



Engaged Leadership

Linking the Professional Ethic and Battlefield Behaviors

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PHOTO: Soldiers and airmen fire their weapons together on the “stress fire” range at Camp Atterbury Joint Maneuver Training Center in central Indiana at dawn, 24 August 2010. (U.S. Army, John Crosby)

ETHICAL BEHAVIOR OF battlefield soldiers is paramount in counterinsurgency and stability operations, where the support of the local populace is vital to mission success. Despite their rarity, ethical lapses even in the lowest tactical echelons can detrimentally affect the strategic mission. A single incident can set back the success of an entire unit.¹ Indeed, it can even set back an entire coalition, as was evident at Abu Ghraib and Haditha.² Recently, similar events took place in Afghanistan when five members of an Army Stryker brigade allegedly murdered three Afghan civilians.³ These events resurrect memories of Vietnam when soldier misconduct was considered more prevalent, as seen in major events such as the My Lai Massacre, but also in frequent drug use, fragging of unit leaders, and poor treatment of noncombatants.⁴ Events in Iraq revived a debate over the ethics of our soldiers, and whether these events represented isolated incidents or an ethical culture problem that might indicate a failure of Army Values and post-Vietnam initiatives to counter the problems of the “hollow Army.”⁵

On the surface, the recent moral failures appear to be isolated incidents. However, the repetitive combat deployments and asymmetric operational environments our Army faces now provide ample opportunities for future behavioral and ethical lapses to occur, as soldiers must make split-second decisions that affect the safety of their units and the local populace. Preventing ethical lapses requires a change in unit culture in which soldiers hold each other accountable to high standards of conduct and performance. This culture change can only occur through direct leader involvement via *engaged leadership* that fosters proper behavior and discourages inappropriate actions. This article offers an overview of factors that produce soldier misconduct, reviews the ethical climate in Iraq, presents a course of action to address battlefield ethics, and discusses how engaged leadership improves ethical performance on the battlefield.

Misconduct in the Operational Environment

During deployments, soldiers face a myriad of physical and mental stressors, both environmental and psychological. Environmental stressors include harsh climates, difficult terrain, constant noise, and the continuous threat of physical harm. Psychological stressors include sleep deprivation, fatigue, and illness or injury. Mental stressors include dealing with organizational dynamics and information flow gaps, performing duties outside one's normal area of concentration, and being separated from friends, family, and support groups. Taken together, these factors are termed combat and operational stressors. Soldiers respond to them with adaptive or maladaptive reactions along a continuum of physical and psychological adaptation.⁶ Adaptive responses lead to increased cohesion, mission effectiveness, and heroic acts, but maladaptive responses take the form of either misconduct behaviors or combat operational stress reactions.

Combat operational stress reactions are defined as "expected, predictable, emotional, intellectual, physical, and/or behavioral reactions of soldiers who have

been exposed to stressful events in combat or military operations other than war" and include physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral responses.⁷

In contrast, misconduct includes a myriad of behaviors that range from shirking or malingering, alcohol use in theater, or significant violations of the Laws of Land Warfare.⁸ Of key interest in stability operations are the soldiers' interactions with noncombatants. Current military doctrine and research is unclear about the factors that lead soldiers toward misconduct during such interactions. Some experts think that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) leads to misconduct behaviors.⁹ However, recent research indicates that the presence or absence of PTSD is not an influential factor in soldier attitudes toward noncombatants. Rather, the volume of combat exposures a soldier experiences seems to be the most influential factor.¹⁰

Furthermore, low levels of training and *poor unit discipline* are key indicators for misconduct.¹¹ Leaders should be aware of the previous experiences of their soldiers and create a climate that not only demands they act appropriately, but also ensures they hold other unit members accountable for their conduct as well.



(U.S. Air Force, SSGT Jorge A. Rodriguez)

U.S. Army BG John Basilica (center, left), commanding general, 256th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, inspects the U.S. Army quick reaction forces at the Abu Ghraib Prison, Baghdad Province, Iraq, and other surrounding check points during Operation Iraqi Freedom, 28 June 2005.

