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Battlefield Ethics "Then and Now"

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Abstract

Battlefield Ethics, morals, and values are a strategic instrument and a combat multiplier for any commander, service, or country. When proper battlefield ethics are applied a desired victory can and will be obtained. When they are abused, misused, or flat-out disregarded a destructive expectation will occur and the undesirable world backlash will result in a mission failure. The American people will be blinded by the fog of war and the public outcry can and will change the direction of the objective, mission, focus of the military, and government leader decisions. This will give our adversaries the advantage they need to turn the world opinion against our goals and objectives and a decisive win will be tarnished and potentially destructive in nature.

This paper will examine Battlefield Ethics from the Philippine War to our current campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq; to the importance for leaders at all levels to know the problems and potential fallouts from improper ethical decisions on the battlefield.

Battlefield Ethics "Then and Now"

As senior Noncommissioned Officers, military leaders, and role models, it's our responsibility, duty, and moral obligation to bring strong ethical power, prestige, and condor to our positions that we are selected to serve. Leaders at all levels possess a strong moral fiber and ethical yield of power which enables the leader to communicate effective influence throughout his ranks and beyond; both in a garrison and on the battlefield.

Recently the Veterans News and Information Service (VNIS) published an article that all 150,000 coalition and U.S. troops in Iraq will be required to get a two-to-four hour core warrior block of instruction on "Battlefield Ethics", morals, and values training, highlighting the importance of adhering to legal, moral, and ethical standards on the battlefield. These orders were directed by the Department of Defense (DoD) in light of the investigation into allegations that U.S. Marines killed approximately up to 24 unarmed people in the town of Haditha last year, (Parker, 2006, The Times Online, ¶1).

With this further embarrassment and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in 2003 still fresh in the minds of most American and Iraqi citizens, not to mention the Insurgence, the question is where and what is the underlining problem? Who is at fault? What can we do as leaders to prevent future events? Should we conduct more education classes, situational exercises, role playing, or cultural awareness training? The answer is probably all of the above and we will examine this within this paper.

The events and conditions that lead up to this point in time have been long scrutinized by the people of the United States. The America public, parents and legislators want to hear that their sons or daughters are the best trained, best equipped, and best led forces in the world. Over the last 30 years or so the military has been very convincing with the first two criteria but the latter is a subject to debate.

In the words of General Sherman, the American people have adopted unvarnished

description of war. They long for the glory, but they expect their leaders to moderate the hell. They do not demand triumph, but they require success and outcomes of which they and their communities can be proud. And success is measured against an egalitarian notion that it must be success for all, from the commanding general to the ammunition handler. A senior leader who meets the public expectation has power. (Osborne, 1996, Senior Leader Ethics, ¶4).

Do our leaders in the military possess power, influence, and the ability to effect actions of Soldiers on the battlefield? You better believe it. Leaders are grown to persuade subordinates in order to accomplish the mission but at the same time we need to ensure it's completed morally and ethically even in the heat of battle. Leaders must produce an ethical command climate in their units that supports the Army's values. They must ensure they set a proper ethical example themselves, and that there is two way communications throughout the unit. Soldiers must feel like they can come to the unit leadership for advice on ethical decisions they face on the battlefield. They must feel that they can do this without fear of punishment, but they must bring their feelings that will help the leaders' decision making process.

The U.S. military is controlled by a civilian oversight committee; The President, Congress, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of the Services, and ultimately the American public. All of the folks expect the military leadership to guide Soldiers and to conduct operations morally and ethically. The military leadership of the United States has power and influence over its subordinates and most coalition forces that are by our side. Our leaders are by far the best in the world but why are there so many issues when it comes to Battlefield Ethics? Is it the leadership's lack of teaching and training of the Army Values? Is it the lack of self-control on the battlefield, or is there a systemic condition of traditional values that has eroded the fiber of the America Soldier?

