



QUICK DECISION-MAKING IN EXTREME COMBAT SITUATIONS

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 20th June 2026

Accepted: 22nd June 2026

Online: 24th June 2026

KEYWORDS

*combat psychology, rapid
decision-making, military
performance, stress, intuition,
situational awareness, cognitive
load, operational readiness*

ABSTRACT

Quick decision-making in extreme combat situations is a critical determinant of operational success, survival, and mission effectiveness in modern warfare. Contemporary military environments are characterized by uncertainty, time pressure, information overload, and life-threatening risks, requiring personnel to make accurate decisions within seconds. This article examines the cognitive, psychological, physiological, and organizational factors that influence rapid decision-making under combat stress. The results indicate that decision performance in combat is shaped by the interaction of experience, cognitive processing efficiency, emotional regulation, and command structure. The article concludes that improving decision-making in extreme combat conditions requires integrated training systems, realistic simulation environments, and structured stress exposure programs that enhance both speed and accuracy of responses.

Quick decision-making in extreme combat situations is one of the most essential capabilities in modern military operations. The battlefield is no longer a predictable or linear environment; instead, it is dynamic, multi-domain, and highly uncertain, involving land, air, cyber, and information warfare simultaneously. Soldiers and commanders are often required to make life-or-death decisions within seconds while facing incomplete intelligence, communication disruptions, environmental chaos, and psychological stress.

In such environments, traditional rational decision-making models based on step-by-step analysis are often too slow to be effective. Instead, combat decisions are frequently made under conditions of uncertainty where time constraints and cognitive overload limit analytical thinking. This has led researchers in military psychology and cognitive science to focus on intuitive decision-making, automatic processing, and experience-based judgment.

The importance of quick decision-making extends beyond individual survival; it directly affects mission success, unit cohesion, and strategic outcomes. A delayed or incorrect decision can lead to catastrophic consequences, while rapid and accurate responses can provide tactical advantage and operational superiority. Therefore, understanding how humans make

fast decisions in extreme combat environments is essential for improving military effectiveness.

The objective of this article is to examine the psychological, cognitive, and organizational mechanisms underlying rapid decision-making in combat and to identify the key factors that enhance or impair performance under extreme stress.

This article is based on a qualitative literature review drawing from military psychology, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and defense studies. Academic journals, military doctrine publications, and empirical research studies were analyzed to identify core concepts related to decision-making under stress and time pressure.

Rapid decision-making in combat relies heavily on cognitive shortcuts rather than deliberate analytical reasoning. One of the most influential models is recognition-primed decision-making, where experienced individuals identify patterns in the environment and match them with previously learned responses. Instead of comparing multiple options, they quickly select a viable course of action based on familiarity and situational cues.

Situational awareness is another critical cognitive component, involving perception, comprehension, and projection of environmental elements. High situational awareness allows soldiers to detect threats early, anticipate enemy behavior, and respond proactively. However, under stress, situational awareness can degrade due to attentional narrowing and information overload.

Cognitive load theory explains that human working memory has limited capacity, especially under stress. In combat, excessive stimuli can overwhelm cognitive processing, leading to slower or incorrect decisions. Effective decision-makers therefore rely on mental schemas developed through training, which reduce cognitive load and increase processing speed.

Intuition in combat decision-making is not random or emotional guessing, but a form of rapid cognition developed through experience. Experts in military operations build mental models that allow them to recognize meaningful patterns almost instantly. This expertise-based intuition enables faster responses compared to novices who rely on conscious analysis.

Experience strengthens neural pathways associated with threat recognition, spatial awareness, and action selection. As a result, expert soldiers can interpret complex battlefield environments with minimal cognitive effort. However, intuition is reliable only when it is based on sufficient and relevant experience; in unfamiliar scenarios, it may lead to errors.

Research in military psychology shows that expert decision-makers often cannot fully verbalize why they made a particular decision, as it occurs automatically at a subconscious level. This highlights the importance of training programs that replicate realistic combat conditions to build accurate intuitive responses. Extreme combat situations trigger strong physiological stress responses regulated by the autonomic nervous system. The release of adrenaline and cortisol increases alertness, reaction speed, and physical readiness. However, excessive stress can impair cognitive performance by disrupting working memory, attention, and executive functioning.

