilot training. Universal pilot training ceased, and was replaced by external and internal recruits.¹ These candidates were recruited into the Air Force within the framework of the NFTC programme and began their training. However, just as the training system, the mentality, attitude and commitment of the emerging generations have also taken a new turn. Generation Y (born between 1984–1994) and the first quarter of Generation Z (born between 1995–2009) can be said to be young people who have not yet fully fallen victim to the digital world. As they say, the world is constantly changing and everyone must adapt to this, otherwise there is a risk of social exclusion. As digitalisation gained ground, new and new professions and fields of expertise emerged, and this in itself brought the opportunity for young people not to have to choose a lifelong profession and live in a rut, but to be able to change and move around the world at any time. For this very reason, the current generation's commitment to a chosen profession has significantly decreased. In contrast to the patriotism and determination of the old days, where the soldier (be it land or air force) chose the defence forces as a lifelong profession and built his own career throughout his life, in today's fast-paced world, learning a new profession no longer takes an entire career, but only a few months or years, so the idea of changing careers is not so terrifying. For this reason, courage as a trait can no longer be interpreted in the same way as it used to be. In the 21st century, courage, in my opinion, can be defined as a kind of perseverance to realise the dreams we have conceived and not be deterred by obstacles.

In terms of navigation, the new types arriving with the modernisation of the military forces can give a favourable direction to the pilots of the future, so that they too can embody this courage. It must be stated that society is moving towards technologies based on virtual reality, so the image of the modern defence forces can also be completed by applying these technologies. The new types meet these requirements, so they can be attractive to those who are about to choose a career. However, this requires an upbringing very early, right from childhood, where the supporting background is ensured along with perseverance in the chosen career path.

In addition, various simulators can greatly enhance the courage that can be learned and developed. In terms of education, there are many options available at home, such as the Digital Combat Simulator or Microsoft Flight Simulator.² Pairing software with VR technology can result in a level of skill improvement that was previously unimaginable. Not only in terms of flight skills, but also in terms of stress management or the ability to act. Let us think about the reaction time in certain dangerous situations, when you need to recognise the seriousness of the situation or simply cope with the stress of performing under intense pressure. In practice, some of the scenarios listed here will also be successfully implemented by applying the individual's learned courage, because today's modern machines do not require immediate action ("First reaction, no reaction" principle³), but rather the sequence of actions expected by the manufacturer (or operator) must be followed. These are called checklists, which can

¹ NATO Flying Training in Canada.

² Virtual Reality.

³ First reaction, no reaction principle: The first reaction is to not react (to rush) and remain calm.

be practiced perfectly in a simulator. In this way, a subconscious sense of security develops in modern pilots and, at the right time and in the right situation, they will act as they have been instructed and as they have learned. Their courage can therefore be interpreted as a conscious resistance to immediate haste and the preservation of composure in a risky situation.

5. Summary

Ultimately, it can be stated that the definition and meaning of human qualities largely depend on the spirit of the era, technological development and geopolitical situation. On a military level, the great wars and battles of the eras have placed certain character traits in different approaches and judgments, so it cannot be said that courage, determination or even recklessness must mean the same thing in every era. This is also true for the 21st century, where it is important to rethink these adjectives. It is important to note that this change will continue in the future, so they will have to be reinterpreted from time to time. In this way, perhaps a kind of change in perception can be brought about not only on a military level, but also socially, which will put certain human qualities in a new light.

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A bátorság mint erény a katonai pilóták történetében

A társadalmak számára fontos erényeknek, amelyek a minden napjaink folyamán előtérbe kerülhetnek és meghatározhatnak bennünket – mint a bátorság, a becsület és a hőség – kiemelkedő jelentőségük van a múltban és a jelenben egyaránt, ahol a katonai hivatás gyakorlásához nélkülözhetetlen alapvető erényeknek számítanak. Napjainkban a becsület és a hőség bár befolyásolható, azonban a bátorság az egyén személyisége alapszik, tanulható és fejleszthető tulajdonság. A katonai pálya elengedhetetlen eleme, hiszen legnagyobb történelmi példaképeink is eme erényüknek köszönhetően értek el hadtörténeti sikereket.

Kulcsszavak: erény, bátorság, pilóta, helikopter, ösztön, képesség

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