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Ethics Thought Paper

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Introduction and Thesis

Napoleon is often credited with saying that with a few ribbons, he could incite his men to perform great feats of valor in distinguishing themselves upon the battlefield. All sources agree that in the context of Napoleon's quote, he was commenting on a maxim of good leadership: that there is tremendous value to be had as a leader in granting proper recognition for the blood and sweat given beyond ordinary expectations by the members of a military unit. Conversely, the failure by leadership to properly recognize and physically demonstrate the extent to which they truly care about their soldiers can have a corrosive effect upon a unit's morale. We have all experienced ourselves or observed instances when Soldiers haven't been properly recognized by their chain of command. Based upon my experience, these instances of injustice reflect a generally low level of leadership quality and more often than not, such behavior is also associated with poor ethical qualities displayed by the unit's leadership. The overall effect negatively impacts a unit's morale, spirit de corps, and vigor in pursuit of mission success in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) and degrades a commander's effectiveness.

Discussion

Most soldiers do not actively seek to be lauded by fans and showered with pretty ribbons and bows by officious leadership. They much prefer the informal praise of their peers and superiors, delivered on the spot after an event of particular difficulty met with exceptional effort and skill, and of course, context matters. For instance: who really expects or perceives an injustice and a failure of leadership if the team members of the post championship softball team do not get Army Achievement Medals (AAMs) for every man or woman on the team? However, when a platoon storms a key piece of terrain – say, a major bridge vital to the drive towards

Baghdad – under heavy fire, against all odds and expectations of sane and rational human beings, you expect that there would be a number of valor awards and decorations, and that the command would fall all over themselves to recognize such tremendous bravery in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

However, all too often, the results are less than what the average citizen of the Nation we serve would expect. Too often, it seems that in fact no one would be recognized for their valor and heroism in such an instance, or at the least, the recognition given and decorations bestowed would be less than commensurate with the actions displayed. What is more typical in the experience of our Soldiers today is indicative of some ethical failures in key leadership, to include senior NCO leadership. In fact, after six years of war, involving extremely vicious close quarters combat, there have been only three Medals of Honor (MOH) awarded, and all to deceased recipients.

Instead, what seems to be more typical is my experience from the very first rotation to Afghanistan, when I was attached to the unit that parachuted into Drop Zone Rhino on October 19, 2001. This unit, a light infantry unit of exceptional skill and demonstrated performance, nonetheless fell prey to the Grenada and Viet Nam awards syndrome: after all that the members of the unit accomplished on the battlefield, they were only recommended for and received a total of 18 Bronze Star Medals (BSM) and 70 Army Commendation Medals (ARCOM). Now, don't misunderstand my meaning: 18 BSMs and 70 ARCOMs, plus some 400 Combat Infantry Badges (CIBs), for four months of combat operations is impressive and appropriate to the results on the battlefield. However, the problem rears its ugly head when you observe that every single one of the 18 BSMs went to key leaders: the Battalion Commander and Command Sergeant Major; all key staff officers (the S1, S2, S3, etc.); and all four Company Commanders and their First

Sergeants. Not a single Bronze Star awarded to any Soldier below the rank of First Sergeant, and no awards, neither BSM w/V nor ARCOM w/V, much less a Silver Star, for valor.

I have observed another egregious instance of such poor and questionable awards results. During my last rotation to Afghanistan (Aug 2006 – April 2007) I observed a Battalion Commander who clearly was more concerned with his own awards while being seemingly indifferent to the actions of the men he commanded in battle. In a country where it is so amazingly easy to earn a CIB or a Combat Action Badge (CAB), this Soldier sought his CIB by stepping out of the last vehicle in the convoy and shooting at a rock on a hillside over 400 meters away – and then claiming that he had killed a “sniper.” He, alone among all the sharp-eyed, battle-hardened and very experienced warriors in the element, spots a sniper hiding on a hillside behind a rock over 400 meters away on the flank of the element – and he spots him from inside an M1114 uparmored HUMMV, and then dispatches the enemy with a single shot. Truly an impressive feat; however, no Soldier present believed anything other than that their Battalion Commander shot at a hill – and hit it. Neither he nor any other member of his element was under fire, nor any body recovered and searched for tactical intelligence. Approximately one week after the completion of the operation, the Commander approached the unit personnel officer and asked him if anyone else had submitted for an award based upon the incident. When the reply was negative, the Commander directed the S1 to prepare and submit for a CIB for the Commander. The witness statements for the award essentially said that the Commander was observed shooting his rifle.

Interestingly, the same commander had terrible results for his post deployment command climate survey. The results were strongly suggestive of poor leadership at his level, especially in those comments that revealed that the perception of the Soldiers in the unit was that the

Commander was not only unethical, but was unconcerned for the accomplishment of any meaning aspect of the Battalion's mission and the welfare of his Soldiers. In addition, he was generally considered to be incompetent. He was (is) a leader who failed to inspire his Soldiers to accomplish their mission through his leadership actions. Instead, he was a leader who convinced his Soldiers that he was much more interested in his own career appearances and recognition, not career substances of accomplishing the mission and caring for the welfare of the men.

Conclusion

Why does it even matter? Well, in truth, no one can actually point to the mechanism of what is this mysterious thing called "leadership." You can't hold it in your hand, you can't order it from a factory, and you can't plant it in a field, pile manure on it, and 6 weeks later up springs "leadership," fully ripened and ready for the harvest. However, we can all see when great or even competent leadership is present and working, and we can also see it when poor leadership is present and failing miserably. In my experience, leaders who are more concerned with themselves and their next promotion and assignment, reveal themselves in the awards and recognition received by the men and women they command. No platoon charges across terrain raked with accurate machinegun fire and destroys the enemy for a mere ribbon as a fitting reward: they do it because they love their job and each other, and because well trained and well led troops get the tough jobs done that they know have to be done. It is that most mysterious yet essential element – leadership - that builds Soldiers into effective fighting teams, and inspires them to accomplish the seemingly impossible. A truly ethical leader selflessly and proudly recognizes the Soldiers he leads into action for their deeds. The end result speaks for itself.