One common effect of extreme stress is attentional tunneling, where individuals focus narrowly on immediate threats while ignoring peripheral but important information. This can

lead to incomplete situational awareness and flawed decision-making. Another effect is time distortion, where perception of time slows or speeds up, affecting judgment accuracy.

Emotional regulation is therefore essential in combat environments. Soldiers who are able to maintain psychological control under pressure perform more effectively. Techniques such as controlled breathing, cognitive reframing, and stress inoculation training help mitigate negative stress effects and improve decision quality.

Training is one of the most important determinants of rapid decision-making ability. Military training systems are designed to develop automaticity, where responses become fast and habitual through repetition. This reduces the need for conscious reasoning during combat. Simulation-based training, including virtual reality and live-fire exercises, exposes soldiers to realistic stress conditions that mimic battlefield environments. These scenarios improve both cognitive and emotional readiness by teaching individuals how to respond under pressure.

Stress exposure training is particularly effective, as it gradually acclimatizes soldiers to high-pressure environments. Over time, this reduces cognitive breakdown under stress and improves reaction time. Repeated exposure also strengthens situational awareness and pattern recognition abilities. Importantly, training must balance realism with safety. Overly artificial training environments may fail to develop accurate decision-making skills, while excessively stressful training may lead to psychological fatigue.

Organizational structure significantly influences decision-making speed in combat. Traditional hierarchical command systems require decisions to pass through multiple levels of authority, which can slow response times. In contrast, decentralized systems such as mission command empower lower-level leaders to make independent decisions based on command intent.

Effective communication is essential for coordinated action. In fast-changing combat situations, communication delays or failures can lead to fragmented decision-making and operational confusion. Therefore, reliable communication systems and shared situational awareness are critical.

Modern military operations increasingly emphasize adaptive leadership models that allow flexibility while maintaining strategic alignment. This balance between control and autonomy enhances both speed and accuracy in decision-making. Despite training and experience, human decision-making remains vulnerable to cognitive biases and limitations. Under extreme stress, soldiers may experience confirmation bias, where they interpret information in a way that supports initial assumptions. They may also rely on heuristics that simplify decision-making but increase the risk.

Fatigue, sleep deprivation, and prolonged operational exposure further degrade cognitive performance. These factors reduce attention span, slow reaction time, and increase the likelihood of incorrect judgments. Understanding these limitations is essential for designing support systems that reduce cognitive strain during operations. Technological tools such as decision-support systems, artificial intelligence, and real-time data analysis can assist human decision-makers, but they must be integrated carefully to avoid overreliance or information overload.

The analysis shows that quick decision-making in extreme combat situations is a multi-dimensional process influenced by cognitive, emotional, physiological, and organizational

factors. It is not simply a matter of intelligence or reaction speed, but the result of complex interactions between experience, stress adaptation, and training. One of the key findings is the central role of experience-based intuition. Skilled soldiers do not necessarily process information faster in a conscious sense; rather, they recognize meaningful patterns more efficiently. This supports the recognition-primed decision model, which emphasizes the importance of mental schemas developed through repeated exposure.

Stress plays both a facilitating and an impairing role in decision-making. Moderate stress enhances alertness and performance, while excessive stress leads to cognitive breakdown. Therefore, effective training must include stress-regulation techniques and controlled exposure to high-pressure environments. Another important insight is the influence of organizational structure. Decentralized decision-making models significantly improve response speed in dynamic combat environments. However, such models require well-trained personnel and clear operational intent to prevent coordination failures.

Finally, technological advancements are reshaping decision-making processes. While digital systems can enhance situational awareness, they also introduce risks of information overload and dependency. Human cognitive limitations must remain central in system design.

Quick decision-making in extreme combat situations is a critical skill that determines operational success and survival in modern warfare. It is shaped by cognitive processes, intuitive expertise, stress responses, training quality, and organizational structure.

The study concludes that improving rapid decision-making requires integrated approaches combining realistic combat simulations, stress exposure training, development of situational awareness, and decentralized command systems. Future research should focus on neurocognitive mechanisms of decision-making and the integration of artificial intelligence tools to support human cognition in combat environments while preserving human control and judgment.

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