Epic tale of facing up to Achilles heel

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 "groovy freak". When Petersen's Achilles was asked what motivates him, he says he wants more. But moviegoers never learn what that more is for Homeric warriors. It is time, 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 Point Class of 2004 fought Achilles and Hector and other Homeric warriors, to teach vital lessons to future officers who will lead troops in real combat against real enemies.

Tom Palaima, professor of classics at the University of Texas at Austin, lectured at West Point about the tactics, techniques and procedures outlined in Homer's Iliad, which are not only of his magnificent Homeric warriors. It is time, public honour bestowed as social payment for service rendered to the community. 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 not decide anyone 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. Perspicuous 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 (hiē), Homer teaches us, was no match for chance or the unforeseen intervention of the gods on the battlefield. The plague devastates his Achaean. 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 masters of strategy and tactics and to create a weight of numbers in order to outmatch their enemy. Achilles was no match for chance or the unforeseen intervention of the gods on the battlefield. The plague devastates his Achaean. 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.

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 humiliation. Achilles' pitiless mayhem engorges the River Scamander with dead Hellenic heroes. Hellenic heroes

The Iliad taught the Greeks everything there was to know about war: bravery, care, strategic dominance, strategic stupidity, bad luck, good luck, fog, clarity, honour, depravity, bloodlust and killing in defence of women and children and civilized 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 return to West Point. A team from the command-in-chief Agamemnon after Agamemnon has made decisions that have jeopardised the safety of the troops and the success of his mission.

The Iliad, a Homeric epic tale of facing up to Achilles heel, is now read by 2003 United States Army cadets at West Point. Achilles is a comic-book character, an action figure like Jackie Chan. He is unreflective, impulsive, morally constraining social roles he occupies. He is aware only of his magnificent Homeric prowess as a warrior, displaying a confident air that would not decide anyone 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.

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