Ethical Climate in Iraq

In 2006, the commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq requested an assessment of the ethical culture of his force in the annual Mental Health Assessment Team (MHAT) Soldier Well-Being Survey of deployed U.S. soldiers in Iraq. This represented the first systematic assessment of battlefield ethics in a combat environment since World War II and addressed soldier misconduct behavior, attitude towards battlefield ethical issues, and battlefield ethical training for soldiers preparing for combat operations.

The findings showed that less than 50 percent of soldiers were willing to report a member of their unit for ethical violations.¹² In addition, nearly 10 percent of soldiers reported damaging a noncombatant's personal property or hitting and kicking noncombatants when it was not necessary.¹³ Soldiers with higher levels of combat exposure reported increased rates of noncombatant mistreatment.¹⁴ These findings were revalidated in the next iteration of the MHAT survey in 2007.¹⁵ The findings were disturbing because they suggested increased vulnerability to further ethical breaches.¹⁶

Battlefield Ethics Training Program

The MHAT findings prompted then-Major General Rick Lynch, the Multi-National Division-Center (MND-C) commander, to develop and implement a battlefield ethics training program for all soldiers under his command. The MND-C staff, with assistance from the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General Center and School, the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (WRAIR), and several civilian experts in ethics, built a comprehensive ethics training program.¹⁷ They based the program on the Laws of War, Army Values, and the West Point Honor Code.¹⁸ They chose a chain-teaching instructional model in which senior leaders taught their immediate subordinates using a compact disc that included video vignettes from popular movies to highlight lesson objectives. The subordinate leaders, in turn, taught their subordinates and soldiers to filter the training down through all levels of military personnel to the lowest echelon.

Training was in small groups in teams, squads, and platoons to promote discussion. To ensure that

they standardized training throughout the organization, unit leaders were provided with a script that accompanied the training program and included a set of key questions and discussion points.¹⁹ The training began in December 2007, and all units reported training complete by mid-January 2008.²⁰

A recent scientific review of the effectiveness of this training program noted significant reductions in soldier mistreatment of noncombatants and simultaneous improvement in soldiers' ethical attitudes. While the video clips and material provided a novel technique to assist leaders with framing the context of the discussion, retaining soldiers' attention, and focusing it on key training concepts, the greatest impact of the program came from the chain-teaching format. It "provided a method for leaders to engage their subordinates (*engaged leadership*) so that soldiers were hearing personally from their own leaders how they were expected to respond to ethically challenging situations and allowed for direct discussion of mission-relevant situations."²¹

Engaged Leadership

In his 2007 book, *Engaged Leadership*, Clint Swindall noted that "engaged leadership" develops employees committed to the organization and its outcomes, including the methods and means used to achieve them. He defines three key tenets for engaged leadership:

