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Truth, Lies, and Mission First: Navigating the Ethical Boundaries of a Noble Profession

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Sergeants Major Course

In a recent conversation with a very senior NCO, he posed a question: “Why has Ukraine been able to hold on for so long against overwhelming odds?” The room fell silent, everyone hesitant to offer an answer. Was it the proliferation of drones, covert Ukrainian tactics, Western support, or Russia’s logistical failures? After a brief pause, he offered a simple but profound answer: “It’s their will to fight.” Then came a question that stayed with us for days: “Do you think we have that same will to fight?” Of course we do; invade the U.S. and see what happens. We thought it but did not say it. The senior NCO was implying that he wanted us to agree

with him. So, we did. We collectively lied about what we thought because of the conversational imbalance of power. There was no malice or attempt at personal gain, we simply lied by omission. While many leaders would see this as a form of ethical fading that leads to normalizing dishonesty (Wong and Gerras, 2022), we believe this happens more than Army leaders care to admit.

Days later, while listening to *The General and the Journalist* podcast where Sir Patrick Sanders, former Chief of the British Army, was discussing the current war in Gaza with journalist Tom Dunn, an interesting phrase came up. Dunn asked Sir Patrick if the British Army

would follow orders even if Soldiers didn't believe in the cause. He replied, "Yes, we are too professional of an army not to follow orders, so long as they are legal." He then spoke of something he called "the nobility of the profession of arms" which enables a force to do what it might not want to do. This idea resonated deeply. Sir Patrick then emphasized that professionalism means not only obedience but also the responsibility to provide honest counsel (Dunn & Sanders, 2025). From this, and his actions while leading the British Army, Sir Patrick Sanders belief in telling the truth no matter the cost is evident.

These stories might seem unrelated — one about a lie of omission regarding the United States will to fight, the other about following orders that one might not agree with — but both speak to the core of what it means to be part of the profession of arms. These stories highlight the tension between obedience and moral agency, a tension that is present for many, if not all, NCOs throughout their career. We are part of a profession that values being truthful, yet to protect the profession and guard readiness, we must sometimes lie.

Why do we do this? Because the profession of arms, despite its lofty ideals, is a human endeavor — messy, complex, and fraught with moral compromises. To pretend otherwise is to misunderstand what it means to lead in uniform. If we are honest, we admit that lying is not an aberration in military life, but a tool we employ to protect cohesion, maintain morale, build readiness, and preserve the nobility of the profession. The real question is not whether Soldiers lie, but whether those lies serve or undermine the Army's mission and values or have long-term consequences and undesired side-effects.

What does it mean to be a professional Soldier? What happens when you disagree with an order or a decision made by higher leadership or even elected officials? The profession of arms is unlike any other vocation. It demands absolute dedication to a cause greater than oneself, the defense of the nation, the preservation of peace, and the protection of constitutional values. Unlike other professions, military service requires adherence to an ethical framework that prioritizes service over self (Department of the Army 2019). That framework requires telling the truth, even when it is uncomfortable.



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Doctrine demands obedience to lawful orders, yet to protect the profession and improve readiness, NCOs often engage in truth management.

At its core, truth management is lying. However, it is not deception for personal gain or malicious intent. Instead, it is a pragmatic tool used by leaders at all levels to preserve unit cohesion, morale, and readiness. When officers issue orders or make decisions that NCOs believe are flawed, the NCO may withhold information, soften the message, or reframe the narrative to maintain trust and effectiveness.

This practice reflects not cowardice, but a sense of responsibility to balance obedience with care for Soldiers and the integrity of the profession (Wong & Gerras, 2015). If you have ever had a closed-door conversation with a senior leader about a decision you disagreed with, then withheld many of the details when you informed your subordinates, or if you have ever put a counseling date on an evaluation that never happened, you have participated in this practice.

Truth Management

The military profession often exemplifies honor, truth, and sacrifice. Yet, beneath this noble image lies a paradox that few outside the profession fully appreciate: Leaders lie. We lie to our superiors, our peers, our subordinates, and even to ourselves. Sometimes we call it *truth management*, other times we soften the term with words like *shaping the narrative*, but at its core, it is lying.

In doing these things, you have shown loyalty to the chain of command by publicly supporting a decision, or you ensured a subordinate's evaluation was processed in a timely manner, but you have also lied.

The Risk of Lying

Words carry immense weight, and leaders must be cautious about how they use them. The wrong message, poorly delivered, can destroy trust and fracture units. Effective leaders must master the art of filtering emotion, adjusting tone, and communicating with clarity (Department of the Army, 2024). Truth management, when applied recklessly, risks undermining the chain of command and destroying unity. Even when applied with prudence, the choice to lie in support of the mission could push one onto the slippery slope of ethical fading, in which minor moral transgressions become major moral lapses over time (Wong & Gerras, 2015).

Furthermore, when Soldiers become aware that they are not receiving the full picture, they may become distrustful or even cynical of their leadership. Of course, this works both ways: strategic and tactical formations manage the truth, and Soldiers, in tactical actions, communicate it to the strategic decision-makers. Lying leaders run a risk of developing lying Soldiers.