ETHICS: THE "JUST WAR" THEORY

Let's examine the definition of a "Just War" and ethics. In the history of mankind, the so called common "Just War Theory and Tradition" had a generalized set the mutually agreed rules of combat. These rules usually evolved between two or more similar type of enemies but were not generally violated. Their size, techniques, morals, values of life, and ethics were generally mutual in some shape or another. (Alexander Moseley, 2006, Just War Theory, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). When there are differences it's usually based on different religious beliefs, race, creed, greed, or communication barriers. With this said enemies rarely have a sit down conference before war to discuss the different ways that the war will be fought. There is no such blueprint of how wars will be conducted but there are instruments such as the Geneva Convention that guide enemies on the proper ethics and treatment of enemy combatants and captured U.S. service members. Is this being applied to Soldiers that we capture? I would say yes for the most part but there have been several cases of improper tactics, prisoner abuse, and unnecessary killings that U.S. Soldiers have committed over the last 4 years or so. The same can not be said for our adversaries. What motivates these Soldiers to commit these acts of disobedience? Is it lack of values, lack of training, or lack of human dignity?

In part the motivation to win, and in some cases by all means necessary, is seen to be the end objective of every leader in combat. Most U.S. generals, senior officers and non-commissioned officers would prefer there be a standard "set of war rules" that is beneficial and gives us the advantage and know how of the enemy. We know that's not going to happen with the enemies and adversaries of the United States. That's why it is so important for us to set the example and be on the moral and ethical high-ground of war. The war that we are currently in is stretching our resources, training, and pushing-the-envelope of our battlefield ethics. What is the right way to fight and what are improper tactics in war? Is there a proper way to fight a war?

BATTLEFIELD ETHICS – THE DEFINITION

What is Battlefield Ethics? Well to answer this we have to look into understanding the framework of ethics then take to the battlefield. We know that ethics is the foundation of philosophy that encompasses the human conduct and morality that is embedded in the fiber of most men. As Webster's states, "Ethics. 1. The study of the general nature of morals and the specific moral choices an individual makes in relating to others. 2. The rules or standards of conduct governing the members of a profession." Given this definition should our leaders conduct themselves ethically on the battlefield?

But what is our standard ethical behavior on the battlefield? A famous English economist and philosopher of the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill, a strong supporter of utilitarianism, a moral right is whatever produces the greatest overall amount of pleasure (hedonistic utilitarianism) or happiness (eudemonistic utilitarianism). Some utilitarian's (act utilitarian's) claim that we should weigh the consequences of each individual action, while others (rule utilitarian's) maintain that we should look at the consequences of adopting particular rules of conduct. (from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, ¶7).

Battlefield Ethics are the rules we must follow in each and everyday when we encounter them in many different situations that we may find ourselves. Many of the decisions made in combat are made on the basis of consequences, weighing the costs and benefits of various alternatives. As Mill stated, a creed which accepts as the principles of morals, utilities, or the greatest happiness principle holds that if actions are legal, right and just as they will promote happiness; if they are wrong they will produce the opposite of happiness and create issues and potentially cause harm.

To give examples of this consider our politicians within the beltway of Washington D.C.; the politics are for the public's good over their own private good. If all politicians were out for

their agenda then legislative bills and laws would not get written or accomplished. This may cause a type of collateral damage to political landscape of America if they were out for their own good instead of looking out for the good of the people. This occurs anyway but the concept that I am trying to get across is that utilitarianism occurs on the battlefield. Leaders at all level need to ensure they are aware of their power and persuasion and not to cause harm to Soldiers on point.

PHILIPPINE WAR – BATTLEFIELD ETHICS

The powers of the leaders have been a point of discussion and concern in just about every war the U.S. has been in. There has been a small percentage of abuse and lack of ethics dating back to as early as 1899. In the Philippine War of 1899-1902, a small percentage of Filipino soldiers were taken prisoner or interrogated by the U.S. Army and underwent any form of physical or mental abuse. Some of the abuse was practices such as forcing large quantities of water down the throats of uncooperative natives also known as the “water cure”. Some of the extreme measures were hanging suspects by a rope, known as the “rope cure”, denying prisoner’s food, water, clothes or penning them in overcrowded cells, and administering dunking and beatings. These events happened quite frequently but the US authorities refused to admit they were happening. Officially, the US Army condemned the water cure, which fell under the General Order 100; proscription of torture. Unofficially, officers winked at the practice, and military courts were reluctant to punish officer charged with applying coercive methods. (Birtle, Counterinsurgency Doctrine, 2004, ¶1, pg 132).

