

Ethical Decision Making: Arming Warriors for Any Operating Environment

Joseph J. Thomas
Lakefield Family Foundation
Distinguished Military Professor of Leadership
United States Naval Academy
(410) 293-6548, jjthomas@usna.edu

Abstract

The US Army's 2007 Mental Health Assessment Team IV was the first to incorporate the opinions of Marines in the survey sample. The findings revealed, among other things, that ethical decision making is a fundamental concern in the conduct of counter-insurgency or irregular warfare. The outcomes of decisions made in the heat of combat not only effect the tactical situation on the ground, but they can have a persistent effect on the warfighter for years to come. It is for this reason that Gen James Conway, Commandant of the Marine Corps, convened the 2007 Values and Ethics Working Group. Nearly 100 combat leaders from the fire team to regimental command level were brought to Quantico to discuss values and ethics and the impact that effective leadership can have.

The results of the working group have been far-reaching. A large scale survey on leadership and ethics was developed and administered to nearly 2000 Marines across the operating forces. Curriculum and training tools were developed to support Marines and sailors in the field and efforts continue. The Gen. John H. Russell Leadership Conference has been reinvigorated to gather first-line leaders (primarily Marine NCOs) to help develop leadership, ethics, and core values doctrine, policy, and curriculum. The results of these efforts serve to prepare Marines for the challenges of irregular warfare. Training and education play a vital role in the prevention of combat operational stress. It is known that warriors who perceive themselves to be doing the right thing, for the right reasons, actually do the right thing and are more accepting of their actions, no matter how taxing and stressful.

A Problem Revealed

On May 3, 2007 Rick Rogers, a staff writer with the San Diego Union Tribune, published an expose entitled *Military Report Shows Ethics of Troops in Iraq*. It was just one of many articles published worldwide concerning the findings of the US Army's Mental Health Assessment Team (MHAT) IV¹ survey and implied there were serious problems with the moral compass of the force engaged in combat operations in Iraq. Rogers opened with the most disturbing statistics, "Only 40% of Marines would report a member of their unit for killing or wounding an innocent civilian...one third of Marines would turn in someone for stealing...30% would report a unit member for unnecessarily destroying property." The Union Tribune had gotten an unauthorized copy of the 30-page report and enlisted the help of a director of a popular think tank to interpret the findings. He posited that "I suspect the combat in Iraq is more stressful than is understood. The list of behaviors shows classic symptoms of combat stress." The article concluded with quotes from professors and combat veterans that "leadership is the answer" to ethical challenges and the resulting stress placed on the warrior engaged in counterinsurgency.²

The reaction within the Marine Corps to the survey results, related articles in the media, and reports from the ranks was to demand immediate and comprehensive action.

Teasing out the lessons of current combat operations would involve medical

¹ The MHAT surveys were conducted by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and the Commander of Multi-National Force Iraq directed that MHAT IV would include a Marine sample of 447 from Regimental Combat Teams and Combat Logistics Battalions 5 and 7. The Navy Surgeon General and Director of the Military Readiness Division at Headquarters Marine Corps took exception to the methodology of the survey and, therefore, some of its findings. While stress control policy and procedures for deployed Marines and Sailors can not be drawn from MHAT findings, the "study recommendations are unobjectionable" (CAPT Bill Nash, MHAT Info Paper dated 3 April 2007).

² Rick Rogers, "Military Report Shows Ethics of Troops in Combat," San Diego Union Tribune, May 3, 2007, Page 1.

professionals, educators, and most importantly combat leaders themselves. One overwhelming conclusion of the most senior Marine leaders was that, in fact, leadership is the answer and that it must be engaged across the ranks to address the issue of moral decision making in combat.³

The Challenge Refined

In April 2007 the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC), Gen James T. Conway, directed Marine Corps Training and Education Command to conduct a working group made up of seasoned combat leaders from across the spectrum of ranks. The purpose of this somewhat unique gathering was to answer several critical questions:

- Is the Marine Corps preparing ethical decision makers effectively for combat in the current operating environment?
- What can be done immediately to improve leadership and ethical decision making throughout the Marine Corps?
- What are the costs of not taking action to improve values and ethics development?