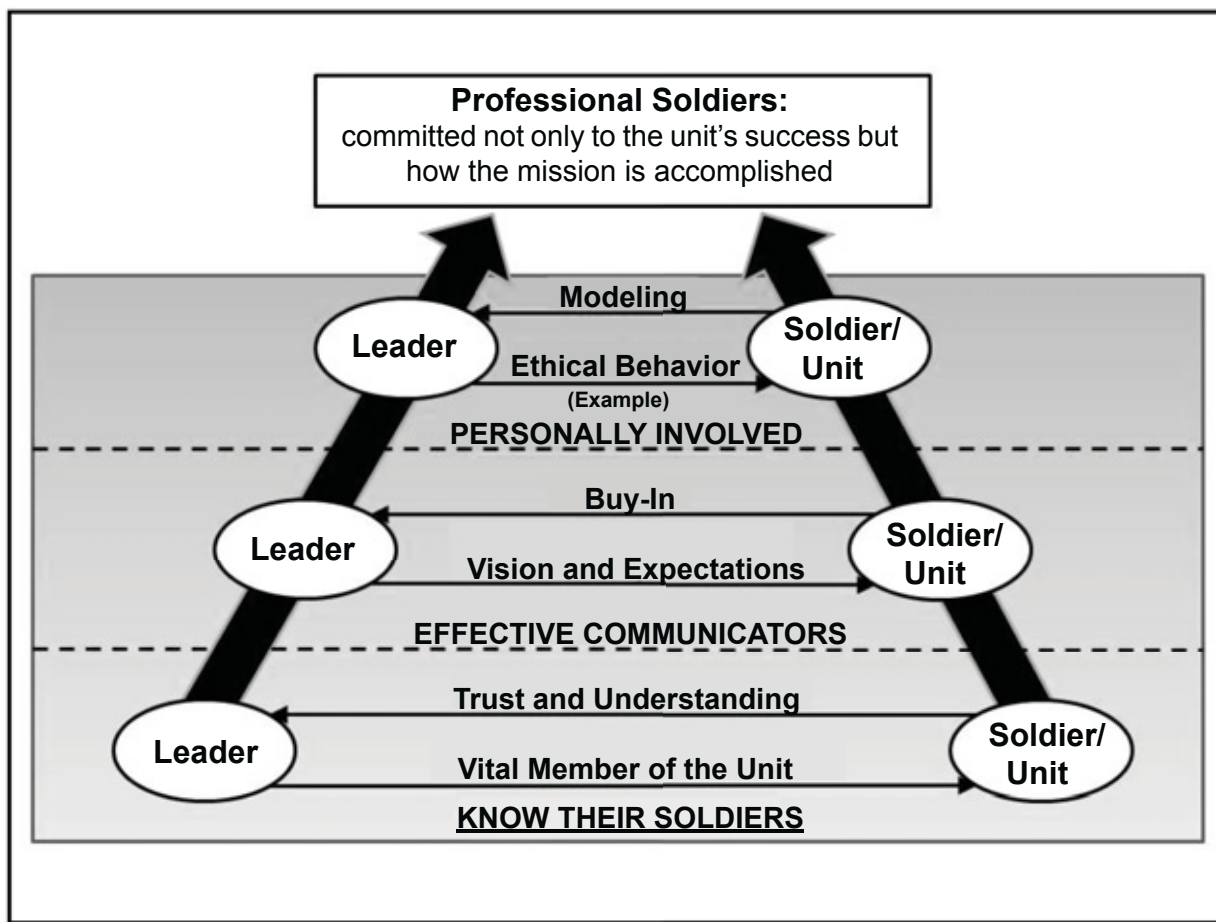
- Directional leadership (building a consensus for the vision),
- Motivational leadership (inspiring people to pursue the vision).
- Organizational leadership (developing the team to realize the vision).²²

These tenets are not new. They are already ingredients in our current military system in the form of leaders who have the staff and positional power to build a consensus, inspire their soldiers, and direct them toward their commander's intent and vision. However, engaged leaders need to focus on the key competencies of knowing their soldiers, effectively communicating, and being directly involved with their subordinates. These competencies closely mirror three of the key tenets of mission command—*understand* your soldier, *describe* the mission clearly, and *direct* soldier actions on the battlefield.²³

These principles are not just about how the commander imposes his will on the enemy and synchronizes his unit's efforts, but also how he controls his unit and sets the conditions for achieving the desired end state.