WORLD WAR II – BATTLEFIELD ETHICS

In this section I am going to do something a little different. I am going to use the movie “Saving Private Ryan” to analyze the Combat Ethics on the Battlefield during World War II. I will discuss some defining moments to include some captions from the movie “Saving the Family”, “Take the Radar Station”, “and Kill the Prisoner”, “Disobeying Orders and The

Sniper”. Some of these principle themes will define certain ethical actions that American Soldiers took on the battlefield during the war.

The story follows a squad of U.S. Army Rangers from the D-Day invasion of Omaha Beach in Normandy on June 6, 1944 to their defense of a strategic bridge in the fictional French town of Ramelle on the Merderet River. The film begins with a graphic recreation of the landing of the first wave of troops on the beach. The film starts it focuses on Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) who eventually manages to lead a group of men through the German beach defenses to reach the heights overlooking the beach.

The story shifts to the U.S. War Department offices where thousands of death notification letters are being typed for delivery to the families of the dead soldiers. It is discovered that three of the four brothers of the Ryan family have all died within days of each other and that their mother will receive all three notices on the same day. The fourth son, James Francis Ryan, a paratrooper, remains unaccounted for somewhere in France. General George Marshall orders that he be found and sent home immediately. The major defining moments of the film are Save the Family? Take the Bunker? Kill the Prisoner? I will cover these in relation to my theme of Ethics on the Battlefield the “Then” portion.

In the first ethical situation that the squad encounters is the “Save the Family” situation where the squad is placed in a dilemma to save a trapped family or let them stay trapped. There is a little girl that is eventually without her family and Chaos Caparzo (Vin Diesel) says to the squad “saving the little girl is the decent thing to do” and in the very next scene the three scenarios’ were about to play out and the squad had to decide what to do. Save the trapped family? To take the girl or to give the girl to the Soldiers? Carpazo says “She reminds me of my niece. The decent thing to do is to take her down the road to the next town” Reply from CPT Miller, were not here to do the decent thing”. The question here is should Soldiers be

compassionate on the battlefield and do the right thing when it comes to human rights and dignity? In this case they choose to take the girl and later down the road they encountered an ambush and shortly after loosing a Soldier in the fight, CPT Miller pointed to a dead Soldier in the town and said “That’s why we can’t we can’t take children. The compassionate, humanitarian gesture that was displayed led to the death of a Soldier. In this case what would you have done? Did the risk outweigh the gain?”

The next scene that I will discuss is the “Heading toward Ramelle” scene. In this scene the squad comes across a machine gun nest and the squad and CPT Miller have a discussion about their mission. In the movie Private Reiben says “this is not our mission and are we taking an unnecessary risk for one Soldier”. The ethical dilemma sets in and CPT Miller disagrees with the mission but continues on with it despite his personal convictions. In the next scene one of the issues that were presented was balancing considerations the squad was contemplating while at the Radar Station. In the scene Sergeant First Class Horvath (Tom Sizemore) was the omni competent sergeant asking “what...will this directly help the mission”. “What help will we give to other Allied soldiers who come this way”. In these two scenarios that lack of Selfless Service, compassion and the frustration of the US Soldiers and the unclear mission and the danger they frequently encountered while trying to locate Private Ryan. This was very difficult for CPT Miller to express his concerns and the amount of risk that his men were exposed to.