Yet when used with wisdom and extreme discretion, lies can protect Soldiers from unnecessary despair and keep units focused on the mission. This is one of the ethical dualities of being a leader. This tension between honesty and protection underscores the ethical complexity of the profession, and each leader must decide how she or he will manage it. If truth management is the only tool a leader has to motivate their subordinates to accomplish the mission, they may want to reflect on the meaning of the famous Abraham Maslow (1966, pp.15-16) quote: "It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." Managing the truth or omitting detail may improve mission outcomes in certain situations, but it cannot be the only tool a leader uses.

Telling the Truth

NCOs are guardians of trust within the Army. They often face difficult decisions about when to be candid and when to manage the truth to preserve their



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Soldiers' fighting spirit. This responsibility highlights the delicate balance between obedience, honest counsel, and stewardship of the profession. Soldiers enlist knowing the risks of military service, but how others communicate those risks can shape whether they fight with determination or collapse under despair or uncertainty. NCOs wield this narrative power with profound consequences.

According to Army doctrine, NCOs exercise authority and conduct the daily missions of the Army, but the ultimate responsibility of command is a function of office, legally vested in commissioned officers. While leaders delegate authority to subordinates to empower them and accomplish missions, they cannot delegate their own responsibility for the outcomes. This principle is foundational to building trust, a central idea in the Army's view of leadership. A leader who appears to avoid this accountability fails to live by the Army Values and risks undermining the trust that is essential for a cohesive and effective team (Department of the Army 2019).

Often, Soldiers will find themselves in harm's way, in dangerous and life-threatening situations their commanders have consciously put them in. The Army is inherently a dangerous profession, and Soldiers accept this when they enlist. When the commander places Soldiers in harm's way, however, NCOs have full control of the narrative and how to use the truth to support or damage the chain of command. There is a time and a place to hide the truth from people; however, the risk to life and associated mechanisms must be clear for all to allow accurate decision-making and required preparations.

Imagine looking at a map through a straw, which is the purview of the young Soldiers in your care. It's a narrow scope with a sometimes-frustrating understanding about the larger picture a soldier fits within. Then look at the same map without the straw; that is what the commanders see — a much bigger picture full of detail and reasons for the selection of routes and actions. And while the profession of arms still calls for an element of autocratic transactional leadership to get things done without discussion when there is limited time, making room to explain the why, to remove the straw and increase the view for our junior teammates, is important and will aid the generation of commitment to any plan. Unfortunately, engaged leadership such as this may include truth management to package huge strategic narratives into something more manageable and understandable at the tactical level.



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When things go noisy, people tend to become subordinate immediately; this starts in camp long before any deployment. Leaders and organizations cannot surge trust; they build it through repeated acts of integrity and care long before deployment. Soldiers will follow leaders who prove they include their welfare in planning, even when those leaders must manage truths to sustain morale. The nobility of the profession lies not in blind adherence to ideals but in the messy, human reality of balancing truth, trust, and responsibility.

Stewardship of the Profession

Before the concept of stewarding the profession was removed from Army Doctrinal Publication-1 (ADP-1), it stated “Stewardship reflects the Army professional’s responsibilities to the Army and Nation (2012, p. 2-9).” There is an inherent nobility in stewarding the profession of arms, and it is an ongoing process. This stewardship

requires lying and telling the truth. Army leaders must care for people, resources, and the institution itself by almost any means necessary. This stewardship involves upholding standards, maintaining professional competence, and adapting to the evolving character of warfare (Department of the Army, 2012) and, at times, lying.

Lying is rarely viewed as positive: Children are taught not to lie, we portray professionals as always telling the truth, our communities make criminals out of liars. Yet many of us lie to ourselves, our children, and our teams without batting an eye. Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, if you make faces behind a person’s back and the wind changes, your face will stay like that forever ... the list is endless. The point is, individuals manage truths to gain compliance, to shield people from the harsh reality, and to encourage Soldiers to do what you want them to do to accomplish the mission. These lies often sound like this: your body is not hurting, you are not exhausted, you are not afraid, and the next objective is only an hour away. Soldiers are told these things in the back end of nowhere while doing extraordinary things that others cannot, or will not, do. That is what lying for the profession looks like.

The profession of arms is noble not because leaders never lie. It is noble because it is rooted in an ethical commitment to serve the nation wherever and whenever required (Department of the Army, 2019b).

Military professionals have unique expertise, and their input is vital to formulating and executing defense policy. Based on mutual trust, this relationship requires candor and authority to execute the decisions of the civilian leaders.

These decisions provide the strategic direction and framework in which strategic military leaders operate (Department of the Army, 2019a).

NCOs, as the linchpins of the profession, sometimes engage in what may appear as “lying.” However, this behavior is often a calculated effort to maintain unit cohesion, maintain readiness, protect Soldiers, and preserve the profession’s viability when confronted with decisions they do not agree with. It is a testament to the complexity and responsibility inherent in military leadership.

The nobility of the profession rests not only on ideals but on the lived realities of Soldiers and NCOs who embody the Army Values, manage difficult truths, and steward the profession with integrity. Their commitment ensures that the profession of arms remains a sacred trust and a calling to serve with honor in the face of adversity, between obedience, honest counsel, and ethical stewardship of the profession. ■



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