

Facing the “What Now?” Moment

A response to “Crossing the Minefield”

by Damien O’Connell

Over the last eleven years, decision-forcing cases (DFCs) have become increasingly popular among Marines—and for good reason. They help improve decision making, promote critical thinking, and develop a bias for action.¹ However, to reap these rewards, Marines must understand the purpose and proper use of DFCs. When we facilitate or experience DFCs without properly understanding them, they can easily become negative experiences that leave Marines frustrated, confused, and without being prepared for combat.

1stLt Ethan Hamilton’s article, “Crossing the Minefield: A Review of TBS Ethics,” (*MCG* Nov18) is a perfect example of the dangers of failing to understand a DFC.² Hamilton describes *The Farmer*, a DFC that he experienced at The Basic School (TBS), as an unrealistic, unlikely, and frustrating “ethical case study” that forced participants to choose between two “equally undesirable” options: hastily navigate a booby-trapped path or coerce a local civilian to help you through. He also condemns the decision made by the case’s protagonist, U.S. Army 1LT James McDonough, and asserts that TBS should discourage lieutenants from making similar choices.³ However, Hamilton’s description of *The Farmer* makes it clear that the case was improperly taught to his class, and that its purpose was never properly explained. Furthermore, in disapproving of McDonough’s actions and asserting that TBS should likewise denounce the incident, Hamilton fails to realize that part of the purpose of *The Farmer* is to encourage participants to form their

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Capt Schwartz teaches “To Kill or Capture” at TBS, September 2017. (Photo provided by author.)

own opinion of McDonough’s decision after developing a well-informed view of the man and the context of his decision.

Contrary to what Hamilton asserts, *The Farmer* itself does not push participants toward an either or choice. If it did, it would not only subject them to a false dilemma (as Hamilton correctly points out) but also violate the definition of a DFC. DFCs present participants with a “wicked problem,” a unique challenge that is extraordinarily complex, “messy,” and open to many possible solutions.⁴ Far

from restricting how students solve the problem, *The Farmer* does not even define the problem. Instead, it describes the situation as McDonough saw it and ends with the open-ended question, “What now, Lieutenant McDonough?”⁵

So where did the either or choice that Hamilton perceived come from? It came not from the case itself, but from the TBS instructor guide for the case, which states that participants “will ultimately have to...[decide]...whether to threaten or do bodily harm to a local civilian in order to save the lives of their Marines

(soldiers).⁶ This is misleading as other reasonable solutions exist. At the risk of spoiling the case for future participants, other possible solutions are:

- Use grenades, a M-79 grenade launcher, or your light anti-tank weapons to try to clear a lane through the booby traps by causing sympathetic detonations. Granted, this may take too much time, and it is also risky because you may still hit a booby trap. Furthermore, using your high explosive weapons now means not being able to use them against the enemy later.

- Implore the farmer for help and promise to protect him and his family from enemy reprisals, perhaps even offering to resettle him within your area of operations (AO). Making good on that promise poses two problems, however, as the farmer may well realize. First, the enemy you would have to protect him from—the Viet Cong—are likely his neighbors or even relatives, who are bound to find him sooner or later if he resettles in your AO. Second, you cannot guarantee your superiors will honor your promise. Still, it is at least worth finding out if the farmer is willing to take a chance and help you.

- Show the farmer the ambush site on your map and ask him if there is another way to get there. Taking another path could result in several bad outcomes, such as running into another booby-trapped area or another ambush. But you may get lucky, and there is no downside in at least asking the farmer if he knows a safe and convenient path to your objective.

- Request air or fire support to open a lane through the booby traps or suppress the enemy long enough for your ambushed men to break contact. Neither of these assets support you directly, and with civilians in the area complicating things, the support would likely arrive too late, if at all. But again, you may get lucky. If the support arrives soon enough, it could embolden your threatened fire team to keep resisting.

- Order the ambushed element to fire a “mad minute,” delivering as much firepower as possible, and attempt to



Maj Helminski teaches “3rd Platoon” at TBS, May 2016. (Photo provided by author.)

break contact either as a unit or as individuals. If evacuating the wounded soldier would likely result in the deaths of the entire team, you could give the highly unpopular (but entirely practical) order to leave him behind. Whether your men would obey (and whether you could look at yourself in the mirror afterward) is another problem altogether.

None of these options are ideal, and some are worse than others, but this is the purpose of DFCs. They force us to make tough calls in tough situations

form their own views, just as Hamilton has done. But to avoid the dangers of “Monday-morning quarterbacking,” they should do so only after obtaining an informed view of McDonough, his experience in the Vietnam War, and the specific situation described in *The Farmer*. The best way to do this is by reading McDonough’s book, *Platoon Leader*, and his remarks on *The Farmer* found in “Part B” of the case.⁸

Furthermore, TBS should certainly not accept Hamilton’s recommendation that it condemn McDonough’s

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with limited time and information. The best statement regarding the purpose of a DFC appeared in the following disclaimer, found on many of the cases developed by the former Case Method Project at Marine Corps University: “This case is neither an editorial nor an essay. Rather, it is an exercise designed to give participants an opportunity to devise, explain, and defend solutions to real-world problems.”⁷ Ultimately, the purpose of DFCs is to help Marines prepare for their own “What now?” moments.