Engaged leaders know their soldiers. Effective leaders build mutual trust by determining the needs and motives of subordinates and understanding how events and life factors affect them. Leaders need not only know their soldiers prior exposures and combat experiences and how that might influence their behavior, but also understand key events or stressors occurring in their lives that might distract their attention or affect their decisions. While combat exposure can be a significant event, recent studies have shown that the most frequent source of combat operational stress reactions are events happening back on the home front.²⁴

Leaders must get to know their soldiers before a deployment. They must learn about their soldiers' families, their friends, key events in their lives, their motivations for joining the military, and their plans, goals, and aspirations, not only for their military career but also for life. Most soldiers will openly share this knowledge, but it can be difficult for some to do so, especially those who are struggling to cope. They are not comfortable openly sharing details about their life outside of work. Studies have shown that there are significant stigmas about asking for help in the military culture with the largest barriers being soldier's concerns that their leaders or supervisors might have less confidence in them or treat them differently if they are having problems.²⁵ This perception more than doubled in those who did have ongoing problems.²⁶ Leaders must work to counter this perception.



Engaged leadership's impact on ethical culture.

Leaders must understand soldier learning styles and effective motivational methods to help them overcome barriers or stigmas associated with seeking help. There is no “one-size-fits all” technique to do this with; leaders must adapt their approach for each soldier and take the time not only to get to know the soldier but those around him, his family, friends, and the key individuals who influence him. These interactions can be both informal and formal, but need to endure throughout the leader-subordinate relationship and be viewed as part of leading.

Making these interactions routine helps overcome the lack of trust a soldier might have with the leader including reservations about the leader’s motivation. If questions about family, friends, and life events are infrequent, soldiers view them as probing and they will be less trusting. However, if the questions are part of the command climate from the moment that the soldier enters the unit, they become part of the culture and yield a higher level of understanding. When leaders possess this level of knowledge two echelons deep on all of their personnel, then they will have a higher level of situational awareness and understand how to effectively motivate, employ, and lead the unit.

Building trust starts with how the leader welcomes a soldier into a unit. Lieutenant General Lynch frequently noted how as a brigade and division commander he met with all newcomers to welcome them into the unit and outline his expectations for the unit. During these sessions, he addressed the importance of seeking assistance and emphasized that he viewed asking for help as a sign of strength, not a sign of weakness. Furthermore, he noted that when serving as a direct level or small unit leader, he frequently called the spouse and parents of each new soldier joining his unit to thank them for the trust and privilege that they placed in him and the Army.

Such interactions have several positive effects. First, they immediately send a message to the soldier that they are important to the unit, a cherished member of the team, and vital to the mission. They provide the commander with a level of awareness, insight, and understanding about the soldier that he is unlikely to get from just an initial interview. Second, the interactions immediately send a message to families that we genuinely care about their soldier. Third, the interactions build a bridge for future communication and instill a culture and climate in which junior or subordinate leaders see the value that the

commander places on getting to know soldiers. The interactions also encourage all subordinates to do this as well.

As previously mentioned, combat exposures and life events contribute to a soldier’s level of stress, and this directly leads to poor behavioral performance. If the leader has a level of insight and understanding about what is affecting the soldier, then he can anticipate potential adverse issues and situations and intervene early to ward them off. The Battlefield Ethics Training throughout MND-C educated soldiers and their leaders about potential negative influences and provided them with information, useful techniques, and methods they could use for intervention. Using the chain-teaching program opened a dialogue between direct-level leaders and their subordinates about issues of stress and combat performance. Furthermore, it emphasized that establishing understanding and awareness was vital to set the conditions for success for the soldier and prevent the negative outcomes that lead to ethical misconduct on the battlefield (Vignette 1).

Vignette 1

After five months in Iraq, a battalion commander noticed his personal security detachment was no longer functioning at the expected level. There was no specific deficiency or issue, but rather, that he and his team could sense there was a problem. He requested the assistance of a combat operational support team. The team conducted a debriefing and learned that there was growing frustration because the team was being “loaned” to the deputy brigade commander who was not following the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) for IED defeat established by the battalion commander. Because of this, the team felt the deputy commander did not value their lives and was not concerned about their safety. Upon learning this, the battalion commander met with the team and addressed their concerns by stating that he would ride in the lead vehicle for all missions in which the battalion supported the deputy brigade commander and would ensure the unit followed the TTP.

