



***Black Hearts:* A Study in Leadership**

**Lieutenant Colonel Paul Christopher, Ph.D.,
U.S. Army, Retired**

AT THE VORTEX of Jim Frederick's *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death* (Harmony Books, New York, 2009) is a gripping account of a single incident involving some of the most despicable actions by U.S. Soldiers since the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam. On 12 March 2006, four members of 1st Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry, 101st Airmobile Division, planned and committed the brutal rape and murder of a 14-year-old Iraqi girl and the cold-blooded execution and mutilation of her and her family, to include her 6-year-old sister. After cover-up by the four perpetrators and at least one member of their chain of command for several months, a private first class from the platoon overheard an off-hand remark implicating one of the perpetrators and reported his suspicions to his chain of command. Subsequently, all four of the men were charged and convicted.

While a single horrendous event is at the core of Frederick's narrative, *Black Hearts* is more than just a thorough, detailed, well-researched, journalistic investigation into the criminal actions of a few men. *Black Hearts* is a study in leadership—mostly bad leadership. Against a documented background of grueling combat conditions, which places the effects of leadership—both good and bad—into vivid relief, Frederick acts for us as Dante's Virgil, only instead of a descent into Hell proper, he takes us into the Triangle of Death, where we watch as the effects of a pattern of poor leadership behavior and irresponsible decisions compound over time, and we cringe as the battalion and its Soldiers are dragged into a dark, valueless abyss.

Admittedly, the conditions were appalling: During its year-long deployment to Iraq, elements of the 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry (1-502) got hit by or disarmed approximately 900 roadside bombs and were shelled, mortared, or received small arms fire almost every day. Twenty-one Soldiers from the battalion were killed during this period, and nine of them came from 1st Platoon, Bravo Company. Of the 135 Soldiers in Bravo, 51 of them did not complete the year-long deployment because they were either

Originally published in the May-June 2010 edition of MR.

*Lieutenant Colonel Paul Christopher, Ph.D., U.S. Army, Retired, worked in Baghdad, Iraq, and is currently a business consultant for an Iraqi-owned company. After graduating from Norwich University in 1972, LTC Christopher served 10 years in Army light infantry units before receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts and becoming the director of the philosophy program at the U.S. Military Academy. He is the author of *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction to Legal and Moral Issues*, and numerous articles on domestic and international humanitarian issues.*

killed, wounded, or transferred. The battalion did not have sufficient strength to accomplish its mission, so in addition to being attacked regularly, they were relentlessly overworked and exhausted. Forty percent of the battalion were treated for mental or emotional anxiety while in country.

Appropriately, Frederick begins his research “from the bottom up.” He conducts extensive interviews with the members of the platoon, company, and battalion, and without adding his own evaluative commentary, allowing these Soldiers to report actions, outcomes, and feelings in their own words. Using careful, even-handed reporting, to include verbatim quotations, Frederick chronicles how the actions of leaders at all levels—from the Department of Defense, to the Coalition Provisional Authority, through the division and brigade, and on down to the battalion—contributed to the organizational climate that allowed this crime and the subsequent cover-up to occur.

Black Hearts is, in the final analysis, a profoundly chilling study of military leadership gone bad, and bad leadership in combat makes for a disaster. As a journalist, Frederick does not make recommendations regarding effective and ineffective leadership behaviors, but rather describes the behaviors of various leaders, and then, through interviews, provides reports from the mouths of subordinates on the impact various actions had on morale, unit cohesion, and mission accomplishment. Frederick’s commitment to detail and organization are brilliant, allowing the perceptive reader to share the frustration and hardship that members of this unit experienced in a climate of dysfunctional leadership. *Black Hearts* invites its readers to spend long frightening nights on undermanned and isolated guard posts and to accompany squads on patrols looking for roadside bombs during the most dangerous period of the Iraqi occupation. We, as readers, are invited not only to empathize with members of the 1-502, but to vicariously experience the exhaustion, the frustration, the sense of abandonment, the anger, the rebellion, and occasionally, the palpable fear that members of the battalion experienced daily for a year.

