

I'm Faded

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In February 2015, Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras published *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*.¹ This study portrayed an Army that purports to value honesty, but the leaders of which have sacrificed their integrity in order to meet an excessive number of administrative requirements. In order to regain our integrity, Wong and Gerras suggest that we, as an Army, acknowledge our organizational and individual fallibilities and have a candid conversation about reconciling who we are with who we want to be. I would like to add to that conversation by discussing how I fell short of who I would like to be.

From Black and White to Shades of Gray

In 2009, I was screened by the Department of Defense Medical Review Board (DODMERB); in 2010, I was examined at a Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS); and in 2013, I completed a Class 1 flight physical.² I had to fill out a thorough medical history for each of these exams. At the end of each history, I certified that the history was “true and complete” and that “no person advised me to conceal or falsify any information.” I completed accurate histories for the DODMERB and MEPS, but I turned in an incomplete history for my flight physical. I had changed between 2010 and 2013, but I cannot tell you exactly why I chose to turn in an incomplete medical history.

A couple events stand out as probable factors for influencing my decision to not turn in a complete medical history. A drill sergeant informing my basic training platoon that “your units won’t care who you are or what you did before the Army as long as you’re not a scumbag when you get there,” taught me that some standards are more important to meet than others. An upper-class cadet ribbing one of my peers for telling the truth on his DODMERB because the upperclassman “thought everyone lied on that thing,” lowered the standard from absolute to conditional honesty. Joking that “you can’t tell the Army the truth about how you drink; they would go crazy,” further trivialized telling the truth at all times. Sadly, I cannot tell you if those events specifically led me to act without integrity.

Instead, I can only tell you that I did not care about signing my name to a document that I knew was incorrect.

I completed the histories for both MEPS and the DODMERB during an application process. My recruiter sent me home with a stack of paperwork for MEPS, and I accessed an online questionnaire for the DODMERB. I was applying to join the Army, and I wanted to make sure I gave an honest account of myself. I completed the history for my initial flight physical before attending the Leadership Development and Assessment Course (LDAC) after my junior year of college. I put my demographic information in the appropriate boxes, checked whichever boxes on the questionnaire required the least effort, and signed my forms before continuing onto my next appointment. Completing my paperwork on time was more important than completing it truthfully.

Accountable to Whom?

I made a troubling choice when I placed a greater weight on completeness than on accuracy. As a cadet, I was working toward earning a commission in the U.S. Army; a commission that is nominally predicated on earning the president’s “special trust and confidence” in my “patriotism and fidelity.”³ I believe volunteering to join the Army demonstrated my patriotism, but did I truly act in a manner worthy of anyone’s trust and confidence in my fidelity?

Perhaps a commission grants officers the authority to choose which requirements are worth the time and effort of meeting if satisfying every requirement is not possible. Robert E. Atkinson Jr. posits military officers are required to disobey illegal and immoral orders.⁴ According to Atkinson, illegality and immorality should be understood in the context of the professional values of military officers, the legal values of the constitutional and international laws which bind the United States, and the moral values that each officer personally holds. If an order conflicts with the common good, then an officer is bound to disobey it.

An officer cannot obey an impossible order. Officers act as agents of the public trust, and a commander is

specifically responsible for everything his or her command does and fails to do. Therefore, an officer should deconflict impossible orders by following those orders which best serve the common good. However, an officer cannot choose which orders to follow while still reporting that all orders have been followed. As agents of the public trust, some of whom have been vested with the authority to make life or death decisions, I do not believe that officers should be a force unto themselves.

Military officers are drawn from and serve the American people, and they are ultimately responsible to the people's representatives. Those representatives make decisions based on the view from the top of the chain of command, a view that is sometimes supplemented by input from the middle and bottom of the chain of command. Some officers may view falsely reporting compliance as protecting themselves or their units from micromanagement, but each individual deviation slowly changes that officer from a public servant—accountable to the American people—into a petty tyrant, accountable only to him or herself.

Policing Our Own

I believe that Wong and Gerras would attribute my action to *ethical fading*.⁵ I did not care about filling out my forms accurately because the only thing that mattered was meeting the appropriate deadline and continuing with my day. *Lying to Ourselves* outlines how ethical fading changes

a signature block from the sworn statement of a public servant to the preferred tool of a well-seasoned bureaucrat. It also offers three steps for how to repair and preempt ethical fading: "Acknowledge the problem. Exercise restraint. Lead truthfully."⁶ The medical staff screening my paperwork at LDAC did exactly that.

When I reported to the medical station, I was pulled aside and handed a folder. Among other things, this folder had the medical history I submitted to the DODMERB and the medical history I had submitted to LDAC. The conditions I had reported in 2009 but failed to report four years later were highlighted, and I was instructed to correct the history I submitted in 2013. For each highlighted entry, I verified that what I had reported in 2009 was true and updated the information as necessary. By pointing out my mistake and giving me the opportunity to correct it, the medical staff at LDAC gave me a gentle nudge in the right direction.

I believe this nudge represented an effective and reasonable first step for implementing the recommendations of Wong and Gerras. Calling out obvious dishonesty and then correcting it shows that integrity always matters. Acknowledging that a systemic integrity problem can be fixed by focusing on the truth instead of staging a witch hunt to punish dishonesty reflects that all Army officers are responsible for this problem, reaffirms each officer's commitment to the Army Values, and regenerates the military profession one officer at a time. ■

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Notes

1. Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* (Monograph, Strategic Studies Institute, 2015).

2. Enlisted and Officer Candidate School applicants are examined at a MEPS. The DODMERB evaluates the medical fitness of all Reserve Officer Training Corps and service academy applicants. Class 1 flight physicals are required for flight school applicants.

3. Department of Defense Form 1, Officer's Commission, January 2000.

4. Robert E. Atkinson Jr., *The Limits of Military Officers' Duty to Obey Civilian Orders: A Neo-Classical Perspective* (Monograph, Strategic Studies Institute, 2015). Atkinson explores the

relationship between military officers and their civilian superiors. However, he points out that the relationship between the civilian statesman and military officer is paralleled in the relationship between military superiors and subordinates.

5. Ann E. Tenbrunsel and David M. Messick, "Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior" *Social Justice Research* 17 (2004): 224, accessed 19 September 2015, doi:10.1023/B:SORE.0000027411.35832.53. Wong and Gerras use the definition of ethical fading offered by Tenbrunsel and Messick: "the process by which the moral colors of an ethical decision fade into bleached hues that are void of moral implications."

6. Wong and Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves*, 28–33.