

Teaching Ethics Isn't Enough

Marines have a dire need for integrated scenario-based ethical training

by LCDR Paul Rodgers

Marines slowly wiped condensation from the van windows as they repeatedly checked their gear through white phosphorescent lenses. One turned his head abruptly as lights flashed in his night vision goggles from the host nation police attempting to pull over their vehicle. The Marines had proper identification. Their weapons were ready. Fragments of cultural awareness briefs and Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape training ran through their minds. In a split second, they had to choose: run, fight, lie, or use diplomacy.

This could be a scene from countless Hollywood movies, but it was a training scenario embedded in the 15th MEU's pre-deployment exercise, Realistic Urban Training, August 2023, in Reno, NV. It was part of a series of ethical injects built into the overall scenario by Expeditionary Operations Training Group (EOTG) at the request of the MEU commanding officer, Col Sean Dynan.

Why? Because history has proven many times that significant risk to the mission and force exists when ethics are unattended to.

Historical Context

Ethical breakdown can put missions at risk when combatants freeze from indecision, add impediments by acting immorally, and take whole units out of action due to lost trust. In *What It Is Like to Go to War*, Karl Marlantes describes an experience when he briefly hesitated in the hope that a North Vietnamese soldier would not throw a grenade and thereby give him

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the option not to shoot. The grenade flew, Marlantes responded in kind, but had the whole platoon been in danger, his indecision might have been disastrous.¹

Mission success is difficult enough without additional ethical obstacles. During the Battle of the Bulge, Nazi SS troopers killed U.S. service members attempting to surrender. That unethical act worked against the SS mission by motivating the Allies to fight more aggressively and assuring that no Nazi

soldiers would be taken prisoner. Making poor ethical choices in combat can affect the immediate situation and the long-term environment.

Finally, ethical violations, whether in combat operations or on liberty, breed a lack of trust from superiors and discourage them from selecting unethical units for future operations, sidelining their potential capabilities. In 2019, a Navy SEAL platoon was sent back from the theater due to misconduct, removing their capabilities at a critical time.

Ethical risk to service members is multilayered. Physical safety of the force can be greatly impacted by the unethical action, or inaction, of a service member, as Marlantes demonstrated. Ethical paralysis or wrong ethical choices can



Marines assigned to Reconnaissance Company, 15th MEU, clear the upper vehicle stowage area during a visit, board, search, and seizure mission rehearsal aboard the USS Boxer in the Tsushima Strait. (Photo by Cpl Joseph Helms.)

result in injury or death of combatants, either immediately or deferred, by increased aggressiveness or reciprocal unethical conduct by the enemy.

The primary risk to the force is moral injury. Without a solid foundation of ethical purpose behind killing, service members are left to themselves to make sense of war. Marlantes remembers, “The ‘I’ that did the convincing was the one who needed desperately to justify the entire experience, to make it sane and right and okay and approved ... with this lie, I’d lost myself.”²² Justifying actions after the fact is a poor substitute for proper preparation. Most of the morally injured I have spent time with went into combat with a very black-and-white, good guys versus bad guys, ethical framework enforced by their training. Not being prepared for morally complex dilemmas and the inherent fog of war undermined their flimsy expectations of the reality of combat.

In *On Killing*, Dave Grossman boldly declares the military’s obligation as “Moral direction and philosophical guidance ... must come with the combat training and deployment of our soldiers.”²³ He suggests that the 75 percent increase in combat effectiveness in Vietnam compared to World War II was due largely to targeted mental training for desensitization, conditioning, and denial defense mechanisms.⁴ Those three factors have continued to be crucial in military preparation for war, including in the Marine Corps.

However, Grossman goes on to state that the Vietnam War may have inflicted post-traumatic stress disorder on as many as half the combatants because of the lack of training for moral direction and philosophical guidance. More recently, scrutiny of Special Operation Command’s moral failings led Ordiway to write, “[I]f not augmented by practical application, this approach [classroom] may instill a superficial sense of competency through mere exposure. Exposure is no substitute for experience. Training to develop moral reasoning requires moving from the classroom to the field.”²⁵ I do not think that effective and practical moral preparation has been widely integrated into the Marine Corps.



LCpl Landen Green, a mortarman assigned to Weapons Company, Battalion Landing Team 1/5, 15th MEU, searches a simulated evacuee before entering Philippine Marine Base Rodolfo, Puerto Princesa, Philippines, during noncombatant evacuation operation training as part of ARCHIPELAGIC COASTAL DEFENSE CONTINUUM 2024. (Photo by GySgt Donald Holbert.)