Frederick’s narrative provides numerous detailed examples of poor leadership behaviors that eroded morale and unit cohesion, and it is useful to look at a couple of them here. The commander of the 1-502 is a central figure in *Black Hearts*, and it is incontrovertible that his behavior was especially dysfunctional. Leaders who refuse to listen to suggestions from their subordinates unhinge any hope of unit cohesion. Even if the commander’s selected courses of action are always the best ones—which is a preposterous supposition—the arrogance of not listening to team members denigrates them. Leader arrogance is the mortal enemy of unit cohesion, and the disenchantment of subordinates can sometimes do more to destroy a unit than enemy weapons. In this case, the battalion commander did not simply refuse to listen to his company commanders or senior noncommissioned officers, but he berated, abused, and publicly ridiculed them whenever they spoke up. His actions completely destroyed any notion of team.

Unlike in mathematics or engineering, in the domain of social discourse, processes are often more important than the content they embody. Good leaders recognize that the methodology by which decisions are reached can often be more important than the decisions themselves. This does not imply leading democratically or by vote, or that a commander must in any way abrogate his or her authority in order to lead well. The process I refer to from the previous example involves encouraging dialogue and making subordinates know that their ideas were listened to and considered, regardless of whether they become part of the final decision or not. In the end, commanders must still choose the course of action they believe to be best in terms of mission and personnel. When a commander makes a final decision following an inclusive leadership process, subordinates feel respected and important, regardless of which decision the commander chooses. It is crucial that our military leaders understand leadership as a social skill, rather than a logical or mathematical-based, decision making one. In Frederick’s study, we see subordinates regularly

Black Hearts is, in the final analysis, a profoundly chilling study of military leadership gone bad...

demeaned, denigrated, alienated, and ignored for making suggestions. Respect is *always* a two-way street, and the person responsible for directing traffic is the leader. In this case, the battalion commander did not respect his subordinates and was reviled in return.

On another occasion, following the deaths of a squad leader and team leader, the battalion commander lectured members of the platoon about how these men were responsible for their own deaths, telling the comrades of the deceased: “When are you going to face up to why Staff Sergeant Nelson and Sergeant Casica are dead? Because they were not doing the right things.” He did this despite the findings of a formal Army Regulation (AR) 15-6 investigation that the deaths of these men could *not* have been prevented by alternative actions. (Incredibly, ignoring the AR 15-6 conclusions, the brigade commander likewise blamed the deceased for their own deaths.) When some of the men tried to point out to the battalion commander “other factors” that were contributing to the high casualties, such as a lack of logistical or engineering support from the battalion, they were met with a barrage of verbal abuse about making excuses and being whiners. Publicly blaming Soldiers who were killed in combat for their own demise seems to have been a pattern for this battalion commander, and it is easy to imagine the intense loathing this must have inspired in the survivors who had lost friends. Again, Frederick permits us to feel their pain.

Another example of poor leadership processes has to do with separating the important from the trivial. Frederick provides numerous examples where persons in authority would show up at isolated military outposts where the men had been attacked relentlessly and badly overworked and rail at them for cigarette butts on the ground, or unshaved facial hair. In one example, after 56 hours since having any “downtime,” a squad returned to their forward operating base expecting to get some rest, but were instead directed to escort an officer to various polling locations so he could meet local officials and shake hands with voters. When they finally returned, “dirty, delirious, strung out, and aching for sleep” they were upbraided for not having shaved. On another occasion a platoon leader responded to a field grade officer that his men had barely enough water for drinking in the 110 degree heat, and that there was none available for shaving.

In yet another example, Frederick narrates how after one Soldier was killed while manning a

checkpoint and two others were captured, members of the same platoon (among others) searched nonstop for days trying to find their missing comrades. When they finally returned to their base exhausted, not having found their comrades who they presumed were being tortured, the only greeting they received from their leaders was the battalion’s command sergeant major yelling at them. As the squad leader put it: “The first thing the sergeant major does is yell at us about the JSB [Jurf al-Sukr Bridge] being dirty. The very first thing. He doesn’t pull the guys together and say ‘hold your heads up, we’ll do what we can to find these guys.’ Neither does the battalion commander. Something to unify the platoon. It didn’t happen. All that happened was the men got yelled at.” The sergeant major then ordered the squad leader to get all his men out of bed to pick up cigarette butts.

