

Ethical Decision Problem #13

Violating Command Policy

Situation

You are the executive officer of a mechanized company, participating in a large-scale force-on-force operation in Korea (TEAM SPIRIT).

Battalion standing operating procedure (SOP) requires that every time the mech company stops for more than 10 minutes all Marines debark from the AAVs and establish security, taking advantage of all possible cover and concealment.

The weather has turned bad. Temperatures have dropped to the mid-30s, and it has started to rain. The CO is ordered to halt and wait for orders from battalion. The Marines begin to immediately debark from the AAVs and establish local security as they have been drilled to do so many times before. As the XO you are overseeing the defensive positioning of the platoons when the company commander orders all the platoons to

get back in the vehicles to stay dry. The company commander gets back into his command track and closes the hatch.

You know that this is wrong and a direct violation of the battalion SOP. You believe it is a particularly bad decision because of the uncertainty surrounding the enemy situation. Both enemy ground and air forces could be in position to attack the company with little or no warning—waiting particularly to hit any vehicle columns on the road. Do you comply with the company commander's orders or do you push the Marines into the proper security positions?

Special Consideration

1. Are there ethical issues involved in this situation? If so what are they?

EDPs involve real-world leadership challenges that usually have a significant ethical/values component. They are typical of challenges that have confronted Marines in the past and could easily be encountered in the future. Readers should analyze the problem carefully and decide what action they would take.

Turn to page 78 to see how others say they would have handled this problem.

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Alternative A

This one is easy. The SOP is a guide to action, not something to be followed mindlessly and absolutely in each and every circumstance. It certainly does not take precedence over the direct orders of the company commander.

What makes this situation touchy or difficult for the XO is the fact that he was the "bad guy" rousting out the troops, causing them to get wet and cold, and then embarrassed by having his actions overruled. Had the CO decided earlier and alerted the XO of his inten-

tions, the mixup could have been avoided, and the troops wouldn't be "half" wet.

The rationale behind the CO's action seems fairly transparent. It's a training exercise; weather is terrible; it may be hours (or days) before an opportunity to dry out arises; deviation from SOP and the importance of adhering to it in combat are easily explained to troops. I don't see any ethical issues here—just the normal difficulties of reaching a sound decision in difficult circumstances and promulgating it on a timely basis.

Alternative B

I would call the CO on the radio immediately and say something like this: "Hey, Skipper, you realize, don't you, that you're violating battalion's beloved SOP? If the enemy is in position to strike us, we'd be declared dead on the spot—'road kill.' One of our training objectives is to conduct a realistic exercise and cope realistically with the realities of weather. I don't think we can explain that away. I think we should train the same way we would fight and rec-

ommend we follow the SOP."

If the CO persists in the violation of the SOP, I would carry out his order. I would, however, not be a part of hiding the company's action or pretending that we played the game during this critical phase of the exercise. If a written after-action report is required by battalion, I believe our input should volunteer the fact that we went nontactical during this phase of the exercise.

These approaches represent the immediate reactions of individual Marines and should not be construed as official solutions. Comments are welcomed.