



# The Greatest Threat Facing the Army Profession

Dan Johnson, Consultant with the Praevius Group, Salado, Texas

**I**T'S ABOUT THE men next to you. That's it. That's all it is." This is the closing note of the movie *Blackhawk Down*, delivered by Sgt. 1st Class Norm "Hoot" Gibson (Eric Bana's Special Forces role). The line encompasses an idea with which most Americans—and all service members—are familiar. He's talking about loyalty.

Framing loyalty as the bonds between soldiers facing conflict together is a common way for us to think about loyalty in the military—particularly when we are applying it to the Army. It is a conception of loyalty that has been explored to explain why American soldiers fight, or the need for esprit de corps, or the strength of traumatic combat experiences.

Often, though, the loyalty felt between comrades is just the loyalty most easily understood and communicated—and we, as the Army Profession, *must* communicate loyalty. It is an Army Value, first in the mnemonic acronym LDRSHIP. The definition we officially provide is—

Bear true faith and allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, the Army, your unit and other soldiers. Bearing true faith and allegiance is a matter of believing in and devoting yourself to something or someone. A loyal soldier is one who supports the leadership and stands up for fellow soldiers. By wearing the uniform of the U.S. Army you are expressing your loyalty. And by doing your share, you show your loyalty to your unit.<sup>1</sup>

This explanation states what the Army Profession expects of new members. It gives them a structure by which to arrange their loyalties. Yet, too many American soldiers come away from the Army Values with the wrong ideas about loyalty. Not understanding, and not living by, the values we profess is the greatest danger facing the Army Profession in the next decade.

As human beings, we naturally feel the strongest emotional bonds—we *feel* loyal—to those closest to us. Our emotional ties evoke a strong sense

Mr. Dan Johnson is a consultant with the Praevius Group in Salado, Texas. He holds a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) and M.A.s from Webster University and Texas A&M University. His military service included multiple deployments to Iraq and an assignment as an instructor in the Department of History, USMA.

PHOTO: Pfc. Kevin March, an armored crewman assigned to 1st Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, stands atop a cliff overlooking the Arghandab River valley, 31 January 2011.

of loyalty to family, to the team on the field, to the local gang, or to the military unit.<sup>2</sup> This loyalty is the default setting—the one our American culture reinforces with movies like *Saving Private Ryan*, with television like *Band of Brothers*, and with the endless echo chamber of the media. Military scholars often revert to the same default.

In “Why They Fight,” Dr. Leonard Wong, et al., agree heartily with historian S.L.A. Marshall’s observations about loyalty. In *Men Against Fire*, Marshall wrote, “I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapons is the near presence or the presumed presence of a comrade. . . . He is sustained by his fellows primarily and by his weapons secondarily.” When Marshall observed that “Men do not fight for a cause but because they do not want to let their comrades down,” the Army War College authors went further. They argued that, in this modern era, American soldiers often “go to war” for larger reasons of ideology: patriotism, altruism, and the like. These men and women put their trust in the larger Army to frame the strategic direction of the war, but they place their loyalty with their comrades.<sup>3</sup>

## So? What’s Wrong With This?

The problem is that we give credence, throughout the Army Profession, to the notion of a “conflict of loyalties.” Drill, small group, and platform instructors have spent so much energy hammering home to aspiring professionals the credo of loyalty to the men and women “next to you” that, in the hierarchy created by the Army’s official definition, the last “level” of loyalty has gained primacy in our minds.<sup>4</sup>

Couple that primacy developed from training and instruction with our emotional tendencies and, all too often, this small-unit loyalty becomes *the* value. Capt. Walter Sowden and Sgt. Maj. David Stewart take note of this in their paper “The Dilemma of Competing Loyalties in the Profession of Arms.” In the past decade, the Army Profession has suffered through a serious public infraction of the Army Ethic on average once a year—and the decision or action occurred in a small, cohesive, *loyal* unit.<sup>5</sup>