The Values and Ethics Working Group was convened in Quantico Virginia and included 96 combat leaders ranging from regimental combat team commanders through fire team leaders. In addition, several Marine Corps generals participated in working groups, listened to briefs and provided feedback and guidance to working group members throughout the conference. The schedule covered three full days. The CMC opened by welcoming participants, explaining his concerns and providing some initial direction to attendees. The Commanding General Training and Education Command also provided his direction to conference attendees and echoed the concerns of the CMC. Recognized experts in leadership, ethics, behavioral science and mental health provided several hours of presentations to serve

³ Gen James T. Conway, Commandant of the Marine Corps, "Noncommissioned Officers Will Win This War," *Leatherneck Magazine*, November 2007, pp. 22-23.

as background information on day one. After these opening and orientation briefs on the first day, the conference divided into three working groups with specific tasks for each. In addition, an executive session met at the beginning and end of each day to capture actionable lessons. On the final day, each of three working groups briefed the rest of the conference attendees on their findings.⁴ A number of themes were identified from the three day Working

Group:

- There is no institutional crisis in values, ethics, and moral courage. There are critical areas for concern. The effort provided the Marine Corps, as a whole, an opportunity to shape a coherent response to the challenge of proper conduct in combat and in peace.
- Outcomes of the Working Group should be tangible, measurable solutions. These solutions require effort and the application of resources (time, personnel, money).
- Leadership and Ethics, as teachable concepts, defy the task/condition/standard approach. At minimum, the underlying purpose of the lesson must be thoroughly explored.
- Not only is the “Center of Gravity” for establishment of values and moral courage the operational forces, it is specifically the Battalion Commander (climate) and small unit leader (Corporal through Company Commander). The majority of tools must support that level.
- Values and Ethics are not and should not be the domain of Chaplains and Staff Judge Advocates (SJAs), they are the domain of leaders. SJAs and Chaplains serve a vital role in advising leaders.
- The Marine Corps must approach solutions to the issues discussed from the standpoint of producing tools for leaders, not additional higher headquarters-driven mandatory training.
- Diagnostic instruments (surveys, heuristics) should, wherever possible, be developed from within. At minimum, outside surveys should be coordinated with Marine culture.

⁴ “Values and Ethics Summary Report,” Marine Corps University, Training and Education Command, June 2007.

- Regularly scheduled opportunities for discussing leader development should be established (Russell Leadership Conference, TECOM-sponsored colloquia, etc.).
- A single point of coordination should exist for the training, education, and practice of leadership and ethics. The Marine Corps has been the only service without such a center. A consistent message, efficient use of expertise, responsiveness to changing needs, and institutional vetting are but a few benefits of the consolidation of these matters.

The critical questions that drove the Values and Ethics Working Group had been answered, but only in part. Further research was needed on the broader Marine Corps to confirm findings or establish a new direction for leadership and ethics development.

The 2007 Ethics and Leadership Survey

During the summer of 2007, a collaborative effort between the Lejeune Leadership Institute and Ground Training Branch of Training and Education Command began with the intent of “filling in the gaps” left by the Values and Ethics Working Group and answering the direct questions of the CMC and Commanding General of the Marine Corps Combat Development Command. The result was a 114 Likert scale question survey with an added five question short answer section. The blind survey forms included explanatory instructions, extensive demographic information, and background definitions for basic terms such as ethics, morals, and values. The questions focused on respondent perceptions of their immediate leadership (battalion or squadron command team, staff-noncommissioned officers, officers, etc.), their experiences in combat (in witnessing or participating in defense or abuse of the rules), their own internal moral world view (personal behaviors and willingness to hold others to account), and the role of the Marine Corps at large in shaping values and ethics in it’s members.

The results of the surveys revealed that the Marine Corps, as a whole, is a cohesive organization that demands and gets the best from its members. However, there were several areas that demand further attention. The survey involved nearly 2000 respondents from all three Marine Expeditionary Forces, to include Marines forward deployed to Iraq. The initial survey was administered to 698 and the following is a summary of those findings⁵:

- 89% of respondents were enlisted, 11% officers, some groups such as the Commanders' Program had a very narrow rank population. 95% of respondents were male.
- Average years in the Marine Corps for respondents was 5.85.
- 55% were from the 20-24 year old age group, 65% had no children.
- 62% of respondents believed the Marine Corps had positively influenced their personal code of morals.
- 81% honor Marine Corps values even when off duty.
- 86% believed the Marine Corps provides clear expectations of moral conduct.
- 65% had at least one tour in Iraq, 10% in Afghanistan, 26% had a platoon mate killed due to hostile action.
- 44% reported witnessing a problem with the moral behavior of Marines in combat.
- 59% believed their judgment was impaired as result of inadequate sleep in combat.
- When asked to write about those things that drive them to "do the right thing" the responses were (in order): 1. Family 2. Fellow Marines 3. Self respect/respect for others 4. Karma 5. Leadership by example 6. To avoid getting into trouble.
- During the in-depth focus group conversations the most common themes were "Marines police their own," "the most important factor in leadership is trust," "standards must be kept high, demand the most from every Marine and hold them accountable when they fail to meet the standard," and "the solution to moral failings will come from leaders in the operating forces not formal schools or classes."