In the next major battlefield ethic I will exam is the killing of a prisoner. In this scene Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davies) is pretty much the coward of the squad and when they come across a German Soldier in the machine gun nest Private Reiben pulls out his pistol and is about to kill the soldier right there and Upham says to CPT Miller and the rest of the squad “Are you going to let them kill him? Sir...it’s not right”. In this situation, they freed the soldier and he later returns to fight against them again. What is the right decision? Take the soldier to a POW

camp? Shot the soldier on the spot and not take a risk to your men? Or let him free and take a chance that later on you will face this enemy again. Later on down the road, CPT Miller states after encountering the prisoner that he is a changed man. He states “ I’ve changed some...My wife might not recognize me...But if it earns me the right to get back to my wife....Every man I kill, the farther away from home I feel”.

The mission in this movie made the squad run into many ethical dilemmas on the battlefield and this is what our Soldiers run into everyday in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are many more scenarios in this movie that I will not cover in detail but they are. Disobeying Orders, The wise rifleman, The sniper, and Consequentialist Calculations (risking 8 men for one life), True Courage, Cowardice, Courage and Self-Sacrifice, Compassion, and lastly Duty. All of these elements comprise the complete ethics of a Soldier on the battlefield.

OPERATION IRAQI AND ENDURING FREEDOM – BATTLEFIELD ETHICS

Now that I have explained some of the Battlefield Ethics from our past let’s look at the current issues that our Soldiers have faced on the battlefield. In June 2006, members of the US Marines unit accused of murdering 24 unarmed Iraqis. This was triggered when one of the members, Corporal James Crossen, who was injured in the roadside bomb attack that appeared to have triggered the incident. Several members of the Marine Corps Unit were young and inexperienced and may have snapped after seeing one of their unit members killed by the bomb; CPL James Crossen said he thought that they were blinded by hate and that they lost control. CPL Crossen passed out after being hit with the roadside bomb in al-Haditha on November 19, 2005. He stated that he thought a “lot of the new Soldiers were very scared and inexperienced and that they were just pissed, really pissed off and did it”

This incident sparked two investigations, one into the actual killings of the 24 civilian Iraqi civilians and the other investigation into whether there was a cover up. As of the date of

this paper; up to half of the Marines are under investigation and may face murder charges. There are witnesses to the actual slaughter in the town. In this case, several battlefield ethics were violated and human abuse and torture cases took place. In this incident the Marines allegedly killed Mothers, Fathers, Grandmothers, Uncles, and cousins. This incident along with another tragedies fuelled anti-American sentiment. In the same month two unarmed Iraqi women were shot and killed; one was about to give birth. This happened after the vehicle failed to stop at an observation post.

So what happens when Soldiers are placed into a situation like this? The value of life within a war zone can be blurred and in some cases life can be lost. The “double effect” of our actions has two actions; those we intend and those that are foreseeable but which we do not intend. In this case we see that the Marines that fired upon the vehicle had a double effect.

Another case in 2006 was of a former FT Campbell Soldier that was indicted and charged in Iraqi Civilian Deaths. These charges included with the conduct that constituted a conspiracy to commit murder, conspiracy to commit aggravated sexual abuse, premeditated murder, murder of perpetration of aggravated sexual abuse, aggravated sexual abuse on a person less than 16 years of age, use of firearms during commission of violent crimes and obstruction of justice. (U.S Newswire).

As you can see this young Soldier is in a deep trouble. But the question is where his leadership was? Were they aware of this before the Soldier discharged from the Military? It doesn't look like it. Some other questions that we need to answer is what type of training did this Soldier receive prior to going to Iraq? These are issues that will be brought up in the trial.

Conclusion

At the Senior Non commissioned Officer Level, must we change or stay the course when it comes to our ethics training and understanding of what Battlefield Ethics really is? Is there a problem and where did it begin and how do we change it? Is there a problem with our mindset and how easy it to change something that is so difficult to change in the heat of battle?

Some may blame the America culture and the focus on western views; some blame the erosion of moral character fiber within the modern warrior. Whatever the problem is we need to combat it and adhere to the Laws, Rules and Regulations, and human dignity set before us. The examples outlined in this paper examined Battlefield Ethics from the Philippine War to our current campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq; to the importance for leaders at all levels to know the problems and potential fallouts from improper ethical decisions on the battlefield. This fail area of emphasizes that we as Senior Non Commissioned Officers can not and will not fail.

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