

Ethical Situation in Combat
“Is firing or engaging a child unethical?”

By

MSG Ly M. Lac

Faculty Advisor: SMSgt Herrick
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I. Introduction

“I am an American Soldier. I am a warrior and a member of a team. I serve the people of the United States and live the Army values.” These are the first three phrases of the Soldier’s Creed. As we continue to fight the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, our young men, and women face many ethical issues. Ethical issues occur primarily when comparing the effects of decisions versus the individual values or beliefs. Is firing or engaging at a child unethical? There are many different perspectives that we can use to analyze a situation. From the senior leader perspective, the ethical action is the one that produces the greatest benefit overall to those directly affected. The U.S. Army is a value-based institution and the core values are ingrained into every Soldier since day one of basic training.

II. Body

Although we have effectively removed the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Husein, we have encountered countless number of attacks by native as well as foreign insurgents. These insurgents are ordinary people to include women and children. Because there are women and children among the insurgency, everyday in many different ways, many different ethical dilemmas demand our leaders and Soldiers attention. The following situation presents an ethical situation that requires our attention. The insurgents conducted an ambush on a logistic convoy on its way to Baghdad. Because of the ambush, this convoy suffered multiple casualties and KIAs. One day later, another convoy was on its way to a Forward Operating Base (FOB) located north of Fallusha. All Soldiers on this convoy were aware of what has happened yesterday and the convoy commander thoroughly briefed them prior to Start Point (SP). Tension was high and

everyone was alert with weapons at the ready position as the convoy proceeded through the busy street of Fallusha. Just as the convoy approached the northern part of Fallusha, SGT X noted that a young boy, approximately 100 meters on the right of his vehicle, was pointing what appeared to be an AK-47. SGT X hesitated; however, he engaged and killed the boy.

Should SGT X killed the boy or let the boy injured or killed him and his comrades on this convoy? The U.S. Military investigated the incident and found that the boy was pointing a plastic rifle, a toy gun, at the convoy. Should SGT X killed the boy has he known it was a toy gun? Of course, he should not. He made the decision based on situation, threat, and information he received prior to the mission. SGT X clearly understood the Rules of Engagement and that is to take out enemy targets efficiently to destroy the enemy. His ethical action produced the greatest benefit overall to those directly affected, because his decision could have saved his convoy and American lives from enemy attacked if it was a real AK-47. Because of the American values, SGT X also understood that killing a young boy is unethical and wrong. However, in this situation, he had to take action to prevent injuries or deaths to himself and his comrades. The fact of the matter is, during war, you have to kill or be killed.

On the battlefield, Soldiers are most likely aware that they will often be facing an enemy who is using any means to conduct an attack. Our brothers and sisters in the arm forces face this kind of ethical situation almost daily in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the fairness perspective, one would question whether to kill an armed child that is pointing a weapon at you is fair on the battlefield. On the justice perspective, (killing a child based on crucial moral differences) would question whether it is fair to innocent children who suffer the consequences of pointing a toy gun at the convoy. It is not fair towards the Soldiers when they get ridicule, scorn, or punishment for

protecting themselves and those who fight side by side with them. It is also not fair towards young children when they are playing on their own back yard. War is tough and destroy the enemy before they destroy us is a way of getting upper hand during combat.

The final perspective of the above situation is the residual effects of the individual for their experience in a significant event, especially traumatic event, in theater. There are serious psychological long-term effects such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that our service members suffered from a traumatic event, which caused a catastrophic stressor outside the range of usual human experience. Studies have shown that an increase number of Iraq war veterans are returning home with PTSD. SGT X might or might not suffer from PTSD; however, we must provide education needs to our Soldiers following major combat operations. This will allow our Soldiers to understand the effect of PTSD on them and their family and seek professional help to assist them to cope with their issues during post deployment.

The situation above is not uncommon or unrealistic. In combat, Leaders and Soldiers must thoroughly analyze and consider each case separately. It might only contribute very little to problem resolution; however, it does help to clarify the gray areas of the law of land warfare and the like. I am not supporting possible excuses for immoral induct. Soldiers are responsible for their actions and cannot call to following orders for justification. Leaders must remember that our Soldiers believe in their country and its leaders. They may not see the full picture as to why certain decisions are made; however, they must fight on a good faith assumption. Leaders who make decisions based on emotional objection can grossly effects the combat effectiveness of our organization, especially during combat.

III. Summary/Resolution

Before closing, I would like to address a possible resolution. If we allow the widespread of media who only tell part of the story, then the consequences of that could be devastating to our military credibility. If military leaders penalized our Soldier for their action based on the partially report by the media and the emotional effects, then the consequences of that could cause unnecessary loss to American lives. This kind of ethical decision from our leaders will eventually cause a delay and hesitation from our Soldier to engage enemies. We must consider seconds of hesitation to engage the enemies could cause our Soldiers lives. Without thoroughly investigated based on the given situation, rules of engagement, threats, and environment is unjust to our Soldiers. Moreover, let us not forget the residual effect on our Soldiers such as PTSD that will result from this. Leaders who made quick decisions could violate the rights of our Soldiers, purpose, society, and future generations. We cannot allow terrorists to use this kind of tactics and get upper hand on our military. Our Soldiers deserve to know that their leaders will support and back them up as long as their actions are just and legitimate. They are putting their lives on the line to fulfill their mission; we must fulfill ours through action instead of worry about senseless rhetoric.