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Ethics: A Moral Obligation to Our Soldiers

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Abstract

This paper is to express the idea that leaders must be ethical concerning the serious matter of preparing our Soldiers for warfare. I am certain that the majority of leaders in the Army put the utmost importance on this task. However, I have observed serious misfortunes over the years. Senior leaders must instill the attitude that all leaders have a moral obligation to ensure Soldiers are trained and prepared for combat. This must be the mindset of the entire U.S. Army, not just the combat arms military occupational specialties (MOS). If the ideal of a professional, ethical, and hardened warrior is not instilled as part of the Army transformation, we will fall short.

A Moral Obligation to Our Soldiers

When I was a young Corporal, I was walking up a stairwell of the brigade headquarters when I noticed a large mural. The mural was set in the 1800s, and it showed a field of cavalry troopers that had been killed in action. Underneath the mural, an inscription read: “Let not one Soldier’s soul say ‘Had I only been better trained’” (Unknown author). Since that day I have carried a moral obligation to ensure soldiers were prepared and ready for the physical and mental stresses of battle.

Senior leaders of the U.S. Army have a moral obligation to ensure that leaders train and prepare our soldiers for combat. Leaders must instill a hardened warrior spirit while maintaining an ethical and professional fighting force. Some say that this is common sense and is not an ethical problem. The ethical problem does not come from ensuring Soldiers receive the proper training. The problem occurs when senior leaders do not enforce tough and realistic training. When leaders implement training distracters or fail to focus the Soldiers training toward warfare we also become guilty of being part of this problem. Our greatest failure maybe when we fail to take corrective action when our junior leaders fail to train soldiers. The current battlefield has changed since the start of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). In the current war, support and service support Soldiers are seeing more than their fair share of combat arms style missions. This means that the old attitude of “we do not need to train on that” is wrong and has resulted in the loss of American lives. The service and support Soldiers need the basic combat skills such as marksmanship, combatives, land navigation, medical skills, and other skills just as much as the combat arms Soldiers.

A Perfect Example

One tragic example of not ensuring our soldiers were not properly trained for the mental and physical brutality of war happened during the initial stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom. On

the night of 22 March, 2003, the 507th transportation company convoy had lost its way and mistakenly entered into the city of Nasiriyah, Iraq. At the time, Nasiriyah was still occupied by enemy troops fighting the U.S. Marines on the east side of the city and U.S. Special Forces on the west side of the city. The convoy drove through the entire city without being engaged by Iraqi forces.

Once on the north side of the city and realizing they were lost, the Company Commander ordered the troops to load their weapons. The troops had been in a combat zone for almost one hundred miles and still had not seen fit to load their weapons. This was true even though the convoy had already encountered enemy troops. The Commander decided that they needed to turn around and go back through the city. While turning around, one of the 5-ton trucks got stuck and the convoy received fire. Instead of the entire force fighting as a whole, the smaller vehicles left the larger ones. In all of the confusion, they left one of the Soldiers behind. The Soldier, realizing the convoy had left him and was not returning, did the only thing he could. The last reports received were a single U.S. Soldier moving south engaging the enemy. Clearly, this shows a state of extremely low training of the unit, which resorted in all out panic once they receive fire from a foe.

The end result of the convoy was that it split into three separate convoys. Of the three only two made it back to friendly forces. The convoy sustained eleven Soldiers killed and five others captured. The U.S. Military has learned from this catastrophe and the current war. In addition to blaming all the officers and noncommissioned officers in that unit, I also blame their senior leaders who should have ensured the Soldiers had the proper leadership and training to prepare them for war. The Army now focuses on the training of combat support and service support units. However, this event clearly proves that leaders have a moral obligation to train and prepare Soldiers for the mental and physical rigors of combat.

Leaders in the Proper Mindset

As aforementioned, the U.S. Army has spent a lot of effort to ensure that units are trained prior to entering into Iraq. It seems once leaders knew what they might face, they focused some training to that threat. However, it is irresponsible to wait until a war is imminent or in progress to train Soldier's to conduct their jobs in a combat environment. We must remember that we are all Soldiers, and this holds true no matter what our military occupational specialty (MOS) is. Upon entering a combat zone, every Soldier must be trained and prepared to kill the enemy. The Soldiers must also be trained to defend themselves and their comrades. It has been proven that the enemy does not care what your MOS is. Therefore, every leader has the moral obligation to train and prepare their Soldiers for combat. Whether they are a Mechanic, Cook or a Special Forces Soldier, they had better have the capability to shoot, move, and communicate effectively. Senior leaders should have the vision to realize the need for all Soldiers to have basic combat skills. Further, the senior leadership should realize that units need to focus on combat related training. Senior leaders also must ensure that junior leaders are focused on tough realistic training that is focused on creating and maintaining a warrior mentality. If leaders cannot accomplish this task, they do not need to be leaders in the Military. No Soldier should die or, even worse, be "left behind" by their unit because of poor training. As leaders, we must instill in the minds of all Soldiers the fact: "Let not one Soldier's soul say "Had I only been better trained""(Unknown author). This is our moral and ethical obligation!

References

Unknown author, 1987