

60

Ethics
A Soldier under 21 drinking in the Barracks

By

MSG Jaime Garza, Jr.

SGM Carpenter

Group Room M 14

16 OCT 05

A Soldier under 21 drinking in the Barracks

I want to share with you a situation I found myself in when I was a First Sergeant of an Infantry Company. A Soldier under the age of 21 drinking in the barracks on a Saturday afternoon was my situation. What do I do? I had to make an ethical decision that I would be able to live with for the rest of my life and that I did.

As I took over Alpha Company 1-22 Infantry 1st Brigade 4th Infantry Division I knew I had to ensure that all my Soldiers were trained to deploy in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. We knew we were going to deploy, but we did not know exactly when. We were constantly in the field training on squad, and platoon level tasks. I was also getting to know my Soldiers. I narrowed the company down after a month or so to whom my high risks Soldiers were. I informed the Platoon Sergeants on who I thought were my high risk Soldiers and they agreed.

All my high risk Soldiers were counseled by their Noncommissioned officers (NCOs) prior to all weekends. I was off to a very good start in my company. I never got a call for the first three months till right before the Christmas holidays. It was a Saturday afternoon when Sergeant First Class (SFC) Garcia called and asked me if I could come to the barracks and link up with him. I told him I was on my way. When I got to the barracks, the NCO on duty informed me that SFC Garcia was on the second floor in Private First Class (PFC) Johnson's room. I headed up to the room to find SFC Garcia talking to PFC Johnson who appeared to be intoxicated in his room. SFC Garcia came outside and told me what was going on.

PFC Johnson had been drinking and was running his mouth to other Soldiers who told him they were going to beat him up if he continued to run his mouth. PFC Johnson felt threatened and called SFC Garcia to come to the barracks and once he arrived and saw that PFC Johnson had been drinking he called me. I gathered all the facts from the NCO on duty and the Soldiers he was talking trash to and then went in PFC Johnson's room to talk to him. I was calm and wanted for PFC Johnson to tell me his side of the story on what had happened that caused him to call SFC Garcia. PFC Johnson told me that he had been drinking and some Soldiers told him that they were going to beat him up. My first question to PFC Johnson was for him to tell me how old he was? He told me he was 19 years old. I then asked PFC Johnson if he knew the policy on drinking alcohol in the barracks and he told me he did. He told me if he was not 21 years of age, he was not suppose to be drinking in the barracks. So I asked him why he was drinking? PFC Johnson went on to tell me his life story on how he was an orphan and was put in a foster home where he was treated really bad. That is why he had joined the Army, to learn what it felt like to be a part of a family and make something of his life.

I told him in front of SFC Garcia that what he had done was wrong and it would not be tolerated ever again and gave him an option. His options were: He would never drink again till he turned 21 and he would self enroll in Alcohol classes and I would take him to war with his new family (Soldiers) or chapter him out of the Army in two weeks. He looked at me in my eyes and told me we had a deal and thanked me for giving him a chance. Thirty days later he came to my office after work and invited me to go with him to his alcohol class downtown. He was going to receive an award for being sober for 30 days and after that he was going to go to church. I could not say no to this soldier so I

went and he stood in front of a group of about 25 people very proud and received his award. He told everyone the reason he was there was because he had made a promise to his First Sergeant and he was not going to break it.

I was proud of him and thought about the ethical call I had made 30 days back. He went on to receive his 60 and 90day awards prior to our deployment and was sure I knew every time he received the awards. I was proud of PFC Johnson and of the drastic change he had made in the last 90 days. PFC Johnson was promoted to Specialist (SPC) and was on his way to Iraq to fight a war against the Iraqi Army as a 240 machine gun gunner and as a part of a family of soldiers that was like no other. SPC Johnson was doing great things in Iraq and even saved the life of a soldier. While on a patrol a team member was hit in the back with two AK-47 rounds on his Sappy plate and knocked to the ground. SPC Johnson ran to the Soldier and dragged him to safety and started first aid. The Soldier was back in action 3 days later due to SPC Johnson's quick actions to remove the Soldier from the line of fire.

Later on in our deployment my mounted patrol was hit with an Improvised Explosive Device and SPC Johnson was the gunner on my vehicle. He was knocked down from the blast and was right back on his feet asking me what I wanted him to do. I told him that I wanted for him to tell me if he was wounded and he said no First Sergeant I am good, what do you want me to shoot. I could not believe the "will to fight" of this Soldier who I could of chaptered out of the Army because he was a minor who drank in the barracks. The tour to Iraq with this Soldier was a trip to combat I will never forget. SPC Johnson gave me a new view of the word ethics and how one should treat every situation differently regardless of what we think is right or what we perceive to be right.

Ethical dilemmas in the Army are something we need to pay close attention to because of the impact it can make on one or several Soldiers in our unit. I know that I will never take any one situation for granted or make a decision without looking past the problem or the subject at hand. I hope that this paper on an experience that I personally experienced makes everyone realize that we as Senior NCOs make our Army the greatest in the World.