The surveys reinforced much of what was discovered in the Values and Ethics

Working Group, although the respondents felt freer to be critical of one or more

⁵ Randy Webb, Training Development Section, Ground Training Branch, Training and Education Command, "Leadership and Ethics Survey," 23 October 2007.

aspect of the institution. This is undoubtedly due to the Working Group participants being hand selected by their commands and participating in close quarters with and being observed by very senior officers. The more senior the audience, in terms of both rank and age, the more positive the response. For example, the staff-noncommissioned officer heavy audience at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island (average time in the Marine Corps over 9 years) was far more likely to have had a platoon mate killed in action (40% vice 26%), twice as likely to feel strongly about avoiding the use of offensive language when dealing with noncombatants in Iraq (44% vice 22%), or would “definitely” confront a fellow Marine suspected of using drugs (80% vice 68%). Commanders’ Program respondents were near unanimous in responses holding themselves and others to account for moral failings.

While the findings were predominately positive, a considerable gap in the moral decision making of Marines was uncovered. Ethics, like safety, is something an organization strives to achieve 100% compliance in 100% of its members. The solutions to this challenge, like the problem itself, require a multi-faceted approach. Doctrine, policy, curriculum, and leadership must be engaged to push the Marine Corps in the right direction. Doctrine and policy are keeping pace. Considerable strides have been made in reaction to the research and ongoing dialogue. Those successes are best covered elsewhere and fall beyond the scope of this paper. It is the most practical tools—the formal and informal curriculum—that has had a tangible impact on the formal schools and operating forces of the Marine Corps.

The Leadership and Ethics Toolkit

Leadership, values, and ethics are personal topics. Yet they strike at the very core of an institution's culture. Values are the starting point for this discussion. Organizational ethos is defined by the norms, rules, practices, and behaviors surrounding leadership and ethics. But what is the best way to transmit these somewhat nebulous concepts? Can these ideas be given, like an inoculation, at the beginning of a career and reinforced by booster shots of training at prescribed intervals? Are these issues beyond formal instruction and rely solely on the example of practitioners in the field and the behaviors they model for the newest members? Has anything been proven to succeed? These questions defy simple answers and after searching for nearly 18 months one thing is clear: multiple solutions, applied early and often by the most influential mentors or role models are absolutely critical. It is with this finding in mind that the Lejeune Leadership Institute has begun crafting solutions for the complex operating environment Marines find themselves today.

Case Study Guides

The best form of education is experience. This is particularly true of combat. It is difficult, some would say impossible, to replicate the multiple stressors, ambiguous situations, and general complexity of combat operations in the modern environment. The realistic training conducted at 29 Palms or any of the other live fire ranges across the Marine Corps does a tremendous job of preparing those technical skill sets for combat operations. The dedication to Professional Military Education (PME) in the Marine Corps is as strong as in any

military service anywhere. However, leadership and ethics are but a small slice of combat training and PME. Special tools are needed to span training conducted in the operating forces and formal PME schools.

Business management and ethics are similarly difficult to adequately cover in the classroom environment. The most successful business schools employ the “next best thing” to experience by immersing students in the experiences of others.⁶ By forcing MBA students into high stakes, realistic case studies that capture the very essence of the tough decisions they’ll be called upon to make in the “real world,” these schools encourage their students to live vicariously through the experiences of others and learn from those successes and failures. The learning occurs primarily in the discussion of actions taken and alternatives for more effective solutions. The written case study forms the basis of its power and its potential is unleashed by the hand of a dynamic instructor.

The Marine Corps doesn’t lack for dynamic instructors. They exist in virtually every platoon in the Corps. As this is the most combat experienced Marine Corps in history,⁷ a unique situation exists. These potential instructors need only be armed with the materials to begin the conversation. The rest can be allowed to their initiative and imagination. Because this is a Marine Corps at war

⁶ The leader in this approach is the Harvard Business School (HBS). Their course catalogue describes the nature of their approach; “Pioneered by HBS faculty in the 1920s, the case method began as a way of importing slices of business reality into the classroom in order to breathe life and instill greater meaning into the lessons of management education. Today, although we also make use of lectures, simulations, fieldwork, and other forms of teaching as appropriate, more than 80 percent of HBS classes are built on the case method.” Marine Corps University personnel, to include the author, visited HBS to study the technique in the summer of 2007.

⁷ Comment by SgtMaj of the Marine Corps, SgtMaj Carlton W. Kent, 20 May 2008 at the 2008 Russell Leadership Conference.

the conversation begins with combat, but is not limited to combat. The first case study guide published by the Lejeune Leadership Institute (see Figure 1),

**Leadership, Ethics
and Law of War
Discussion Guide
for Marines**

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Figure 1, Discussion Guide Cover and Table of Contents

Leadership, Ethics, and Law of War Discussion Guide for Marines, is made up primarily of situations drawn from Iraq and Afghanistan and others are taken from peacetime training missions and related ethical crises. The request that each case be “ripped from the headlines” was taken quite literally during the Values and Ethics Working Group and each is drawn from actual, highly publicized events.