The tolerance American men and women have for toxic leaders within the profession evinces the dynamic of competing loyalties: men and women who bide their time and hold their tongues in the face of incredible disrespect because they do not want to

appear *disloyal*. That desire influenced subordinates to tolerate Lt. Gen. Patrick O’Reilly’s common threats to “choke” those around him and Col. Frank Zachar’s oft-voiced threats to stick an ice pick in the eye of the disloyal.<sup>6</sup> Army professionals *feel* the need to be loyal, Lt. Gen. Walter Ulmer writes. “Subordinates are reluctant to identify their boss as toxic. They feel a loyalty and do not want to embarrass their unit.”<sup>7</sup> All too often Army professionals choose not to speak—when a superior is wrong, when a superior is unethical, when a superior is toxic—because of the cultural power of loyalty.<sup>8</sup>

Our training and education system reinforces this conception of loyalty so often as men and women enter the profession that it becomes an active part of their identity. It becomes part of the culture, a given element of an Army professional’s emotional composition—he or she is loyal to their comrades, their battle buddies, their unit, first, last, always.<sup>9</sup>

This is important. It’s great for cohesion, for fighting spirit, for esprit de corps. It is terrible for ensuring that the Army Profession is stewarded into the next decade. This all-important loyalty to the small group can be in conflict to loyalty to the Army, to true faith and allegiance to the U.S. Constitution.

Because identity and emotional ties will easily overwhelm the intangible idea of allegiance to ideals,



Army Staff Sgt. Richard Grimsley greets an Iraqi girl at a checkpoint in the Madain region outside eastern Baghdad, 19 August 2009. (U.S. Army, Pvt. Jared Gehmann)

this conflict is rarely resolved. Behavior economist Dan Ariely in *The Upside of Irrationality* discussed something called “self-herding”; we make decisions based upon the actions we have taken and the decisions we made in the past—based on our ideas about who we are.<sup>10</sup> To consult the high ideals embodied in the Constitution is too hard, and as psychologist Daniel Kahneman’s “law of least effort” observes, “Laziness is built deep into our nature.”<sup>11</sup> Too few Americans have read the Constitution, and digested the values and principles expressed, for the power of their oath to override the emotional tie to their ranger-buddy.

However, loyalty is not an expression only of emotion. It is also a function of identity. In his *Sociology of Loyalty*, James Connor wrote, “Our loyalties furnish identity.”<sup>12</sup> We are loyal to the things most closely tied to our identity. The problem is that, today, too much of the *identity* of an Army professional is built around the emotional bond of loyalty between fighting men on the field of battle, until it has power far from the battlefield. While we need that emotional connection for esprit de corps, we also need to step away from it and carefully reinforce an identity that venerates the Constitution.

***We are loyal to the things most closely tied to our identity. The problem is that, today, too much of the identity of an Army professional is built around the emotional bond of loyalty between fighting men on the field of battle, until it has power far from the battlefield.***

---

Constructing this identity is a career-long process. Dr. Pauline M. Kaurin delivered a paper at the Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics in 2006, saying, “Rather than seeing identity as a possession, identity [even for the most senior Army professionals] “is something one is in the process of cultivating, leaving open the possibility of changing, evolving and altering one’s identity in response to either individual or social influences and concerns (or both.)”<sup>13</sup>

As Army professionals, we must recognize that the key element of our identity is our sworn oath to support and defend, to bear true faith and allegiance to, the Constitution of the United States of America. Sharing an identity centered on the Constitution builds more expansive ties than the insular, yet tight-knit bonds of combat. Bonds forged to support an ideal rather than forged in shared hardship or firefights allow for an institutional trust that suffers otherwise. As Michael Wheeler wrote for the *Air University Review*—

[This] is a different view of how loyalty can be inspired, in a manner such that the military goal of discipline can be achieved along with the social goal of having soldiers who are also reflective, morally sensitive men. This conception of loyalty is one of loyalty inspired by trust, where that trust resides in the moral integrity of the commander.<sup>14</sup>

That trust is the foundation of the Army Profession. If we purposefully build and continuously refine identities centered upon a desire to “establish Justice, insure [sic] domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”<sup>15</sup>

- We will have no more conflicts of loyalty. Either a decision, an action, will reflect our true faith and allegiance, or it will not. If our smaller groups take action counter to the Constitution, it is that group that is disloyal.

- We will more clearly understand our duty to strive for excellence in supporting and defending the Constitution and the mission defined within it.

- We will not wonder how to treat people with respect, but recognize that every person has intrinsic worth and we must recognize their dignity.

