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Epic tale of facing up to Achilles heel **Lt Col Ted Westhusing and Tom Palaima**

Lady Luck can be a great ally - or foe, as US cadets found by simulating the battles of the Iliad. Lt Col Ted Westhusing and Tom Palaima report.

If you have seen Brad Pitt as Achilles in Wolfgang Petersen's film *Troy*, you might wonder what Homer possibly has to say to future US Army officers. Petersen's Achilles is a comic-book character, an action figure like Jackie Chan. *New Yorker* film critic David Denby accurately describes Petersen's Achilles as a "glory freak". When Petersen's Achilles is asked what motivates him, he says he wants more. But movie-goers never learn what that more is for Homeric warriors. It is *timé*, public honour bestowed as social payment for service rendered to the community.

Petersen's Achilles is also not the Achilles who recently visited the United States Military Academy at West Point, along with Hector and other Homeric warriors, to teach vital lessons to future officers who will lead troops in real combat against real enemies.

Last autumn, Tom Palaima, professor of classics at the University of Texas at Austin, Achilles and the *Iliad* were invited into Lieutenant-Colonel Ted Westhusing's senior seminar on warrior conceptions and his second-year philosophy course on the morality of war. Achilles is seen first as the most successful allied Greek warrior-commander in the field. He alone steps forward and tactfully, then forcefully confronts the commander-in-chief Agamemnon after Agamemnon has made decisions that have jeopardised the safety of the troops and the success of his campaign.

The Greek coalition is ten years into a protracted campaign. To supply the troops, Achilles has successfully conducted 23 siege operations against surrounding towns. Achilles is broken by Agamemnon's public insults and abuse of power. He withdraws himself and his contingent of soldiers from combat and sticks to his resolve, even as the Greeks suffer serious reversals. The loss of his closest friend, Patroclus, whom Achilles sent forward into battle, reduces Achilles to such abject grief that he is placed on suicide watch. He then moves out as the killing machine we see in Petersen's film, but with a laser-focused desire for revenge that is not sated even when he has killed Hector, commander-in-chief of the Trojan forces, and mutilated his body. When Hector's father, Priam, king of Troy, approaches Achilles as a suppliant for his son's corpse, Achilles finally recognises the common humanity of his enemy. He suppresses his still volatile rage and returns Hector's body.

The myths of Achilles and Hector, opposing leaders of offensive and defensive armies, are what the Greeks used to acculturate their young citizens to the grim realities of warfare. The *Iliad* taught the Greeks everything there was to know about war: bravery, cowardice, strategic

brilliance, strategic stupidity, bad luck, good luck, fog, clarity, honour, depravity, bloodlust and killing in defence of women and children and civilised ways of life. The Trojans and Hector are presented humanly and sympathetically throughout. All these things are still good lessons for officers in the field.

In the spring, Achilles and the *Iliad* returned to West Point. Developing out of a Discovery Channel documentary on warfare in the *Iliad*, several members of the West Point Class of 2004 fought Achilles and Hector in virtual reality. During battle simulations, a team of four cadets re-fought the Trojan War on the Scamander Plain.

The cadets simulated Hector's Great Day of Success (*Iliad*, Books 8-16), when the Trojans and their allies take advantage of Achilles' absence to punch forward into the Greek encampment and set fire to Greek ships. They also simulated Achilles' Day of Revenge (Books 19-22), when the Greeks counterattack with Achilles in a murderous rage. At one point, Achilles' pitiless mayhem engorges the River Scamander with dead Trojans, and the Scamander joins forces with the Simoeis River to overwhelm Achilles.

Discounting purely mythological elements and using data about troop strength, freshness or fatigue, equipment, terrain and positioning, and command strategies, the simulations demonstrated that these two major engagements might have played out just as Homer vividly depicted them. Yet these West Point cadets learnt much more. They learnt about the challenges of asymmetric warfare - that is, how dissimilarities in organisation, equipment, doctrine, capabilities and values between opposing armed forces (formally organised or not) might affect the outcome of engagements.

