

Ethical Dilemma – Retirement at 20 Years

By  
MSG Roy D. Lee

SGM Abdul Cole  
Faculty Advisor  
Group R07  
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An ethical problem facing the Army today is whether or not a soldier should continue to serve after he completes his commitment to the Army. The focus of this paper is mainly on Master Sergeants selected for attendance at the United States Army Sergeant Major Academy but who were not on the most recent SGM selection list. A lot of the Master Sergeants in this category are close to 20 years time in service and will soon be eligible for retirement.

So what is the new dilemma? With the current operations ongoing in Iraq and Afghanistan and the current deployment length of one year, many are contemplating retirement as soon as possible once the two year commitment incurred from attendance at the USASMA SMC is complete.

Staying in the Army after 20 years of service has some benefits. First, there is the continued opportunity to do what most senior noncommissioned officers love, lead soldiers. Second, if you continue to work hard and lead well, your chances of promotion continue to increase. Finally, each year served adds money to your pocket after retirement.

The dilemma has several dimensions. First, one must weigh the desire for family stability and personal safety against selfless service and personal courage. A deployment in support of the global war on terrorism is lengthy and dangerous. A tour in Iraq is normally a year in length. Over 1000 soldiers have already died and the situation is not getting safer. If an individual values his family stability and personal safety more than selfless service and he lacks personal courage, he will be tempted to retire as soon as eligible. He will also look for an assignment where there are more guarantees he will not deploy while there. There are even some NCOs who will make a small injury into more than it is to avoid deployments. There will be more cases of exaggeration of family issues as well. Spouses will increasingly press their soldier to retire in lieu of a deployment or assignment to a unit likely to deploy.

Another dimension deals with senior NCOs who have significant employment opportunities outside of military service. If a soldier can retire and move directly into a job that pays enough to increase the soldier's family's standard of living, doesn't risk the soldier's life, and allows the soldier to come home every night, why should he stay. These soldiers have to deal with the dilemma of loyalty versus financial gain and family stability.

Another dimension deals with the changing Army and the individuals beliefs of how to organize, and employ the Army. Many soldiers signed up for an Army structured to fight the Cold War. The relatively short Gulf War and the vision of an army that could defeat another country's army, redeploy its soldiers, all in six months, pulled many recruits in. Peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations are complex tasks and most soldiers did not foresee expending so much time and effort into such an operation. Deployments were normally for six months, other than the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division's initial deployment to Bosnia for almost a year. In 1999, rotations to Kosovo added another six month tour to the list potential deployments. Occupying a country by force and maintaining a combat force for nearly a decade to deter the reemergence of civil war is much different then what some soldiers signed up for.

Restructuring and realigning the force to the point a senior NCO is unsure of what units will and will not exist six months from now causes a degree of uncertainty that we have not dealt with since the early 1990s. Stop move and stop loss orders have contradicted original contracts and good faith on the part of the Army as an institution. Many senior NCOs wonder if the Army will allow them to retire when they make that decision or whether they will fall under stop-loss and deploy again like so many before them. Due to the increased operational tempo, many soldiers return from a year-long deployment, move to another duty station and then deploy on another year-long deployment. The increased long-term stress will wear any soldier down. A married

soldier's spouse may weigh in and request that the soldier retire. The spouse may also file for divorce, further complicating matters for the soldier. This continued pressure and uncertainty causes senior noncommissioned officers to seize the window of opportunity to retire as soon as they no longer fall under stop loss.

Another disheartening factor is the current centralized promotion system. The promotion system does not offer any feedback to a soldier not selected. The soldier is never really sure what his record was lacking. A soldier, who has two extremely successful combat tours under his belt but does not make the list, only wonders what else he needs to do for selection. Compounding this is when someone who has no combat experience makes the selection list. The combat veteran, proven under fire, may retire because he feels the Army is not loyal to him. Those not selected for promotion on this most recent list have fewer incentives to continue service and some are baffled as to why they were not selected.

Another facet of this dilemma is the competition between the Army and a soldier's family. A soldier must ask himself a few questions: "Does the Army take second place to your family? If your family takes precedence, then does loyalty to your family win over loyalty to the Army? Does your duty to be a husband and a father outweigh your duty as a soldier?" If the answer is yes to any of these questions, the dilemma may be different. Many will need personal courage to face their superiors, peers and subordinates and say, "I'm done." Many will step down from their astute positions in a military unit and resign themselves to a less prestigious job in the civilian sector, all for the sake of their duty to their family. Leaving the Army may also be an act of selfless service, though it may not appear so initially. Some senior noncommissioned officers would prefer to stay in the Army, continuing to do what they love to do, but retire to maintain stability at home.

Of the many ethical dilemmas facing the Army today, the dilemma of when to retire affects all of the senior noncommissioned officers at some point in their career. A soldier must give careful thought and consideration to making this difficult decision.