- We will not wonder what it means to offer selfless service, but recognize we derive fulfillment and worth from *servicing* the American people in a unique profession with individual expertise.

- We will not debate honor, but know that it is a reverence for honesty, candor, and the truth.

- We will strive every day for enough courage to live these values openly, with integrity, admitting our shortcomings, but striving.

We are working toward an achievable goal. Striving to be Army professionals, worthy of trust and sworn to support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America. **MR**

## NOTES

1. See <<http://www.army.mil/values/>>.
2. Simon Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 31; James Connor, *The Sociology of Loyalty* (New York: Springer, 2007), 44, 69.
3. Leonard Wong, Thomas A. Kolditz, Raymond A. Millen, Terrence M. Potter, "Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War," *US Army War College's Strategic Studies Initiative* (Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2003). The Marshall quote is from page 2, and the authors' argument is on page 19.
4. Walter J. Sowden and David L. Stewart, "The Dilemma of Competing Loyalties in the Profession of Arms," Paper Submission: Fort Leavenworth Ethics Symposium "Applying the Military Ethic Across the Spectrum of Operations" (Fort Leavenworth, KS, 7-10 November 2011), 19.
5. Sowden and Stewart, 3. The authors cite the following to support their claim: the Guantanamo Bay (Gitmo), Abu Ghraib (2003), Ltc. West (2003), Ltc. Sassaman/Samarra (2004), Pat Tilman (2004); Haditha (U.S. Marines in 2005), Bagram Airfield (2005), Hamdania (U.S. Marines in 2006), Mahmudiyah/Black Hearts (2006), Operation Iron Triangle (2006), Baghdad Canal Killings (2007), "Kill Team" (2010) incidents, and the rash of senior commanders (Army and Navy) being relieved over the past year (2011).
6. Inspector General, "Report of Investigation, Lt. Gen. Patrick J. O'Reilly, U.S. Army, Missile Defense Agency," Alexandria, VA, 2 May 2012; Joe Gould, "Germany-based colonel relieved of duty," *Army Times*, 6 March 2011, <<http://www.armytimes.com/news/2011/03/army-report-finds-toxic-command-climate-zachar-030611w/>>.
7. Walter F. Ulmer Jr., "Toxic Leadership: What Are We Talking About?" *Army* June (2012): 50.
8. Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 2013), 190. Kaplan illustrates this point when he records that "[Maj. Gen. Peter] Chiarelli wasn't the protesting or resigning type. He'd signed on to this assignment, to this war. He valued the Army's hierarchy and its ethos of loyalty. He gnashed his teeth over Casey nearly every day, but always spoke up on his behalf and never—at least at the time—spoke out against him."
9. Sowden and Stewart, 18.
10. Dan Ariely, *The Upside of Irrationality: The Unexpected Benefits of Defying Logic* (Harper Perennial: New York, 2010), 262.
11. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2011), 35.
12. Connor, 51.
13. Pauline M. Kaurin, "Identity, Loyalty and Combat Effectiveness: A Cautionary Tale," *JSCOPE* (2006), 2, <<http://isme.tamu.edu/JSCOPE06/Kaurin06.html>>.
14. Michael O. Wheeler, "Loyalty, Honor, and the Modern Military," *Air University Review*, May-June (1973): 4.
15. The Constitution of the United States.

# COMBAT STUDIES INSTITUTE

## FORT LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS



### *New from the Combat Studies Institute*

CSI is proud to publish Georgii Isserson's 1936 treatise, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, one of the founding works of Soviet Deep Battle theory, available for the first time in English. Translated by Bruce W. Menning, this work is the best example of the distillation of Soviet military thought before the Second World War. For the modern reader this book provides a historical example of a codified body of thought that enabled senior military commanders to visualize the aggregate effects of tactical engagements across time and space.

For more information about CSI publications or assistance to your organization, contact the following at the Research and Publications Team:

Dr. Donald P. Wright: [donald.p.wright.civ@mail.mil](mailto:donald.p.wright.civ@mail.mil) or Mr. Kendall D. Gott: [kendall.d.gott.civ@mail.mil](mailto:kendall.d.gott.civ@mail.mil)

Visit our web site at: <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/csi/>