For Cadet George Feagins, the *Iliad* simulation has affected the way he is approaching preparation for conditions in Afghanistan or Iraq. In *Iliad*, Book 10, for example, Diomedes and Odysseus execute a daring raid deep into Trojan territory to try to determine the enemy array. Feagins may soon lead similarly high-risk combat operations. Cadet Dan Delargy, in his simulation, was struck by how few casualties were caused by the sword. He had expected far more, given the determined lethality rates of the sword, javelin and arrow in Homeric hand-to-hand combat.

For their professor, Paul West, a major lesson for the cadets was a "pattern of problem-solving far outside the comfort boundaries of traditional thinking". His cadets created from scratch a virtual city and its surrounding terrain, using archaeological data and satellite terrain imagery, much like those they may create for operations in Fallujah or Najaf. They also crafted a weapons database for "unconventional" weaponry such as the Homeric arrow, sword, spear and rock - much like creating databases for suicide bombers, car bombers, improvised explosive devices and the like. According to West: "They will take this forward thinking into the future defence of our society."

But, as West notes, perhaps the greatest war-fighting lesson reinforced for these soon-to-be-commissioned lieutenants was that "reality may occasionally be a statistical outlier - what really happens in combat may be that one-in-a-million chance". Hector, for example, died during one

simulation of his Great Day of Success. And Patroclus did not die every time he pressed forward to the walls of Troy against Achilles' wishes.

Luck is an all-important factor in war for individual soldiers and commanders. Napoleon understood the role of luck or chance and exploited it. War historian David Chandler saw Napoleon's mastery of chance as one of the keys to his success: "Accident, hazard, chance, call it what you may, a mystery to ordinary minds becomes a reality to superior men."

Achilles, in contrast, never completely grasps the import of chance.

Despite his anxieties about Patroclus, Achilles never imagines he will not return alive with Achilles' armour intact. Nor could Achilles foresee Priam's embassy and the effect it would have on restoring his own humanity.

The question worth asking, then, is why.

As the scholar James Redfield argues, Achilles, despite his status as the "best of the Achaeans", has no reference points other than his heroic society and its supreme measures of value - *timé*, or public honour, and *kleos*, or fame. No hero in Homer's *Iliad* transcends his preoccupation with individually achieved glory. Achilles responds almost by rote to the circumstances he confronts. He is unreflective by habit and disposition, and he shows little self-knowledge of the morally constraining social roles he occupies. He is aware only of his magnificent prowess in battle.

Achilles possessed an unmatched capacity to employ force decisively. If Achilles were in uniform today, he would know everything about the tactics, techniques and procedures of warfare. He would possess a dominating war-fighting competence. He would lead from the front in every warrior skill. He would be absolutely fearless on any terrain, in any circumstance and against any foe. He would be supremely self-conscious of his prowess as a warrior, displaying a confident air that would no doubt inspire all who might fight alongside him. And his ambition, too, would be otherworldly; only absolute pre-eminence over any and all warriors or collective enemy would satisfy him. He would require public recognition and public honour.

Several of Achilles' traits, however, have a dark side. Perceptive cadets executing their simulations of the Trojan War might have wondered about Achilles' pursuit of individual glory. We hope each cadet learnt that even Achilles could fall prey to chance. His unmatched strength (*bie*), Homer teaches us, was no match for chance or the unforeseen intervention of the gods on the battlefield. The plague devastates his Achaeans. His beloved Patroclus dies at Hector's hands. Apollo sweeps Hector away from Achilles' clutches in Book 20, just when Achilles has him in the sights of his spear.

Here then is the greatest question posed by the *Iliad* and the Trojan simulation. How should 21st-century American soldiers best manage Fortune when they meet her in combat?

An answer that goes a long way is this. Today's war-fighters must strive to become fair masters of chance. Their mastery begins with understanding chance's all-encompassing pervasiveness on any battlefield and it ends with their becoming authentic leaders of character.

Lieutenant-Colonel Ted Westhusing is a professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. Tom Palaima, professor of classics at the University of Texas at Austin, lectured at West Point in October 2003. Both were consultants to a Discovery Channel documentary on warfare in Homer's *Iliad*. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defence or the US Government.