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Conflicting Loyalties and the Marine NCO

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Ethical challenges need clarity

by SSgt Lance Minor



Have we instilled them an understanding of what is right and integrity most important leadership trait? (P by Cpl Athanasi Genos.)

As the Chief Instructor, Sergeants Course, one of my duties is to teach the ethical decisionmaking class in which sergeants discuss various moral dilemmas. Students bring up the My Lai massacre and the recent incidents at Haditha and Abu Ghraib, as well as other scenarios where essentially good people did bad things, and the actions of those individuals had global effects. In all of these scenarios the final outcome—the distinction between success and disaster—rested with the decisions and actions of small unit leaders.

After leading guided discussions with numerous classes and more than 100 smart and dedicated noncommissioned officers (NCOs), I've come to the conclusion that there is a problem with loyalty in the young leaders of our Corps.

No, our Marines are not morally corrupt; they are not selling our Nation's secrets. The backbone of our Corps is not conspiring to undermine good order and discipline. On the contrary, they are the agents for good order and discipline, but I believe that they are receiving mixed messages. The sergeants I teach come to me teetering on the fence between two ways of thinking. On one side they possess a code of behavior where the ends justify the means.

They also possess an unquestionable loyalty to their Marines and an understanding that their primary mission is to take care of their Marines at all costs. If you combine these views you have a recipe for Marines willing to do whatever it takes, even things morally and ethically wrong, justifying their behavior because their intentions are good. On the other side of the fence are the core values of honor, courage, and commitment; the commander's intent; and the absolutes of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).

The decision between right and wrong in this struggle should clearly fall on the latter side of the fence with our core values and the UCMJ. In fact, you would be hard pressed to justify any questionable behavior using the core values as a guide, but still the debate arises in all of my guided discussions with Sergeants Course students.

The purpose of this article is to expose an unspoken code of conduct that exists in our Corps, one that puts our young leaders at odds with our core values. We want our young NCOs to continue to exercise that unique ingenuity and resourcefulness they are known for, but we want them to do so without jeopardizing their integrity. They need to understand the change that is required of Marines in order to support their commander's intent once they transition to the NCO ranks. Additionally, the Marines our NCOs lead need to expect that change, as well as recognize the path they have before them. They need to understand the changes that come with being promoted, so they know what to expect when their friend becomes their leader.

Familiarity Breeds Contempt

"Familiarity breeds contempt"—some people attribute this quotation to the Greek philosopher Aesop. It suggests that the more we come to know something (or someone), the less we will appreciate it, even to the point of despising it. Today, leaders apply the phrase to the relationship between seniors and subordinates. It suggests that if young Marines come to know their leaders too intimately, they will not maintain the respect that is required for good order and discipline. Young NCOs have a tough time with this lesson because they start off at a disadvantage in this area, particularly when they initially join the NCO ranks and must now lead those who were formerly their friends and peers.

Fraternization and undue familiarity are not new concepts; however, they are key elements in understanding the conflicting loyalties that our young leaders face today. We tell them to take care of their Marines, and for them that means honoring their friendships and protecting their subordinates from "bad" situations. They would rather "take care of a situation" on their own and avoid reporting things because they want to keep their Marines from getting into trouble.

Certainly there are circumstances where discipline and corrections are handled at the NCOs' level, but their limited experience oftentimes blurs where one level of infraction meets the next level; they fail to recognize when the platoon sergeant or even the first sergeant should get involved. By the time they do figure it out, it is usually too late. What NCOs fail to realize is that when they are promoted and accept the added responsibility of leadership, their commander's intent takes precedence over their own personal loyalties. They are the first agents of order in the chain of command, charged with maintaining discipline and enforcing rules. They do not have the luxury of interpreting those rules to fit certain circumstances. ✓

I remember seeing posted on the wall in the duty hut a sign that read, "A Marine on duty has no friends." Once Marines are promoted to corporal they should consider themselves always on duty, always responsible for maintaining the good order and discipline of their Marines. Niccolo Machiavelli was a 14th century Italian poet, playwright, and philosopher. In his book, *The Prince*, he tells a young ruler, "It is better to be feared than to be loved." For the young NCO, this is especially true.

Unspoken Behavior

There is an ethical subculture in our Corps that opposes our core values. I'm sure making that statement will raise eyebrows, but I level the charge to get your attention. Ask most young Marines who Machiavelli is and they will likely tell you something about the dead rapper Tupac Shakur. True enough, Tupac's alter ego was known as Makaveli, and the lyrics of some of the songs he wrote on his album, *Me Against the World*, mirrored some of Niccolo Machiavelli's theories. In *The Prince* the real Machiavelli offers guidance to a fictitious political leader on how to gain and maintain power and control. In addition to explaining "that it is better to be feared than to be loved," Machiavelli also posits the theory that certain unethical behavior is essential to maintaining power. This code of conduct is very close to some of the adages I hear from my students. You may have heard them yourself:

- "Admit nothing. Deny everything. Make counteraccusations."
- "If you ain't cheating, you ain't trying—if you get caught, you didn't try hard enough."
- "Marines don't steal, they just reappropriate other peoples' gear."
- "There is only one thief in the Marine Corps—everyone else is trying to get their sh** back."

- "Gear adrift is a gift."