Engaged Leaders Are Effective Communicators

Effective communication spans the gap between the leader and subordinates. The leader must ensure that soldiers know they are valued members of the organization and understand unit standards, values, behaviors, and expectations. The leader should seek buy-in from his subordinates.

To be an effective, engaged communicator, leaders must be able to do three things:

- Show empathy and connect with soldiers.
- Articulate the vision, direction, and expectations (mission, intent, and end state) to subordinates.
- Modify their delivery style to effectively motivate soldiers.

Showing empathy and connecting with soldiers is vital. Empathy is not sympathy. Rather, it is about reflecting back to the soldier that you understand his experiences and care about his personal needs and achievement. Empathic leaders seem to be better able to effectively build and maintain relationships. Leaders need to hone their empathy skills through listening, perspective-taking, and compassion.²⁷ This is especially important in a diverse organization such as the military because subordinates come from many different backgrounds and life experiences. As Stephen Covey noted in *Seven Habits for Highly Effective People*, empathic listening allows the leader to appreciate and understand the impact that different life experiences have on how individuals respond to and act in situations.²⁸ Empathy shows the sincerity and authenticity vital in understanding and creating a connection with soldiers.

As previously mentioned, getting to know soldiers is about building trust and developing an understanding of the soldier's needs and motives. Leaders who have a strong level of awareness and understanding of their soldiers can then carefully select their tone, word choice, and message in linking the soldier's personal motives to the unit's mission and vision. Creating a new connection to the unit's mission, vision, and values is a powerful influencing tool in all stages of the deployment cycle because it strengthens the core of the unit. As Gene Klann notes in his book, *Crisis Leadership*, "During a crisis, the leader can leverage a credible vision and value system and use both as a rallying point and as a way to provide stability to employees who are rocked by events."²⁹ A clearly communicated vision and set

of values creates a unit standard that will provide a learned response for how soldiers should act in times of crisis. These clear, established standards of performance become part of the unit culture and lead to adaptive rather than maladaptive responses to stress. Furthermore, they provide soldiers with internal direction to hold each other accountable to maintain the mission.

Leaders must establish the soldier's commitment to the unit's mission and values through many different methods. In his book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, John Maxwell noted that individuals first "buy-in" to the leader and then into the vision.³⁰ Unit leaders must leverage their awareness and understanding of the soldier to transition their behavior from compliance to the positional power of the supervisor to commitment to the organization and to its outcomes. Through the enhanced level of understanding, leaders are able to use rational influence techniques such as rational persuasion and apprising as well as soft tactics such as inspiration, relationship building, and personal appeals to achieve this goal. A leader can implement these methods in day-to-day operations, programmed performance counseling sessions, casual daily contact, and mentoring relationships. By converting from a culture of compliance to a culture of caring and commitment, leaders are able to establish cultural norms in which soldiers will be more apt to hold each other accountable and uphold the standards even when the leader is not present. This is vital in battlefield situations where soldiers may encounter swiftly changing, challenging situations where they must make rapid decisions. A clearly communicated vision, which establishes the level of expected standards and acceptable behaviors, creates a culture of commitment to the unit's vision, its values, and other members leading the soldiers to exhibit appropriate behavior.

Effective communication was a key component of MND-C Battlefield Ethics Training. Starting at the top with senior leaders, the first line supervisor met with their direct subordinates and subordinate leaders to discuss the issue of battlefield ethics. Rather than sending out a chaplain, lawyer, or senior leader to rotate between units delivering the message, the individual who knew the soldiers best and had a good understanding and awareness of each soldier's current levels of stress and life events was account-

able and delivered the training. This proved a much more effective approach and made the subordinates more receptive to the training. The leader tailored the dialogue to battlefield situations the unit had encountered, thereby enhancing the relevance of the discussion while referring back to the bedrock Army Values, timeless principles of the West Point Honor Code, and the Marne Standard book. Soldiers participated in the training with a group of their peers to create an environment where they felt more comfortable sharing their experiences and developing a collective situational understanding. As a result, the soldiers were able to grasp the importance of this issue allowing the leader to use his personal influence, rather than positional power, to enable the soldiers' commitment to a culture of battlefield ethics rather than mere compliance with a set of rules (Vignette 2).