Military persons all know that personal appearance and cleanliness are important indicators of good units. But good leaders also realize that such superficialities are not themselves problems! Rather, they are symptoms of other, larger problems. In this case, poor cleanliness and unkempt appearance were indicative of low morale, a lack of organizational values, and utter exhaustion from being overworked. Incompetent leaders are, characteristically, more comfortable dealing with problems such as cigarette butts or facial hair than with real problems such as low morale and the disenchantment of Soldiers.

Leaders at all levels must inspire respect. Subordinates will not effectively follow those who they detest or do not respect. Unfortunately, leaders sometimes believe that it is a subordinate’s duty to respect them. Respect for the office or a position is a fleeting phenomena that is quickly supplanted by experience and interaction with the person occupying the position. Respect is crucial because while Soldiers (or wild beasts) might fight tenaciously to save their own lives, this is sorely inadequate for our professional Army. We expect our Soldiers to fight just as tenaciously for the lives of their comrades and the success of their mission. When Soldiers feel disenfranchised from their leaders, they lose any sense of loyalty to organizational goals.

An obvious question readers may have upon completing Frederick’s book concerns whether

Incompetent leaders are, characteristically, more comfortable dealing with problems such as cigarette butts or facial hair than with real problems...

members of the chain of command, especially some of the officers and senior officers from brigade on down, should also bear some culpability for the actions of the four men who were convicted. I don't believe so. While some members of the chain of command were grossly incompetent, they were not unethical, and this is more of an indictment of our military training and certification programs than the character of the leaders in question. Unlike the murderers and rapists they led, these leaders were not bad people, just deplorable leaders.

Would better leadership at battalion and company levels have prevented the criminal acts of the four members of 1st Platoon? No one knows the answer to this question, and Frederick does not overtly venture an opinion, but it seems uncontroversial that better leadership would have reduced the likelihood of such acts.

Frederick suggests other factors that contributed to the battalion's ineptitude:

- The decision, at the Department of the Army level, to grant large numbers of "moral waivers" (one for every four recruits) in order to meet recruiting goals was irresponsible. One of the perpetrators of the murders and rape had dropped out of high school in the 10th grade, been arrested twice for drugs and alcohol by the time he was 19, and had served time in a juvenile detention center for one offense and in jail for another. He was well known for his verbal tirades denigrating "n-----s," Jews, northerners, foreigners, and other groups to which he did not personally belong. He had been granted a moral waiver to enlist.

- The pressure at the highest levels to reduce combat strength without a corollary adjustment in the mission was a disaster. Even when insurgent attacks were on the rise (from 26,500 to 34,000 in 2005), General Casey, the U.S. military commander for Iraq, "unrelentingly, consistently, and adamantly pushed for fewer troops in Iraq." This obdurate, single-minded focus on a particular policy which, based on the evidence, must have been motivated solely by politics rather than the tactical reality on the ground, was irresponsible.

- The opulence and excesses of the living conditions in the Green Zone was preposterous and had a detrimental effect on the morale and attitude of front lines troops when, while visiting on business, they witnessed military and civilians tanning by the pool, playing Frisbee, being able to choose among several fast food stands such as Burger King and Pizza Hut, and being served lobster and steak in the dining hall. Frederick's interviews point out that front-line Soldiers were constantly berated for rolling up their sleeves or taking off their helmets in scorching heat.

- Decisions made (against strong objections) by L. Paul Bremmer, leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority, to bar from government employment everyone who had been with Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and to dissolve the entire Iraqi military and national police force were disastrous. The first decision, according to Frederick, "jettisoned the midlevel doctors, bureaucrats, and engineers who actually provided essential public services to the people on a daily basis." The second decision, made in the face of even more opposition, put "between 500,000 and 900,000 people, the majority of them armed and now humiliated men, out of work—on top of the already 40 percent of Iraqi adults estimated to be jobless."

Going to war can entail violating the most fundamental human prohibition—the killing of innocent people—in order to achieve a political objective. Accordingly, the means permitted to achieve political outcomes through the use of force come with serious mandates and prohibitions, which must be enforced even when Soldiers, and the leaders themselves, are tired, dirty, angry, and scared. It would be good for our Nation and our military if the examples of bad leadership exposed by Jim Frederick in *Black Hearts* become a subject of study in our military education system. As a Nation, we really do need to learn from our mistakes, the lessons of which are, in this case, available to us because of Jim Frederick's hard work. **MR**