Ask some company gunnies, and they will probably tell you that the last three quotations above are rules to live by. In fact, in his book, *First to Fight*, LtGen Victor H. Krulak devotes a whole section to the "The Honorable Art of Institutional Theft." He makes an important distinction that all company gunnies will appreciate. He writes:

There were a few unwritten rules. You stole for the outfit, never for yourself. You didn't steal weapons. Some poor fellow was signed up for every one.³

There is no denying that resource management was and still is a crucial element in mission accomplishment. However, technology has changed. Methods for accountability and our means to trace pilfering are much more accurate. Even still, what young Marines need to understand is that most of what company gunnery sergeants do, the way they keep the unit supplied, is done above the table using official supply systems. Most staff NCOs (SNCOs) have established honest connections with people they have developed working relationships with over the years. Sure, they trade favors with these contacts, but there isn't some SNCO mafia, though some would have you think that there is.

What is troubling about the statements listed above is that none of them are taught in any leadership book, yet they are part of our culture. They are ingrained in the zeitgeist of our enlisted Corps, yet they are in direct opposition to our core values. Most of the time these phrases are said in a joking manner, almost tongue in cheek, yet they truly do affect the way our NCOs think and act. I hear it in our discussions.

Anchors in the Storm

Lessons learned from Vietnam's My Lai massacre and 1LT William Calley, USA, have been finalized after nearly 40 years. As far as Haditha, the details from this event are still unclear. Responsibility for what truly went wrong is still being determined. The fundamental lesson from each of these scenarios is clear. In spite of the turbulent horror and emotional storm that surrounds war, leaders have the obligation to anchor their Marines, to regulate action and keep it well within realms of ethical behavior. * This is hard to do when we have been conditioning our young leaders with relative ethics.

If you ask Marines for whom or for what they fight, the answer is nearly universal. They answer that they fight for the buddies to their right or their left. In their book, *Downrange: To Iraq and Back* (Wordsmith Books, LLC, Seattle, WA, 2005), Dr. Bridget Cantrell and veteran Chuck Dean write about the level of intimacy that develops between soldiers/Marines as they fight and suffer together. What is sometimes overlooked is that officers and commanders are also included in the "each other" that Marines fight for.

At times even the lines between officers and enlisted personnel become less important when facing constant death. We return to the adage that familiarity breeds contempt, but instead of contempt we find complacency. Marines are quick to justify their questionable actions on the battlefield because they are "taking care" of their buddies even though doing so puts them at odds with standing orders.

We tell Marines, "Take care of your Marines." We tell them to handle things at their level, yet we also want them to uphold the commander's intent, to report all infractions of the UCMJ from underage drinking to violations of the laws of war. Some might argue that comparing underage drinking to murder is a long stretch, but the issue isn't the crime. The issue is the relativism to which our Marines are being conditioned every day.

During Vietnam, 1LT Calley was found guilty of premeditated murder and sentenced to life. President Richard M. Nixon ordered him released pending appeal. 1LT Calley served 4 1/2 months in the U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, KS. He claimed he was following orders. Similar to Haditha today, suggestions of coverups and finger pointing saturated the media. Today's war is not being fought so much by officers; more often than not, NCOs are being placed in positions of great responsibility, where they are the decisionmakers on the ground. In the My Lai incident, 1LT Calley and the officers on site were expected to be the anchors of reason. They failed. Today, our NCOs are in that position. We must harden them to that responsibility. They must know that in the chaotic and uncertain environments, they must be the voice of reason and act as the litmus for right and wrong.

Prevention vs. Damage Control

Marines by nature are offensive creatures. It makes sense that we can "take care of Marines" by practicing fundamentals of the offense. In keeping with Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, Warfighting, we must "seize and maintain the initiative" not only in dealing with the enemy, but also when it comes to managing our Marines. NCOs need to learn that the high expectations they set day to day translate into stability and cohesion in the long run.

The alternative is hoping that their subordinates follow the rules and then being forced to do damage control when they don't. That goes for SNCOs as well. Marines emulate those whom they respect. If we practice flaky ethics, so too will our Marines. It may seem tolerable for the little things, but eventually our Marines may find themselves facing more serious circumstance where their moral compass is set spinning. I hope that none of us are so naïve as to think that the lines between right and wrong are always clear. Effective leaders dance in and out of the ethical gray areas every day. The problem is that our young NCOs lack the experience for that dance; therefore, they need to be taught to err on the side of prudence.

In sharing with you my observations of our Corps' NCOs I seek a final purpose. Hopefully, this article will stimulate discussion. Hopefully, it will force you to scrutinize your own ethics, whether it is the challenges you experience daily or events that affect the perception of our Marine Corps on a global scale. As Marines we pride ourselves on our abilities to adapt, to improvise, and to overcome any situation. Our success in these areas has historically been linked to our tactical flexibility, moral fortitude, and legendary temerity.

Simply put, we outthink, rise above, and roll over our enemies. With such a reputation it makes sense that we would be challenged to find outside agencies that can control such strength, and so we must look within. Honor, courage, and commitment are our core values. I emphasize the word "core." There should be nothing hollow about these terms. By allowing Marines to think that "cheating is trying" and getting caught means that you didn't "try hard enough," we are planting a cavity in the core of our values. This cannot be tolerated, no matter the unspoken traditions.

For me, I will continue to teach our NCOs to listen to their attitudes and correct them one at a time. As they come to me teetering on the fence I will push them off onto the right side and hope that they land safely, that they take their lessons with them, and that they teach someone else. As I close this article, I leave one parting question. Which side of the fence are you on?

Notes

1. Franklin, Benjamin, Poor Richard's Almanac, (1742), Barnes and Noble, Inc., NY, 2004, p. 103.
2. American Heritage Dictionary, Houghton Mifflin Company, NY, 2006, p. 342.
3. Krulak, LtGen Victor H., First to Fight, Blue Jackets Books, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1999, p. 151.

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