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Ethics and the Profession of Arms

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Abstract

This ethics paper places a majority of its focus on ethical behavior in the Armed Forces during our current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Soldiers are comfortable operating in the “Grey Area” in order to get the mission accomplished. This “Grey Area” is saturated with moral and ethical dilemmas when often times there are little to no direct supervision to assist young Soldiers. These Soldiers have trained for years to fight a conventional ground force battle and not trained to mount a Counter-Insurgency Campaign. There are a number of problems that face these Soldiers. Their level of training, the Army values, and their own morals help to guide these professionals through difficult decisions that, if mishandled, can have adverse effects on the mission and the ability to make the right ethical decisions.

Ethics and the Profession of Arms

Ethical behavior by anyone is the conduct that we expect of a person with strong, unrelenting moral fortitude. Ethical behavior represents the strength of character and seems to embody the “Do the Right Thing” theme. However, as easy as the concept is to describe or imagine, in practice doing the right thing is far more complicated and situation dependent. Soldiers have no template that covers all instances in which they can possibly find themselves. Fortunately, we have general guidelines that shape our conduct in the majority of tests of our own character. As a Soldier, ethics take on a more important role as the lives of others may weigh in the balance.

Defining moments come without warning. Soldiers have no time to prepare or to rehearse. Decisions are made at a pace that few can understand, especially when lives are at stake. Take, for example, the life of a child in a battlefield environment. Whether used as a shield or just unfortunate enough to be a bystander, a child still in the infancy of life’s cycle can affect a tactical response. Is there room for compassion in warfare? In the heat of a battle, a Soldier notices a frightened child while the squad is engaged with a sniper in a building in the distance. The Soldier is compelled to help the child because he or she is an innocent victim. The Soldier loses his life to the sniper while trying to rescue the child. He lost his life trying to do the decent thing. Pointing to the dead Soldier, the commanding officer commented to the others that they were not there to do the decent thing. Should we only consider what would benefit the mission and forsake humanity?

Today, new recruits average 18 years of age. The United States Army struggles to meet set recruitment numbers, and as a result, continues to drop recruitment requirements. The easing of requirements for a person to join the Army, qualifies more individuals attempting to

join the Army who in the past would not qualify. New recruits come from all different cultural backgrounds and different life styles, making the Army a true “Melting Pot.” The enormity of the responsibility placed on the shoulders of America’s eighteen-year-old citizens defending their country and our interests is severely understated. Soldiers have such a fine line between that warrior ethos spirit of seeking and neutralizing and then switching it off to protect the innocent public who might be caught in the crossfire. For this reason, and many others, we tend to weigh the options of a given scenario in terms of cost and benefits. Is what we will gain worth the lives of our peers? What are the consequences of my decision? This sheer contemplation of possible consequences is inevitably the cause of indecisiveness in younger Soldiers and leaders. Ironically, that lack of firmness can cost as many or more casualties when a decision must be made.

What about the use of weapons or force only to the degree necessary to accomplish the mission? Suppose a Soldier has just lost his friend of ten years to an opposing force. At the controlling end of his weapon, he encounters three enemy Soldiers waving a white flag attempting to surrender. His emotions cloud his rational thought at times. The Soldier who is overcome with the loss of a friend will most likely get his revenge by shooting the enemy Soldiers despite their effort to surrender. He will rationalize that he is not doing anything they would not do; knowing that he is trying to justify it to himself still makes it wrong. Casualties are a known fact in combat. Actions governed by sheer emotion are seldom rational. In these cases, adrenaline and rage far outdistance what the consequences might be.

Our armed forces displayed personal courage and bravery throughout our history. Our Soldiers perform distinguished actions beyond the scope of normality and perceived ability. Heroic patrons use superhuman strength and resolve when tested by adversity. Conversely

though, some will hide or take cover. What makes these people different from the ones leading the way? It may not be a simple lack of guts or will to achieve. Some admittedly do not know if a presented risk is worth taking, or just how precarious a situation really is. These people will almost assuredly be on the side of caution. Their sense of consequence focuses on the most catastrophic of possibility. They will toil with their sense of duty to the country and their fellow comrades in arms with their own self preservation. Regardless, in the eyes of many, they are labeled as cowards.

The war on terrorism continues to force the United States Army to put young Soldiers on the front lines of our nation's defense. Second Lieutenants, Sergeants (E5) and below average less than three years in the Army. Many of these young Soldiers are still in the developmental phase of their career. Soldiers receive ethical and Army value classes prior to deployments. Ethics and Army value classes are one to two hours in duration; these classes are in no way sufficient training to prepare young Soldiers for war. Combat in Iraq and Afghanistan is brutal. In many cases, these young Soldiers have no combat experience, and as a result we do not know how any of them will react to witnessing a fellow Soldier's death.

Lieutenants or young non-commissioned officers lead many patrols and convoy security operations. During these operations, these leaders find themselves in situations, which cause ethical dilemmas. Think of this situation, a young Staff Sergeant leads his or her squad as they enter a suspected terrorist hideout. During the entry, a firefight breaks out. At the end of the firefight, the Staff Sergeant and the squad attend a wounded enemy Soldier. The Soldier providing first aid for the POW is a young Private First Class (PFC) married with two children. The PFC is close to the squad members and considered as part of the family. The Prison of War (POW) suddenly reaches in his coat and retrieves a knife. The POW grabs the PFC by his collar,

and cuts his throat mortally wounding him. The squad members immediately attack the POW, but the POW drops his knife and throws his hands up in the air as to surrender. The Staff Sergeant orders the squad to back down, but notices the young PFC struggling for air while losing his battle for life.

The ethical reasoning process would help the Staff Sergeant as he or she struggles with the decision on what to do. Hopefully, the Staff Sergeant has assimilated into the Army way of life, and has had prior training on ethics and Army values. This type of ethical dilemma continues to test our young leaders in the battlefield, and their ability to make the right decisions. The ethical decisions our leaders make will influence the way subordinates make ethical decisions. Leaders must remember that subordinates will mimic their actions, and although no one knows how he or she will react in a similar situation, leaders must strive to do the right thing.

Army training on ethics and values must be an integral part of a unit's Mission Essential Task List (METL). Leaders must discuss army ethics and values with Soldiers on a daily basis. Leaders should use situations, which arise during regular operations as examples when training Soldiers on ethics and Army values. Leaders cannot rely solely on the required quarterly training mandated by Army Regulation 350-1. Everyday exists an opportunity to train Soldiers on proper ethics and living the Army values.

Conclusion

As you can see, our profession presents us with multiple chances to engage in ethical or unethical behavior. The United States Army prides itself on producing Soldiers with a warrior mentality, but at the same time treat people fairly. Regardless if a person is a combatant, or a non-combatant, Soldiers must treat people with dignity and respect. Despite a warrior ethos,

and a calling to the greater good, Soldiers are undoubtedly human. Our ethical reasoning process and decisions should be instilled early in our careers when we are taught what a Soldier should be. We are charged with maintaining and displaying conduct consistent with our adopted seven Army values. Leaders must ensure that Soldiers do not get caught up in anger when making ethical decisions. A Soldier that does not live the Army values, and understands ethical reasoning is a time bomb waiting to explode. Soldiers must remember that by treating people with dignity and respect, we not only winning over their minds, but their trust as well.

References:

All knowledge came from the author's personal experience.