

# MISSED THE MARK

**Situation:** The Troop deployed back to Fort Campbell from Afghanistan exhausted after fourteen months of combat operations. I had taken command of the Troop mid-way through the deployment and I would take them back to combat in approximately one year. During this home station period, the unit entered into a rigorous training cycle to prepare for combat in Iraq.

After about four months at Fort Campbell, my Troop had established a quality training and maintenance regimen focused on its next combat tour in Iraq. All but one of the lieutenants and platoon sergeants remained in the Troop and they brought a wealth of experience to the unit. Unfortunately, the Troop and the entire squadron experienced serious turbulence among its junior NCO ranks and enlisted Soldiers. This personnel turnover demanded the lion's share of the platoon leadership's attention. They had to focus on quite a few basic individual and collective tasks to build cohesive and trained crews. However, I believed the Troop leadership had adjusted well given the conditions.

About this same time, the IED threat in Iraq continued to rise unabated and armored vehicles—particularly up-armored HMMWVs, M1114s—were in high demand. My Troop had twenty of these coveted vehicles. The Division received orders to move all M1114s to the post railhead site in less than 24 hours. The order went out to all units with M1114s and we immediately recognized the criticality of the tasking. We knew our comrades in Iraq needed these vehicles more than we did at home station. I gave the order to the two platoon leaders and they turned-in the twenty vehicles complete with their machine gun mounts. The original order called for us to also include the MK-93 universal machine gun mounts on the vehicles. The MK-93 is a separate line item and not actually part of the M1114 component of end items or basic issue items listings. Essentially, the MK-93 is a separate property book item that costs approximately \$3,000 each. After we delivered the M1114s to the railhead and I had the paperwork to remove them from my property book, I got the FRAGO that we were not to include the MK-93 mounts. I informed the lieutenants of this change and they confirmed about two hours later that they had policed up the MK-93 mounts before the M1114s left the railhead. I was relieved \$60,000 of my property remained in my control and we would need these mounts for our next deployment.

Three weeks after the rapid turn-in my squadron commander informed me of a change to the command slate. I would take command of the Headquarters and Headquarters Troop prior to our next deployment and conduct a change of command inventory. In preparation for this inventory I ordered the platoons to conduct pre-change of command inventories to identify any major issues. After my first platoon conducted their inventories, 1LT Wells came to me and told me the bad news. He informed me his platoon was missing their MK-93 machine mounts. He told me he failed to physically check if his Soldiers secured the mounts from the railhead site. 1LT Wells' failure to do his job properly created a \$30,000 mistake since I did not have any paperwork proving I turned-in the mounts. As I composed myself and not explode on 1LT Wells, I quickly scanned my brain for a solution to this mess. Why shouldn't I just report 1LT Wells' failure? Or should I help him out?

## REFLECTION...

At first glance, this situation seems pretty cut and dry. My first option is to hold the lieutenant responsible and conduct a report of survey for the equipment that would basically erase two months of his pay since any survey officer would find him accountable. This option would also erode his reputation in the eyes of the battalion commander. Since he failed to confirm the collection of the MK-93 mounts, I was tempted to execute this option. This option was also far less painful for me as a commander since the report of survey would erase the MK-93s off of my property book and I would not be held accountable for them except to order new ones.

The wrinkle in this story is I had great respect for this first lieutenant and we had served side-by-side in combat. 1LT Wells had earned two valorous medals—a bronze star with V and an ARCOM with V—as well as two purple hearts. His actions directly saved the lives of four of his Soldiers. 1LT Wells was also extremely loyal, dedicated, and professional. He was the poster boy of what a platoon leader should be in the US Army. I hated to have to punish such a quality leader and Soldier.

As I pondered this first option, I thought of a way to circumvent the situation since I had a few months before the change of command. I had spent about 15 months as a battalion maintenance officer before I was a commander. During this time, I became quite familiar with the Army supply system and I had made a good friend in the battalion maintenance technician, a chief warrant officer (CW3). I devised a plan with this CW3 to order the three major components of the MK-93 via the class IX repair parts supply system. Before we went ahead with this plan, I wondered why I should do this for 1LT Wells. He had violated my trust and caused the unit to be short critical equipment all through his carelessness. I felt I knew 1LT Wells' character though and I believed he had learned his lessons from this event. I also could not ignore our relationship in combat and his previous deeds. I decided to circumvent the system.

I called in a favor with this CW3 and he had the components expedited from the supply depot to our unit in about three weeks. The battalion account was charged the money for the components, but it came out of the CL IX fund so no one noticed. We compiled the components to create 10 new machine gun mounts. I never told the squadron commander what I did and I still regret that. I used my logistical knowledge and connections to cover up a leader's mistake. I have always thought I "worked" the system and violated my own integrity for the loyalty I had for a subordinate.

Ethical Dilemma at the Time of the Incident: I had to decide whether to follow normal supply accountability procedures or utilize my knowledge to side-step the Army's property system.

Rules/Laws That Apply: Many components of the Uniform Code of Military Justice apply to property accountability. Furthermore, all supply standing operating procedures from battalion to division were in effect which gave clear guidance on missing property.

At What Point Did You Say "Enough is Enough"? When And How Did You Take Action? I had enough as soon as 1LT Wells told me of the situation. I knew I had to take action as soon as possible to account for the property and reprimand my lieutenant. I thought about it for a day before I decided to circumvent the supply system.

Conflict or Tension of the 7 Army Values? How Did You Resolve Those Conflicts? In this case, honor, integrity, and duty would seem to dictate that I report 1LT Wells' actions. However, I thought of 1LT Wells' loyalty to me and his selfless service over the years. I decided the person trumped the property rules in this case. I believe I saved a quality officer for the Army and the country by choosing loyalty and selfless service first.

Consideration of Other COAs and the 2nd and 3rd Order Effects. I believe I would still do the same thing again given the same circumstances. I would have told the squadron commander this time however. The most important point is 1LT Wells continued to be an outstanding leader and Soldier. 1LT Wells never had a property accountability issue again and performed brilliantly the rest of his career. He completed another combat tour and then served as the rear detachment commander for the unit's last deployment. By all accounts, he did the best job of anyone commander in the brigade. Unfortunately for the Army, 1LT Wells did leave the Army to pursue a law career, but we still keep in touch. I even wrote him letters of recommendation for law school and clerkships.

How Did You Get the Courage To Do the Harder Right? I assumed responsibility for my subordinate's mistake and took the risk to protect him. By the book, I did not do the harder right. However, I believe I did the harder right to develop and protect a quality leader. His stellar prior performance provided me enough courage to do the harder right in this case.