Engaged Leaders Are Personally Involved. In the "Commander's Role" in *Mission Command*, FM

Vignette 2

A battalion was six weeks into its third deployment to Iraq. While more than half of the soldiers in the unit had previous experience in Iraq or Afghanistan, less than a quarter of them were with this battalion during prior deployments. During the train-up to deployment, the company commanders and first sergeants emphasized how the tactics, techniques, and procedures were significantly altered from prior deployments in accordance with the new counterinsurgency doctrine. All units rehearsed them during their exercises and leaders placed specific emphasis on how to interact with the locals to focus on establishing security. However, once in theater, one of the squads began to be confrontational and derogatory towards noncombatants. A sister squad leader pulled the senior NCO from the renegade squad aside and asked why they were acting in that manner and was told "that is how we did it in my old unit and we all got through safely." The sister squad leader replied, "That is not how we do it in this unit and you need to change or we are going to fail to accomplish what we are all here for."

3-0 notes that the commander directs all aspects of the operation by preparing, positioning, ordering, and adjusting personnel.³¹ In *engaged leadership*, the leader directs through his personal presence and involvement. Put simply, leadership is a contact sport. Good leaders are *engaged leaders*. They personally set and enforce standards, perform checks and inspections, share in hardships, and remove barriers to create the best possible conditions for the unit and soldiers to succeed.

While leaders publish their standards, orders, intent, and other expectations, they must first set and enforce them through their own actions and example. An *engaged leader* recognizes that he is always on a platform with soldiers watching him, so he leads the way for others through his example. An *engaged leader* must set the tone for the desired values and principles for the unit. A leader's actions are more influential than developing trust and communicating the values, goals, and vision. If a leader communicates the desired values in his vision, spoken word, and unspoken communication but then violates those same values through his own behavior or conduct, he creates a hypocritical ethical climate that will quickly erode morale and unit mission effectiveness. By modeling expected behaviors, the appropriate standards will trickle down through the ranks of subordinate leaders who will likewise mimic or emulate the leader's actions.

An example of this occurred during Operation Iraqi Freedom when a division commander wanted to increase the emphasis his subordinate commanders put on addressing soldiers' mental health concerns. Rather than instructing his commanders to place emphasis on this area, the commander modeled this behavior, mentioned how he was focusing on this area for his staff, and had his staff behavioral health provider travel with him to several engagements with his brigade commanders. The subordinate commanders quickly noticed his emphasis and followed suit, acting in kind without any prompting or verbal instruction from the division commander.³²

Leaders must follow-up to ensure they set the proper tone through their direct involvement in performance checks, inspections, and counseling. A leader's personal participation and involvement in and emphasis on events, actions, activities, and items have significant impact. In 2007, a newspaper

story about poor living conditions for recovering Wounded Warriors at Walter Reed Army Medical Center received worldwide attention and resulted in the resignation of the secretary of the Army and dismissal of two general officers. During the congressional testimony surrounding this event the surgeon general of the Army testified that he did not inspect barracks.³³ While it was by no means the surgeon general's responsibility to inspect barracks, the remark highlighted that soldier living conditions were not a priority in that organization. Priority dilemmas constantly challenge leaders. The *engaged leader* must determine the key areas that support the organization's mission and values and emphasize them through performance checks and inspections. He must regularly examine the ethical culture and climate of the unit and anything that impedes this climate.

Engaged leaders remove all obstacles and barriers by creating the best possible conditions for success. As leaders communicate with their subordinates and motivate them toward the commander's vision and unit end state, they learn of impediments and roadblocks that hinder soldier effectiveness and unit performance. This feedback from subordinates is vital. It allows the leader to engage at various levels to make changes or determine effective workarounds in line with the values of the organization. This level of personal involvement aids direct leadership and allows the leader to establish and encourage ethical practices that help prevent unsound practices not in line or keeping with Army Values.