The second case study guide is similarly designed for practitioners in the operating forces, although each are simplified hypothetical cases inspired by events in Iraq. These discussion materials demand far less preparation time and even less time to discuss within a small unit (see Figure 2). All are based on principles that clarify and simplify actions that guide warriors in the volatile, hostile situations that warriors experience on the modern battlefield.

A third case study guide based on peacetime events is scheduled for publication later this year. Its subject matter will focus on those non-combat issues that make up the majority of moral failings by Marines. Topics such as hazing, harassment, off duty employment, fraud, alcohol abuse, and undue influence are all covered in case study and discussion guide format. The trainers are the unit leaders and they themselves learn as they teach and discuss. This garrison case study guide will be distributed Corps-wide.

**Discussion Material
for Small Unit Leaders:
Issues of Battlefield
Ethics and Leadership**

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Figure 2, Discussion Material Cover and Table of Contents

The so-called Millennial Generation—those who have come of age after the turn of the Millennium—demands interactive multimedia instruction. They are not always satisfied with traditional books or discussion guides. It is with this in mind that Marine Corps University began investing in the “video game” approach to case study instruction. Starting later this year “Call of Duty ©” quality decision games based on the case studies outlined in Figure 2 will begin being disseminated to the operating forces.⁸ These games have been reviewed by the end users and were met with enthusiastic support. The greatest advantage in this approach is that each case study is self directed and self paced and allow for a more personal learning experience at home or in the barracks.

Leadership Conferences, Symposia, and Mobile Training Support

Book and video games are insufficient in themselves to solve the leadership and ethics challenges of the Marine Corps. Select influencers must be seeded throughout the organization and armed with special preparation. One way to do this is to provide expert instruction on-site to specially selected NCOs, SNCOs, and officers. The Lejeune Leadership Institute has performed a broad variety of support missions directly to the operating forces at locations as diverse as Parris Island and Djibouti. By disseminating published materials in such settings and engaging in debate and dialogue with key influencers, LLI creates a cadre of force multipliers, each charged with arming their subordinates with ideas and materials to make them more effective and protected.

An even better, more substantial option is to bring these influencers to Quantico and expose them to a broad variety of experts and senior leaders that could not otherwise be taken on the road to the bases and stations of the Marine Corps. The best example of

⁸ Call of Duty © is a popular video game among the Millennials, and particularly popular among the young Marines participating in the Russell Leadership Conference. More information can be found at <http://www.callofduty.com/hub>.

this approach is the 2008 Gen John H. Russell Leadership Conference held at the Gray Research Center in Quantico, 20-22 May 2008. The Russell Conference brought together over 220 Marine NCOs from throughout the operating forces and exposed them to Harvard professors, best selling authors, and thought leaders from the fields of leadership, psychology, military culture, and ethics. Added to this were discussions with the key leaders of the organization to include the Commandant and SgtMaj of the Marine Corps. Panels were established for the fundamental challenges to tactical-level leaders navigating the difficult contemporary environment. The conclusion reached by participants and organizers was the Russell Conference and other similar venues were the best means to prepare young leaders for increased responsibilities and arm them for any operating environment the Corps may find itself in the future.

The Road Ahead

All of these books, video games and conferences are of secondary importance to the intervention of genuinely concerned and adequately prepared leaders. The true potential of such tools will only be realized when unit commanders and SNCOs make them part of their informal education process during the pre-deployment cycle. Considerable time is being dedicated at Senior SNCO and officer PME in discussing these issues. The materials themselves are being distributed in great numbers at the resident PME schools in Quantico and on support visits to the operating forces. Whether they have substantial impact on the preparation for combat and reduction of combat operational stress remains to be fully measured. Until then, the Lejeune Leadership Institute of Marine Corps University and other like organizations must continue to canvas

the operating forces and supporting establishment for ideas to arm warriors for any
operating environment.

Author Bio:

Dr. Joseph J. Thomas is the Lakefield Family Foundation Distinguished Military Professor of Leadership at the United States Naval Academy and past Director of the John A. Lejeune Leadership Institute, Marine Corps University. The author of numerous articles on the subjects of command and control, military training and education, and leadership, his published books include, *Leadership Education for Marines* (UMI Press, 2000), *Leadership Embodied* (The US Naval Institute Press, 2005, 2007), *Naval Leadership Capstone* (McGraw-Hill, 2006), and *Leadership Explored* (AcademX, 2007). Joe's education includes an M.S.Sc. from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, a M.S.S. from the US Army War College, and Ph.D. from George Mason University.