As for the propriety and soundness of McDonough’s own decision, we should encourage participants of *The Farmer* to

decision. Indeed, commands should go out of their way not to pass judgment on any particular course of action in a DFC. DFCs are designed to help Marines become confident decision makers, ready to act creatively and unexpectedly against the enemy to achieve the desired result. Handing down judgments on particular courses of action tends to have the opposite effect, causing participants to doubt themselves and consider only officially sanctioned school solutions to complex, real-world problems. In truth, no one has *the answer* to a DFC. There should be no school solutions, no “yellows” or “pinks.”⁹ To be sure, there are errone-



Mr. Roydes teaches “Funeral Details” at Fort Lee, May 2019. (Photo provided by author.)

ous, impractical, and outrageous solutions, but participants will often challenge these themselves—and if they fail to—a skilled facilitator can help them identify problematic decisions through Socratic conversation and other types of questioning.¹⁰

It is also important to note that the current use of DFCs at TBS suggests that DFCs may have a branding problem. Many Marines consider them suitable only for “soft subjects” like leadership and ethics, but they are in fact designed to teach many subjects at once. As an example, *The Farmer* can be used as a basis for discussing not just leadership and ethics, but also decision making, squad tactics, patrolling, ambushes, booby traps, supporting arms, counterinsurgency, the Vietnam War, and more.

1stLt Hamilton deserves praise for writing a thought-provoking article. Although his experience with *The Farmer* left him frustrated, his response to that experience accomplished two important things. First, the experience moved him to think, write, and contribute to his profession. Any experience with a DFC that does this is successful, at least to some extent. Second, and perhaps unbeknownst to him, it raised the question of whether Marines need to better understand the purpose and proper use of DFCs, which is, first and foremost, to prepare Marines to face their own “What now?” moments.

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Notes

1. For more on the benefits of DFCs, see Bruce Gudmundsson, “The General Education of Military Professionals,” *BlogSpot*, (Online: September 2016), available at <http://casemethodusmc.blogspot.com>; and Ralph Soule, “The Learning Experience of Tough Cases: A Descriptive Case Study,” (doctoral dissertation, George Washington University, 2016). Dr. Soule refers to DFCs as “tough cases.”
2. Ethan Hamilton, “Crossing the Minefield: A Review of TBS Ethics,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: November 2018).
3. Ibid.
4. Bruce Gudmundsson, “Decisions and Design,” *BlogSpot*, (Online: September 2016), available at <http://casemethodusmc.blogspot.com>; and Bruce Gudmundsson, “The Take-away,” *BlogSpot*, (Online: September 2015), bavailable at <http://casemethodusmc.blogspot.com>.
5. Two versions of *The Farmer* exist: a written version in two parts (“Part A” and “Part B”) and another in PowerPoint, based on pictures and speaker notes. Most TBS staff appear to use the written version, reading it aloud to students.

6. The Basic School, “Ethics I Case Study, B220142-DM, Assistant Instructor Guide,” is found on page 3. On the same page, the guide further states that,

The Farmer is a case study... meant to place the students into a dilemma where their binary understanding of right and wrong begins to shift into the gray. The situation should push the student to shift their judgement from a long-term absolute to a short term [sic] practical rationalization. They will be challenged not to make a decision in which the ends justify the means. Then on the backside of their decision, they will have to reconcile not only what that decision means to their own moral foundation, but to the moral foundation of their Marines.

7. The Case Method Project began putting disclaimers on its cases primarily to combat widespread confusion about what was and was not a decision-forcing case. Readers should also note that future editions of *The Farmer* will come with their own disclaimer. This action was taken in approximately the 2013 time frame.

8. James R. McDonough, *Platoon Leader: A Memoir of Command in Combat*, (New York, NY: Presidio Press, 1985). “Part B” of *The Farmer* includes excerpts from both *Platoon Leader* and interviews that directly address the morality and legality of his actions, the reactions of his men, and so on.

9. In the not-too-distant past, Marines Corps schools had approved solutions for tactical exercises of various kinds. The answers to these exercises were often referred to as “the yellow” or “the pink,” after the color of the slips of paper they were printed on.

10. Bruce Gudmundsson, “Poker Face,” *BlogSpot*, (Online: July 2016), available at <http://casemethodusmc.blogspot.com>. Facilitators can also use the ORID Method (objective, reflective, interpretive, decisional) or the Paul-Elder Framework for Critical Thinking.