Conducting performance checks and inspections, as well as sensing sessions with the staff, also aid in recognizing key obstacles. In battlefield ethics, direct leader involvement is key. Ethical issues must be an important part of mission analysis and the evaluation of results. Leaders must identify potential situations units might encounter on the battlefield and build realistic scenarios into all training to challenge subordinate leaders and soldiers, prompt the right response, and reward the right behaviors. The professional performance of the soldier should be a daily concern in garrison, training, and deployment, not just in quarterly or annual training classes.

The MND-C Battlefield Ethics Training involves leaders directly with their soldiers. Chain teaching and scenarios infused with current unit experiences allow leaders, soldiers, and subordinates to

discuss how to cope with the same or similar ethical challenges on the battlefield as well as identify and address obstacles, including key equipment, translators, or items to overcome a barrier (Vignette 3).

Vignette 3

During a site visit to a remote patrol base in southern Iraq by the brigade commander and his staff, a member of the team became aware of a significant morale problem. A sergeant said that "he was so hot and tired, he didn't care" to enforce standards anymore. Thus, the patrol base had no ice, cooling systems, or reliable power. The following day, the brigade commander personally led a convoy carrying two new generators to the site. On follow up evaluation three weeks later, unit morale was significantly improved, standards were clearly being enforced, and commanders at all levels were now routinely assessing and addressing living conditions at patrol bases.

The Way Ahead

Leaders must demonstrate competence, courage, candor, and commitment, point the unit in the right direction, and maintain the laws of war, even in the toughest of times. To do this they must keep their troops informed—of the objectives of the operation, the mission, actions to take, and the commander's intent. They must conduct after action reviews to reduce uncertainty by candidly addressing the actions that occurred and defuse resentment and tension before soldiers come into contact with noncombatants. In doing so, leaders show that they understand challenges and the stress of combat but maintain a focus on the mission and end state to keep soldiers on the objectives and remind them of the true enemy.

Leaders must be aware of their soldier's levels of stress and fatigue. Fatigue can interfere with sound and effective decision making. The 2007 MHAT report noted that soldiers averaged only 5.6 hours of sleep per day, which is significantly less than what is needed to maintain optimal performance (7-8 hours per night).³⁴ Furthermore, the MHAT reported a decrease in work performance due to the accumulation of stress associated with higher cumulative

months of deployment.³⁵ Commanders must attempt to ensure that all soldiers get enough rest and monitor units for signs of elevated stress. If possible, they must establish predictable work and rest cycles. In 2007-08, Lieutenant General Lynch noted early in MND-C's deployment that some of his officers were nodding off during the day. In response, he established a division standard daily routine of 15 hours of work, 2 hours of physical training/personal time, and 7 hours of rest. He modeled this behavior himself and set the clear expectation that the staff would also. He soon noted significant improvements in officer performance and attitudes. This underscores the effectiveness of leading by example and becoming personally involved.

Lastly, the commander must make ethics a top priority throughout the deployment cycle. He cannot tolerate violations. Inappropriate soldier actions should be frequently discussed throughout

units. Ethics should not require a special class. It should become a habitual part of the unit's routine, incorporated throughout all actions of the unit and in all discussions. Leaders must directly participate in this process, signaling the priority of the issue and modeling the expected behavior. Otherwise, interventions are likely to be less effective.

The ethical performance of our soldiers on the battlefield is of great concern to all leaders. It not only affects our profession of arms, but individual lapses can have significant tactical, operational, and strategic level impact. Leaders must set the conditions that promote and uphold the ethical performance of soldiers at all levels. As evidenced by the MND-C Battlefield Ethics Training Program, appropriate ethical performance is not achieved through a specific training program, but instead through integrated ethical training and most importantly *engaged leadership*. **MR**

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