

I WILL NOT LET ANOTHER MAN DIE

Situation: We had an incredibly rough start. We lost four men before we began to feel more settled and secure in our assigned sector. We learned the enemy's tactics and became familiar with the area. As violent conflicts and non-battle related incidents decreased, our spirits began to rise. However, these feelings did not last long. Our new orders from Division told us to report to their sector where we were to become the Brigade reserve. We started working with several other units in very dangerous and unfamiliar areas. Our sense of security quickly disappeared.

Then, in December 2004, the Division reassigned us to a US Marine Corps Infantry Battalion in North Babel, part of the Sunni Triangle. We found out first-hand just how dangerous it was in this area. We constantly had to deal with improvised explosive devices (IED), detain multiple suspicious personnel, and had to police up countless dead bodies resulting from sectarian violence. We could not seem to get a feel for the enemy's battle rhythm, making our sense of unease and insecurity all the more intense. On December 16, seven IEDs detonated on us while conducting a patrol resulting in one man wounded and three damaged HMMWVs. We went to bed that night praying we would make it home soon, as our tour was nearly over.

The next day, my unit embarked on a patrol to locate IEDs in an area known to be inhabited by the enemy. During the patrol, we tried to gather information on who was planting the IEDs by talking with some of the locals; they refused to cooperate with us. We continued on patrol and found an IED which the Explosive Ordnance Disposal team cleared. One hour later, we found another IED, but this time it hit us. Fortunately, the damage was minimal so I ordered the patrol to continue. About 600 meters further down the road, the lead patrol vehicle stopped and reported seeing what appeared to be yet another IED. My vehicle was 200 meters behind, so I got out of the vehicle and looked at the site through my binoculars. I observed signs of a possible IED. I knew how experienced the lead crew was and trusted their judgment. I did not want to put my crew in unnecessary danger without first trying to ascertain information about the possible IED site. I decided to talk to a couple of locals standing at a nearby roadside shop. Again, the locals were uncooperative. This made me extremely angry and frustrated. I knew the locals had to have heard the previous IED that struck our patrol just a few minutes prior. I yelled at them to give me any information regarding who was planting the IEDs.

One of my sergeants approached two of the locals and ordered them to take the shovel he was holding. He then told them to walk up to the suspected IED site and dig up the area. I said nothing. The two locals refused my sergeants' command until another sergeant put a gun to one man's head and threatened to shoot. Again, I said nothing. I felt nothing for these Iraqis who I assumed were putting my men in danger daily by being uncooperative. However, the two men did not find an IED.

How would you have handled this situation? Would you have stopped the Sergeant from forcing the Iraqi civilians digging up the suspected IED?

REFLECTION...

After 13 months in an incredibly unpredictable war, I had lost four of my men. The line between right and wrong blurred and I stepped outside the ethical circle. The mission seemed useless. Furthermore, our unit's experience led us to consider all Iraqis as insurgents or supporters of insurgents. I did know, however, that my decision not to stop the event was wrong. Today, I wish I would have taken charge of the situation, stopped my men from involving the Iraqi civilians, and completed our mission honorably. In reflecting, I now realize forcing Iraqi civilians to accomplish a task such as clearing an IED will only feed the insurgents' cause and potentially generate more anti-American supporters.

It is very important to realize that a long, stressful deployment will have significant impacts on your judgment, frame of mind, and focus. Such deployments can easily blur the lines of ethical conduct, making it easier to cross those lines in order to come to terms with the perceived reality on the ground. Moral and legal issues will come to bear if you forego ethical choices and allow the desire to keep your Soldiers safe override the mission. Leaders must consider every decision as an ethical choice.

The Role of the Major Participant in the Scenario: I was the company commander and had the ultimate responsibility for the safety, discipline, and behavior of my men.

Ethical Dilemma at the Time of the Incident: Ordering Iraqi civilians to dig up a suspected IED. Our small infantry unit went to Iraq for a 13-month tour. It was a very difficult deployment as we lost four comrades; I vowed not to lose any more men.

Rules/Laws That Apply: Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and Rules of Engagement.

Conflict or Tension of the 7 Army Values? Out of the 7 Army values, my actions directly conflicted with duty, honor, integrity, and personal courage. I did not fulfill my obligations as a company commander to uphold the Army values. I was not the moral compass for my Soldiers. This compromised my integrity in the strictest sense, legally and morally. Even though we had all shown immense personal courage throughout our entire deployment, I did not follow through with our previous stellar performance this time because I let the fear of losing more men outweigh doing what was necessary and right.

Consideration of Other Courses of Action (COA) and the 2nd and 3rd Order Affects: I could have stopped the situation, telling my men that it was legally and morally wrong to use Iraqi civilians to do our job. They would have listened to me, and perhaps spread this ethical behavior to other Soldiers during follow-on tours. Another COA would have been to detain the two Iraqi men for further questioning, but still doing our job of clearing the suspected IED. This would have shown my men that I did not believe the two Iraqis' stance of ignorance, but we were going to follow proper procedure.

How Did You Recognize Unethical Behavior? I knew the decision to use Iraqi civilians to dig up a potential IED was wrong. Unfortunately, my desire to protect my Soldiers in a dangerous situation overrode my judgment. After 13 months in Iraq, I did not want to lose another man. We were operating in unfamiliar areas and IED attacks were a regular occurrence. The nature of our counterinsurgency mission blurred the dynamics of war and resulted in me making a very poor decision in a tough situation.

How Did You Process Or Judge This Was An Ethical Dilemma? Ordering non-combatants to conduct a military operation is a direct violation of the rules of engagement and punishable by UCMJ. However, my desire to protect my Soldiers overrode any moral or ethical struggle I may have been confronting.