Experiential Instruction

Expectations for ethical standards of behavior in the Marine Corps are embedded during boot camp, service schools, Officer Candidate School, The Basic School, professional development courses, and countless liberty briefs. There is no doubt about what the Marine Corps expects concerning ethical choices in the broadest sense. Other than sporadic tie-ins incorporated into the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program, these ethical broad strokes are only occasionally assessed in tactical implementation, based mostly on a commander’s inclination to do so.

The Marine Corps has pushed hard for realistic training through the Infantry Immersion Trainers, live tissue training, digital scenario integration, and countless other innovations, lauding the age-old “train how you fight.” However, if we train how we fight, then ethical neglect results in moral failure.

The 15th MEU sought to address the potential for ethical neglect with three elements: relevant tools, immersive training, and direct feedback. We created tools in the form of resources and classes to set a practical ethical base for unit members. We generated a 92-page resilience curriculum led in

discussion groups by staff noncommissioned officers that required Marines to individually reflect on their core identity, values, and priorities. Building on that, everyone went through a decision-making class to learn the psychology and sociology behind their choices, with our sergeant major teaching advanced leaders’ classes during deployment. Finally, we generated an ethical risk checklist that was included in the 15th MEU’s tactical standard operating procedure. The checklist quickly walks the user through a series of questions to help identify the basis of any ethical dilemma and ways forward.

During the MEU’s pre-deployment exercises, EOTG created scenarios that allowed the tools to be put into practice. Utilizing *A Special Operations Force Ethics Field Guide* as a foundation, the 15th MEU and EOTG injected complications into tactical operations, such as the soft compromise to our recon company element by local police during their reconnoitering of an extraction site. Every Marine, regardless of rank or role, was in play. One of our senior joint tactical air controllers called in an airstrike, resulting in significant collateral damage, a private first class threw a grenade that killed civilians,

our information operations team had to diffuse a negative social media post from a “native-born” Marine, and a lieutenant colonel had to deny evacuation to family with small children. No one knew when and where the scenarios would surface, and EOTG observed closely.

The final, and arguably most crucial, step was the inclusion of ethics into the immediate mission debrief. History and experience have shown that addressing ethical challenges promptly after their occurrence greatly decreases the likelihood of future justification and minimization, which can lead to cover-ups and delayed healing. We carefully crafted a simple script with only two questions so as not to overburden the weary post-mission hotwash. The MEU did not always get this right. At times, leaders were not aware of moral challenges junior Marines had faced, and some leaders attempted to minimize ethical violations, even to the extent of

excluding the ethical debrief from the hotwash. Other times, we got it right. During a military-assisted departure mission debrief, it was the lieutenant colonel who broke the ice by sharing the difficulty in turning that young family away. The debriefs were highly successful in forcing everyone to recognize the vital importance of allowing all ranks to voice concerns early.

Conclusion

Marines live and die by the motto *Semper Fidelis*—always faithful. When it comes to ethical preparation, I’m not sure the institution has given Marines the tools to be *always* faithful in morally complex situations. Previous generations of warfighters have raised the concern, and in some cases, pleaded for change. The 15th MEU attempted to equip our Marines and sailors with the tools and experiential training before they faced any potential real-world ethical dilemmas. Our recon Marines

presented their IDs and called the embassy, choosing diplomacy to defuse their ethically complex scenario. That practice rep could prove invaluable in the future for those Marines. Perhaps our efforts can further the discussion on how the Marine Corps can formalize scenario-based ethical training for deploying units. I recommend that commanders start by implementing the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs’ and Marine Corps’ resiliency initiatives to fortify the solid foundation set by the Marine Corps. Then, commanders can develop unit-specific ethics tools, introduce scenario-based ethical injects throughout tactical training, and tenaciously debrief every time. As we consider a future where combat becomes further distributed and ethical conundrums are continually faced at the individual and small-unit levels—ethics and the lifelong repercussions of immoral actions—will take center stage for individual combatants, commands, and the country.

Notes

1. Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011).
2. Ibid.
3. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Open Road Media, 2010).
4. Ibid.
5. Benjamin Ordiway, “Developing SOF Moral Reasoning: Preparing Humans for Hard Wear on the Moral Terrain,” *Special Warfare Magazine*, (March 2022).



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